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# Avant-Garde Theory in the 1960s

by **Vratislav Effenberger** (1923–1986)

Translated by Matthew Rampley

## Abstract

Vratislav Effenberger is remembered primarily as the heir to Karel Teige from the 1950s and, as such, the leading representative of Surrealism in post-war Czechoslovakia. The editor of Teige's collected writings, as well as of anthologies of Surrealist texts, he wrote numerous articles on contemporary art and culture, with a focus on the legacy of relevance of Surrealism in the 1950s and 1960s. This text consists of a translation of a chapter from his only book-length theoretical study, *Reality and the Poetic* (1969), in which he offered an interpretation of the history of the avant-garde as well as a theoretical elaboration of avant-garde aesthetics. The translated chapter is prefaced with an introduction that provides a historical and intellectual background to Effenberger's work, including discussion of his marginalization by the socialist authorities as well as emphasis on key concepts in his work.

## Keywords

Surrealism; avant-garde; Prague Spring; Paris; André Breton; Marxist aesthetics; dialectics; creative imagination

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# Avant-Garde Theory in the 1960s

by Vratislav Effenberger

## Introduction

Matthew Rampley

The text translated here is a chapter from a longer book, *Reality and the Poetic: On the Developmental Dialectic of Modern Art* (**Figure 1**), by the poet, essayist and cultural theorist Vratislav Effenberger (1923–1986). It was published in 1969 and was Effenberger’s longest sustained historical and theoretical study. It tries to make sense of modernist and avant-garde practice in Czechoslovakia, but frames it with a wider discussion of American and European art.<sup>1</sup> The chapter ‘The Concept of the Avant-Garde’ explores a number of themes, such as the role of aesthetic value and ideology, the art market, taste, the relation between the avant-garde and socialist revolutionary politics, the place of the individual artist in the avant-garde as a broader collective phenomenon, and the consumption of avant-garde art. A recurring central pre-occupation is with how to describe and interpret the idea of the *history* of the avant-garde, and, as such, it is concerned with questions of historiographic method. The chapter and the book of which it is a part was written against the background of the dominance of historical and dialectical materialism (Effenberger refers to it as *vývojová teorie* - ‘developmental theory’) in socialist Czechoslovakia. Thus, while it was ostensibly about the past, the book was also about the present for, as Effenberger made clear in the introduction, ‘the historiography of art can only be an active cultural agent if it helps us form a perspective on *contemporary* questions of artistic creation.’<sup>2</sup> It is a densely argued text that can sometimes be difficult to follow, and it is not helped by Effenberger’s contorted style of writing. He often relies on overly complex sentence constructions that pile subordinate clause onto subordinate clause, in a manner that can only be rendered with difficulty in English. Yet despite such challenges it presents to the reader, it repays careful attention as a document of the history of art theory and criticism in Czechoslovakia in the 1960s and because of its analysis of the dilemmas and contradictions of the avant-garde.

## Effenberger: biographical background

Before we consider the details of the text, it is useful to ascertain who Effenberger was, for outside of the current-day Czech Republic, he is little known. His relative anonymity can be attributed to the fact that he wrote almost entirely in Czech and, as with so many other Czech writers, his work struggled to gain international recognition. Equally it can be put down to

1) Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie: k vývojové dialektice moderního umění*, Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1969.

2) Effenberger, *Realita a poesie*, 12.



Figure 1: Front cover Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie: k vývojové dialektice moderního umění*, Prague: Mladá Fronta, 1969.

the fact that much of his writing remained unpublished in his own lifetime, suppressed by the censorship of the socialist authorities.

Effenberger is known primarily as the most prominent advocate and representative of Surrealism in post-1945 Czechoslovakia. He was born in the provincial town of Nymburk in Bohemia but moved to Prague in 1932. After finishing high school in 1944, he was employed as a laboratory assistant at the Baal film cinema company. In 1946 he moved to the Czechoslovak Film Institute. At the same time, he enrolled at the Academy of Chemical and Technical Engineering, while also studying history of art and aesthetics at Charles University in Prague. He never completed his education in chemistry but graduated at the latter institute under the supervision of Jan Mukařovský, one of the leading members of the Prague Circle of linguistic and cultural theorists. Subsequently, Effenberger endured a career of official suppression and marginalization that was typical for many intellectuals under socialist rule. Deemed subversive because of his intellectual interests, he was sacked in 1954 from his job at the Film Institute and compelled to work in the Brewing and Malting Research Institute in Prague. Four years later, he was sacked again and had to work at an underground coal gasification plant in Březno u Chomutova in north-western Bohemia. In 1966, in more auspicious times, he was allowed to resume working at the Film Institute and then, two years later, was appointed a researcher at the Arts Faculty of Charles University. This promising turn of events came to a brutal halt in 1970 when, in the wake of the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia and suppression of the Prague Spring two years earlier, he was relieved of his university position and sent to work as a translator in the government information service bureau. In 1975 he was then required to work as a nightwatchman for two years. Along with other notable representatives of Czechoslovak culture such as Václav Havel and the philosopher Jan Patočka, he was one of the 242 signatories to Charter 77 criticising the government for its abuse of human rights and, like them, was then subject to state harassment.<sup>3</sup> The same year that the charter was drafted, 1977, he was forced into early retirement and then led a twilight existence until his death in 1986, writing numerous texts but not being permitted to publish anything.

Effenberger's oeuvre embraced a diverse range of material and encompassed literary as well as theoretical and historical writings. He was also a significant poet.<sup>4</sup> Of the academic works that appeared in his own lifetime, the first was a short monograph on Henri Rousseau that appeared in 1964.<sup>5</sup> Later, in 1969, he published *Reality and the Poetic* and, in the same year, he edited (**Figures 2 and 3**) two anthologies of Surrealist art and writing.<sup>6</sup> In 1984, a volume of short filmic / theatrical scripts was published in exile in Toronto (it was republished in Czechoslovakia in 1991), which have drawn some degree of interest, primarily because they are difficult to categorise.<sup>7</sup> He also gained prominence as editor of the oeuvre of Karel Teige, who had died in 1951. This included a volume of late unfinished texts by Teige on Cézanne and

3) See Jonathan Bolton, *World of Dissent: Charter 77, the Plastic People of the Universe and Czech Culture under Communism*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2012.

4) His collected poems were published posthumously as *Básně I & II* [Poems], Prague: Torst, 2004 and 2010.

5) Vratislav Effenberger, *Henri Rousseau*, Prague: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění, 1964.

6) Vratislav Effenberger, *Surrealistické východiště (1938–1968)* [The Surrealist starting point, 1938–1968], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969; *Výtvarné projevy surrealismu* [The artistic expressions of surrealism], Prague: Odeon, 1969.

7) *Surovost života a cynismus fantasie* [The cruelty of life and the cynicism of fantasy], Toronto: '68 Publishers, 1984.

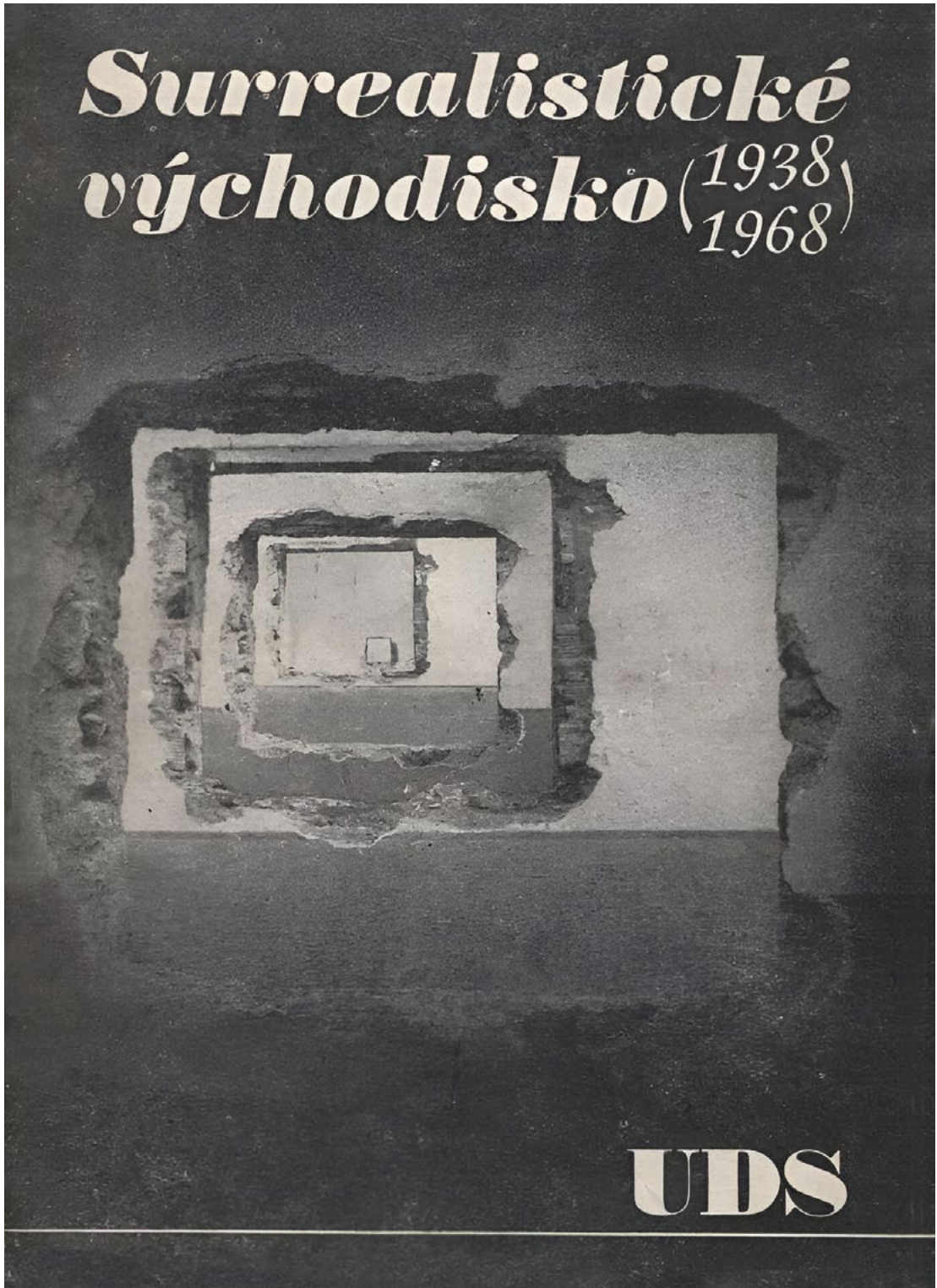


Figure 2: Front cover of Vratislav Effenberger, Stanislav Dvorský and Peter Král, eds, *Surrealistické východisko 1938–1968* [The Surrealist starting point], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969.

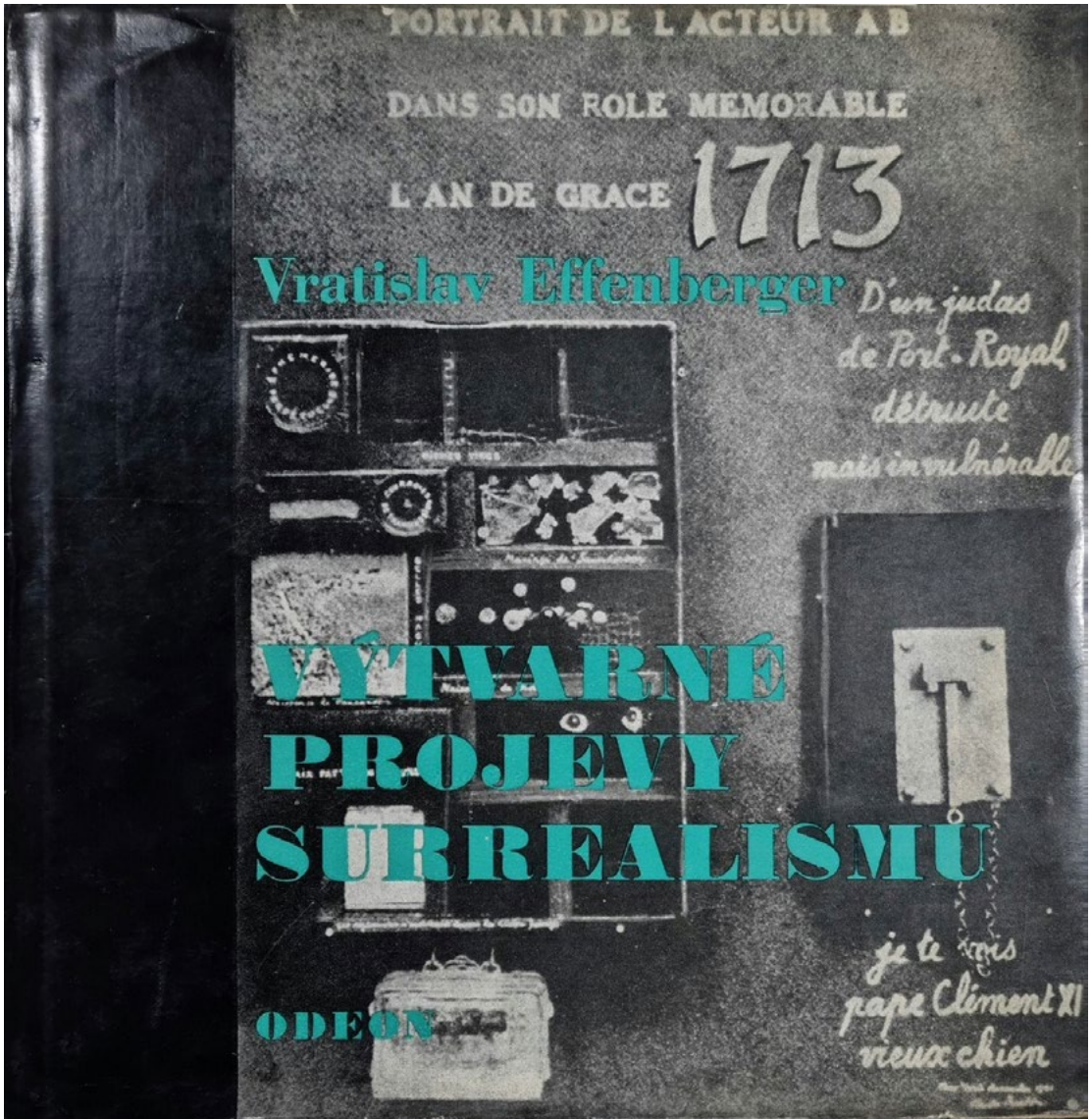


Figure 3: Front cover of Vratislav Effenberger, *Výtvarné projevy surrealismu* [Artistic expressions of Surrealism], Prague: Odeon, 1969.

Cubism, as well as the first two volumes of a projected three-volume edition of the selected writings of Teige, published in 1966 and 1969.<sup>8</sup>

8) Karel Teige, *Vývojové proměny v umění* [Developmental transformations in art], ed. Vratislav Effenberger, Prague: Nakladatelství československých výtvarných umělců, 1966; Teige, *Výbor z díla I: Svět stavby a básně* [Selected works I. The world of building and poetry], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1966; *Výbor z díla II: Zápasy o smysl moderní tvorby* [Selected works II. Struggles over the meaning of modern creative work], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1969. The project was cancelled in the wake of the Normalization of the 1970s. The final volume was not published until 1994 as Teige, *Osvobození života a poezie: studie ze čtyřicátých let* [Selected works III. The liberation of life and poetry: studies from the 1940s], Prague: Aurora, 1994.

The suppression of Effenberger's writings ensured that even in the Czech Republic he never achieved widespread recognition. He also lacked the international network of contacts that kept many other Czechoslovak dissident intellectuals in the public eye.<sup>9</sup> 'The Concept of the Avant-Garde' was translated into German in the early 1970s as part of a planned larger edition of his work, but it never came to fruition and the translation has since disappeared.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, this English translation is the first rendering in any language other than Czech.

## Cultural Politics and Totalitarianism

How might we interpret the text? In socialist Czechoslovakia, the avant-garde had long been viewed with suspicion by an official cultural apparatus that imposed Socialist Realism as the only acceptable cultural practice. However, Effenberger's book exemplified the loosening environment in Czechoslovakia that followed the death of Stalin in 1953 and, more importantly, Nikita Krushchev's 'Secret Speech' of 1956 that denounced the cult of personality and dictatorial rule of his predecessor. From the later 1950s onwards there began a process of critical reflection, in which, under the banner of Marxist humanism, many official cultural and political doctrines were revised and scrutinized by philosophers and political theorists.<sup>11</sup> State-imposed attitudes towards Socialist Realism and the avant-garde were also brought into question. Yet we can place this exploration of the meaning of the avant-garde in a larger international context, for, from the later 1950s, it became a subject of increased reflection. In 1959 the Italian literary critic Mario de Micheli, for example, published a survey, *The Artistic Avant-Gardes of the Twentieth Century* (published in Czech five years later).<sup>12</sup> In 1962, a better known study on the same topic, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* by the Italian literary theorist Renato Poggioli, was also published in Italian and then, the same year as Effenberger's book, in English translation.<sup>13</sup> The culmination of this process, perhaps, was Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, first published in 1974 and undoubtedly the most internationally influential study of the history of the avant-garde.<sup>14</sup> Such works had in common a sense that modernism and the avant-garde had reached a point of exhaustion or crisis. The paradigm of the 'new' seemed to have become exhausted – what Bürger later referred to as the 'ageing of modernity' – and the avant-garde had lost its critical function.<sup>15</sup> Although Effenberger was concerned

9) Vratislav Effenberger, 'Roman Jakobson and the Czech Avant-Garde Between Two Wars,' *American Journal of Semiotics* 2: 3, 1983, 13–21.

10) I am grateful to Šimon Wikstrøm Svěrák for this information.

11) On Marxist humanism see Jan Mervart and Jan Růžička, *Rehabilitat Marx! Československá stranická inteligence a myšlení poststalinické modernity* [Rehabilitate Marx! The Czechoslovak party intelligentsia and the thought of post-Stalinist modernity], Prague: NLN, 2020. See, too, Mervart and Růžička, 'Czechoslovak Post-Stalinism: A Distinct Field of Socialist Visions,' *East Central Europe*, 48, 2021, 220–49.

12) Mario di Micheli, *Umělecké avantgardy dvacátého století* [The artistic avant-garde of the twentieth century], Prague: Státní nakladatelství krásné literatury a umění, 1964.

13) Renato Poggioli, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1969.

14) Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984. Originally published as *Theorie der Avant-Garde*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974.

15) Peter Bürger, *Das Altern der Moderne: Schriften zur bildenden Kunst*, Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag, 2001.



with reclaiming the avant-garde, he also recognized, like Bürger and Poggioli, its failings. He warned of the danger of avant-garde art degenerating into an empty play of signs, into ‘avant-gardeness,’ in other words, the adoption of the formal language and strategies of the historical avant-garde, but with none of its ideological commitments. These wider connections will be explored later but despite the emphasis on the wider context, it is still useful initially to approach his book, and this chapter, as a response to a specifically Czechoslovak situation.

The Nazi occupation of 1939 led to suppression of the vibrant artistic environment that had flourished between the wars. The Protectorate of Bohemia and Moravia did not bring about a complete collapse of avant-garde culture, and significant artistic groups either continued working or were set up.<sup>16</sup> Of these, the most significant was *Skupina 42* (Group 42), a loose grouping of writers and artists that was established in 1942. Nor did the Nazi suppression of modernist culture occur immediately or uniformly. Nevertheless, modernist culture ceased to play a significant role in public life. Intellectual figures who resisted the occupation, such as the Marxist literary critics Eduard Urx (1903–1942) and Bedřich Václavěk (1897–1943) were killed by the Nazi regime and others who had not managed to escape into exile embarked on a kind of inner emigration.

The situation changed at the end of the Second World War when, in the brief period between liberation in 1945 and the Communist assumption of power in February 1948, there was intense reflection on the state of Czechoslovak culture and society and, in particular, on the fate of modernism. On the one hand, as the art critic Jindřich Chalupecký noted, it was difficult to avoid the sense that modernism and the culture that had spawned it was exhausted. In a lengthy article reflecting on the present, ‘The End of the Modern Era,’ published in 1946, he noted that the major achievements of modernism – he cited, as examples, Joyce’s *Ulysses*, Eliot’s *The Wasteland*, Cubism, atonal music and Stravinsky’s *L’histoire du soldat* – all lay in the past.<sup>17</sup> Modern science had produced the atom bomb, and leading representatives of modernist culture, from Heidegger to Ezra Pound, Salvador Dalí and Louis-Ferdinand Céline, had been supporters and enablers of fascism. Yet despite such pessimism, Chalupecký believed it was possible to revitalize contemporary culture. In that same year he published a short pamphlet, *A Great Opportunity*, that spelled out a programme for the systemic reorganization of art and design education and exhibitionary practice to that end.<sup>18</sup>

Many sought to recapture the spirit of the avant-garde. It was in this context that Effenberger came to public attention, with his first theoretical articles on film production and practice.<sup>19</sup> He had met the Surrealists Karel Teige and Vítězslav Nezval during the war, and quickly became a member of the circle of intellectuals and artists associated with Teige, and garnered critical attention as a young Surrealist poet.<sup>20</sup> Yet the critical climate was fraught. In the period

16) A major collection of literary and theoretical texts by Skupina 42 was published as Zdeněk Pešát and Eva Petrová, eds, *Skupina 42: antologie*, Brno: Atlantis, 2000.

17) Jindřich Chalupecký, ‘Konec modern doby’ [The end of the modern era], *Listy* 1, 1946, 7–23.

18) Jindřich Chalupecký, *Veliká příležitost: poznámky k reorganizaci českého výtvarnictví* [A great opportunity: observations on the reorganisation of Czech creative culture], Prague: Výtvarný odbor Umělecké besedy, 1946.

19) Vratislav Effenberger, ‘Studie o filmu’ [A study of film], *Kvart* 5:1, 1946, 59–64; ‘Problémy filmové kultury’ [The problems of film culture], *Blok* 1, 1946–47, 317–18.

20) He is mentioned, for example, in Ludvík Kundera, ‘Na okraj poesie mladých surrealistů’ [On the edge of the poetry of young surrealists], *List Sdružení moravských spisovatelů* 2: 9–10, 1948, 18–20.

following the Nazi defeat, the Communist Party, still not in power, expended considerable energy in its attempts to shape the field of cultural politics in order to lay the groundwork as a prelude to the planned acquisition of social and political hegemony and, ultimately, control.<sup>21</sup> In the 1930s Teige had become entangled in the antagonisms between the Surrealists and the Communist Party, culminating in **(Figure 4)** *Surrealism against the Current*. In 1947 he re-established the Surrealist group, with Effenberger becoming a member, but his prior criticisms made him a target, and after the Communist coup d'état in February 1948, he was relentlessly hounded by the government and its representatives.<sup>22</sup> Dismissed as an exemplar of bourgeois cosmopolitanism, he died prematurely of a heart-attack in 1951, his death celebrated on the pages of the journal *Tvorba* with a notorious article accusing him of being a Trotskyite subversive.<sup>23</sup> Effenberger's association with Teige meant that he was accepted as his intellectual heir and unofficial head of the Surrealists in Prague, but he was consequently also identified as an enemy by the state and marginalised, although it was another three years before he was forced out of his position at the Film Institute.

The brief three years of public intellectual debate about the role and possible futures of modernism and the avant-garde were thus abruptly interrupted, and the hopes of reviving interwar modernist culture, albeit in altered form, were dashed. Socialist Realism was officially imposed by the government and dissenting cultural figures, including, most scandalously, the philosopher and critic Závěš Kalandra, who was executed in a show trial in 1950.<sup>24</sup>

The recent publication of transcripts of debates and surveys conducted in the 1950s by members of the Surrealist group, in which Effenberger played an active role, indicates that Surrealism had far from disappeared, but the members of the group were forced underground.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the restrictions placed on the activities of Effenberger and other Surrealists may have contributed to the extended significance enjoyed by Surrealism in Czechoslovakia, long after it had given way, in France and elsewhere, to other artistic concerns and interest. Faced with the official state aesthetic of Socialist Realism, Surrealism was an unintended beneficiary of events, for in the eyes of many it provided an obvious focus for dissident practice.

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21) Alexej Kusák, *Kultura a politika v Československu, 1945–1956* [Culture and politics in Czechoslovakia, 1954–1956], Prague: Torst, 1998. See, in particular, '1945–1948: Kultura a komunisté' (pp. 143–227).

22) Shawn Clybor, 'Socialist (Sur)Realism: Karel Teige, Ladislav Štoll and the Politics of Communist Culture in Czechoslovakia,' *History of Communism in Europe* 2, 2011, 143–67.

23) Mojmír Grygor, 'Teigovština: trockistická agentura v naší kultuře' [Teigovinese: Trotskyite agency in our culture], *Tvorba* 20: 44, 1951, 1060–1062.

24) Jaroslav Brouček, *27.6.1950 - poprava Závěše Kalandry* [27.6.1950 – the execution of Závěš Kalandra], Prague: Havran, 2006.

25) František Dryje, Šimon Wikstrøm Svěrák and Ladislav Serý, eds, *Hádky v kompasu: Surrealistické ankety, 1951–1986* [Quarrels in the compass: surrealist inquiries, 1951–1986], Prague: Památníkrodního písemnictví, 2023.



Figure 4: Front cover of Karel Teige, *Surrealismus proti proudu* [Surrealism against the current], Prague: Prague Surrealist Group, 1938.

## Surrealism after the War

Its major exponents had produced their most important work in the 1930s, but in the era of revisionism in the later 1950s and the 1960s, it became once more a subject of serious study, with Effenberger playing a significant role.<sup>26</sup> Interest was evident not only in academic publications but also in exhibitions, of which the most significant, perhaps, was *Imaginative Painting, 1930–1950* staged in 1964.<sup>27</sup> Official attitudes were still hostile; the exhibition was closed down and its catalogue was pulped, but the revived interest in Surrealism could not be suppressed. The following year the art history journal *Umění* (Art) featured a special issue on Surrealism and the issues raised by the exhibition. A central question was whether Surrealism (and the interwar avant-garde more generally) was merely a historical episode or whether it still had contemporary relevance. An implicit answer was provided by contemporary New Wave cinema in Czechoslovakia where Surrealist motifs and practices persisted, long after they had disappeared into the history books elsewhere.<sup>28</sup>

The 'rediscovery' of Surrealism was, however, one instance of the wider exploration of interwar avant-garde legacies. In 1961 the first volume appeared of a multi-volume edition of the interwar Marxist literary and cultural critic Bedřich Václavěk (1897–1943) that continued into the 1970s.<sup>29</sup> Five years later an edition appeared of the interwar aesthetic writings of Jan Mukařovský (1891–1975) the most internationally prominent member of the Prague linguistic circle between the wars, who had enjoyed close relations to the artistic and literary avant-garde.<sup>30</sup> The chronological range of the edition was telling; not only did it foreground, once more, the interwar period, it also explicitly excluded his later work from the period after 1948, when he had publicly endorsed the Communist régime. We can view Effenberger's editions of Surrealist texts and the writings of Teige in this light, too.

An influential interpretation of the return to the avant-garde has been Hal Foster's analysis of the American neo-avant-garde of the 1950s and 1960s in terms of the Freudian thematics of deferral, following. For, as Foster claims, 'one event is only registered through another that recodes it; we come to be who we are only in deferred action (*Nachträglichkeit*) ... historical and neo-avant-gardes are constituted in a similar way, as a continual process of pretension and retension, a complex relay of anticipated futures and reconstructed pasts ...'<sup>31</sup> Duchamp, for example, only became 'Duchamp,' Foster notes, as a 'retroactive effect of countless artistic responses and critical readings' leading to his elevated status in the 1960s as an emblem of

26) Anja Tippnerová. *Permanentní avantgarda? Surrealismus v Praze* [A permanent avant-garde? Surrealism in Prague], Prague: Academia, 2014, 71–79.

27) Věra Linhartová, ed., *Imaginativní malířství, 1930–1950* [Imaginative painting, 1930–1950], Hluboka nad Vltavou: Alšova jihočeská galerie, 1964.

28) On the return of surrealism in the 1960s see Jonathan L. Owen, *Avant-Garde to New Wave: Czechoslovak Cinema, Surrealism and the Sixties*, Oxford: Berghahn, 2011.

29) The volumes included Bedřich Václavěk, *Tvorba a společnost* [Creative work and society], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1961; *Literární studie a podobizny* [Literary studies and portraits], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1962; *O lidové písni a slovesnosti* [On popular poetry and literature], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1963; *Kritické stati z třicátých let* [Critical essays from the 1930s], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1975; *Juvenilie* [Juvenilia], Prague: Československý spisovatel, 1978.

30) Jan Mukařovský, *Studie z estetiky* [Aesthetic studies], ed. Květoslav Chvatík, Prague: Odeon, 1966.

31) Hal Foster, 'Who's Afraid of the Neo-Avant-Garde?' in *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century*, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996, 1–34, here, 29.

the avant-garde. This logic applied no less in Czechoslovakia than in the United States, France and elsewhere, and it is notable that in 1969 Jindřich Chalupecký staged a retrospective exhibition in Prague on Duchamp at the Václav Špála Gallery in Prague.<sup>32</sup> Foster's emphasis on temporal delay *intrinsic* to the construction of historical meaning is an important element in the understanding of the reception of the avant-garde, but it runs the risk of flattening out the task of analysis without attention to the specifics of each individual case. In Czechoslovakia, the attention to the avant-garde tradition was also an attempt to 'fan the spark of hope in the past,' as Walter Benjamin put it, an attempt to recover a lost object or to 'wrest tradition away from the conformism that is working to overpower it.'<sup>33</sup> Benjamin would never have imagined that it was the culture of socialist Czechoslovakia that was the prime agent of such oppressive conformity, but the analogy still holds, and the memory of the interwar avant-garde still fulfils the same function in the contemporary Czech Republic.

## Effenberger and Definitions of the Avant-Garde

If we turn to Effenberger's text itself, it seems that at first sight, it draws no distinction between the avant-garde and modernism. As examples of the avant-garde, he lists Surrealism, Cubism and Impressionism, and then, later, Joyce, Kafka and Proust, none of whom would fit the description of the avant-garde familiar from Bürger's analysis, for example. Yet Effenberger raises two issues that give a sense of how he does, in fact, distinguish between the modernism and avant-gardism. The first, as he states from the outset, is that 'avant-garde' is not an inductively generated concept based on synoptic assessment of the range of empirical works of art deemed 'avant-garde.' Rather, it is a theoretical impulse, a tendency towards destabilization or transgression, that can take on different guises (Effenberger uses the term 'concretizations') at different times, and that can also assume different ideological positions. It is for this reason that it can be a contradictory phenomenon – this is the sense in which Effenberger refers to its dialectical development – and he observes that scientific and artistic avant-gardes can often be at ideological variance. Effenberger frequently refers to 'ideology' in the text, but although he relies on a conceptual framework that is heavily shaped by the terminology of Marxist analysis, it is far from clear that he is applying a Marxist interpretation of the word. As with 'dialectical,' which he often uses loosely merely to denote internal contradiction, 'ideology' means little more than 'a belief in the possibility of a unified conception of the world and a belief in the possibility of the social and psychological realization of ideological ideas.'<sup>34</sup>

Earlier in his book Effenberger argues that Romanticism was the precursor of the avant-garde. Following a theory of Romanticism derived from Roman Jakobson and Teige, he identifies two tendencies in Romanticism: one that was revolutionary and emancipatory,

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32) Ibid., 8.

33) Walter Benjamin, 'The Concept of History,' in Benjamin, *Selected Writings IV: 1938–1940*, trans. by Edmund Jephcott, edited by Michael Jennings and Howard Eiland, Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003, 391.

34) Šimon Wikstrøm Svěrák, 'Vratislav Effenberger's conception of the role of imagination in ideological thought,' *Studies in East European Thought*, 2023. Published online: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11212-023-09594-2>.

and another, conservative and constructive.<sup>35</sup> Yet he distances himself from the common view, asserted by Teige, for example, that this difference could be mapped onto a political distinction between ‘left-wing’ and ‘right-wing’ impulses.<sup>36</sup> The avant-garde is ideologically underdetermined. He notes, ‘The characteristic nonconformity of the avant-garde, in its original meaning, is thus brought about by the *principle* of exploration, and never by exploratory *values*, because the latter are determined solely on the basis of the theoretical programme of a specific movement or of a theoretical programme of supplementary interpretations.’<sup>37</sup> Only in its individual instances does the avant-garde take on specific characteristics, and we can view Effenberger’s broader motivation for analysing the avant-garde in this light, since he is concerned with foregrounding precisely those individual practices – of which Surrealism was the most important for him – that could be used to prise the concept of the avant-garde from the grip of the dead hand of official culture.

His second observation is that while ‘avant-gardeness’ is conceptually under-determined, it is absolutely vital that its individual manifestations should be the vehicles of specific programmes. He acknowledges that there is a tension between the quasi-anarchic impulse to transgression and the requirement that it be attached to a particular programme. Nevertheless, if the latter is absent, he notes, the avant-garde is absorbed into ‘the aesthetics of modern art’ and ‘turns into decoration.’<sup>38</sup> By ‘decoration’ Effenberger is not referring here to the long-established modernist invective against ornament. Rather, he is merely pointing to the aestheticization of the avant-garde, and the danger of its degeneration into empty signifier. He notes that there was a ‘flood of absurd, irrationalist art, “anti-theatre,” “non-drama” and “anti-books”’, in which avant-garde gestures of ‘destabilisation’ had been stripped of their ideological baggage.<sup>39</sup> Strikingly, he draws comparisons with contemporary America. Even though beatnik novels and Pop Art were very different from the kind of practices in Czechoslovakia that Effenberger had in mind, they, too recognized the need for a conceptual programme, for ‘no artistic work will last any time on the basis of aesthetic intention alone, if, rather than wishing to be mere decorative production, it aspires to having some extra-aesthetic impact.’<sup>40</sup>

Effenberger’s judgement has commonalities with those of Bürger and Poggioli, yet there are two important differences. The first relates to the question of ideology. For the crisis of the avant-garde is not merely a problem of aestheticization and commodification, it is, for him, fundamentally a crisis of *ideology*. For if ideology is the crucial element that helps prevent the avant-garde lapsing into mere ‘avant-gardeness,’ he argues that the crisis lies in the fact that since the onset of the Second World War, moral and epistemological relativism and the loss of a sense of historical meaning – the collapse of metanarratives, to cite a more recent author –

35) ‘The dialectical spirit of Romanticism combined, from the start, destructive and constructive tendencies, hope and, at the same time, resignation, élan and weariness, life and death, short-lived moments of revolutionary consciousness ...’ Effenberger, *Realita a poesie*, 134.

36) ‘The differentiation of Romantic artists, philosophers or scientists into the two wings of leftist and rightist romanticism that prevailed in the ideas of the interwar avant-garde (Karel Teige) can be understood as only an approximate explanation. The revolutionary and constitutional elements, one subversive and the other constitutive, are mixed together in all cases in the development of the Romantic movement ...’ Effenberger, *Realita a poesie*, 134.

37) Effenberger, ‘The Concept of the Avant-Garde,’ 56

38) Effenberger, ‘The Concept of the Avant-Garde,’ 59

39) Effenberger, ‘The Concept of the Avant-Garde,’ 64

40) Effenberger, ‘The Concept of the Avant-Garde,’ 62

means an abandonment of the belief in the *possibility* of ideology, understand as some or other conceptual or normative scaffolding essential to any avant-garde practice.<sup>41</sup>

Set against this pessimistic picture is the second difference that stems from Effenberger's commitment to Surrealism, specifically, the creative imagination and its constitutive role in ideology. For the latter is not an empty structure. Instead, 'ideology' is part of the *dialectic* of thought that is structured by systems of signification but is also in a dynamic with the creative imagination. For Effenberger, informed by the writings of André Breton, the imaginative creation of poetic images was understood to be an expression of the unconscious, analogous to the process as that which produced dream images. Effenberger was not explicit about the *source* of the imagination, but he appeared to regard it as a quasi-anthropological constant. An ideology thus may be a structure of thinking, values or beliefs, but it is always being generated and regenerated due to the dynamic activity of the creative imagination. The avant-garde may be currently endangered by a crisis of ideology, but as Effenberger suggests towards the end of the chapter, that crisis may be just a transitional stage, a prelude to an ideological reconfiguration.

We might view this as the last vestige of a romantic humanism, but in the final part of his book, Effenberger turns the imagination into a tool of political polemic. For in a section titled 'Reality and the Poetic' he turns to the concepts of causality and temporality, and attacks crude dialectical materialist models of history:

Some Marxist theorists have deepened their view that development in science, just as in art, leads ineluctably to human social and psychological liberation, from lower forms of cognition and organization to higher ones, from the kingdom of Necessity to that of Freedom. However, during the past century, the outcomes of this idea of development have not shown themselves to be too convincing. Every attempt to analyse the mutual dependence or the dialectical relations in the historical dynamic of scientific and artistic cognition, which should have revealed the *secret of developmental necessity*, has unfortunately always been a supplementary interpretative construction ...<sup>42</sup>

For Effenberger it was precisely in the 'unfathomable relations, the obscure mode of thinking about its own nature and creative intentional values,' that the avant-garde, and above all, Surrealism, challenged the straitjacket of dialectical materialism. His reading of the avant-garde is thus not merely reflection on a past cultural episode, but also an attempt to interrogate the concept of history that had governed how its significance had been hitherto understood.

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41) Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984.

42) Effenberger, *Realita a poesie*, 277.

## Vratislav Effenberger

# The Concept of the Avant-Garde

Originally published as 'Pojem avantgardy' in Vratislav Effenberger, *Realita a poesie: k vývojové dialektice moderního umění*, Prague: Mladá fronta. 1969, 162–184.

Translated and edited by Matthew Rampley

If we speak of Impressionism, Cubism, Surrealism, these concepts comprise, from a certain moment, something more than the sum of creative works based on collectively recognized principles. They become concentric models of theoretical thinking that, at certain points of contemplation, exhibit an autonomous existence more or less independently of the concrete work they refer to. They are not just historically definable concepts, they often become theoretically independent when subject to interpretative analyses, such that it is difficult to give them a fixed profile. The ability of creative work to inspire theoretical or ideological contemplation, which can only be realized in the form of critical conflicts – whether they evolve out of the work in question or annexe it for some other system of ideas, in order to amplify and develop the work's emotional impact – grows out of the expressive character of the point of view evident in the collective awareness of the artistic tendency the work fulfills. Although it must be admitted that the author's own confession and self-interpretation are a negligible obstacle for the skilfully guided interpretation of the philosophical, aesthetic, sociological or psychological transplantation of their work (Ernst, Miró etc.), creative affiliation to a certain ideological current nevertheless presents a much more powerful foothold than any other documentary material, because it is the intersection of different imaginative and intellectual individualities, jointly creating broader communicative possibilities and the potential intervention of certain spiritual currents.

Examples of a special creative type, not immediately belonging to any avant-garde movement, but yet strongly influencing the expressive morphology of the avant-garde (James Joyce, Marcel Proust, Franz Kafka etc)<sup>43</sup> are testament to the fact that it is precisely ideological elements that shape the directions of art and, consequently, the history of the avant-garde, too, and that the absence or vagueness of specific ideologies amongst such authors makes it difficult to assign their work to any theories of development, even though their work, given its features, would otherwise belong to them. Even the term 'avant-garde' was not adopted from the military lexicon inappropriately. It is clear from the history of avant-garde movements that the formative impulse of the artistic vanguard is primarily resistance to conservative stabilization, from which an ideological programme only arises in a causal context. This process is most often latent, however, and it is not infrequently subject to divergent influences of which the theory of development accepts only those in keeping with its concept of causal continuity, or transposes them interpretatively to this end. For this reason, it is not difficult to

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43) See the chapter 'Absurdnost v umění a povaha dadismu' [Absurdity in art and the nature of dada], Effenberger, *Realita a poesie*, Prague, Mladá fronta, 1969, 15–22.



counter one concept of causal continuity with another one, different from the one rejected, by laying emphasis on another logical series, to which the interpretation of the creative or developmental process in question can be subordinated.

From an ideological point of view, the analysis of avant-garde movements is complicated by the fact that they do not devise mutually complementary or commensurable plans. It is only in exceptional and, for the most part, extreme moments that progressive scientific, social, artistic and philosophical conceptions found common concepts of progress, even if they had the prerequisites for the deepest affinity. It has been stated more than once that the scientific or political avant-garde is closer to conservative artistic and philosophical stagnation than to the intellectual conquests of a different order from its own, and that many artists and philosophers surrender to often reactionary points of view in other areas of opinion that otherwise seem most closely related to their own.

The reciprocal relation between the avant-gardes of the spirit and of science is overlaid and overshadowed by the need of rebellious experimenters for confirmation, support and cultural adaptation of their conquests through reference to authorities generally acknowledged in other cultural fields. Freud tested his socially disruptive discoveries on Shakespeare and Leonardo, while Surrealist experimentation did not interest him at all. The studios of the Cubist revolutionaries were decorated with reproductions of canvases by Ingres, as André Salmon testified.<sup>44</sup> This need for cultural adaptation never ceases to be retrograde, considering the heuristic tendencies of avant-garde thought, even where this traditionalist and conservative style leads, one way or another, to remarkable conclusions, when, at the same time, it means a distinct rebuttal of the original, traditional point of view (for example, Dali's interpretation of Millet, or of the Modern style, etc).

The chronology of the avant-garde movements as definable systems of thought and spheres of inspiration cannot, in a historical sense, be clearly identified in spatial, temporal or causal terms. The development of French Impressionism dates from the beginning of the 1870s, while German Impressionism, which only appears twenty years later, is not just a different version or mere indication of the influence of the School of Paris; rather, it is to a great degree inspired by the powerful tradition of Symbolist painting. Paul Fechter recalls that at the end of the century the rising German art industry laid greater emphasis on the decorative, and this factor was not without an indirect effect on part of the German Impressionist, Secessionist and Expressionist avant-garde, which led to a sharp distinction between existential demands and progressive artistic work.<sup>45</sup>

The core of avant-garde activity and the individual stages of its development are most frequently identified with the highly variable, ambiguous and vague concept of the *Ecole de Paris*, which merely emphasizes that Paris is the axis of modern European cultivated education or, to be more precise, the Parisian 'artistic Republic of free spirits.' However, this School of Paris, which encompasses modern artists of all nationalities living in Paris, as well as authors outside of France, whose work shares certain characteristics with that in Paris, or is directly influenced by it, also comprises what are, in relation to the history of the avant-garde

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44) André Salmon, 'Die Offenbarung Seurats,' *Das Kunstblatt*, 6: 10, 1922

45) Paul Fechter, *Der Expressionismus*, Munich, Piper, 1914. Editor's note: Effenberger erroneously refers to Fechter as 'Fechner.'

movements, highly disparate elements (unofficial and official art). Furthermore, an array of avant-garde directions (Expressionism, the Secession, Futurism, Dada, Constructivism) arose outside of France and passed it by without any substantial direct influence.

The concept of the artistic avant-garde as a set of ideologically concretized values also includes reference to established critical and theoretical praxis, in which the artwork being assessed is extricated from the ideas of the tendency of which it is a part (even if, historically, it was part of it), and the individual artist is placed in opposition to this conceptual affiliation, which is seen as having a disparagingly and degradingly uniform character. Several avant-garde movements are understood, in the light of this distinction between an artistic tendency and the creative individual, in terms of the tradition of the schools of the old masters. The artistic tendency is viewed as a zone of inspiration, brought about by second-rate epigones, whereas excellent artistic individuals generally achieve their significance by, in some sense, opposing or outgrowing the tendency that they were fulfilling. This singling out of the individual, this endowing of artistic expression with aesthetic autonomy, is undoubtedly appropriate for levelling out an inconveniently stratified terrain. Ascertaining influences and inspirations can effect a new critical point of view in an interpretation, just as long as it is not just a statement of the dehistoricizing and absolutizing impulse of formal aesthetics. Although forming an interpretation, in and of itself, is the inalienable right and natural necessity of any critical activity, it can only be inspiring and fruitful if it maximizes, from the start, the consistencies of the work being scrutinized. If, for example, the painting of Max Ernst is set up in opposition to his participation in the Surrealist movement merely in order to highlight its artistic values, then this interpretation would not come close to Ernst's actual work and imagination, which had such a significant involvement in the development of Surrealism. The difference between the old concept of the master school and the nature of avant-garde movements is not merely a matter of their differential scope, which sets the belief in aesthetic autonomy apart from a much more comprehensive and dynamic stance and ideology. Instead, it represents a fundamental difference in concept and structure of inspiration, a difference in style of thinking, in which questions of individuality and originality are addressed otherwise than has hitherto been the case. Ozenfant once acknowledged, when it came to the relation between the artist and artistic -isms, that the methods of Picasso, Braque, Léger, Metzinger and Gleizes were completely at odds, and yet Cubism existed. If we strip away wholly external aspects and focuses on what is referred to as uniform opinions, which in reality are only secondary and epigonal expressions, the question of the relation between the artist and the artistic tendency continues to be a complex problem of individual and collective consciousness. Their dialectical connection demands that one assess, first of all, the nature of individuality inasmuch as it appears as the only possibly creative state of mind in the given circumstances capable of accepting and transmitting inspiration and therefore endowed with creativity and invention. Where it is possible and necessary to take the power of invention and invention as the supreme manifestation of a person's mental abilities, the assumption of creative individuality is the necessary initial condition for inquiry into possible forms of concretization and values of the creative process.

In this context C. G. Jung proposes the term 'individuation,' which he links to the ideas of 'self-realization,' because he seeks a conceptual distinction between such individuation and

individualism. ‘Individualism’ is the deliberate emphasis on perceived unique qualities in opposition to collective considerations and interests, whereas ‘individuation’ corresponds to a deeper understanding of collective human destiny. The unique qualities of the individual cannot be grasped as an alien aspect of his or her essence or parts, but rather as a mixing ratio or gradated differentiation of functions and faculties that are actually universal. After all, universal factors can only exist as individualized forms. It is in this same sense that Ozenfant says of individuality or, rather more, individuation, in lyric that ‘It is the wellspring of our modern freedom of invention, a mighty effort always signed by a single name.’<sup>46</sup>

Can this inspiring and inventive capacity for individual conception in artistic creation be decisive in the formation of a specific movement? To what extent, under what conditions, and in what sense? In answer to this question E. Tériade states that innovators, before others, sense new needs that go against deep-seated ideas in a certain milieu. They find the most effective way of revealing the insufficiencies of the present. If this emphasizes the powerful dependence of movements on individual creative personalities, it is, conversely, necessary to admit that some progressive individuals find themselves on common paths of inquiry and in common conceptual spheres, even though they have not become fully assimilated to the current that they are jointly working on. The thinking of Cézanne would not have had an impact on the Impressionist movement, and it would hardly have been able to foster its refreshing innovative quality, if Impressionism had not introduced a youthful and free élan into painting.<sup>47</sup>

In his book on André Breton, Julien Gracq comes to a similar view, articulated, in his case, using Surrealist concepts, when he likens the Surrealist movement to a closed and isolated order or idea, a phalanstery surrounded by magical walls.<sup>48</sup> He sees in Breton’s mentality a plural narcissism, a leader of the movement rejuvenating everyone, the founder of a religion.

The occult character of Surrealism demanded by Breton in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* can only emphasize how set apart avant-garde collectives are, and this gives them an almost magical effect, but it did not create this avant-garde exclusivity on its own. If the occult existed as a basic phenomenon of the artistic and scientific avant-garde, and if, at the same time, it was connected to the need to overcome itself in passing on the developmental impulse, it also modified the individuality of those who gave it all its content and meaning. Breton, who we can consider proficient in this question, acknowledges this in *Communicative Vessels*.<sup>49</sup>

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46) Amédée Ozenfant, *Foundations of Modern Art*, trans. John Rodker, New York: Dover Books, 1952, 6.

47) E. Tériad, ‘Documentaire sur la jeune peinture III: Consequences du cubisme,’ *Cahiers d’Art* 5: 1, 1930, 17–27.

48) Julien Gracq, *André Breton, quelques aspects de l’écrivain*, Paris: José Corti, 1948.

49) ‘Does such and such a great captain fully realize his victories; does such and such a great poet (the question has been asked for Rimbaud) seem to have been completely aware of his visions? It is unlikely. The very nature of the “one,” whether he be acclaimed a genius, a simpleton, or a madman, is absolutely opposed to that. This being must become other for himself, reject himself, condemn himself, abolish himself to the profit of others in order to be reconstituted in their unity with him. [...] Perhaps it is fitting that there should be shaped, in the most tormented periods and even against their will, the solitude of a few whose role is to preserve in some corner of a hothouse what cannot have any but a fleeting existence, in order to find much later its place in the center of a new order, thus marking with a flower that is absolutely and simply present, because it is true — a flower in some way axial in relation to time — that tomorrow should be linked all the more closely with yesterday for having to break off’ in a more decisive manner with it? André Breton, *Communicative Vessels*, trans. Mary Ann Caws, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1990, 134 and 137–8.

Here it was already determined that, externally, two components are characteristic of avant-garde movements, each of which is fundamental to the extent that neither is conceivable without the other: the programme and the group. Without a programme, a movement would not have become avant-garde, and without organization into a group, an avant-garde idea would not be transformed into a movement. When we look at the historical material, these two components are clearly interdependent, as is the manner of their emergence and their further development. If the nature of the ideology and worldview of the latter inclines to transform every avant-garde formation into an integrative system, with a basic tendency to submit the meaning of the entire history of the human mind to its own conceptual parameters, then it is understandable that every avant-garde movement becomes, to some extent and in a certain sense, what religious sects used to be. Here, conceptual integration has, it seems, deep psychological and mythological roots. A characteristic sign of a sect is the suppression of individual qualities in the name of the idea of higher integration. We encounter this tendency towards authorial anonymity not only at the stage of the manifesto ('Boccioni, the futurist,' 'Jaroslav Seifert of Devětsil') but also in conformity in the means of expression. The pictures of Picasso and Braque from certain Cubist periods are mutually indistinguishable, just like the works of Carrà and de Chirico from the period of metaphysical painting. This expressive conformism is more something more than mutual influence, even if it is demonstrably about two independent delimited individuals. It is the deliberate suppression of the individual, the sectarian service to an idea. The Surrealists, who, ultimately, brought avant-garde ideology to its most extreme consequences in different ways, even considered the suggestion of Man Ray that they adopt a collective brand, a kind of seal of the movement, which would have replaced the name of the author, so that they could counter the danger of forgery.<sup>50</sup> This tendency was not possible without a very deep connection to the scientific and philosophical intensification of modern life, with an influence that grew into the magical power exercised by modern psychological systems – Marxism and psychoanalysis.<sup>51</sup>

*Development theory* – pressed into service by tendencies to integration at a stage when artistic programmes were transformed into world views in a most pervasive manner – is predetermined by a principle of discovery and a prospective ideological model in which, from a certain historical perspective, a final resolution of current contradictions can be seen, in the widest possible sense, almost as if the ancient myth of paradise lost would be fulfilled by it.

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50) 'Somehow, discoveries do not belong to their discoverers, and for this reason it is inappropriate to have too much in mind the question of priority, which painters too often ask of the historian.' Louis Aragon, *La peinture au défi*, Paris: Librairie José Corti, 1930, n.p. G. Hugnet cites Eluard's declaration, that 'it is necessary to delete the reflection of personality so that inspiration come jump out of the mirror,' and he adds: 'Poetry is the restitution of a gigantic voice that resonates for everyone. It is not a more or less elegant social game, but rather the tragic game of the anonymous, constantly murdered, mediocre pride of the individual. Names do not have any significance here, and they are not interesting, except when they are confirming the testimony of a real process. If I do not try to ascertain who signed this especially beautiful woman (no other adjective can be used) that I recently met in this street, that was so empty and suddenly so unique ... how wouldn't I desperately wish to surprise, on the table of my awakening, the book that killed its author, so that poetry would be able to find an apology, once and for all, for the fact that it was written?' Paul Éluard, *Petite anthologie poétique du surréalisme*, Paris: Jeanne Bucher, 1934, n. p.

51) In his monograph on Freud, Ernest Jones notes that when he was getting ready, at the beginning of the 20s, to undergo an operation, Freud handed out his own signet rings to his own closest collaborators, which in the event of his death would transfer the authoritative power of his science to the circle of his successors. Jones, *The Life and Work of Sigmund Freud*, New York: Basic Books, 1957.

One of the first signs of the formation of a developmental theory of modern art was Meier-Graefe's *History of the Development of Modern Art* (1904) mentioned before. Here all its basic features can be found together, and they will be deepened and amplified in subsequent stages:

Art forms the most powerful bond between the external world and the world within us ... It binds, communicates and exceeds all the other human capacities for communication because its nature and forms succeeds in shutting out all the distracting incidental noises ... Art even achieved the correction of a mass current, admittedly quite unconsciously and more negatively than creatively. Today, it shows us the superficiality of the current classicism that was a fashion. Almost everything that went beyond the portraits was dispensable. The typical forms of the Empire proved to be obstacles to art that served the expression of humanity. If one were to keep to the official paintings of the School of David, a miserably hollow period would emerge ... With Gericault and Ingres, on the other hand, the contemporary, freed from all conscious formalism, is the best, and in this way, Goya achieves his originality, in which he renounces all compromises with the backward-looking current of the times and shapes the awakening sensibility of a new world.<sup>52</sup>

These are the first symptoms of the identification of avant-garde tendencies with the principle of development, which can be seen today in the way that the interpretative impulse also makes use of historical material. This approach shows itself at its most suggestive above all in the fact that it indicated the very real path towards objective criteria used in the construction of the integrative systems of opinion that all avant-garde tendencies were heading towards by the end of the 1930s. The principal of discovery suggested the principle of liberation, initially just in the creative context, then later in the much more extensive domain of the human mind. Amédée Ozenfant, one of the leading representatives of the Purist artistic renaissance, finds that Rimbaud dared to emancipate poetry from the influence of the laws of prosody, and Mallarmé did not hesitate to go much further in subverting normal syntax, grammar, language in the pursuit of lyrical exaltation.

In *The Character of Modern Evolution*, from the period when Dada and Surrealism intersected, when he tried to set out guidelines for the defence of the modern spirit, Breton considered the three final stages, Cubism, Futurism and Dada, to be the threefold component of a broader movement, whose sense and significance was still not clear, and he tried to discern in these developmental changes the emergence and take-off of an idea that was awaiting a new impulse so that it could continue on its curved trajectory.<sup>53</sup> As has already been noted, Guy Mangeot observes in *The History of Surrealism* the multi-faceted process of this single developmental necessity in the liberation of eroticism in de Sade, of dreams in Nerval, of words in the case of Mallarmé, humour in Jarry, form in Apollinaire, and of the object in Picasso.<sup>54</sup> It lets the human mind, indeed humans in general, be led to a state of

52) Julius Meier-Graefe, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst: Vergleichende Betrachtung der bildenden Künste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik*, Stuttgart: Hofmann, 1920, II, 232 and 234.

53) André Breton, 'Les caractères de l'évolution moderne et ce qui en participe,' in Breton, *Les pas perdus*, Paris: Gallimard, 1969, 148-74.

54) Guy Mangeot, *Histoire du surréalisme*, Brussels, René Henrquez, 1934.

receptive and heightened perception suitable for the pure expression of ideas, so that a space can be created, clear of any compromises in the face of life's illusions.

The interpretative dynamism and the integrational intention of development theory are substantially reinforced by conscious or unintended analogy with the development of technology and other discoveries of civilization. Technological progress, which suddenly invaded the sweet slumber of the nineteenth century, could not but tempt one to look at the evidence of analogous processes in the history of the mind and cultural forms. Such certainty affected development theories in art to the point where science itself expressed its initial doubts about the conclusiveness of those of its results that were obtained over and above the empirical domain, without them thereby being any less true. But until then, this analogy is powerful and unshakable in the sense of an integrative finality, in the sense of the universal completion of human history, and until when modern art also converges with Marxism.

It is indisputable that the principle of creative discovery is an anticonservative critical and revolutionary principle that originally, perhaps, was mostly confined, in its negative and provocative aspects, to 'shocking the bourgeoisie,' to overwhelming the public, approaching new methods of artistic invention with extreme skepticism. The artistic avant-garde could only become a true avant-garde when it was capable of transgressing existing aesthetic convention, which, at the end of the day, was never a fixed code of recognized criteria and values. Convention consisted, and up to the present continues to do so, of extremely diverse and elastic concepts and methods. It thus comprises some or other basic approach to the work of art rather than individual ways of evaluating it. For the artistic vanguard to be able to transgress such convention, and for it to be able to realize its exploratory mission, it could not limit itself to merely aesthetic considerations, for with them it would never have broken through aesthetic convention. It instead had to oppose contemporary aesthetics with its mind on certain ideological preconditions that could have nothing in common with aesthetics apart from the fact that, ultimately, they would inevitably capitulate to it, one way or another, either as a wreck or as a victim. If the aesthetics of autonomy ultimately always authorized these discoveries, incorporated them in its systems, and expanded the scope of aesthetic awareness with them, the avant-garde mission of these discoveries was thereby fulfilled, and other tendencies assumed the character of the avant-garde, struggling with another ideological structure. But that struggle never bypassed aesthetics, if it was not to lose its avant-garde significance.<sup>55</sup>

The history of the avant-garde is thus in this sense the history of conflicts between general aesthetic awareness and a new ideological system of creative thinking that came to re-establish such awareness in order merely to cultivate it and then submit and fulfil its mission through it. The characteristic nonconformity of the avant-garde, in its original meaning, is thus brought

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55) It matters equally little if some artist, in whose oeuvre there has been, until now, an element of critical conflict, is 'bought' by public recognition and is subjected to the full glare of official approval. If he loses himself – and there exist the most propitious circumstances for this and, ultimately, the truly compelling silence of the new situation contributes to it – there just happens what has almost always happened in the history of art, he fulfils his individual destiny. The problem of creative art carries on without his involvement, for his mode of expression has reached a stable form, it presents a completed and closed set of values. It expanded, maybe, the basis of aesthetic awareness, but at the same time became a constitutive part of it. The power of inspiration that set him against aesthetic conventions will go on to be valid elsewhere, even in opposition to him, enriched, for example, by the viewpoint he opened up.

about by the *principle* of exploration, and never by exploratory *values*, because the latter are determined solely on the basis of the theoretical programme of a specific movement or of a theoretical programme of supplementary interpretations. For this reason they are relative values, and can never be applied to the concept of the avant-garde in general. Avant-garde nonconformism is consequently determined by the concrete contents of the ideological presuppositions of a *specific* avant-garde movement that come into conflict with conservative thought and, in the domain of aesthetics, only resonate through their consequences.

The awareness of a connection between the avant-garde and programmes of social revolution (with their political formation) nevertheless has, wherever artistic thought comes into contact with political praxis, a sequence of moments that lead, on the one side, to an anarchic Romanticism, and, on the other, to the energetic requirement that art should serve concrete political goals. This basic contradiction, which has shown itself to be insuperable up to the present day, does not include, however, those elements of social utopianism that have encumbered the greater part of the ‘aristocracy of the soul’ that feels rather abandoned in its exclusive perspectives. Carrière, whose work cannot, even from afar, be assigned a place in the avant-garde work of his time, wrote enthusiastically about the socialist element in the thought of Gauguin, called for a new cathedral that would be a common place for everyone, a new artistic focal point for general liking. That prince of symbolic mysticism, Gustave Moreau, dreamt, above his museum of curiosities in the Rue Larocheffoucauld, of an artistic communism of public monumental art.<sup>56</sup>

The relation of the artistic avant-garde to the revolutionary reconstruction of society arose in the very same questions of evaluation that had the necessarily revolutionary and reconstructive character in avant-garde conceptions. The determining factor in this relation was the resistance to so-called bourgeois values, which it equated with academic conservatism and which represented a quite distinct and stable model of values. This resistance, which made possible or, ultimately, suggested a similar distinctiveness of values to the avant-garde, was the decisive agent of this relation. This process of evaluation, carried over into theoretical considerations, too, was at base an ideological critique, one that stemmed from an ideological system. From there it led to profound shifts in significance between theoretical and ideological contemplation, from which was derived an unavoidable and logical symbiosis of artistic and political revolution. Thus, the permanent, critical, character of the avant-garde, which felt itself to be the most advanced outpost of all progressive tendencies, was overshadowed by the premise of general harmonious advanced development:

Neither economic circumstances nor development have kept in step with the avant-garde. The laboratory inventions of artists in the West have been of no use to anyone. Established as a requirement and for the benefit of everyone, they reach only a tiny minority of the audience, spectators, readers – and, eager to make life fulfilled and thriving, they turn to a life that is fettered, threatened and tormented.

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56) Wilhelm Hausenstein, *Die bildende Kunst der Gegenwart: Das soziale Element in der Kunst der Gegenwart*, Berlin, Stuttgart and Leipzig: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1923.

Revolutionary consciousness, which is the expression of this realization, is never a rebellion against art, but against such a life. Against the rational and clear spirit of invention and the new pure terrain, art is dominated by rebellion, the subconscious and the cruelty of its revenge.<sup>57</sup>

The revolt against the art of a certain society becomes here a struggle against the society itself, for the meaning of avant-garde outbursts is to achieve ever deeper and more penetrating symbolizations, reaching those locations in the mind where everything is symptomatic and thus the image, thrown at prevailing aesthetic conventions, is, in a most essential way, like a bomb thrown at the government representative and thus, in its latest phases of consciousness, like the Marxist fight ‘against the exploitation of human by human.’<sup>58</sup> The revolutionary spirit and programme of the avant-garde can only merge with the ideology of social revolution, however, when both are set by a common sense of opposition and ideological conflict. If this tension is released by the outbreak of a real revolution, and if this sense of conflict is dissolved by a new revolutionary or, especially, post-revolutionary order, the assumed symbiosis loses all its harmonizing potential and the old contradiction between the tendencies to constitutional order and ferment show themselves in new inconsistencies and conflicts, and especially, too, in new personal forms. How these new clashes are held depends on entirely external circumstances.

The intellectual seriousness involved in the adoption of new thinking in avant-garde concepts, which originally mostly scared rich conservative circles, gradually brought about the modernization of *snobbery*. Seriousness became here a badge of intellectual capacity. Although snobbery was found most frequently in close proximity to the avant-garde and was emphasized as being an essential constitutive component, in reality its meaning is that of an unclear psychosocial problem, the multifaceted nature of which has often been recognized (for example, Karel Teige, *The Marketplace of Art*<sup>59</sup>) every time as a necessary evil that has to be taken into account and dealt with, until conditions have improved for the development and distribution of culture, education and artistic creation. It has gone unnoticed, however, that hidden deep inside this problem is the question of the initial approach of the uninformed consumer who possesses the prerequisites for a more fruitful interest that sooner or later will overcome the stage of snobbery. Here, too, is voiced the external need to label oneself and to identify with a movement, which plunges the consumer, passing through a first dilettantish stage, into fierce emotions and superficial affectation. In the interim they have a merely passive will to self-identification. Yet, while in other, earlier, cycles, there was nothing to stop this dilettantish figure from becoming permanent, it was precisely the conflict-ridden nature of the avant-garde movement that laid the preconditions and requirement for an active type of consumer, because the latter becomes the critical co-creator of the work and the movement inasmuch as they are compelled to take up, develop and verify opinions that come up against

57) Jiří Honzl, ‘Sovětská a naše divadelní studia’ [Soviet theatre studies and at home], *Země sovětů* 2: 6, 1933, 92.

58) Editor’s note: Effenberger does not refer to any particular source here. However, the well-known idean of the ‘exploitation of humans by humans’ arose in circles around Henri de Saint-Simon in the 1830s. See Vincent Bourdeau, ‘Les mutations de l’expression ‘exploitation de l’homme par l’homme’ chez les saint-simoniens (1829–1851),’ *Cahiers d’économie politique* 75: 2, 2018, 13–41.

59) Karel Teige, *The Marketplace of Art*, trans. Greg Evans, Helsinki and Prague: Rab-Rab Press and Contradictions / kontradikce, 2022. First published as *Jarmark umění*, Prague: Živé umění, 1936.



unprepared ground and unyielding solutions on all sides. This aspect of the psychosocial problem of snobbery is far from exhausting its most essential aspects, which were and are manifest in the promotion and distribution of avant-garde work where they touch on its critical function in relation to social reality. It is often not easy to discern their compatibility with the original inspiration and intention of the creative act.

Only snobbery awakened the interest of the art market in the non-conformist avant-garde. It was a secondary but no less significant diktat of the art market which, in the 1910s and 1920s, penetrated into the genetic sources of the historic golden era of the avant-garde of the beginning of the century and valorized their legends. One more light shone out above the magical light of images and poetry, one more magnetic force added itself to the values that had been decided on. And it was not only the magnetism of material interests, it was also the emotional significance of the respect that their reality awakened: success. If artistic creation is not realized by means of the written poem or the painted image, but rather by real books, exhibitions, magazines and theatres etc., then the publicity for them cannot avoid securing the financial means that artists on their own have increasingly less at their disposal. Given the necessity of such material resources, disparate external influences penetrated into avant-garde creation. Market speculation became more attentive to avant-garde nonconformism. Its social revolutionary ideology could be attributed to a sympathetically attractive bohemianism (Picasso), or, depending on the circumstance, restrained in the most diverse ways.

The ideologists of the interwar avant-garde were conscious of this situation as a danger which art did not, ‘until the new state of affairs,’ have the power to remove. In 1936 Karel Teige wrote in *The Marketplace of Art*:

... there is no reason to think that the present-day avant-garde, which the conservative audience considers to be crazy, won't one day be well exhibited and promoted on the rue La Boétie in Paris, that it won't find a way into the salons of bourgeois buyers ... the bourgeoisie can appropriate the artworks that grew out of the fire of revolt, out of anti-bourgeois hatred, as soon as the situation on the art market comes about when such works can be profitably converted into cash.<sup>60</sup>

The fact that the ideology of the avant-gardes saw here merely the consequences of the commercialization of all human values of a faulty society is a symptom of the nature of their criteria, which related to the revolutionary transformation of every aspect of the world. When formulated in this way, however, the question of the promotion and distribution of avant-garde work that this ideology encountered bypassed an important moment that separated out ideological concepts and ideas from aesthetic ones, an extremely elastic division cutting through not only the galleries of art dealerships but also that socially vague area from which the moderately independent and liberal outlets such as the *Cahiers d'art*, Skira editions, and so forth, emerged. Neither the best organised propaganda of the Rue de la Boétie nor the exceptionally cultivated nature of Skira touched the reality that what was originally avant-garde and non-conformist work only ever entered into commercial transactions as spoils, but never in the form of the spoils of commercialism, but rather as aesthetic spoils. The avant-garde work of art had first to be aesthetically stabilised before it could tread the path towards

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60) Teige, *The Marketplace of Art*, 43–44.

the heights of the market. Yet even if such aesthetic stabilization is not to be understood in a demeaning or pejorative sense, it presents, in relation to avant-garde ideology, a *different category* of concepts and values, a category that is alien to the interests and concerns of the artistic vanguard, precisely in tending towards the stabilization of values, whereas it is their interruption and transgression that gives the avant-garde its sense and name. Only here does aesthetic production, stripped of its relative and serious ideological content, enter the realm of aesthetic autonomy: it begins to belong to the aesthetics of modern art, it loses its avant-garde potential, its developmentally conflicted nature, which has already just become just a historical reminiscence without which it would have lost its historical significance. Its original non-conformity was made to conform for the purposes of aesthetic evaluation, the creation of aesthetic awareness, a consequence of the aesthetic environment in which it turns into decoration with the emblem of completely different modalities than those from which it was created.

A few findings follow on from this fact and they are tightly connected as much to the history of the avant-garde as to the situation of contemporary art. The most important one is that if we trace the growth of its influence, in the years after the second war, on the evolution of neo-abstraction, formalist aesthetics is an accompanying manifestation of the crisis of ideologically significant communication. Its emphasis on autonomous values is not a display of opposition to figurative expression. Rather, it is an aversion to the concrete in the deepest sense, which, in resigned acceptance of its ideological significance, endeavours, intentionally or not, to become a decorative mark of social or cultural privilege. This aesthetic approach acknowledges beauty in terms of perfection, without regarding it as essential to inquire into its definitions or the questions of its creation and meaning. It feels itself as being gifted with its own distinctive capability that it refuses to defend. The ideological view of this issue considers beauty and perfection to be disputable and, at the end of the day, to be contentless concepts, because they are, as such, indeterminate. It turns its attention to the conflict between creative work and its social and psychological meaning, and it denies (or does not assume) aesthetic autonomy or the aesthetic as an absolute, for the latter necessarily lacks critical potential, and thereby any link to living reality. If these two basic approaches to the question of art, as indicated here, have persisted from time immemorial to the present alongside each other, with greater or lesser degrees of distinctiveness, while also being contaminated by overlapping or encroaching on each other in the most varied forms, they have not ceased to be antagonistic principles that validate the normative and revolutionary elements of the history of art. The conflict between them shaped the history of the artistic avant-gardes as a history of ideological revolutions and aesthetic norms, whereby it became an adventure of the spirit and, at the same time, an inevitable constitution of a new aesthetic order, which, the next avant-garde outpouring inevitably overcame. From the moment when the ideological component of this antagonism was shaken up under the influence of more essential historical foundations, this antagonism was interrupted, and the history of the avant-garde came to an end.

The tendency towards autonomous abstract formal aesthetics is necessarily ahistorical. In the moments when it informs interpretative study, we often come across formal comparison between current artistic phenomena and earlier, completed, stylistic cycles. In Miró the

updating of the Baroque is made an absolute, aspects of the Secession are descried amongst the leading representatives of contemporary creative work, without such comparison transgressing its formalist limits. The Surrealist conceptions of Max Ernst can be set aside as well as his own creative inputs, and then he can be freely compared to Hieronymus Bosch, just as *le douanier* Rousseau can be to Uccello. From that point, however, there can arise further fruitful interpretations, which, in return, have an impact on the avant-garde or themselves *become* avant-garde. However, if this is the case, it is only insofar as, or in the sense that, they give up the tendency to become autonomous, for the latter does not let them develop and complete their ideological mission.

If modern aesthetics investigates the nature of the artistic avant-garde and how the avant-garde can even be identified, then it cannot be an inquiry into anything other than novel aesthetic values. However, ideological critique sets them beyond the reach of aesthetic evaluation and, ultimately, in opposition to its tendency to sort and order things. Because these questions and answers are not set on the same level, they cannot avoid more or less obscured or conspicuous confusion. ‘Where does art begin and end?’ Waldemar George remarks in response to the question in the survey by Massat:

The works we despise today may tomorrow raise a voice that none of our contemporaries would assume. It is better to err than to adopt an accepting or passive point of view out of cowardice or opportunism. – The *authenticity* of a work of art eludes every definition and, with its coils, slips past any interpretation. It is something that is experienced. It cannot be measured.<sup>61</sup>

This crisis of avant-garde concepts is above all an ideological crisis, and it is deeply rooted in the much wider and more penetrating crisis of human consciousness and cognition that appeared in politics, just as in science and philosophy, from the 1930s onwards. At the same time, the growing sense of crisis in one image of the world has strengthened the entry of formal aesthetics, which emphasizes the artistic freedom of creative work and classifies ideological approaches according to the ‘literary content’ of painting. Although Miró the Surrealist sharply rejected, more than once, the formalist interpretation of his work, formalist aesthetics has been indulgently reprieved by Surrealism and positively valued on the basis of its ‘pure artistic values.’ It is only here that it comes to that formalism of which Surrealism was accused by its Marxist opponents, although here, in reverse, Surrealism is blamed precisely for its formalist insufficiency.

The *irreal* progress of avant-garde concepts was merely an outward sign of a deeper mental process which, in the face of exhausted and waning approaches, turned to deeper and more real sources. It was irreal only in relation to conventional forms of ‘realistic’ artistic expression. In relation to recognized and, until then, unspecified forms of human intellectual activity, conventional ‘realistic’ expression was, conversely, irreal. Here is the source of the eternal lexical quarrels about the terms ‘reality’ and ‘realism.’

At present there is a tumultuous upswing in the aesthetics of creative miserabilism and poetic absurdity, under the most diverse titles, whose number increases almost daily. It is not difficult to recognise in them a passive reception of the concretely irrational components

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61) Waldemar-George, *Aujourd’hui: art et architecture* 32, 1961, n.p.

of the pre-war avant-garde, especially Surrealism. The difference is that in Surrealist work the concretisation of the irrational was not, at least in its most essential parts, the main intention and meaning of the Surrealist movement, but rather, merely a contribution to an objectifying investigation, a sort of interim product of research into hidden mental processes and emotional forces, aimed above all at orientation amongst the possibilities of free forms of life. In his book *Amour fou* André Breton showed, in relation to the creative process in Giacometti, following the individual phases of the sculptural composition of a female figure, how capable unconscious artistic desire was of influencing not only the way he arranged the work, but also the random discovery of the subject that this composition was leading to from the start.<sup>62</sup> The resulting irrational appearance of Giacometti's figure was less important in comparison with this objectification of random chance, by which this unconscious desire was materialized. The finished Surrealist work was then actually just a document of this process of objectifying an inspiring materialization, to which the Surrealists turned all their attention. It is in this process of objectification, seeking its most sensitive and concrete psychological and philosophical space in the material of art, above all, that the ideological intent of Surrealism finds its place. Its philosophical and social mission has only just been capable of being realized, in the sense that the irrational has ceased to be irrational, and that the value of human nature, unfamiliar until now, has been understood dialectically, by which a path leads to the rediscovered world of a new consciousness, whose socially revolutionary character Surrealism strove to realize from the very beginning.

The irrational concrete form of miserabilist production that now almost dominates the art market, takes from the concrete irrationality of Surrealism just its external, absurd appearance. It will only end with a truly Surrealist intervention. Devoid of any ideological aim, it remains in the domain of autonomous aesthetics, which Surrealism encountered everywhere, since it expressed itself in recognisable artistic media, but it passed it by and went beyond it, at least in its most forceful intentions. If resistance to any particular ideology is also ideological, but just a retreating, exhausted ideology (for art can never cast off its communicative function since it would otherwise inevitably become commercial design), then it is necessary to add that any artistic work that subscribes in one or other way to Surrealism only superficially, in the sense that it is limited to aesthetic appearance or to its own creative form, is secondary or of no significance in terms of the principles of artistic development, because it is not a dynamic transformative medium in the service of the understanding of human being, but rather the reproduction of aesthetic facts.

If the phenomenological and anthropocentric nature of the avant-garde collapses, then the avant-garde *per se* collapses, even though there is a constantly increasing number of artists who would gladly join groups and 'make avant-garde art.' This tendency has been mostly brought about by the additional success in galleries and the market of the pre-war avant-garde and yet, amongst the incomparably smaller number of creative agents with no commercial interests, it has been brought about by the involuntary need 'in some way' to address the amorphous nature of the expressive functions, as well as communicative insignificance. The fact that irrationalistic work palpably lacks any ideological basis precisely today can be demonstrated by the emphasis that representatives of Pop Art in American society lay on its critical function

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62) André Breton, *L'amour fou*, Paris: Gallimard, 1937.

exactly as does the Zen-Buddhism of the American beatniks. The pop-artists and the beatniks want to be the ideological opposition to a prospering rational life, a material prosperity whose price is the suppression of mental potency. However problematic, naive and, above all, maybe just superficially attractive both these forms of opposition seem to be, they are no less evidence of the fact that aesthetic intention alone will never be enough for artistic creation, if it seeks to be not mere decorative production, but aspires instead to achieving some extra-aesthetic impact. Evaluation of this kind of work does not rest with the analysis of the artistic questions and creative moments in it. Instead, it begins with critique of its ontological and gnostic intent, for only then is it possible to find the criteria for orientation, without which every judgement is just interpretative whimsy and 'scientific lyricism.'

This is why the contemporary inflation of irrealist and irrationalist art, acknowledging or denying that it formally profits from Dada and Surrealism, is exclusively regulated by the complex laws of the art market, which, as a special sorting organism, has in fact replaced the task of criticism and theory in this field. The image that most often offers the concept of the avant-garde is a historical once. The theory of art usually defines it as a historical phase from Impressionism to Surrealism, regardless of the evolutionary logic it finds in it. In the last twenty years since the Second World War there has been no movement that did not return to some phase of the avant-garde in one or other form, either directly (Neoabstraction) or through contamination (Abstract Expressionism). Some of the more recent impulses seek for a source of inspiration in Dada, Surrealism and the Bauhaus (Pop Art, Op Art, Happenings, Lettrisme, Concrete Poetry).

While all these postwar tendencies are often designated as 'avant-garde' because they are evidently inspired by concepts that could find a place in history, their avant-garde nature is disputable, when taken into consideration more precisely. This development certainly has a deeper cause than can be explained merely as a lack of creative initiative, implying an era of stagnation following on from one of violent tumult. It has been demonstrated more than once that there has never existed in the history of art a truly stagnant era, for in every such era active elements of ferment have been sooner or later revealed to be newly emerging out of broader concepts. Decay and growth occur in history at the same time, even if differing intellectual standpoints arrive at different results when these elements are assessed.

The increasing complexity of sociological and psychological inquiry together with the shocks in the political history of the second third of this century have markedly complicated the ontological and noetic questions that the history of the avant-garde from Impressionism to Surrealism has had to answer. New images were opened up before it, they placed it before new civilizational facts, but all these new elements only touch the surface of human consciousness. The conquest of the air that inspired the Futurists to the destruction of theatres at the beginning of this century, had the same impact, in the order of the human mind, as the conquest of space fifty years later, which, for all its dizzying qualities, remains external to the human imagination, at least in its immediate effects. However we assess their significance, the fact remains that the way in which these new elements are reflected in contemporary art is incomparably feebler than the influence of Dada or Surrealism. As if here the development of the avant-garde had reached certain basic questions of artistic creation, such that it was

enough merely to designate an approach for them to be gradually specified and modified far into the future.

The previous pages indicated the kind of historical factors that made Surrealism into a highpoint in the development of the avant-garde movements, from which point it became its own philosophical domain, a specific kind of ontological and noetic problematic with its own history and development. In the same way that *psychoanalysis* also ceased to be a movement, this movement also became a broad base, split into different cognitive systems, and yet the principles of the original movement persisted in these systems, in a superior, more up to date, albeit differentiated, form. We ascertain an identical development within *Existentialism*, whose long-lasting co-existence with Surrealism is linked to the coincidence of their ambivalent relationship to Marxism and their inclination towards the Romantic models of mentality (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Hölderlin). As Surrealism evolved, just like Existentialism, a crisis of direct social engagement became visible, the result of which was that the merging of philosophical and artistic questions with aspects of practical social and political activity was gradually transferred to another order of comparison. The Romantic element of Surrealism represented by the interrelation of freedom, love and the poetic is not, in its revolutionary impulse, reduced to a programme of social or political praxis, but is conceived rather as the most profound dynamism of the creative life forces. This, its current alignment, is not a retreat from concrete to abstract concepts, in the philosophical sense of ones that are dematerialized (it was never deterred from formulating a position in questions of political praxis). It is instead an inclination to find concrete expression in models of another kind, in which social and political activity is one of the surface forms of conflict determined by forces shaped at a deeper level, that gain their legitimacy from them. In a similar way the speculative ideas of Heideggerian Existentialism arrive at the conceptual categories of the old philosophies, where the current moments of crisis of the European spirit appear as surface spasms of an originary and unchanging essence, that can only be viewed without resignation once it has been understood.

The spheres of Surrealist and Existentialist thought, which can be differentiated using a sufficiently incisive method similar to the way that imaginative and formally speculative contemplation can be distinguished from each other, have shared points of contact in an introverted ontological investigation, although in the introversion of different types, in which there is a revalorization and rehabilitation, in the context of contemporary thought, of ancient myths and their dynamic principles, without which the present crises of consciousness are not only inexplicable but also completely depressive. The most important feature of this direction in Surrealism is the fact that, gradually, the old opposition between the objective and general, and the subjective and individual, collapses, for it replaces the principle of identity with that of analogy. Was it the anti-naturalistic forms of art after Impressionism (Cubism, Expressionism, Surrealism) that reawakened the most ancient instincts, or do the most ancient instincts, awakened by the earthquakes of modern science in the system of the human consciousness and the unconscious, merely illustrate, through artistic creative work, their new development at the foundations of contemporary life? In *The Twilight of Images*<sup>63</sup> Germain Bazin detects in the dogma of the Mâyā the Vedic analogue of relativity, the same counterpart to the macrocosmic,

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63) Germain Bazin, *Le message de l'absolu: de l'aube au crepuscule des images*, Paris: Hachette, 1964.

static, cosmos based on observation, an essential cosmos eluding anything other than abstract symbolization, identical to what modern science exposes by way of pure reasoning; a bivalent system, expressed by Bohr's concept of complementarity.<sup>64</sup>

In the history of the avant-gardes a *new discursive space* slowly formed out of the fierce battle of ideas in what until now had been labelled art and the poetic, a discursive space in which the possibility of unity in the conceptual and terminological apparatus of art theory is as small as it is desirable, where a unified methodology, which remains a constantly unobtainable goal, gives way increasingly clearly to the dialectical relations between individual conceptual systems, and where the history of art, itself until recently still the domain of the most stable values, displays changing systems of different interpretative models. This change in the meaning of artistic work is clearly fundamental. The life of a work of art, whether an image or a book, is not fulfilled by the fact that it has been created to be a suggested source of specific value – the validity of which could never be reliably secured – or so that it could or ought to be in itself the most effective form of the liberation of supreme intellectual powers. Its real life is only fulfilled in the way it is received, the critical and theoretical interpretations that can be made of it, and the character of those it is able to prompt. It is only thus that it fulfills its highest task, since it contributes to the cultivation of consciousness and to the sorting of minds, which is essential for all living creative thought.

If, today, the greater part of critical activity retreats before the flood of absurd, irrationalist art, 'anti-theatre,' 'non-drama' and 'anti-books' to some kind of wise position, equally far from anywhere else, it can consequently easily be accused of passivity or sterility. Yet these accusations change nothing about the crisis of criteria that is emphasized with increasing frequency, and that has been going on in art since the first avant-garde movement opposed the positivist doctrine of beauty with the principles of discovery and evolution. Since then, the history of the avant-garde can be considered the history of a crisis in the evaluation of artistic creative work, for it only evolved at moments of crisis when its earlier mode of evaluation failed and a new one emerged. This state of crisis may seem to be provisional and capable of being constantly overcome anew, but in forms that differ from a renewed positivist idea consisting of the conviction that there is a universal solution to all questions in art, a viewpoint carried forward to its most rigorous conclusion by the discipline of socialist realism, with consequences, however, that are well known. *This* crisis of evaluation, which is essentially the protracted agony of positivism in art theory and its methods, will inevitably persist in its present elementary forms for as long as the pressure of the inner necessities of artistic creation and the interest of the public retains a hold – less and less willing to take patient note of rhetorical commentary instead of clearly defined opinions – and compels discursive renewal as the sovereign form of critical evaluation and thus a relaxation of the developmental dialectic, but this time free of obsolete universalist violence that condemns that dialectic to sophistic playfulness.

Even if history changed the conditions underlying the premises of the artistic avant-gardes, in the most comprehensive sense, this does not also mean that the dynamic forces that gave avant-garde movements their critical potential collapsed with them. These forces

64) The Māyā is the game of relations or, rather, the tensions between appearance and essence, between a superficial knowledge of the world, which penetrates our senses, and that other space that reveals to us a method that yogi call introversion, the pure knowledge of the soul.

certainly continue to exist today in certain forms and in some current parts, but they can only appear when they are allowed a *real* space for discourse and polemic, which represents a unique form of *active culture*. Active culture which, as a mode of cultural existence, brings about sophistication and cultivation, epitomizes, with its escalation of critical, conflicting potency, the basic precondition for permanent hygiene of the mind, which neither suffocates nor deadens, but is instead capable of awakening and developing new conceptions in human cognition in novel psychological and social situations, which today, perhaps at a rudimentary stage, are preparing to make hitherto unknown and unsuspected transitions from the avant-garde system to new formations, for which the sum of avant-garde developmental contributions has created latent preconditions and which, in their totality, may be able to contribute to more realistic forms of conflict and agreement over conceptions of the world. Thus, it is not entirely unlikely that the shaking of some basic certainties into which avant-garde creative thought has entered is merely a symptom of some fundamental shift in existing notions, the initial stage of some new way of looking at the counter-problems of humanism, the contours of which are as yet unknowable. If the history of human thought, - and the legendary times of the avant-gardes testify to this - is a chain of crises in the evaluation of human orientation, then even this present crisis, which seems to be more hopeless than others, cannot be the last, and the knowledge of it cannot be an admission of failure. What will awaken from our present skepticism will surely be stronger than all the arguments of hopelessness.



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