

The Avant-Garde – The Very Short Introductions Podcast – Ep 58

Rebecca Parker 00:07

Welcome back to the Very Short Introductions Podcast. From public health to Buddhist ethics, soft matter to classics, and art history to globalization, we'll showcase a concise and original introduction to a wide range of subjects, for wherever your curiosity may take you. So here is today's very short introduction.

David Cottington 00:26

Hello, my name is David Cottington. I'm professor of the history of art at Kingston University London. I've been interested in political and social issues within art and culture all my adult life. And this has led me to an interest in the avant-garde, which has become my major scholarly focus. It's a topic of my very short introduction on this concept, and I'd like to talk to you about it.

David Cottington 00:48

It's an important topic, I think, because it's on the one hand, a familiar term; you will probably already know that across both culture and the market for goods, it's one that identifies novelty and originality. In recent weeks, I've come across haircuts, property lettings, fashion and even, only this week, breadmaking described as, quote, avant-garde. In other words, it's a marketing asset. On the other hand, however, this, in fact, is all that's left of a much bigger idea that's been a key term in our means of understanding modern culture across all its practices, and whose history I want to explain. At its origins, avant-garde was a term of approval, one identifying new and different qualities of cultural practices, and a criterion for assessing the value of their products, for distinguishing what was worth attending, from what wasn't. If a work was termed avant-garde, it was aesthetically valuable. If it wasn't, it was already conventional.

David Cottington 01:49

So it was an important arbiter of cultural quality. What then happened to it? How did it become reduced and generalized into a marketing tool? This is what I want to explore. It's a French term, as you've probably recognized, a military one, for that part of an army that went ahead of the main force and scouted out for the enemy. Originating in the militias of the French Revolution of the 1790s, part of that amazing upheaval that led to so many of the modern values such as egalitarianism that govern the lives we still lead. It initially had both political and social meanings. Slowly, its connotations broadened as revolutionary notions of progress and originality took hold. And when the monarchy was restored in France in 1815, much to the chagrin of many on the political left, it became for these former revolutionaries a way of thinking how society might be moved forward from such outmoded autocracy. One technocratic socialist thinker, Count Henri de Saint-Simon, proposed in the mid 1820s, that society should be led by a triumvirate of occupations.

David Cottington 02:55

Those are the scientist, the industrialist, and the artist. Of these the artist's creative faculties should take priority. Since Simon's group described this role as that of the avant-garde, as generating the means of the economic renewal of society. You may recognize here what was the first iteration of that policy of promoting the creative industry, so called, that currently drives many of the policies of Western governments. It was and is an instrumentalisation of artistic creativity, a harnessing of it for economic purposes. This idea took hold in France, where the centralized government that Napoleon bequeathed even in defeat allowed it to be deployed effectively by the state. And through the mid 19th century, it made of Paris the cultural capital of the Western world, with an unrivaled infrastructure of cultural institutions, led by the Académie Française, and including exhibiting societies, prizes, structured careers, critical apparatuses and their criteria. I should say here that this wasn't the only understanding of the role of art then current. Across the channel in England, the poet Shelley and other writers opposed to the ways in which industrialized capitalism was reducing all social relations to those of exchange value between commodities. The cash nexus, as the philosopher Carlyle called these, around 1820 declared the values of the poetic imagination to be paramount.

David Cottington 04:22

Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world, as Shelley rather hopefully proclaimed. Their imagination, and this was generalized to cover artists in all media, whilst, he argued, the most important quality in its own terms, as being those that enable the poet to think otherwise, to envision alternatives to the lived present of capitalism. This libertarian principle stood in clear opposition to Saint-Simon's emphasis, but I'll return to this. In the meantime, across the western world, and soon from beyond it, aspirant artists in all media flocked to Paris, to try for a successful career. So many in fact that the channels of their advancement through the state edges of a conventional career became overloaded and many turned to rely upon each other, and on the sector of the art market that like them was looking for opportunities for success on the periphery. In these circumstances, aesthetic innovation and originality gained market value as differentiating them from the mainstream. The result was that by the end of the 19th century in Paris, there had developed a considerable community of several thousand cultural producers across the arts, who were committed to the celebration of artistic imagination for its own sake, as being the only asset they possessed. This differentiated them from the mainstream and deposed them to its values. They reached for the identity of avant-garde as that of community within art, placing themselves in a different and more innovative inheritance. This is the understanding I started with as an art historian.

David Cottington 05:50

From 1970, I acquired a belief in the avant-garde as the locus of the best the most radical art being made at any particular time, in any of the arts. It was a given. It was taken for granted without analysis or reflection. Indeed, it was accepted by all art historians, including myself, as a truth about this population of artists, on the terms that the avant-garde itself had secured, as being so distinct from the mainstream as to have achieved a break with his values. The term adopted was that of rupture. So when I began to look at modern art in Paris at the beginning of the 20th century, I looked in particular at the movement in painting called Cubism, which Picasso and Braque originated in around 1907, and which was driving the avant-garde in the five years before the First World War and through the years of this conflict. I took for granted that Cubism was to be understood within the context of the avant-garde preoccupations, and that the avant-garde aspirations and obsessions were what gave it the value it had

for modern culture. But then I began to think about it. Why this? Not just what was cubism but what really was the avant-garde, in a material practical sense? Then like most of my colleagues and most of the art historians I was reading, I became fascinated by this question. I realized that within the matrix of factors that were making artists turned towards aesthetic radicalism, the most important was that a professionalization, a professionalization that was common among the non entrepreneurial occupations, mostly of the middle class of the societies and economies of the advanced capitalist West.

David Cottington 07:26

That is, for about 50 years, from the last third of the 19th century on, there was a wave of professionalization on the part of accountants, lawyers, doctors, and artists, too, all seeking to take control, either from the state or from the vagueries of the market for their skills, of the means of managing their own careers, as well as of upholding standards and of safeguarding their monopolies on the knowledge is required for this. And I realized that this was also what happened in the avant-garde, because they too, are subscribing to the notion of expertise. In their case, that of aesthetic experimentation and innovation. So they were the taste professionals, if you like, a community, a homogeneous population of cultural producers, whose ideas were being shaped from the outside by this professionalization process of which they were yet apart. And at the same time, they also had a sense of themselves as opposed to this process. So they were both complicit with and resistant to it. They were, in effect, a formation, a term I borrowed from sociology, a social structure, both shaped by outside factors, and also structuring the work of its members.

David Cottington 08:38

It wasn't just willpower alone, that made this formation, but also the effect of accidental or contingent historical factors such as professionalization. So what you have in the Parisian avant-garde around 1900, is a potential tension between professionalization and rupture, between the contingent and the ideological. This was a tension that could, and eventually did, turn into a contradiction, one that would destabilize the formation. It would take several phases of development of the formation to break out, but if we're to understand this dynamic, it's crucial to hold on to both the fact and history of the social community and that of the ideology of rupture, that for its members, was driving this. In a nutshell, over the course of the succeeding century, these phases of development saw the formation become progressively co opted by the attractions of capitalist consumerism, while the ideology led artists repeatedly to seek to recuperate the originary libertarianism of Shelley, the idea of the imagination as a privileged faculty. In the May 1968 events in Paris, for example, the revolutionary ferment threw up the slogan, among others, "All power to the imagination."

David Cottington 09:51

The first phase, when around the turn of the 20th century, artists in this newly consolidating avant-garde sought ways of using their innovations for market advantage and aesthetic distinction. They're coming together as a formation was an ad hoc or unintended affair. This produced the flourishing of isms, within which that period is peppered, as well as the nearly, would you believe, 200, little literary and artistic magazines that circulated in Paris in the decade before 1914, each declaring its break or rupture with all the others. The formation itself was a byproduct of this competition, but the next generation of its members who came to adulthood, during and after the war, it had become a given. the medium they grew up in. Progressively, it became the most influential factor in the shaping of Modern

Art and the inter-World War decades were its high point. For some avant-gardists, especially those in Russia in the years after the Bolshevik Revolution in 1917, that upheaval gave a political legitimation to replace the making of art objects, "baubles for the bourgeoisie," as they were dismissed, with initiatives to support the new socialist society.

David Cottington 11:04

For others, the height of their ambition was to lead this increasingly co-opted institution to be the CEO, as it were, of Avant-Garde Incorporated. The Dadaist Tzara, the constructivist Theo van Doesburg and the surrealist Breton, all aspired to this. By the mid 20th century in return, sectors of capitalist culture such as fashion had accommodated themselves to the avant-garde. In 1951, the fashion photography of Cecil Beaton did a shoot for Vogue, in which he posed models wearing that year's new frocks in front of a huge strip painting by the leading abstract expressionist Jackson Pollock. It was unlikely that either Beaton, Vogue, or the models had any idea of Pollock's purpose in making such paintings. But they were recognizably avant-garde, and had by then, a cultural cachet that could be useful in the fashion world. This was the tipping point. The moment when the relationship between the avant-garde and commodity culture became a two way process. It was the moment when the pent up, unspendable wartime savings of the American middle class could at last be spent on the Cadillacs, etc., that were once again replacing cruisers at the center of the US economy.

David Cottington 12:17

And reciprocating Beaton's gesture, US artists celebrated this development with pop art as Lichtenstein, Rosenquist, Wesselman, and many others fetishized this aesthetics of plenty. Not all artists across the West did, so let alone elsewhere or shared their optimism. Besides a few Americans such as Oldenburg, Edward and Nancy Kienholz, and, more ambivalently Andy Warhol, those in Europe, in rationing-restricted Britain, for instance, the Independent Group, artists Richard Hamilton and Eduardo Paolozzi drawled with some equivocation over US car styling and refrigerators, while in East Germany, Gerhard Richter, Sigmar Polke, and their comrades in the Critical Realist group, were more explicitly condemnatory. And over the next 20 years from the mid 1960s, as pop broadened into post modernism, this bifurcation was consolidated into opposing camps, producing a celebratory and a critical post modernism, the one being happily assimilated into capitalist culture, and the other looking to recuperate Shelley's libertarian ideology. This, in brief, brings us to where we are now.

David Cottington 13:30

On the one hand, there is an assimilated, co-opted, de facto avant-garde that, promoted by most of the art market, the inheritor of the institutional history and cultural cachet of the 20th century avant-garde, the patrons, both on the supply and the demand side of the mushrooming number of art fairs across the world, where there were three such fairs only a few decades ago, there are now over 100 globally each year, and which represents the high art sector of the generalized commodity market, where, as I suggested at the start of this talk, the status claim of avant-garde is merely a promotional asset. On the other, a socially committed tendency that is inherited, and is grounded in not the cultural cachet of avant-gardehood, but the potential freedoms and critical disposition of those previous attempts at the recuperation of avant-gardist ideology. There's very little relation between these two alternative avant-gardes. As is so much at the present time, they seem to represent that private, the public bifurcation

that dominates public discourse. In short, the concept of errant guard is still one to be struggled for. How, and with what aims, depends upon your point of view. I'll leave this with you. Bye bye.

Rebecca Parker 14:48

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