Abstract

As avant-gardes decisively emerged after World War I, art that was rooted in disruptive gestures found explicit expression across diverse artistic products and actions. Avant-garde art increasingly aligned with revolutionary movements, tending to become an integral part of social change. However, as can be shown, avant-garde groups and trends rarely pursued any teleology of revolutionary politics. Instead, they primarily aimed to create conceptual subversions within established social orders and mindsets. Through experiences of disappointment and euphoric breakthroughs, avant-gardes developed a transcultural understanding of art and its societal role. The ultimate "success" of later avant-gardes (in the 1960s and 1970s) was manifested on both sides of the Iron Curtain. At this time, theatre and cinema expanded subversions of the "system" into actual art forms, employing signifiers of discontinuity and radically rejecting conventional codes for public messages. The world that became "subverted" was the same in Paris, Prague, Belgrade and Ljubljana. It can be argued that, under so-called real socialism, avant-gardes aligned with movements aiming to reorient the path of emancipation towards a modernist project uniting autonomous art with social freedom. Numerous cases of "experimental" theatres, films, poetry and philosophies of liberation in Yugoslavia, as in other "peripheral" countries under real socialism, exemplify this approach.

Keywords: art, subversion, society, theatre, liberation

Darko Štrajn earned his degree in philosophy and sociology from the Faculty of Arts at the University of Ljubljana, where he later obtained a doctorate in Fichte's philosophy. Alongside his work at the Educational Research Institute in Ljubljana, he lectures on film theory at the School of Arts at the University of Nova Gorica and on the epistemology of the humanities at the Faculty of Humanities (AMEU – ISH) in Ljubljana. His research spans topics such as philosophy, aesthetics, film studies, politics, education and social change. He is the author of six books, numerous book chapters and hundreds of other publications. His book *From Walter Benjamin to the End of Cinema* (2017) was published in English and his latest book, *Either Existence or Subject?*, was published in Slovenian language in 2022.

darko.strajn@guest.arnes.si

The Legacy of Avant-Gardes in Social, Cultural and Political Contexts

Darko Štrajn
Educational Research Institute, Ljubljana

Theatre is a form of knowledge; it should and can also be a means of transforming society. Theatre can help us build our future, instead of just waiting for it (Boal 16).

Introduction

The present has become a key category for art, which in modernism increasingly shook off normative frameworks. Such art became only indirectly decorative and increasingly directly political. This applies at least to that part of art which the current theory considers to be more relevant. Of course, in diverse areas of art, transformations and inventions manifest themselves in a range of specific ways. Especially in the field of performative arts, among which theatre has a representative role both in "classical" avant-garde productions and in those from the pivotal years before and after the emblematic year 1968, *events* were marked both aesthetically and sociopolitically in a very transformative way. As Alain Badiou claimed, the new approach to the concept of time was already evident from the emergence of Rimbaud's poetry: "Art is no longer essentially a production of eternity" (*The Century* 134). Badiou focused specifically on theatre in the cited book, claiming "the twentieth century is the century of the theatre as art", adding: "Now, it can be argued (and this is an important symptom) that the twentieth century is the century of the theatre as art. It is the twentieth century that invented the notion of the *mise en scène*. It transformed the thinking of representation into an art in its own right. The theatre director is something like a thinker of representation as such, who carries out a very complex investigation into the relationships between text, acting, space and public" (40).

When the avant-garde decisively expanded after World War I, this relationship, more an attitude or mindset than a defined concept, became a fully conscious orientation, which was explicitly articulated in various avant-garde manifestos, statements and, of course, in artistic works and actions. There is no firm and universally accepted definition

of the term avant-garde. However, the common thread in diverse interpretations is the examination of the relationship between art and processes of social change. Peter Bürger (1984) condensed various definitions into the observation that avant-gardes brought about a rupture by opposing institutionalised art, which – from the perspective of artistic movements in bourgeois society – hinders the connection between art and life. Avant-garde art increasingly sided with revolutionary movements and positioned itself as an integral part of social change. However, avant-garde groups and trends – as can be demonstrated – did not produce a teleology of revolutionary politics. More often, they tried to create breaks and discontinuities within established social orders and mentalities. Avant-gardes, throughout their paths of experiencing disappointments and euphoric breakthroughs, creating subversive effects in relation to the political system as well as to prevailing morality and ideology, developed a transcultural understanding of art and its role in society. The almost definitive "success" of the late avant-gardes, also called neo-avant-gardes (in the 1960s and 1970s), occurred on both sides of the then Iron Curtain. Disruptive courses of action are archived in virtually all areas of art. Theatre and film, however, were particularly emphasised at that time, expanding the subversion of the "system" as actual art forms that were created on the use of discontinuities and surprising new arrangements based on radical transformations of conventional public communication coding. The world that was thus "subverted" was diverse yet, at the same time, the same in Paris, Prague, Belgrade or Ljubljana.

In the confusion caused by the pre-emptive naming of the period around the beginning of the 1980s as postmodernism, there arose ideas that a new era could be produced by assembling previous artefacts, combining decorative elements of various architectures, merging genres, crossing disciplinary boundaries, by using media and so on. In short, the modernist focus on the present was supposed to give way to a "return" of temporality, which was to be composed of arbitrarily selected fragments of the past. Given that postmodernism supposedly coincided with the rise of neoliberal ideology, the absorptive power of the concept of the free market proved itself. "Artists, gallery owners, critics, and public wallow together in the 'anything goes,' and the epoch is one of slackening. But this realism of the 'anything goes' is in fact that of money; in the absence of aesthetic criteria, it remains possible and useful to assess the value of works of art according to the profits they yield" (Lyotard 76). Moreover, it allegedly all started with two sentences at the beginning of Lyotard's most notorious book, *The Postmodern Condition*, originally published in 1979: "The object of this study is the condition of knowledge in the most highly developed societies. I have decided to use the word postmodern to describe that condition" (xxiii). As we know, after the publication of this statement, many antagonistic discussions followed in various fields, particularly in the field of aesthetics. It should be noted that Lyotard is not talking about the notion but about the *word* postmodernism. Lyotard soon

distanced himself from the scattered and widespread uses of the word in an essay that answers the question of what postmodernism is. This essay was published, among other things, as an appendix to the English translation of *The Postmodern Condition* published by the University of Minnesota Press. In addition to the finding from this essay, Lyotard also wrote the following sentence: "A work can become modern only if it is first postmodern. Postmodernism thus understood is not modernism at its end but in the nascent state, and this state is constant" (79). Lyotard, therefore, provoked, so to speak, mass reactions with his formulation of postmodernism. Of course, a huge flow of simplified appropriations of his description of the "condition in the most developed societies" followed in the form of linear chronology.

The essay appended to *The Postmodern Condition* reflects some of the effects of one of the author's most concise yet most influential books. In the main text, Lyotard writes emphatically about knowledge and thus about science and transformations in their social and economic-political context. In reaction to the immense wave of controversial discussions about the word postmodernism, however, he focuses primarily on art and aesthetics. It looked as if he wanted to correct the impression of the original text and charge the sphere of art and its theoretical reflective interpretations with the task of producing a decisive self-understanding of society in its transformations, which in (Lyotard's) future appear as interactions of the forms of capitalist society and emerging groundbreaking new technologies. In all this, art, precisely because of its inevitable political nature, is in an ambivalent relationship with time: time does not determine art, but art determines time. Thus, Lyotard's problematisation of the chronology can be understood as an affirmation of modernism through its chronological end. Many have understood this point in such a way that postmodernism means a new level of modernism, its new affirmation through Hegelian sublation (*Aufhebung*). However, this created a structural shift that concerns precisely the driving force of the avant-gardes, their potential as a social agency. If modernism is the historical framework of the avant-garde, then the agencies operating within it work to change the perspective: postmodernism retroactively establishes the effect of the avant-gardes upon their "constant" self-renewal.

The Trace of the *Aura*

Contemporary artistic events are reflected in theories in such a way that they cannot be interpreted without referencing past avant-garde and neo-avant-garde phenomena. Given the inherent dialectics of artistic form, during the period of postmodernism – regardless of the controversies surrounding this term – adaptations of avant-garde inventions emerged, combining either with classical theatrical techniques or with other media. Consequently, theory and criticism are also faced with recognising

variations of avant-garde and neo-avant-garde components in art that do not claim the attribute of avant-gardism. An extensive cultural and research space of reflection has been established through Lyotard's designation of an era that was not so prominently new compared to how much it defined a change in understanding artistic invention. This virtual space has enabled the restitution of the political nature of art by constantly questioning its functioning in the face of the effects of reification in the currents of fetishised market freedom. Among many possible examples, let us take the artistic breakthroughs of the 1960s and 1970s, which, in interaction with protest movements and emancipatory ideas, achieved long-term political effects. The artefacts themselves and all kinds of evidence of events have become objects of a process of symbolising social effects within the space of postmodernism. Artefacts and simultaneously symbols on the market acquire a price regardless of their content, regardless of the meanings of gestures and declarations, thereby neutralising their original subversiveness. However, they remain paradigmatic, open to reinterpretation and revitalisation in repetitions that are legitimised by the framework of postmodernism: repetition, namely, questions the context. The concepts of modernism and avant-garde should not simply be equated but rather considered as intertwined categories whose movement unfolds through differences and indistinguishability. "A possible treatment of the two concepts of the avant-garde and the modern extends from a tendency to neutralise their difference (modern is avant-garde and vice versa) to the proposition to interpret them in a classification as incompatible and exclusive (the avant-garde arose against modernism)" (Müller-Funk 22). This kind of binary opposition has been inscribed in the never-ending debate about groundbreaking artistic works and activities in the 1960s and 1970s as either the culmination of modernism or the beginnings of postmodernism.

Amid this thicket of concepts and diverse artistic practices, theatre held a special role, which applies both to the avant-gardes of the 1920s and to those at the peaks of modernism in the 1960s and 1970s. For example, what were such inventions as Meyerhold's biomechanical theatre or Brecht's epic theatre in the 1920s became performances in the 1960s and 1970s. In the 1920s, theatre – very explicitly in the mentioned two cases – positioned itself against the institution of theatre as it had settled in bourgeois society. Meyerhold aimed for a revolution in theatre and radically altered the role of the actor and director in his productions, thus calling for a break in the continuity of the so-called rhetorical theatre: "Since the theatre has the power to stimulate the emotions as well as the intellect, it follows that it is wrong for a play as a work of art to limit itself to sheer rhetoric, employing raisonneurs and indulging in dialogues borrowed from the so-called 'conversational theatre'. We reject such a theatre as a mere debating chamber" (Braun 217). Brecht more explicitly emphasised the sociohistorical context. "It is understood that the *radical transformation of the theatre* can't be the result of some artistic whim. It has simply to correspond to the whole radical transformation

of the mentality of our time" (Brecht 23). To this, Walter Benjamin, the great thinker of historical discontinuity, added: "The stage is still elevated. But it no longer rises from an immeasurable depth: it has become a public platform" (*Understanding Brecht* 22). The specificity of theatre within that time becomes even clearer in the realm of Benjamin's concept of *aura*, which uniquely names the irreversible transformation of art brought about by reproduction as the key agent of industrial society. If the disappearance of the *aura* affects all arts in terms of the relationship between the original and the copy and the uniqueness of the encounter with the artwork, theatre retains a "trace of the *aura*" precisely because each repetition differs from previous performances, even if only in the smallest details. "[…] man has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence; there can be no replica of it. The aura which, on the stage, emanates from Macbeth, cannot be separated for the spectators from that of the actor" (Benjamin, *The Work of Art* 231).

In a society of mass culture – according to Benjamin, in a society of technical reproduction – theatre became a component of the expansive multiplicity of interactions between social realities and arts, between art genres, between different media, between theories and, ultimately, between artistic ideas and political events. In such plurality, it is not advisable to seek the origins of various mutual influences between art genres. Singular artistic events emerge as products of reflection, media interactions and theoretically grounded actions. Thus, in the neo-avant-garde period, theatre developed its performances even more than in the period before World War II, both based on its traditions and in the search for new foundational concepts in the hybridisations of its artistic form in relation to other arts. The most reproducible and most mass-oriented of all arts, namely film, reaffirmed its role as an agent in the avant-garde from its beginnings. Deleuze's concept of the time-image was complemented particularly with the advent of the French New Wave in the 1960s. In his analysis of Godard's film *Pierrot the Fool* (*Pierrot le Fou,* 1965), Jean-Louis Leutrat referred to Barthes's comment on Schumann's music: "In the end there are only intermezzi, whatever interrupts is itself interrupted, and so on …" He then continued:

> This describes excellently a certain cinema of Jean-Luc Godard. From filled-in gaps to immediately dissolved plenitudes, the splits and divisions seem only to expand or multiply as each film draws its form and force from the fractures and digressions that might just as easily engulf it. Continuity of meaning is subverted, spatial and temporal coordinates are altered, and logical links are disjointed . (181)

Thus, the New Wave cinema[1] introduced a change in film form and, as has often been the case in various art genres, this meant that the form adapted to the "content" of

1 In contemporary film studies this concept increasingly encompasses not only the original French film revolution but also all other national variations such as the British Free Cinema, the Young German Film, the Yugoslav Black Wave, the Czechoslovak film miracle, etc.

the new spirit of the time as well as the changed social circumstances and the actions of social actors. At that time, among other things, these actions were about political movements that aimed to abolish capitalism. Although the realisation of this goal failed, the cultural revolution succeeded, which included changes in the forms of everyday life, the position of social minorities, the sexual revolution with an emphasised role of feminism and, ultimately, also artistic production.

The so-called experimental theatres of the 1960s were based on a logic similar to what Leutrat defined in the case of Godard's film. The various radical happenings and performances of the 1960s and 1970s more or less abandoned the narrative form of theatre. In a new echo of the avant-garde declarations of the 1920s, they established a connection between "art and life". Although it would be difficult to define a common characteristic of the entire range of concepts, currents and movements in the theatre scene of that time, it can still be said that these theatres emphasised the signifier of the body. There are dozens, if not hundreds, of anthological examples that could be mentioned. For the sake of clarity regarding what I am talking about, let us remember The Living Theatre, the performance *Dionysus in 69*, Viennese Actionism, Boal's Theatre of the Oppressed and so on. The theme of the body, which during this period became the subject of various humanistic theories, was most notably illustrated in the practices of theatrical avant-gardes by the Benjaminian "trace of the *aura*", thereby manifesting the irreducible difference between theatre and film. The physical body of the actor simultaneously served as an important "instrument" for establishing contact with the audience and as an instrument for dismantling the bourgeois institution that separated spectators from actors. What theory developed regarding the function, meanings, roles, sexual attributes, ideology and liberation of the body, theatre applied to its practice: "First, the body is prepared for performance, worked up to it by formal or informal regimes. Second, the preparation of the performing body is undertaken within a context of assumptions about 'body' in society and thus has a relationship – conscious or not, critical or not – with what are perceived to be dominant norms" (Shepherd 11). Many theatres did not shy away from performative reinterpretations of classical works, starting with ancient dramas or even directly with the mythologies of antiquity and the traditions of diverse cultures. The deconstructions of characters from past tragedies, the dramatisations of poetry, and the inclusion of other media in performances that originated from radical experiments linked to the prolonged revolution marked by the year 1968 were eventually appropriated by even the most institutionalised theatres. Theatrical actions outside and inside theatrical spaces or in reconfigured spaces produced an excess of political engagement. This was most explicitly manifested in parodic gestures, in provocations against the prevailing taste, in the use of disruptive techniques to break narrative fragments, or in the complete absence of narrative. With all of this, theatre, as part of protest demonstrations or parallel to them, engaged in social struggles. In that context, theatre achieved effects that no other art form could,

precisely because of the mentioned "trace of the *aura*". Even though avant-garde theatre is far from being the entirety that is considered the art of theatre and, although in terms of audience size, it certainly lags behind traditional theatres and commercial theatres, it was, in each of its new manifestations, the one that redefined the boundaries of theatrical art, reshaped the work of dramaturgy, actors, directors, etc., while also, willingly or unwillingly, defining itself in its temporal transience. It, too, fell victim to its own destruction of the prevailing perception of time. The artistic activities of the 1960s and 1970s cannot be fully understood if we do not include in the conceptual framework Deleuze's notions of deterritorialisation, reterritorialisation and, of course, nomadism.

All Spaces Are Peripheral

The period most marked by memories of student protests, particularly against the Vietnam War and simultaneously against the repressive system in its global binary of capitalism and real socialism, brought about a significant shift within the domain of the colonial notion of the metropolis or centre. Protests resulted neither in the collapse of capitalism and its complementary real socialism nor in a reduction of the dominance of economic, military and financial oligarchies. Instead, they resulted in a new geography of art. There was an even greater emancipation of the periphery than during the early rise of the avant-garde. Avant-garde artistic practices emerged not only in the urban centres of the West but also in most countries of the so-called Eastern Europe: most notably in Poland, Czechoslovakia, Hungary and even in the Soviet Union. A special instance is the countries of Central and South America.

Avant-garde artists made Yugoslavia a kind of anti-centre of artistic movements, as evidenced by the fact that the country hosted several major and minor international festivals, among which the Genre Experimental Film Festival (GEFF) in Zagreb and the Belgrade International Theatre Festival (BITEF) stood out.[2] The openness of national borders and the relatively high tolerance for artistic freedom within the self-management system also extended to the openness towards contemporary social-intellectual movements. Thus, from 1968 to 1974, the so-called Korčula Summer School was organised on the island of Korčula by the Zagreb philosophical journal *Praxis*, gathering several leading figures of Western Marxism,[3] more or less

2 On a fundamental level, artistic manifestations such as BITEF – thoroughly catalogued and described on widely accessible platforms (even on *Wikipedia*) – were factually recognised in metropolises (centres). Their initiators and organisers, such as Mira Trailović and Jovan Ćirilov, were awarded across Europe and collaborated with numerous important European institutions (e.g., Festival d'Avignon, etc.). BITEF itself received a special award in 2000 for its "past work" from an institution under the auspices of the European Commission.

3 During the rise of far-right movements and political parties, the slur *cultural Marxism* emerged, first popularised in 2011 by the Norwegian mass murderer and neo-Nazi Anders Breivik. Cultural Marxism is associated with the concept of *Western Marxism*, which refers to a range of philosophical and political trends that, based on Marx's philosophy, opposed Stalinism – beginning as early as in the Weimar Republic in the works of Korsch, Lukács, and the philosophers of the Frankfurt School. The peak of these intellectual Marxist currents was the philosophy and praxis of the New Left.

aligned with the concept of the New Left. In art, Yugoslavia's openness also allowed for politically charged performances, though this does not mean that the League of Communists did not closely monitor them. Through its organs and loyal intellectuals, it publicly criticised them, yet by the late 1960s, there were almost no direct bans or legal prosecutions. However, certain performances by avant-garde theatres provoked intense reactions, blending moral panic with perceptions of political deviations based on judgements of "quasi-art".[4] Of course, even in the so-called free world at that time, artistic actions provoked harsh reactions and even police repression. Many "experimental" performances were, sometimes explicitly and sometimes in the interpretations of critics and theorists, grounded in broader artistic movements, such as Situationism and, somewhat later, Conceptualism. They reflected epistemological shifts in philosophy, from existentialism to poststructuralism. All of this, along with references to "classic" avant-gardes, led to a disruption of the very concept of theatre. "[In dramatic texts], the elements of drama are disappearing, and the text becomes disposable and directs the other aspects of theatrical performance. Meaning is lost or remains extremely open, which leads to fragmentation and arbitrariness of interpretation" (Troha 129). In Yugoslavia at that time, the signifying interactions between student unrest and various intellectual movements were as evident as elsewhere in the world. Performances such as Raša Todosijević's happening *Decision as Art* (1973), the performances of Marina Abramović, the emergence of the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre in its various versions in Ljubljana (1968 to 1975), and many other events continuously introduced new inventions in unconventional spaces. In the history of Slovenian performance art, there are numerous examples where established theatrical institutions opened to new tendencies towards the late 1960s. Particularly in the Small Stage of the main Slovenian theatre house (today's SNT Drama Ljubljana), works by avant-garde authors (e.g., Arrabal, Handke, Jovanović and others) were staged. European theatre groups often stopped in Ljubljana on their way from the BITEF in Belgrade, and so on. If we talk about the circuits of ideas and mutual influences with social movements, the example of the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre stands out in Slovenia.

> Just as radical practices, which the secret police identified as Trotskyist, anarcho-liberal or even Maoist, emerged within the second phase of the student movement, it can also be said that PFT [Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre] realised a radical artistic practice that was similarly intrinsic to the contemporary OHO group. If PFT is critically noted for introducing into the theatrical space ludism, or playfulness, as the basis of artistic work, the same can be said for the second phase of the student movement. Here, too, there was a noticeable creative playfulness, most prominently expressed at the literary marathon [at the Faculty of Arts] in November 1970. (Kreačič 327; my trans.)

4 I wrote more extensively about these aspects of the relationship between art and politics in the article "The politics and aesthetics of democratic socialism in Yugoslav modernity. The case of Yugoslav modernism and its impact: some examples of breakthrough art in the context of self-management". See Štrajn.

We can say that the Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre was the most representative of the numerous theatre movements in Slovenia at the time, including those that either continued or newly emerged in the 1970s. The artistic form, if it can be called that, illustrated the "end" of traditional theatre by staging the "most scandalous" among their performances, *Pupilija, papa Pupilo pa Pupilčki* (*Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks*) at the student housing restaurant (in 1969), which was based on parodic fragments on the theme of consumer society. It is understood that the performance had no narrative line; the scenes followed each other in an unstructured manner, leaving the audience to create connections for themselves, as the performance did not suggest any unambiguous ones. On the stage, surrounded by a predominantly young audience, a series of group physical movements took place, which could be perceived as a political metaphor for the disciplining of individuals. The political context of socialism was portrayed through the lens of society as a sphere of traditionalism and moralism. This was symptomatically evident in the reactions of the media at the time to some scenes featuring partially or completely naked bodies.

The political dimension of Pupilija Ferkeverk Theatre thus transcended earlier dissident confrontations with authority, its repressiveness, ideological limitations and censorship. Through the theatrical form of parody, it addressed lifestyles and everyday life. Its political effect was not limited to "critiquing" socialist authority but, alongside political theatres in the West, also targeted broader social and economic trends, particularly consumerism. This was, therefore, a form of indirect political engagement that aimed at ways of life and aligned itself with marginalised social groups. In the Slovenian context itself, the theatre – through the act of slaughtering a chicken on stage in the performance *Pupilija, Papa Pupilo and the Pupilceks* – signalled the growing distance of an increasingly urban society from rural normality. In retrospect, an analysis of the workings of experimental theatre reveals the complexity of the culture and politics of the time. A relatively repressive society is depicted in its historical trajectory, including agencies and actors, among which the government and its policies are just one component in the continuity of domination. The manifestations of the performance, which could be understood as allegories, metaphors and metonymies reflecting this society, demonstrate a stance of inarticulate subjectivity in the discontinuities of the performance. In the gaps of these discontinuities, subjective freedom is realised as resistance, mockery, transgression of the ruling morality and, ultimately, as a subversion of the system, whose intended static nature is depicted in the process of potential disintegration. It is precisely through staging in discontinuities, in the dismantling of established meanings with gestures of mockery and resistance and highlighting the view from the social margins and the core of the plurality of mass culture that several such theatres, like Pupilija Ferkeverk, manifest a political effect. This is an effect of *indirect politics* (cf. Bartholomew, 2014). Of course, traditional theatre can also function similarly. "The theatre alone points

out the comical appearance of what power is in the present and thus opens it to derision. In every tragedy, we see the dark melancholy of power. In every comedy, we see the farcical semblant" (Badiou, *The Pornographic Age* 3). In a critical time of social anomie, however, the change in the form of the theatrical event, in fragments of the *aura*, revitalises, among other things, its political effectiveness. Conceptualist performances, which were based on a focused exposure of the subjective position from which the intervention into the field of the other's gaze takes place, achieved a similar effect in a slightly different way.

The avant-garde experiments of the pivotal period of the 1960s and 1970s were driven by the movement of deterritorialisation within the multiplicity of mass culture, which inherently triggered processes of reterritorialisation. This means that impulses from one location had a transformative effect on another location, which in turn triggered reverse effects. A simple example: during that period, action performances, for instance, sent messages about the absurdity of the Vietnam War to very culturally diverse areas of national organisations around the world. American avant-garde theatre arguably began as early as the 1940s with the founding of The Living Theatre, which, among other things, "imported" the staging of Brecht's and Pirandello's works. A notable manifestation was undoubtedly *Dionysus in 69*, an adaptation of Euripides' *The Bacchae*. Certainly, from the 1960s in the United States, the theatre movements of Guerrilla Theatre remain unforgettable – originating from the work of the San Francisco Mime Troupe. The most prominent representative of this movement was The Bread and Puppet Theatre, which also pioneered forms that merged art and protest into street theatre.

The concept of centre and periphery maintained its significance for conservative and regressive ideologies and for the colonial perspective. Without adding much more to what I have written about in the past, not to mention the enormous number of discussions of the pivotal period in the extensive postmodern literature, I can assert that much more happened during this period than was pessimistically imagined at the time when various radical socioartistic events gradually diminished. How much the neo-avant-garde achievements became objects of market reification or – as Herbert Marcuse expressed the problem at the time – *absorption* into the system of repressive tolerance is a question that, with its constant relevance, has remained an impetus for the evocation of unique neo-avant-garde events. Such effects as the relative successes in the fields of sexual politics or the relative shifts in attitudes towards ideologies such as racism, homophobia, etc., were significant. Sadly, this is evidenced by the fact that even the small achievements of emancipatory movements have increasingly become objects of conservative counter-revolution in the time after the first decade of the 21st century.

Conclusion

How can one adapt Shakespeare's drama in a way that would be engaging for today's audience, who have been raised within the frameworks of the "distracted perception" (cf. Benjamin, *The Work of Art*) of mass culture? Such questions arise for every theatre, no matter how conservative or devoted to sublime art it may be. The explanation for such questioning, which often refers to the empty formula "times are changing", is clearly inadequate. What matters is what has happened in these changing times across all areas of historical processes, from wars to the effects of natural sciences and technology, without excluding the trajectories of artistic activities from this multiplicity of movements. When we zoom in on time, the period of the avant-garde and neo-avant-garde proves to be decisive in mapping the field in which art is navigating – both the art we perceive as mainstream and the art that questions existing social relations. Even if it seemed to the actors themselves that avant-garde interventions in all forms and across all fields of art were ephemeral and unsuccessful in their marginalised activity, it is now evident that their transience, uniqueness, singularity, extreme gestures, disruptions and "scandalousness" gradually established a distinction from the mainstream, which, in contrast, gradually normalised and absorbed the components and attributes of avant-garde actions. The paradox in this process, regarding the political intent of the avant-garde, lies in the fact that through appropriation into the mainstream, the subversive note was neutralised, meaning that the success of radical artistic forms in their market placement lost their most fundamental emancipatory targets. In light of the calls for a "return to the aesthetic", which appeared with the advent of postmodernity, in complex polemics with the proponents of this call, Fredric Jameson pointed to its unspoken goal: "The dialectical twist here lies in the way in which the historic mission of the postmodern is said to consist in discrediting the more noxious aspects and developments of the modern itself (as that is conventionally understood)" (114). Criticisms of radical art for either abandoning or dismantling aesthetics stem from the fact that it transformed the understanding of aesthetics within the framework of the inherent interdependence of mass culture and established bourgeois culture. This does not mean that it stepped out of the field of aesthetics but instead placed it in relation to its social positioning. Benjamin (*Work of Art*) referred to this as the politicisation of art. The discourses of the "return to the aesthetic", though not in every signifying chain but in the mentioned figures, are symptomatic as products of a process in which avant-garde art of the past became a matter of market exchanges and, at the same time, of targeted discreditations and banalisations in the interest of the counter-revolution.

Avant-garde theatre, in its diverse manifestations – from Brechtian theatre, for instance, to happenings and street theatres in the 1960s and 1970s – did not produce a rigidly coded form that would be as repeatable, even if open to reinterpretation and adaptation, as classical theatre. Today, we speak less and less of avant-garde theatre,

but this does not mean that radical explorations in theatrical art have ceased. The avant-garde approaches discussed here – such as de-narrativisation, the use of elements from the Theatre of the Absurd, multimedia tools, etc. – are essentially fragments of an archive that new performances revive and recontextualise. Such radicalisations may occur at the level of form. However, they are more often employed in attempts to theatrically re-enact social and political events, as seen recently, for instance, in portrayals of the fates of immigrants. At the same time, there is no doubt that the entire avant-garde tradition has also enabled innovations within institutionalised theatres, which postmodern audiences accept. This means that avant-gardes have sparked movements that have influenced the evolution of theatre audiences themselves.

Eppur si muove! While it is entirely comprehensible that the neo-avant-garde of the mid-20th century is now a matter of archives, catalogues and retrospectives, it is evident that its artistic forms have persisted. Performance art and the use of the hybridisation of artistic genres have especially accelerated, as has the dynamic of deterritorialisation driven by the nomadism of inventions and, not least, the use of digital technologies. Above all, the strengthening of the politicisation of art is entirely evident.[5] The invention of new artistic forms, the use of already tested or new approaches to theatrical productions with the aim of activating the audience and so on, continue and have almost become a standard occurrence even in established theatre houses. Disruptive artistic actions that take place in public spaces, sometimes even at the cost of conflicts with the authorities, have already become characteristic of urban environments. All this activity has its background and is nourished by theories and concepts. The current, conditionally speaking, avant-garde art operates as a laboratory from which artistic interventions with political effects also emerge. An illustrative example was the Belgrade non-governmental organisation Teorija koja hoda (Walking Theory), founded in 2000. Its activities took place through workshops, lecture "schools," performances and a "cartel" that mimics the scheme of a corporate company, etc.

> An organisation is a body or institution that enters the system of social struggles for influence, power, hegemony, centring or relocation, i.e. transfiguring the system of performing arts through theoretical assumptions, intentional conflicts and unexpected potentialities of materialistically oriented poststructuralism, cultural studies, techno theory and critical biopolitics (Šuvaković 268–269).

Long before this, a "retro-garde" activity emerged in Slovenia, centred around the principle of collective collaboration with the musical and performance group Laibach under the banner of NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst). This movement encompassed

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5 At the most representative art events, such as the Venice Biennale, *documenta* in Kassel, etc., exhibitions of paintings and sculptures are mixed with video and live performances, including more radical political messages that relate to global phenomena of discrimination and social injustices as well as singular instances of repression (e.g., against Indigenous people, Palestinians, etc.). The dilemma for artists in all this is that we can talk about the aestheticisation of the consequences of injustices, the suffering of individuals and entire ethnic groups, but the impact on the public is not like that of the 1960s and 1970s.

not only music but also visual arts and theatre. As is well known, the emergence of this artistic collective significantly influenced political events before the dissolution of Yugoslavia, after which it continued its activities on a global scale. Much later, in the independent Republic of Slovenia, the alliance between art and social movements was evident in the realm of inventions within the context of protest manifestations. The justification for the Golden Bird Award for inventive art, which in 2013 was awarded to an anonymous collective for the project *Zombie*, reveals that the events recorded in history as the First Pan-Slovenian Uprising saw art realised as political action.

Prime Minister Janez Janša's Slovenian Democratic Party (SDS) – the embodiment of the "operation of the apparatus" – described the participants of the First Pan-Slovenian Uprising against the overt neoliberal intervention in the Slovenian state and society as "zombies" on 21 December 2012. The "protestival" that followed on 22 December 2012 demonstrated that mass public protests against ruling oligarchies in Slovenia were simultaneously cultural and artistic events. This became even more evident during the continuation of the uprising on 11 January 2013. "Zombies" were an indispensable component of the events in 2013, especially on Culture Day, 8 February 2013, when the populist political party, with its visibly diminished support, suffered a significant defeat. The parody of the Prime Minister's insult in the form of a street play by "nameless" directors and actors was a unique Slovenian artistic achievement among other social actions during the financial crisis. The *Zombie* project clearly showed that, unlike many former emancipatory politicisations of art, today's focus is no longer on the artistic production of utopias but instead on the next step after exiting the aesthetic regime: the broader social capitalisation of ghettoised artistic production and the integration of art into collective action against the perpetuation of society's expropriation. This issue of contemporary art, which seeks to reach the public through artistically pointed political stances, was also reflected in the speech by Zdenka Badovinac (former director of Slovenia's Museum of Modern Art), chair of the committee for awarding the prestigious Slovenian national Prešeren Awards to artists, during the 2025 awards ceremony:

> Capital and politics have hijacked the language of art: they promote themselves through provocation, uncritical imagination and a non-binding freedom of spirit. What, then, is left for art? Provocation rarely shocks any more. Art is becoming increasingly inclusive, opening up space for the greatest possible participation in its processes. In this way it plays a part in creating our social fabric. (Badovinac)

From this point on, the most inventive art is a component of a broader social coalition aimed at establishing a different paradigm of sociality. In the Second Slovenian Uprising (2020–2022), the so-called cycling protests that took place for more than a hundred consecutive weeks, the *Zombie* project continued and contributed to the performative effects and iconography of the protest.

Disruptiveness, fragmentation, subversiveness and so on – often in the form of discontinuity as a legacy of the avant-garde from the modernist era – remain key characteristics of art that aligns with emancipatory social aspirations. Questions about how to achieve the goal of unsettling the public, decentralising mass perception through innovative uses of new technologies and so forth remain constantly open. Each successful artistic action is a unique response, a singular gesture and a transcultural signifier for decoding forms of domination. Therefore, an artistic intervention must occur unexpectedly, unpredictably, in the manner of aesthetic guerrilla tactics and as an *event*. The example of the opening ceremony of the 2024 Olympic Games in Paris, which proved to be highly controversial for its thematic focus on history – particularly the French Revolution – and its portrayal of mythologically grounded exuberance, will remain unparalleled. The event itself is typically expected to be a parade of kitsch and extravagance. However, in Paris in 2024, the meaningfully rich performance on the river Seine added an extraordinary component to the event. The fact that such content – highlighting the achievements of historical emancipatory struggles, the celebration of the politics of difference and recognition, etc. – was elevated to the highest level of visibility within the core of the spectacle. Even if packaged with the kitsch of fireworks and other attractions, it represented a unique culmination of previous artistic emancipatory gestures. The LGBTQ movement, with its characteristic costuming, illustrated the connection between "art and life" following this spectacle – a connection that, throughout the history of the avant-garde, has often needed to be rearticulated despite sometimes sounding naively optimistic. The search for and attempts at artistic actions are sometimes obscured and narrowed down to the sphere of intimacy, and at other times, as we have seen, involving spectacularity, thus continuing from one performance to the next, with no end in sight.

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Povzetek

Ko so se avantgarde odločilno razmahnile po prvi svetovni vojni, je umetnost, ki temelji na disruptivni gesti, pridobila eksplicitne artikulacije v raznolikih umetniških izdelkih in dejanjih. Avantgardna umetnost se je vse pogosteje postavljala na stran revolucionarnih gibanj in težila k temu, da bi bila sestavni del družbenih sprememb. Vendar pa so avantgardne skupine in trendi – kot je mogoče dokazati – redko delali na kakršni koli teleologiji revolucionarne politike. Največkrat so si prizadevali ustvariti konceptualne subverzije znotraj ustaljenih družbenih redov in miselnosti. Avantgarde so na svoji poti doživljanja razočaranj in evforičnih prebojev uveljavljale transkulturno razumevanje umetnosti in njene vloge v družbi. Tako rekoč dokončni »uspeh« kasnejših avantgard (šestdesetih in sedemdesetih let) se je zgodil na obeh straneh železne zavese. Tedanji teater in film sta razširila subverzije »sistema« v dejanske umetniške forme, ki so temeljile na rabah označevalcev diskontinuitet in na radikalni odpovedi običajnim kodam sporočil občinstvu. Svet, ki so ga »subvertirali«, je bil isti v Parizu ali Pragi ali Beogradu ali Ljubljani. Lahko trdimo, da so se avantgarde v tako imenovanem realnem socializmu vpisale v gibanja, ki so poskušala preusmeriti pot emancipacije v končni modernistični projekt interakcije med avtonomno umetnostjo in družbeno svobodo. Številne primere »eksperimentalnih« gledališč, filmov, poezije itd., skupaj s filozofijami osvoboditve v Jugoslaviji, med drugimi »obrobnimi« državami realnega socializma, lahko uvrstimo med primere na tem prizorišču.

Ključne besede: umetnost, subverzija, družba, gledališče, osvoboditev

Darko Štrajn je diplomiral iz filozofije in sociologije na Filozofski fakulteti Univerze v Ljubljani, kjer je doktoriral iz Fichtejeve filozofije. Ob delu na Pedagoškem inštitutu v Ljubljani predava teorijo filma na Visoki šoli za umetnost Univerze v Novi Gorici in epistemologijo humanistike na Fakulteti za humanistični študij (AMEU – ISH) v Ljubljani. Njegove raziskave zajemajo teme, kot so filozofija, estetika, filmske študije, politika, izobraževanje in družbene spremembe. Je avtor šestih knjig in številnih knjižnih poglavij ter na stotine drugih publikacij. Njegova knjiga *From Walter Benjamin to the End of Cinema* (2017) je izšla v angleščini. Njegova zadnja knjiga pod naslovom *Ali eksistenca ali subjekt?* (Either Existence or Subject) pa je izšla leta 2022.

darko.strajn@guest.arnes.si

Zapuščina avantgard v družbenih, kulturnih in političnih kontekstih

Darko Štrajn
Pedagoški inštitut, Ljubljana

Avantgarde so ves čas na svojih poteh doživljanja razočaranj in evforičnih prebojev, ustvarjanja subverzivnih učinkov glede na politični sistem, vladajočo moralo in ideologijo, razvijale transkulturno razumevanje umetnosti in njene vloge v družbi. Tako rekoč dokončni »uspeh« poznih avantgard, poimenovanih tudi neoavantgarde (šestdesetih in sedemdesetih let), se je zgodil na obeh straneh takratne železne zavese. Disruptivni poteki dejavnosti so arhivirani tako rekoč na vseh področjih umetnosti. Gledališče in film pa sta takrat še posebej poudarjeno razširila subverzije »sistema« kot dejanske umetniške oblike, ki so temeljile na rabah diskontinuitet in presenetljivih novih form na podlagi radikalnih preobrazb običajnih kodiranj sporočil javnosti. Svet, ki je bil tako »subvertiran«, je bil sicer raznolik, a hkrati isti v Parizu ali Pragi ali Beogradu ali Ljubljani. Dogajanja v sodobni umetnosti pa se odražajo v teorijah tako, da jih ni mogoče interpretirati, ne da bi navajali reference na avantgardne in neoavantgardne pojave v preteklosti. Obsežni kulturni in raziskovalni prostor refleksije se je vzpostavil s pomočjo Lyotardove označbe dobe, ki je bila manj nova v primerjavi z njeno opredelitvijo spremembe razumevanja umetniške invencije. Ta virtualni prostor je omogočil restitucijo političnosti umetnosti tako, da je nenehno postavljal pod vprašaj njeno delovanje v soočenju z učinki reifikacije v strujanjih fetišizirane svobode trga. Med mnogimi možnimi primeri navajam umetniške preboje šestdesetih in sedemdesetih let 20. stoletja, ki so v interakciji s protestnimi gibanji in emancipatoričnimi idejami dosegli dolgoročne politične učinke. Sami artefakti in vsakovrstne evidence dogodkov so v prostoru postmodernizma postali objekti procesa simbolizacije družbenih učinkov. Artefakti in hkrati simboli na trgu dobijo ceno ne glede na svojo vsebino, ne glede na pomene gest in deklaracij, s čimer je njihova izvirna subverzivnost nevtralizirana. Vendar pa ostane paradigmatska, odprta za reinterpretacijo in za oživljanje v ponovitvah, ki jih legitimira okvir postmodernizma: ponovitev namreč postavi pod vprašaj kontekst. Pojmov modernizma in avantgard pa ne gre preprosto izenačevati, ampak ju je treba upoštevati kot prepletajoči se

kategoriji, katerih gibanje se odvija skozi razlike in nerazločljivosti. Tako imenovana eksperimentalna gledališča šestdesetih let so temeljila na taki logiki, kakršno je Leutrat opredelil v primeru Godardovega filma *Nori Pierrot* (Pierrot le fou - 1965). Različno radikalni hepeningi in performansi šestdesetih in sedemdesetih let so se bolj ali manj odrekli narativni formi gledališča in v novem odmevu na avantgardne deklaracije dvajsetih let vzpostavljali povezavo »umetnosti in življenja«. Čeprav bi težko opredelili skupno značilnost celotne množice konceptov, struj in gibanj v takratnem gledališkem dogajanju, pa je vendarle mogoče reči, da so ta gledališča plasirala označevalec telesa. Antoloških primerov, ki bi jih lahko našteli, je na desetine, če ne na stotine. Zaradi jasnosti, o čem govorim, naj spomnim na performans *Dyonisus in 69*, dunajski akcionizem, Boalovo gledališče zatiranih, Living Theater itn. Tematika telesa, ki je v tem času postala predmet vrste humanističnih teorij, je v praksah gledaliških avantgard še najbolj ponazorila benjaminovsko »sled avre« in s tem manifestirala iredukitibilno razliko med gledališčem in filmom. Fizično telo igralca je pomemben »instrument« vzpostavljanja stika z gledalci in s tem instrument rušenja buržoazne institucije, ki je ločila gledalce in igralce. Kar je o funkciji, pomenih, vlogah, spolnih atributih, ideologiji in osvoboditvi telesa razvila teorija, je gledališče apliciralo na svojo prakso. Če se je zdelo tudi samim akterjem, da so bile avantgardne intervencije v vseh oblikah in na vseh področjih umetnosti v njihovem marginaliziranem delovanju efemerne in neuspešne, pa je zdaj vidno, da so prav s svojo hipnostjo, enkratnostjo, singularnostjo, ekstremnimi gestami, prekinitvami in »škandaloznostjo« sčasoma vzpostavile razliko z *mainstreamom*, ki je nasprotno normaliziral in absorbiral sestavine in atribute avantgardnih delovanj. Paradoks v tem procesu z ozirom na politično intenco avantgard pa je v tem, da se je skozi apropriacijo v *mainstreamu* nevtralizirala subverzivna nota, kar pomeni, da je uspeh radikalnih umetniških form v plasiranju na trg izgubil najbolj temeljne emancipacijske težnje. Disruptivnost, fragmentarnost, subverzivnost ipd., najpogosteje v formi diskontinuiranosti kot dediščina avantgard iz časa modernizma, ostajajo ključne lastnosti umetnosti, ki se navezuje na emancipativne družbene težnje. Vprašanja, kako doseči namen, namreč senzibilizirati javnost, decentralizirati množično percepcijo z izvirnimi vključevanji novih tehnologij ipd., so nenehno odprta. Vsaka uspešna umetniška akcija je enkraten odgovor, singularna gesta in transkulturni označevalec dekodiranja form dominacije. Zato je pomembno, da se umetniška intervencija pripeti nepričakovano, nepredvidljivo, na način estetske gverile in kot *dogodek*. Iskanja in poskusi umetniških akcij, včasih obskurnih, zoženih na tako rekoč sfero intimnosti, drugič pa tudi spektakularnosti, se torej nadaljujejo iz performansa v performans brez perspektive konca.