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Revolutions and the Avant-Gardes

1. Introduction

Most of us will agree that today revolutions are hard to find. A decade ago issues of communism, revolution and class antagonism attracted some attention but only until the economic crisis stunningly revealed the absence of viable theories relating to issues such as social justice, revolution, social antagonism, etc. Soon it became generally accepted that new times required new theories, but since revolution was no longer happening the term soon lost much of its subversive meaning. As a consequence of such situation the term has been transformed into a quotidian word used in everyday speech to enhance the meaning of extreme change or achievement. We thus hear speak of the revolutionary anti-ageing formula that reduces wrinkles by 64%, about a revolutionary financial invention that allows one to spend more than he or she earns, or of a gastronomic revolution brought about by fusion cooking. What about “aesthetic revolution?” Perhaps not surprisingly, in Wikipedia the term refers foremost to “Lifestyle fitness clothing.”

The mentioned examples show that, especially in the last decades, revolution has lost much of its previous significance. In the past it affected innumerable human lives and determined the course of communities of sense in ways that very much diverged from those of our contemporaneity. Today revolution has lost its historical and political significance, and this change has opened the door to inflationary use of the term.

In Western history the paradigmatic socio-political revolution is the “French Revolution” (1789–1799)—an event of such historic proportions that it produced a specific signification not only in relation to other similar events that followed it but also when transposed into other realms of society. Compared to the French Revolution, all previous revolutions appear insignificant. This holds true both of the English Revolution of 1642 and the “American Revolutionary War,” i.e.,

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“American War of Independence” (1775–1783), as well as for later cases such as the European revolutions of the nineteenth century (of 1830, 1848 and 1871). Kant referred to the invention of his transcendental philosophy as a “Copernican revolution,” while Romanticist philosophers such as Friedrich von Schlegel spoke of “aesthetic revolution.” After 1789 “revolution” soon became a household word.

The other historic socio-political revolution in the last two centuries was the “October Revolution” (1917), which, like the French Revolution, sent ripples of fear, hope and anxiety across Europe. “Revolution” also entered the vocabulary of avant-garde artists and helped engender the idea of an “alliance of political and artistic radicalism, this parallel of the two avant-gardes.”¹ In 1917 the Dadaist artist Hugo Ball referred to “the Dada revolution,” the leader of the surrealist movement André Breton often referred to the surrealist revolution, and the leader of Italian futurism, Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, elaborated on the futurist revolution and the “Italian revolution.” In these last cases it is reasonable to infer that such an omnipresence of the term was linked to the October Revolution. In the Italian case, early on the term signifying the “aesthetic act of gigantic significance” was “war,” which was only later fully replaced by “revolution.”

“Scientific revolution” is another concept related to the already mentioned meanings of “revolution.” It was developed in the thirties of the previous century by French philosopher of science Alexandre Koyré. Koyré distinguished several revolutions in modern physical science that were all characterized by discontinuities: the Greek development of the idea of Cosmos, the revolution of Galileo and Descartes, an unspecified revolution in the nineteenth century, and finally the more recent revolution of Albert Einstein and Niels Bohr. In his view the scientific discoveries in Europe a few decades before and after 1600 constituted the paradigmatic revolution: “Earlier concepts and theories lost their meaning because they no longer made sense in the context of the new world-view; the new concepts and theories at once began to look seductively self-evident for the same reason.”² The “intellectual mutation,” as Koyré called it—borrowing the term from the French philosopher and historian of science

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¹ Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), p. 11.

² Floris H. Cohen, *The Scientific Revolution: A Historiographical Inquiry* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), p. 75.

Gaston Bachelard—consisted of “the replacement, by Galileo and Descartes, of the closed, purposive, qualitative Cosmos of the Greeks and of medieval Europe with the conception of the infinite space of Euclidean geometry. [...] The concept of the ‘Scientific Revolution’ denoted, in its original guise, not a historical period so much as an event, or rather a highly interconnected range of events.”³

More recently the concept of the scientific revolution became associated with Thomas Kuhn’s famous work, *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions* (1962). Kuhn too, saw the main precondition of a revolution in the capacity of natural sciences to create a radically new viewpoint and a novel way of looking at, and explaining, natural phenomena—in other words, to create an intellectual mutation.

An issue related first to scientific revolution was the question of whether a revolution is a single and unique (specific) historical event or rather a part of a recurring (or potentially recurring) pattern. The prevalent view is that such scientific revolutions were more than one, but the revolution around 1600 represents *the* scientific revolution.

Another revolution was the philosophical one, made by Immanuel Kant. Kant, who saw his own philosophical endeavor as “scientific,” regarded his transcendental philosophical project as an essential turning point in modern philosophy and thus a veritable scientific revolution. In the preface to the second edition of his *Critique of Pure Reason* (1787), Kant twice likens his own philosophical “revolution” to that of Copernicus: the latter dared, “in a manner contradictory of the senses, but yet true, to seek the observed movements, not in the heavenly bodies, but in the spectator.”⁴ Similarly, claims Kant, “Hitherto it has been assumed that all our knowledge must conform to objects.”⁵ Contrary to this common sense approach, we must, argues Kant, “suppose that objects conform to our knowledge. This would agree better with what is desired, namely, that it should be possible to have knowledge of objects *a priori*, determining something in regard to them prior to their being given. We should then be proceeding precisely on the lines of Copernicus’ primary hypothesis.”⁶

³ *Ibid.*, p. 495.

⁴ Immanuel Kant, *Critique of Pure Reason*, translated by Norman Kemp Smith (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1965), p. 25.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 22.

⁶ *Ibid.*

In relation to revolutions in science as well as in society, the ambiguity of the term “revolution” was often played upon, for it could denote both a mechanical circular motion, and thus a recurrence of the same, and an instance of radical historical change intrinsic to human knowledge or historical progress, based on the negation of the past and a vision of a future.

The revolution in the twentieth century was the October Revolution, with yet another historic revolution on grand scale being the “Great Proletarian Cultural Revolution” (1966–1976) in China. Of course social and political revolutions also existed elsewhere: in Latin America, for example, where the major ones were those in Mexico, Cuba, and Nicaragua. In the Cuban case the idea of a social and political revolution was linked to a characteristic component of cultural revolution, namely that of a “New Person” (an idea initially conceived by Leon Trotsky) who resembled a kind of a communist superman.

Since the nineteenth century and especially in the first half of the twentieth, the social agent of socio-political revolutions was considered to be, according to Marxism, the proletariat (or the working masses), with class struggle serving, in the words of Louis Althusser, as the “engine of history.” Such revolution, led by the communist party as the vanguard of the proletariat, was often designated as a “proletarian revolution.” An alternative agent of such revolutions was the nation. Marinetti thus claimed in 1921 that “The Nation is nothing other than a vast political party,”⁷ while in 1920 Chen Duxiu (1880–1942), one of the founders of the Chinese Communist Party, argued: “I recognize the existence of only two nations: that of the capitalists and that of the workers. [...] At present, the ‘nation’ of the workers exists only in the Soviet Union; everywhere else we have the ‘nation’ of the capitalists.”⁸

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“Political revolution” is related to social revolution, which is—especially according to Marxism—the pivotal form of revolution, around which cluster other revolutions: the political, the economic, and the cultural. Together with the political, social revolution designates a radical (and often violent) transformation

⁷ F. T. Marinetti, “Beyond Communism,” in Günter Berghaus (ed.), translated by Doug Thompson, *F.T. Marinetti, Critical Writings* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2006), p. 341.

⁸ Quoted in Benjamin I. Schwartz, *Chinese Communism and the Rise of Mao* (New York: Harper & Row, 1968), p. 28.

of the political and social system of a society as a whole. Such an interpretation was not limited to Marxists: Mussolini claimed, “For a revolution to be great [...] it must be a social revolution.”⁹ Since the French Revolution, modern revolution has been based on the idea of social justice—that a radical change is “just” even if it is against extant laws. In the nineteenth century it became related to the communist political agenda and its belief in an ontological antagonism that exists as a clear polar division of society and is materialized also in state institutions and their repressive or ideological mechanisms—in what Louis Althusser has called “ideological state apparatuses” and Jacques Rancière the “police.” Another possible cause for social upheaval—more common under populist regimes—is the creation of an enemy on ethnic or racial grounds.

Let me now for a moment stop at “cultural revolution.” It concerns two possible interpretations of culture within a society that is undergoing a social and a political revolution. In its conventional sense it concerns both, although it is usually carried out within the framework of the latter—but with the intention of achieving results also within the former, for it aims at remolding a society from the economic base to its superstructure. While social revolution aims primarily at transforming the economic base of a society and thereby effect a transformation in the means of production, cultural revolution aims either to transform segments of the already extant culture (by pursuing a certain cultural policy) or—and in such instance we speak of cultural revolution proper—to transform the very mentality and mindset of a people: “all systemic revolutions have had to confront this problem: [...] the production of a new culture in the narrow and specialized sense of literature, film, and the like; and the remolding of the culture of everyday life in the more general sense.”¹⁰

Lenin employed the notion “cultural revolution” in 1917 and the term in 1923 when he argued that “in our country the political and social revolution preceded the cultural revolution, the cultural revolution that now confronts us. This

⁹ Benito Mussolini, “Address to the National Corporative Council,” in *A Primer of Italian Fascism*, edited and with an introduction by Jeffrey Schnapp; translated by Jeffrey Schnapp, Olivia E. Sears, and Maria A. Stampino (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2000), pp. 163–164.

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 2010), p. 267.

cultural revolution would now be sufficient to transform our country into a completely socialist state.”¹¹

The need for rapid cultural transformation of society was especially urgent in underdeveloped countries such as the Soviet Union or China, prompting the respective communist parties to accentuate the need for a cultural revolution so as to accelerate the pace of economic transformation. It was within such a context that Joseph Stalin referred to writers and cultural workers as the “engineers of the human soul.”

The Cultural Revolution in China attempted to change not only the property of the means of production and thereby the class composition of Chinese society, but also the essential subjective and existential conditions of the lives of the Chinese people: Mao Zedong sought to transform norms, values, and culture as such, subsuming all forms of social and private lives to the aims of the Revolution. It offered the point of departure for the New Wave movement of the 1980s that attempted “to effect an aesthetic and ethical transformation of Chinese society and to redefine the Chinese identity.”¹²

Yet another revolution is “artistic revolution,” which designates an emergence of a new style and a new technique in art, a new mode of expression or language of art that can be relatively independent of simultaneous historic political or social transformations. Cases abound: impressionism (1870s and 1880s), expressionism (1905), cubism (1907), or abstract expressionism (1950s) were all instances of unprecedented artistic inventions.

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Artists were well aware of the capacity of art to transform our perception of the world and perhaps even to contribute, in its own way, to the transformation of the world itself. Thus the Mexican muralist painter Diego Rivera proclaimed cubism to be “a revolutionary movement, questioning everything that has previously been said and done in art. It held nothing sacred. As the new world would soon blow itself apart, never to be the same again, so Cubism broke down forms as they had been seen for centuries, and was creating out of the frag-

¹¹ Quoted in Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, p. 270.

¹² Martina Köppel-Yang, *Semiotic Warfare: The Chinese Avant-Garde, 1979–1989, A Semiotic Analysis* (Hong Kong: Timezone, 2003), p. 182.

ments new forms, new objects, new patterns, and—ultimately—new worlds.”¹³ A related point was made by Herbert Marcuse in his book *Aesthetic Dimension* (1977): “Art can be called revolutionary in several senses. In a narrow sense, art may be revolutionary if it represents a radical change in style and technique. Such change may be the achievement of a genuine avant-garde, anticipating or reflecting substantial changes in the society at large.”¹⁴ Nevertheless, both statements also imply that the “revolutionary” gesture is essentially that of a novel form of *representation* as opposed to the *transformation* effected by a movement such as Italian futurism, which as early as its initial 1909 “Futurist manifesto” announced its intent not only to change the established representations of the world, but also to transform the world itself.

2. The Avant-Gardes and Revolutions

The link between political and artistic revolution and between the artistic and the political avant-garde was highlighted by the Hungarian researcher of avant-gardes, Miklós Szabolcsi, who observed that “a [political and social] revolution without an avant-garde [in art] is really a pseudo-revolution.” He furthermore argued that “we can speak of a true avant-garde only if it overlaps with a political revolution, realizes it or prepares it.”¹⁵ What Szabolcsi was claiming was that without a connection to some kind of political avant-garde project, a true artistic avant-garde just doesn’t exist. In Szabolcsi’s view this is valid also the other way around: without the identification of avant-garde artists with the political revolution (and their ensuing support), such a revolution doesn’t stand a chance—not because artists would be such great soldiers, but because practically every authentic revolution contains an essential emancipatory kernel that is to be found in art. Such art is often (although not necessarily) also avant-garde: if a political and social revolution is avant-garde too, then these broader circumstances find an affinity with similarly revolutionary (avant-garde) art: “The avant-garde movements saw the artistic and the social revolution as an interdependent process, as a single continuum. That is why artists and critics often

¹³ Quoted in David Craven, *Art and Revolution in Latin America, 1910–1990* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2002), p. 11.

¹⁴ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978), p. xxi.

¹⁵ Miklós Szabolcsi, “Ka nekim pitanjima revolucionarne avangarde,” *Književna reč* 3, no. 101 (1978), p. 14.

described the October Revolution as a continuation of the revolutionary process started in Cubism and Futurism in the early 1910s. They believed that artistic and the social revolutions complement and reinforce each other.”¹⁶

The affinity between the political and the artistic avant-gardes is manifold: they often share a certain *Weltanschauung*, they both find themselves in a marginal and subordinate position and thus in similar circumstances, and both are forms of emancipation—just like the broader social revolution. Such affinity most frequently doesn’t last long: soon the anarchic spirit of the avant-gardes in art comes into conflict with the emergent institution-building spirit of the political avant-gardes.

What is avant-garde art? “Avant-garde” is a military term that was in use long before the French Revolution. It designated the advance guard—a small unit of soldiers who moved ahead of the main military force to explore the path on which the main unit will proceed. In the nineteenth century it started to be used also in politics and in art. What avant-garde means in politics is fairly well-known: it usually applies to the communist party. Why? Because according to Marxism (Leninism), the transitional period of socialism is to lead to a classless society, but to get there the proletariat—and society as a whole—needs someone to guide and lead it—and this is the communist party for it purportedly represents the advance guard or unit of the working class as a whole. The communist party is a collective revolutionary subject. This is why it is anonymous and why its members are replaceable: they are but cog wheels in the machine that is taking them—alas, with much effort and friction—to a classless society. In the Soviet case the party claims to possess the objective truth of history, this being possible only if it considers itself to be simultaneously exterior and interior to history. It is here that the difference between avant-garde art that involves changes in style and technique and that which involves the “descent into the street” occurs.

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The early meaning of the avant-garde is perhaps best explained by Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant in 1845: to know “whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human

¹⁶ Jaroslav Andel, “The Constructivist Entanglement: Art into Politics, Politics into Art,” in *Russian Constructivism 1914–1932: Art into Life* (New York: Rizzoli, 1990), p. 225.

race is.”¹⁷ In other words, as in politics, we can speak of an avant-garde in art only if the avant-garde artist knows where society is heading, what its historical purpose is—something that is possible if the artist ascribes to certain political ideas and visions of the future. Of course, in art these visions of the future are not as obvious as in politics; in art this future can also be present as an opposition to the past, as its transgression by new styles and expressive inventions—something that is typical of avant-garde art as well as of modernism as a whole. Nonetheless, Laverdant’s description of avant-garde art differs from its contemporary meaning, one that has been formed on the basis of twentieth-century experiences both with *Realsozialismus* (where it was the “real” that aborted the spirit of the revolution) and with its socialist aesthetics and cultural policies.

If in the nineteenth century we speak of avant-garde artists (forming what Stefan Morawski named “proto-avant-gardes”¹⁸), then in the twentieth century we refer to avant-garde movements—loose groups of artists who often disclaim such designation and proclaim their aim to transcend art in the classical sense. These movements share some common features: working as groups; publishing manifestoes; scandalizing society by provocative statements, behavior and actions; being active in different artistic genres or ignoring borders among them altogether; and, often, being also politically provocative and revolutionary. But there is also an important difference within the avant-gardes: there are those who limit their revolutionary actions to the realm of art—Cubism for example—and there are others who demand “that art move from representing to transforming the world,”¹⁹ that it step out of museums, galleries and so on into “life”—be it as political propaganda or as the transformation of society and the individual in other ways. What this means can be described by an unlikely author, namely Karl Marx from the eleventh of his “Theses on Feuerbach” (1845): “Philosophers have hitherto only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is to change it.” All we have to do is replace “philosophers” with “avant-garde artists” in order to discern where avant-garde artists were heading—to the demand “that art move from representing to transforming the world.” We see that there is thus a deeper unity or resemblance between the political and artistic avant-gardes—a feature

¹⁷ Quoted in Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 9.

¹⁸ Stefan Morawski, “On the Avant-garde, Neo-avant-garde and the Case of Postmodernism,” *Literary Studies in Poland* 21 (1989), p. 83.

¹⁹ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship and Beyond*, translated by Charles Rougle (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992), p. 14.

that, to a different extent, can be found throughout the previous century when appearances of avant-garde art coincided with political revolutionary events.

As has been claimed in more detail elsewhere,²⁰ in the twentieth century there existed three waves or generations of avant-garde art: the early (between 1905 and 1930), the neo-avant-garde (after World War II) and the post avant-garde (in the eighties in former or present socialist countries). The politicized avant-gardes sometimes found a political avant-garde with which to share their ideas and visions and sometimes they did not, in which case they played both roles—that of the political agent and the artistic creator. The early avant-gardes represent the paradigmatic instance of avant-garde movements in the twentieth century.

The early avant-gardes—futurism, cubism, expressionism, surrealism, constructivism and so on—wanted to change the world, society and art and didn't care much about money, profit or success. They were like political revolutionaries, completely devoted to their cause. The revolutions they created were both artistic and political, which is why I call them “aesthetic revolutions.” They conflated artistic and political aims, pursuing these in the artistic, political and social spheres of society. Other instances of aesthetic avant-gardes will be discussed in the closing part of this essay.

3. Revolutions through Art

We may agree that the purpose of the political avant-garde is to carry out a socio-political revolution, while the purpose of the politicized artistic avant-gardes is to carry out an aesthetic revolution that changes not only artistic styles but also the ways in which we perceive the world and life in general.

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At first glance all revolutions seem to fail—not only as attempts to “move from representing to transforming the world,” but also in their efforts to revolutionize life and society: in the 1920s Marinetti and the Italian futurists abandoned their ambitions to lead an independent and progressive politics and started to support or coexist with fascism, sharing the latter's nationalist affinities; Russian futurists—soon to be identified with the radical journal *Lef*—became increasing-

²⁰ See Aleš Erjavec (ed.), *Postmodernism and the Postsocialist Condition: Politicized Art under Late Socialism* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2003).

ly exclusivist and in 1925 lost the support of Lunacharski, who proclaimed the Lef group “to be an almost obsolete thing;”²¹ Constructivist artists Rodchenko and Lissitzky turned to publication design, making the propaganda magazine *USSR in Construction* (1930–1941) the means of their increasingly solitary constructivist research; surrealists in the thirties underwent transformation from a movement into a school, slowly losing or abandoning their special role as “adoptive children of the revolution,”²² no longer supporting Stalin but Trotsky and the Fourth International.

Yet in the decades following World War II, the early avant-gardes have undergone an unexpected change: “the failure of the avant-garde utopia of the unification of art and life coincides with the avant-garde’s overwhelming success within the art institution.”²³ Since “life” is not a definable category, “the avant-garde project is predisposed to failure, with the sole exception of movements set in the midst of revolutions,”²⁴ such as Russian constructivism. Bürger was the first to make such a claim, for he “viewed the situation from the perspective of the avant-garde rather than the traditional arts, and he therefore judged success not according to lasting aesthetic potential but according to radical political effect. [...] [A]s he argued, the avant-garde’s failure lay precisely in its being accepted as nothing more than the producer of legitimate works of art.”²⁵

The dilemmas then are these: should the fact that the radical early avant-gardes ended up progressively influencing other art the same way as the non-radical ones did be considered failure or success? Moreover, should the fact that they did not transform the world by fusing art and “life” be regarded as a sign of their

²¹ Leon Trotsky, quoted in Halina Stephan, *“Lef” and the Left Front of the Arts* (Munich: Verlag Otto Sagner, 1981), p. 53.

²² Walter Benjamin, “Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia,” in *Selected Writings 1927–1934*, vol. 2, edited by Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland and Gary Smith; translated by Rodney Livingston and others (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1999), p. 209.

²³ Peter Bürger, “Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*,” *New Literary History* 41, no. 4 (Autumn 2010), p. 705.

²⁴ Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the Turn of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1999), p. 15.

²⁵ Brandon W. Joseph, W. *Random Order: Robert Rauschenberg and the Neo-Avant-Garde* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), p. 12.

ultimate failure or not? In this respect their success equaled that of the “purely” artistic avant-gardes such as cubism.

The answers to these questions are important in relation to the assessment of the nature of an aesthetic revolution: “an aesthetic revolution could only be realized in conjunction with a total overhaul of society,”²⁶ the latter being contrasted with the “partial, the *merely* political revolution, which leaves the pillars of the house standing.”²⁷

The “bare” definition of a revolution runs as follows: “Revolution is a term with a precise meaning; the political overthrow from below of one state order, and its replacement with another. [...] [R]evolution is a punctual and not a permanent process. That is: a revolution is an episode of convulsive political transformation, compressed in time and concentrated in target, that has a determinate beginning [...] and a finite end.”²⁸

The opposite opinion is that of revolution as a continuous process and as a permanent revolution. Such revolution is a “*déroutement*”—an unfolding that transgresses the “end as a necessary failure” paradigm.

Revolution is here described either as an event or a process, or as a tension between the two. In this last case we regard it as both at once. In such a case, “revolution must be conceived [...] as an irreducible duality oscillating between process and event.”²⁹ Its nature as a temporal process causes it to remain unfinished and therefore a failure and a defeat: “self-criticism of the revolution [...] is the very condition for its reactivation, the condition for the ‘inversion’ of the void into a new opening on to the event.”³⁰ A revolution is thus a combination of a process and an event. This is true of a social and political revolution, but is it

²⁶ Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909–1944* (Providence, RI: Berghahn Books, 1996), p. 47.

²⁷ Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy of Law,” quoted in Stathis Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution: From Kant to Marx* (London: Verso, 2003), p. 326.

²⁸ Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review* 144 (March–April 1984), p. 112.

²⁹ Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, p. 27.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 341.

true also of aesthetic revolution? It seems that it is but to a lesser extent, for the sensible and sense-perception are not easily defined and articulated.

We will recall Laverdant's description from 1845 of an avant-garde and his demand that to know "whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going, know what the destiny of the human race is."³¹

It was the Croatian literary theorist Aleksandar Flaker who attempted to resolve this issue, a part of which concerned also the almost standard question of political and aesthetic utopia. Flaker introduced the notion of "optimal projection" in the etymological sense of *pro-jectio*, namely a shot forward, into the distance. He argued that the self-designation of individual avant-garde movements, such as futurism, constructivism, Zenitism and Ultraism, contained a projection toward the future. In such an instance at stake was not a "utopia," warned Flaker, but movement: "The notion of the 'optimal projection' does not signify for us the same as the notion of 'utopia.' 'Utopia' already with its original semantics designates a nonexistent 'place' or 'land,' while the texts that formed utopia regularly designate it as a closed, delimited space with an ideal social structure."³² In its representative discourse the avant-garde is the *opposite* of utopia and opposes "reification of the ideal, incessantly realizing its proper, individual, and poetic selection."³³ Utopia is a *static* entity and therefore the opposite of a movement: "The utopian project is a structure projected into the future, while optimal projection is only the direction of the movement. When we say: utopian project we by that very designation disqualify it as unrealizable while when speaking of optimal projection, we speak of a movement, which is realizable."³⁴

In this way a series of avant-garde activities acquires sense: manifestoes, public statements, political agendas, imaginary representations of the future to come that are immediately denigrated and overturned, leading Marx to abstain from depicting the classless society. Some of the same activities appear on the side of the political avant-gardes, especially once they gain power: the infinite planning in the former socialist countries, the detailed projections of the future and

³¹ Quoted in Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 9.

³² Kouvelakis, *Philosophy and Revolution*, p. 68.

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 69.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 336.

reports both equally fictitious, constitutes an imaginary movement into a socialist future that exists in documents and political speeches but not in historical reality—nor is it ever to appear therein. It is perhaps for this same reason that avant-gardes “theorize endlessly.”³⁵

Upon closer scrutiny the idea about the failure of the aesthetic avant-gardes seems premature, for an important segment of the “transformation of the world” includes not only punctual events within a revolution, but also profoundly changed sense perception and a redistribution of the sensible engendering new visions of world and of life, leading not only to a transformation of the expressive means of future art, but also to already lived as well as imagined or projected life all at once. Here is how these visions and experiences are expressed by the futurist Giovanni Papini in an article in the journal *Lacerba* on December 1, 1913:

I am a futurist because futurism signifies a total appropriation of the modern civilization with all its enormous wonders, its fantastic possibilities and its horrible beauties. [...] I am a futurist because I am tired of Byzantine tapestries, false intellectual profundity[,] [...] of harmonious rhymes, pleasant music, pretty canvases, photographic painting, decorative, classical, antique and ambiguous painting. [...] I am a futurist because futurism signifies love for risk-taking, for danger, for what didn't attract us, for what we have not tried, for the summit that we didn't expect and for the abyss that we have not measured. [...] I am a futurist because futurism signifies a desire for a greater civilization, for a more personal art, for a richer sensibility and for a more heroic thinking. I am a futurist for futurism signifies Italy as it was in the past, more worthy of its future and its future place in the world, more modern, more developed, more avant-garde than other nations. The liveliest fire burns today among the futurists and I like and I am boasting that I am and remain among them.³⁶

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Statements such as these show that a transformation of the world doesn't have to be deferred to an imaginary or distant future, but is already here. Within such framework “life” ceases to be an empty concept but becomes instead “a

³⁵ Stefan Morawski, “The Artistic Avant-Garde: On the 20th Century Formations,” *Polish Art Studies* 10 (1989), p. 88.

³⁶ Quoted in Giovanni Lista, *Le futurisme* (Paris: Hazan, 1985), pp. 91–92.

concept designating all material being and all that is immediately present to the senses.”³⁷ Life can also designate the shared life of individuals, of a social class or of a community. It is what they all have “in common,” with art being at the same time their expressive means and an experiential object of their perception.

Although an aesthetic revolution may be announced by an event—the founding manifestoes of various movements would count as such events— it necessarily involves a process whereby the extant, assimilated (and therefore often unnoticed) kinds of sensibility are replaced by some other kinds, with this change being constituted by and affecting different spheres of life. An aesthetic “revolution” thus always involves a profound change or transformation of perspective that necessarily exceeds the limits of art as “pure” art—especially that whose ambition is to research its proper expressive means (or “language”) or one that possesses no function except to be without one. If one compares the provocative and disorderly *serate* of the early Italian futurists or Giacomo Balla’s 1914 *Il vestito antineutrale*, with “shoes ready to deliver merry kicks to all neutralists,”³⁸ on the one hand and the pastoral artifacts of developed cubism from across the globe on the other, then one senses the difference between the radical and the artistic avant-gardes and therefore between different facets of art. It is now possible to answer the question about the “failure” of the avant-gardes: for the most part they failed neither in transforming life—instead they merged with it— nor by becoming successful—in this they simply joined their more pronouncedly artistic counterparts.

As already mentioned, there is a link between aesthetic, artistic and political revolution: “The coming Revolution will be at once the consummation of and abolition of philosophy; no longer merely ‘formal’ and ‘political,’ it will be a ‘human’ revolution. The human revolution is an offspring of the aesthetic paradigm.”³⁹ In this way the politicized avant-gardes represent in art a particular parallel and complement to the revolutionary political avant-gardes: they both strive to trans-

³⁷ Friedrich Schiller, *On the Aesthetic Education of Man, in a Series of Letters*, edited and translated by Elizabeth M. Wilkinson and L. A. Willoughby (Oxford: Clarendon, 1967), p. 101.

³⁸ Catherine Tisdall and Angelo Bozzolla, *Futurism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), p. 194.

³⁹ Jacques Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, translated by Steven Corcoran (London: Continuum, 2010), p. 120.

gress the borders between the relatively autonomous spheres of life that were erected in modernity and that art, by its very nature, transgresses incessantly.

The avant-garde movements of the previous century—be they the “early” (the “classical,” the “historical”) avant-gardes, the neo-avant-gardes or the post-avant-gardes—have been characterized by revolt, be it against art, tradition, the bourgeoisie, society or all of these; but not all of them have bound revolt to revolution—not all of them have bound the often individual and always counter-reactive action and discourse of revolt to the often programmatic and always collective and future-oriented project of a revolution. Those that did experience the conflicts inherent to political struggles, which, as a rule, avant-garde artists appear to have lost: they seem not to have been successful in welding the individual experience of freedom to the other, collective revolutionary experience. Since our view is usually that of autonomous art, its political aspirations and involvements arising from this striving for the “marriage of artistic and social revolution” fall victim either to the charge of cooption of art by politics or of the willful desire to turn its revolt into revolutionary action.

4. Aesthetic Revolutions⁴⁰

There is a Romantic author, often described as a major aesthete in the Romantic movement in Germany, who profusely employed the notion of “aesthetic revolution,” namely Friedrich von Schlegel (1773–1829).

In Schlegel the “aesthetic revolution” relates to two theses: that art of his contemporaneity (as well as any art of the present or the future) is not restricted by the seemingly unattainable ideals of Greek antiquity but is “futuristic, or to use Walter Benjamin’s terminology, a messianic one, considering art within a process toward ever higher achievements.”⁴¹ In Schlegel there thus exists no historic closure of art as in Hegel. Instead, art continues on its path, which is determined by philosophy: art of different epochs, whether of modernity or futurity, meets on the same comparative theoretical ground and in every epoch, be it present or future, continues on its path. Last but not least, Schlegel claims

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⁴⁰ See also Aleš Erjavec, “Estetska revolucija: Schlegel, Malraux in Rancière s Schillerjem,” *Filozofski vestnik* 33, No. 1 (2012), pp. 77–90.

⁴¹ Rancière, *Dissensus*, p. 60.

that in modern art—or with the demise of the ancient world—boundaries among genres have collapsed, thereby setting the stage for the general notion of art as such, which has become the dominant artistic designation for the next two centuries and beyond. Such a claim is echoed in Jacques Rancière and in his view that in the so-called “aesthetic regime of art” different genres and works coexist within an undifferentiated realm of art.

Another author employing the notion of the aesthetic revolution was André Malraux (1901–1976). Especially in his *La Métamorphose des dieux* (1957), Malraux outlined his own theory of “aesthetic revolution.” Again resemblance both with Schlegel and Rancière can be discerned, the reason for this uncanny similarity probably lying in their common reference to Kant and his Copernican revolution, which resulted not only in the transcendental position as regards our interpretation of the sensible world but was also related to the “‘way’ of seeing” in the aesthetic sense.

In Malraux “aesthetic revolution” refers to the enormous expansion of the realm of art occurring since 1900: “The metamorphosis of the past was first a metamorphosis of seeing. Without an aesthetic revolution, the sculpture of ancient epochs, mosaics, and stained glass windows would never have joined the painting of the Renaissance and the great monarchies; no matter how vast they might have become, ethnographic collections would never have surmounted the barrier that separated them from art museums.”⁴²

What caught Malraux’s attention and the reason why he designated it an “aesthetic revolution” was the phenomenon that occurred toward the end of the nineteenth century as Europeans for the first time started to regard—and thus to see and interpret—artifacts from historically and geographically distant cultures as subsumable under the general category “art”—even in instances in which such artifacts were created in settings that were unfamiliar with the notion of art altogether: “There seems in short to have been a puzzling transformation. An object that was (for example) once created to be a god, in a culture that had no

⁴² André Malraux, *La Métamorphose des dieux* (Paris: NRF, La Galerie de la Pléiade, 1957), p. 21.

word for art, has become a ‘work of art’ in a Western culture that, often enough, is unsure even of the name of the god that the object once embodied.”⁴³

What happened toward the close of the nineteenth century was that objects that were previously valued by Europeans for their material value only were then transformed in the eyes of their beholders: coins or statues comprised of precious metals, for example, that were previously simply melted down started now to be regarded as precious objects, their value to a large part unrelated to the material from which they were made. It was this essential transformation of the interested look into a disinterested aesthetic “gaze” that was of concern to Malraux: “The Egyptian statue that we now admire as ‘art,’ he suggests, is not ‘timelessly or essentially art any more than it was timelessly or essentially the Pharaoh’s double.’ It is both—and neither: ‘both’ in the sense that it *has been* a ‘double’ and is *now* a work of art; ‘neither’ in the sense that it is not *essentially* either.”⁴⁴

Malraux touched upon the issue of artifacts that have become art due to their being exhibited in museums, thereby joining Renaissance and modern western works in the “imaginary museum” of “art.” In other words, by detecting the changed stance of the European public and art establishment toward a whole body of artifacts that until then were not considered art but rather ethnographic objects or even precious metals only (what he called “a metamorphosis of our way of seeing”), Malraux diagnosed a hitherto unnoticed “aesthetic revolution” whereby the realm of art (and of the beautiful) was substantially broadened, setting the stage for its further expansion in the remainder of the twentieth century.

Schlegel and Malraux employed the notion of aesthetic revolution in related as well as in dissimilar ways. In Schlegel it applied both to the theory and to the object of its inquiry. In Malraux it applied to reality only, namely to the hitherto disregarded transformation of the way of seeing art objects and thereby to a profound reconfiguration of the realm of art. In this respect the aesthetics of Jacques Rancière resembles the logic of Malraux’s, for they both allow us to see the essential transformation as concerns “art” in the manner in which certain objects have begun to be regarded. Rancière distinguishes three regimes: the ethical regime

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⁴³ Derek Allan, “André Malraux and the Challenge to Aesthetics,” *Journal of European Studies* 33, no. 1 (2003), p. 28.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 31.

of images, the representational regime of art and the aesthetic regime of art. The first is based on ethics and the second on the veracity of the representation: by comparing the representation and the represented referent we can determine the “quality” of an image. Contrary to these two regimes the “aesthetic regime of art” abolishes the system of genres and creates “art” in the singular. The prerequisite for the creation of the aesthetic regime is a so-called “aesthetic revolution.”

In Rancière the “aesthetic revolution” concerns a hitherto unrecognized (or incorrectly designated) move from the representative regime of art (which is normatively based on representational criteria of veracity to the depicted referent) to the aesthetic regime of art (this one being much more democratic and transformative of the extant relations between the visible and the invisible): “In this regime, the statue of Juno [Ludovisi] does not draw its property of being an artwork from the conformity of the sculptor’s work to an adequate idea or to the canons of representation. It draws it from its belonging to a specific sensorium.”⁴⁵ This new sensorium is based on “aesthetic free play”—a feature in Rancière’s eyes essentially characteristic of the novel regime of art that emerged two centuries ago. The new regime introduced by Rancière covers all the art of more than two centuries.

According to Rancière, then, the “Kantian revolution” engenders an aesthetic “silent revolution” that creates the conditions of possibility for perceiving modern artifacts as art (very much along the lines noted by Malraux). Aesthetic free play thus “ceases to be a mere intermediary between high culture and simple nature, or a stage of the moral’s subject self-discovery. Instead, it becomes the principle of a new freedom, capable of surpassing the antinomies of political liberty.”⁴⁶

An “aesthetic revolution” is realized by spontaneous collective action—contrary to a political revolution, which is most often realized by a directed political action. The former involves not individuals but movements: cases where the discursive, practical and material activity and creativity of a group (or sporadic singular instances thereof) eventually generated an “enthusiasm” that transformed solitary cases into historically recognizable and mutually related events

⁴⁵ Jacques Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, translated by Steven Concoran (Cambridge: Polity, 2009), p. 29.

⁴⁶ Rancière, *Aesthetics and Its Discontents*, p. 99.

realized by groups or movements that are today displayed in material and discursive repositories of culture and art history or have been retained as material cultural artifacts. Italian futurism, surrealism, and other aesthetic avant-garde movements are not “just” a series of artistic phenomena that have been political and politicized simply by coincidence. They have become such things intentionally and have accordingly effected historical innovations and consequences. As instances of the “aesthetic,” they have intentionally attempted to unify the artistic and political components of human and social existence in a “futurist moment” or an “optimal projection.”

In Schlegel, Malraux and Rancière we encounter different albeit related usages of “aesthetic revolution.” In Schlegel the “aesthetic revolution” is not really a concept but a descriptive term referring to aesthetics and to its *object*, i.e. the beautiful in art. At the same time it is involved in Schlegel’s development of a different historical interpretation of art. Malraux’s use of the term is in some respects uncannily close to that of Rancière for it also involves a “way of seeing,” thereby pointing to the transmogrification of anthropological artifacts into works of art before the eyes of the public in an “imaginary museum.” At the same time, however, “aesthetic revolution” does not carry considerable conceptual import in Malraux either.

A different case is that of Rancière, who imputes to Schiller’s commentary on the Juno Ludovisi not only “aesthetic revolution,” which purportedly represents a “silent revolution,” with both revolutions naming the emergence of the “aesthetic regime of art.” He also, moreover, connects such a revolution to the Kantian “Copernican revolution” and to aesthetic experience, judgment of taste and the sensible. What Rancière is thus doing is transposing Kant’s “revolution” into the realm of the sensible, proclaiming aesthetics to be the transcendental precondition for contemporary notion of art. While Rancière shows much sympathy for aesthetic avant-gardes, he nonetheless regards them within the frame of his aesthetic regime of art.

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What is characteristic of an aesthetic revolution is that it is carried out by aesthetic avant-garde movements and that it accomplishes a pivotal modification in what Rancière designates as the “distribution of the sensible” (or, rather, its “redistribution”) in the sense that it represents a unity of art and politics, which are “consubstantial insofar as they both organize a common world of self-evident

facts of sensory perception.”⁴⁷ An aesthetic revolution resembles other kinds of revolutions except that it is realized by aesthetic avant-gardes that strive for a unity of art and “life.” It also produces a new sensibility and engenders a “new way of seeing.”

At the beginning of this essay I pointed out the obvious: recently the notion of the revolution has lost much of its former subversive potential. This doesn’t signify that this cannot change in the future and that revolution will never again acquire “revolutionary” significance. If it does, such an emergence will signify that certain conditions for the resurrection of revolution have been met and that these are now once more mirrored in contemporary social and political circumstances. The next time around such circumstances and context may transgress the dominant western paradigm of this notion as it has existed since the French Revolution and through the October and Chinese Cultural Revolutions, even though such interconnectedness is weaker than expected. It is equally possible that if a new revolution were to arise, it may reflect the fact that today society is organized differently than in the previous two centuries. Thus, today the world is one, but its singularity is less uniform than it was no more than a few decades ago. Revolutions are furthermore internally divided. It has thus been pointed out that “The French Revolution [...] was really three revolutions—a democratic republican revolution, a moderate Enlightenment constitutional monarchism invoking Montesquieu and the British model as its criteria of legitimacy, and an authoritarian populism prefiguring modern fascism.”⁴⁸ Every revolution can be divided in similar ways. In this essay it was my intent to explain the relation between revolution and avant-garde art and movements, a tandem that has very often existed together and that reached its apogee in the very beginning of the twentieth century. At that time and somewhat later, the forceful emergence and existence of aesthetic avant-garde movements such as Italian futurism and Russian constructivism shared a strong state, persuasive political ideology and often clear identification of the enemy. Today this situation is a thing of the past. Only the resurrection of these and related characteristics will allow for the avant-gardes to be born again. Revolution may follow a similar path.

⁴⁷ Gabriel Rockhill, “The Politics of Aesthetics,” in Gabriel Rockhill and Philip Watts (eds.) *Jacques Rancière. History, Politics, Aesthetics* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), p. 196.

⁴⁸ Jonathan Israel, *Revolutionary Ideas: An Intellectual History of the French Revolution from the Rights of Man to Robespierre* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2014), p. 695.