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Mapping Old Traces of the New

Towards a Historical Topography of Early Twentieth-Century Avant-Garde(s) in the European Cultural Field(s)

How can we outline the historical and geographical spread of the so-called “historical avant-garde”? An examination of the historiographical status of a few movements that are commonly considered as part of this avant-garde illustrates the lack of a consensus. For instance, some accounts ascribe a pivotal or privileged role to cubism and expressionism, whereas others explicitly exclude them. Neither the self-understanding of the “historical avant-garde” nor the innovations of its literary, artistic, and political practices yield a satisfactory definition. Instead, we should start viewing the “historical avant-garde” as a network and map it out as a rhizomatic complex.

Where did the European “historical avant-garde”, as it has been evoked by Peter Bürger, Matei Calinescu and Jean Weisgerber, begin and end?¹ How can we delineate the historical and geographical spread of this avant-garde? Which currents, schools, movements, isms, projects, which artefacts, works of art, architecture, music, literary texts and other aesthetic and cultural practices can be subsumed under the umbrella label “avant-garde” in the early twentieth century? Straightforward as these questions may seem, they are seldom addressed today in studies of the avant-garde. However, an examination of just a few movements that are commonly considered as part of the “historical avant-garde” illustrates that a consensus is lacking. Major early twentieth-century isms, such as cubism, expressionism, fauvism and surrealism, are included by some scholars, and even attributed a pivotal or privileged role in their account of the avant-garde, whereas they are explicitly excluded by others.² On what grounds can dis-

¹ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1974, passim; Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity. Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism*, Bloomington/Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1977, p. 140; Jean Weisgerber (ed.), *Les Avant-gardes littéraires au XX^e siècle*, vol. 1, Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982, p. 13, 71. Since the common label “historical avant-garde” is in itself quite problematic, I use the term here only between quotation marks. Cf. Hubert van den Berg, “On the historiographic distinction between historical and neo-avant-garde”, in: Dietrich Scheunemann (ed.), *Avant-garde / Neo-Avant-garde*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2005, p. 63–74.

² For example, Peter Bürger and Fernand Dijkonigen exclude cubism and expressionism from their “historical avant-garde” (cf. Bürger, *Theorie*, as in note 1, p. 44; Peter Bürger, “Rebellion am

tinctions be made between these movements? Why are some formations considered to fall under the umbrella term, and others not? The present essay addresses these questions by looking at two problematic sets of parameters in avant-garde studies concerning the assumed self-understanding of the “historical avant-garde” as avant-garde, and its alleged aesthetic and – in the widest sense – cultural novelty. By qualifying these imprecise and ultimately inaccurate parameters, this essay proposes an alternative way of investigating the beginning and the end of the “historical avant-garde” as a network.³

Badesece. Die Künstlergruppe Die Brücke wird 100 und überall als Avantgarde gefeiert. War sie das wirklich?” See: <http://www.zeit.de/2005/23/Die_Bruecke>, consulted 15.09.2005; Ferdinand Drijckoningen, “Voorwoord,” in: Ferdinand Drijckoningen, Jan Fontijn, eds., *Historische Avantgarde. Programmatische teksten van het Italiaans Futurisme, het Russisch Futurisme, Dada, het Constructivisme en het Tsjechisch Poëtisme*, Amsterdam: Huis aan de Drie Grachten, 1982, p. 5–51). In contrast, Dietrich Scheunemann regards cubism and expressionism as pivotal movements of the early twentieth-century avant-garde (cf. Dietrich Scheunemann, “On Photography and Painting. Prolegomena to a New Theory of the Avant-Garde,” in: Scheunemann, ed., *European Avant-Garde. New Perspectives*, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, p. 15–48). The indeterminacy of the historical extension of the twentieth-century “avant-garde” is not just confined to the inclusion or exclusion of one ism or another. Although the “historical avant-garde” is a core element of most studies on “the avant-garde,” many studies have assumed the existence of this “avant-garde” for a longer period, which is understood to extend from the early nineteenth century to the present day, cf.: Per Bäckström, “Avant-Garde, Vanguard or ‘Avant-Garde’. What We Talk About When We Talk About Avant-Garde,” in: Karin Granqvist, Ulrike Spring (eds.), *Representing Gender, Ethnicity and Nation in Word and Image*, Tromsø: Kvinnforsk, 2001, p. 173–184; Francis Francina (ed.), in *Modernity and Modernism. French painting in the Nineteenth Century*, New Haven, London: Yale University Press / Open University, 1993; Manfred Hardt (ed.), *Literarische Avantgarden*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989; Corona Hepp, *Avantgarde. Moderne Kunst, Kulturkritik und Reformbewegungen nach der Jahrhundertwende*, München: dtv, 1987; Cornelia Klinger, “Das Jahrhundert der Avantgarden,” in: *Transit. Europäische Revue*, 2002, nr. 23, p. 3–10; Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde*, Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press, 1968; Charles Russell (ed.), *The Avant-Garde Today. An International Anthology*, Urbana, Chicago, London: University of Illinois, 1981; Charles Russell, *Poets, Prophets and Revolutionaries. The Literary Avant-Garde from Rimbaud through Post-Modernism*, New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985; John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde. Explorations in Modernism*, London: Alcove Press, 1973.

³ This essay is based on a paper presented at the conference “The Return and Actuality of the Avant-Garde” at Hald Hovedgaard (Viborg, Denmark), organized by the Danish avant-garde research network in May 2003, and published as: Hubert van den Berg, “Kortlægning af det nyes gamle spor. Bidrag til en historisk topografi over det 20. århundredes avant-garde(r) i europæisk kultur,” in: Tania Ørum, Marianne Ping Huang, Charlotte Engberg (eds.): *En tradition af opbrud. Avantgardernes tradition og politik*, Hellerup: Spring, 2005, p. 19–43. The research for this essay was funded by the Flemish-Dutch Committee for Dutch Language and Culture (VNC) of the Netherlands Organisation for Scientific Research (NWO).

“Avant-garde” as metaphor and self-denomination

It has often been suggested that the term “avant-garde” should be reserved for the “historical avant-garde” alone, particularly because representatives of this configuration of isms regarded and presented themselves *as* “avant-garde”, more than others did before and after. However, although the label has been employed since the mid-nineteenth century, initially in particular in the French cultural field, the term assumed its privileged character as common denominator for the configuration of isms nowadays called “historical avant-garde” only *after* the Second World War. Before the war, “avant-garde” was used by the avant-garde itself and by congenial as well as hostile critics only very seldom, as a synonym for such parallel, yet far more common terms as “modern”, “ultramodern”, “new”, “young”, “newest” and “youngest”. As such, the label (or translations like *Vorhut* in German or *voorhoede* in Dutch) was generally employed only as an additional qualification accompanying some more specific denomination (symbolism, impressionism, cubism, futurism or constructivism), if it was used at all. For example, the Italian futurists called themselves futurists in the first place, and attributed to themselves the quality of being avant-garde *as* futurists in the second place.

Nevertheless, there were cases and texts in which representatives of the “historical avant-garde” wrote about the conglomerate of the early avant-garde as “avant-garde”. An often quoted example is a series of essays by Theo van Doesburg in the Dutch magazine *Het getij* in the early 1920s, entitled “Revue der Avant-garde” (Dutch “revue” meaning both “review ...” and “inspection of the troops”, “parade”).⁴ Drawing on, “La Peinture d’Avant-garde”, an article that the futurist Gino Severini previously published in *De stijl*, Van Doesburg claimed: “Op ’t oogenblik is Avant-garde de *collectieve benaming voor alle revolutionaire kunstenaarsgroepen*” (Currently, Avant-garde is the *collective term for all revolutionary artists’ groups*).⁵ Van Doesburg and Severini were exceptions, though. Even Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, one of the few protagonists of the avant-garde who was fond of the term “avant-garde”, presented the “historical avant-garde” in his manifesto “Le Futurisme mondial” of 1924 not as avant-garde, but as futurism.⁶ Another interesting case is the book *Die Kunstismen. Les Ismes de l’art. The Isms of Art*, compiled by Hans Arp and El Lissitzky in 1925. The book names and pre-

⁴ See Theo van Doesburg, “Revue der Avant-garde [Frankrijk],” in: *Het getij* 6/1, 1921, nr. 1, p. 109–112; “Revue der Avant-garde. Deutschland,” in: *Het getij* 6/1, 1921, nr. 3, 193–200; “Revue der Avant-garde. België,” in: *Het getij* 6/2, 1921, nr. 1, p. 25–29; “Revue der Avant-garde. Italië [I],” in: *Het getij* 6/2, 1921, nr. 6, p. 138–141; “La littérature d’avant-garde en Hollande,” in: *Ça ira* 1, 1921, nr. 12, p. 241–244; “Revue der Avant-garde. Italië [II],” in: *Het getij* 7, 1922, nr. 1, p. 13–15.

⁵ Van Doesburg, “Revue der Avant-garde [Frankrijk]” (as in note 4), p. 109.

⁶ Cf. reprint in: Giovanni Lista (ed.), *Marinetti et le Futurisme. Études, documents, iconographie*, Lausanne: L’Age d’homme, 1977, n. p.

sents a list of some fifteen isms from the previous decade: “Abstrakter Film, Konstruktivismus, Verismus, Proun, Kompressionismus, Merz, Neo-Plastizismus, Purismus, Dada, Simultanismus, Suprematismus, Metaphysiker, Abstraktivismus, Kubismus, Futurismus, Expressionismus,”⁷ but does not refer to them as “avant-garde”. Only in a recent essay accompanying a reprint of the book, does the editor allude (unknowingly, perhaps, since Van Doesburg’s essays were never translated) to the title of Van Doesburg’s “Revue der Avant-garde”, by calling *Kunstismen* a “Letzte Truppschau, Dernière Revue des Troupes, The Last Parade”.⁸

This later attribution of the term “avant-garde” to the early twentieth-century “isms of art” indicates once more that “avant-garde” became fashionable only as a common denominator for these isms – and increasingly so – after the Second World War. At the time of the “historical avant-garde” itself, it was still anything but a standing term. The label was virtually absent from publications of the “historical avant-garde”, even when its members presented surveys of the avant-garde as a whole. This changed after 1945, perhaps as a result of linguistic-economic factors.⁹ The labels previously used by the avant-garde itself (“new art”, “modern art” and “isms of art”) were either too indistinct and vague, had lost their meaning (“modern” and “new” were already fashionable in the late nineteenth century), or had become impossible as a label for the art of past decades (“modern” being a label for the latest fashion and not for yesterday’s fashion, until “postmodern” made its entrance). Another reason why “avant-garde” became fashionable only after the war stems from the military origin of the term: the vanguard or military units were ahead of an army advancing against the enemy. As Hans Magnus Enzensberger has suggested¹⁰, previous artistic movements obtained the role of forerunners of a following “army” only after 1945, when new groups, movements and isms in the cultural field – the so-called “neo-avant-garde” – took up the tradition of the pre-war movements.

However, since only small sections of what is now called “historical avant-garde” actually used the label themselves¹¹, the often-assumed self-denomi-

⁷ Hans Arp, El Lissitzky (eds.), *Die Kunstismen. Les Ismes de l'art. The Isms of Art*, Erlenbach, München, Leipzig: Rentsch, 1925, p. III.

⁸ Alois Martin Müller, “Letzte Truppschau, Dernière Revue des Troupes, The Last Parade,” in: Hans Arp, El Lissitzky (eds.), *Die Kunstismen. Les Ismes de l'art. The Isms of Art*, Baden: Müller, 1990 [inserted leaflet].

⁹ Cf. also: Paul Wood (ed.), *The Challenge of the Avant-garde*, New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999, p. 10–11. The first German book publication mentioning the “historical avant-garde” as “avant-garde” in its title was the exhibition catalogue: Leopold Reidemeister (ed.), *Der Sturm. Herwarth Walden und die Europäische Avantgarde, Berlin 1912–1932*, Berlin: Nationalgalerie, 1961.

¹⁰ Hans Magnus Enzensberger, “Die Aporien der Avantgarde,” in: Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten II*, Frankfurt a. M.: Suhrkamp, 1984, p. 50–80, here p. 63.

¹¹ Cf. Ulrich Weisstein, “Le terme et le concept d’avant-garde en Allemagne,” in: *Revue de l'Université de Bruxelles* 1, 1975, nr. 1, p. 10–37; Gérard Conio, *Les Avant-gardes entre métaphysique et histoire. Entretiens avec Philippe Sers*, Lausanne: L’Age d’Homme, 2002, p. 9–14.

nation or self-understanding of this avant-garde as avant-garde cannot serve as a criterion for deciding where it began or ended. Since the umbrella term is an invention *ex posteriori*, its use as a common denominator for the “isms of art” of the early twentieth century could arguably be dropped. The label has, however, a practical historiographical function. If, as Ulrich Weisstein¹² has suggested, “modernism” can serve as a *Lückenbüsser* between the early avant-garde and the neo-avant-garde of the post-war period, “avant-garde” could also serve as a historiographical stopgap, as a missing umbrella term for the conglomerate of what Arp and Lissitzky called “isms of art”, especially since in most divergent understandings of the term many of these isms are actually included. Important here, however, is that “avant-garde” proves to be a rather arbitrary meta-term that may have acquired its own historiographical rationale and by now even its own tradition. Still, the label is most certainly not intrinsically linked to those formations we now tend to call “historical avant-garde”.

The metaphoric qualities of the term are equally problematic, in spite of its current popularity. When used in a military context, avant-garde allows only one conclusion: the original military purport and status of the avant-garde (vanguard) in the theatre of war¹³ is not as appropriate and fitting as it might seem from the rather distant perspective of today’s cultural field. First, in military terms the avant-garde may occupy a forward position in the battlefield, but remains subject to the orders of the general command of the main army behind it. In this regard, the main commandments of the military avant-garde are obedience and discipline, not self-will and originality, which are pivotal in the avant-garde discourse of the twentieth century.¹⁴ In the case of the early twentieth-century aesthetic avant-garde, the question therefore arises: where were the general command and the main body of the (following) army to be found? In the second place, military tacticians make no qualitative difference between troops entrusted with the role of avant-garde (in certain hostilities) and other troops that are part of the following army. The former possess no intrinsic special qualities, apart from their role or fate to be the first to meet and engage the enemy. They

¹² Ulrich Weisstein, “How Useful is the Term ‘Modernism’ for the Interdisciplinary Study of Twentieth-Century Art?” in: Christian Berg et al. (eds.), *The Turn of the Century. Le tournant du siècle. Modernism and Modernity in Literature and the Arts. Le modernisme et la modernité dans la littérature et les arts*, Berlin, New York: De Gruyter, 1995, p. 409–441.

¹³ As elaborated on in handbooks on military tactics like: Oscar von Lettow-Vorbeck, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Beispiele. Im Anschluß an den an den Königlichen Kriegsschulen eingeführten Leitfaden der Taktik*, Berlin: Decker, 1896; Karl von Clausewitz, *Vom Kriege*, Berlin, Leipzig: Behr, 1915, p. 274–281; Frédéric Culmann, *Cours de Tactique Générale d’après l’Expérience de la Grande Guerre*, Paris, Limoges: Charles-Lavauzelle et Cie, 1922, p. 173–200; Hubert van den Berg, Gillis Dorleijn (eds.): *Avant-garde! Voorhoede? Literaire vernieuwingsbewegingen in Noord en Zuid opnieuw beschouwd*, Nijmegen: Van-tilt, 2002.

¹⁴ Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, Cambridge, Mass., London: MIT, 1986, p. 151–170.

are not “special forces” per se, but rather regular units with a specific task or role. In the third place, more than just *one* avant-garde enters enemy territory at any given time – unlike the point of the red wedge in El Lissitzky’s famous image *Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge* (1920). When it is ahead of an army on the march in single-column formation, the military avant-garde may seem like a spearhead. However, in most battle situations, in which certain troops are given the role of avant-garde, more than one section or division of an army may serve as avant-garde. Those units that have the good (or bad) luck to be the closest to the enemy¹⁵ are destined simply for avant-garde duty. Finally, not only a marching army has its avant-garde units; a standing, defending army has them too: those in front position and in immediate range of the enemy. Put differently: on the battlefield, *every* army has its avant-garde(s), be they the good guys or the bad guys, be they progressive or reactionary or just middle of the road.

Not accidentally, Enzensberger did not draw on military literature for his understanding of the term, but rather on a distant and amputated explanation he found in an old edition of the German *Brockhaus* encyclopaedia: “Vorhut, Vortrab, der Teil eines Heeres, welcher vor dem Gros der Armee marschiert, Hindernisse beseitigt, im Fall eines Angriffs aber den Feind so lange aufhält, bis die nachfolgende Kolonne gefechtsbereit ist (Avantgardengefecht).”¹⁶ Indeed, it is not the military use of the term as such, but rather this minimalist explanation that permitted its metaphoric transposition and elaboration into a standing term for the “isms of art” of the early twentieth century in the cultural field. Only a selection of aspects of the term’s military meaning have been mobilized in the description of the aesthetic avant-garde. The forward position of the avant-garde in a military context, the fact that it operates in a rather isolated fashion as the harbinger of something larger still to come, its operations in enemy territory, its function as a reconnaissance unit – these are the main facets that have been related in the cultural field to the emergence of new artistic and cultural phenomena, and inscribed into a linear understanding of cultural history ruled by progress and constant innovation – as if cultural history were a theatre of war.

Unlike many other terms in literary and art history that were originally metaphors as well (like “movement”, “current”, “school”), “avant-garde” is not a dead metaphor. The term thus is frequently used in criticism focusing on the avant-garde by reminding its readership explicitly and often extensively that the notion has a military provenance.¹⁷ Presented in this way, the notion does not

¹⁵ As for example in the 1866 battle of Königgrätz, cf. Lettow-Vorbeck, *Kriegsgeschichtliche Beispiele* (as in note 13), map 17 opposite p. 82.

¹⁶ *Brockhaus’ Kleines Conversations-Lexikon. Enzyklopädisches Handwörterbuch*. Vol. 1, Leipzig: Brockhaus, 1886, p. 174.

¹⁷ See for example: Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-garde* (as in note 2); Drijckoningen, “Voorwoord” (as in note 2); Richard Kostelanetz, “Introduction,” in: Richard Kostelanetz (ed.), *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes*, New York: Schirmer, 2000, p. XIX–XXII.

serve primarily as a neutral, descriptive denomination or period label but rather as a value judgement. In the past century-and-a-half, it has often been used in a positive sense, especially in the symbolic capitalism ruling the European cultural field(s), in which, as Pierre Bourdieu has pointed out, innovation and progress have become certified parameters for gaining symbolic capital and a comfortable position.¹⁸ Yet the notion has also frequently been endowed with rather negative overtones. In particular, the label also possessed many pejorative connotations in Western Europe and North America after the Second World War, partly due to the political, Leninist intertext of the communist party as the veritable avant-garde of the working class. This made the avant-garde – as a possible competitor – undesirable behind the Iron Curtain as well.¹⁹

The pursuit of the New

Another popular parameter for avant-gardism is the criterion of novelty, which was modelled largely on the “avant-garde” metaphor and based on claims by that avant-garde. The “historical avant-garde” is then defined as an agency or set of agencies in pursuit of the new, stressing radical innovation and assuming the creation of a completely new art that breaks with traditions and conventions in aesthetics, culture and even politics. The “new art” of the “historical avant-garde” might seem compatible with “modern life”, for its aesthetic appropriation and critical use of the new media (photography, film and radio) of its time, and its concern with modern metropolitan life, including the social, political, economic and technological dimensions of capitalism in its imperialist phase. But, apart from the more fundamental problem of the modernist ideology of progress, the question is whether the “new” was really as new as it claimed to be. Certainly, the avant-garde had to claim the novelty of its art in line with the modernist ideology of progress and the logic of the symbolic capitalism of the artistic and literary field. But was its art really as new as it pretended? And could the new only be

¹⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Les règles de l'art. Genèse et structure du champ littéraire*, Paris: Éditions de minuit, 1992.

¹⁹ Cf. Alfred Andersch (ed.), *Europäische Avantgarde*, Frankfurt a. M.: Frankfurter Hefte, 1949; Hans Sedlmayr, *Verlust der Mitte. Die bildende Kunst des 19. und 20. Jahrhundert als Symptom und Symbol der Zeit*, Salzburg: Müller, 1948; Hannes Boehringer, “Avantgarde – Geschichten einer Metapher,” in: *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte* 22, 1978, p. 90–114; Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, München: Hanser, 1988; Willemijn Stokvis, “Totalitair en revolutionair denken en de avant-garde in de kunst,” in: *De Gids* 153, 1990, nr. 1, p. 3–16; Dirk von Petersdorff, “Das Verlachen der Avantgarde. Rückblick auf eine ästhetische Prügeley,” in: *Neue Rundschau* 106, 1995, nr. 4, p. 69–73. A first discussion of the avant-garde as avant-garde in the German Democratic Republic was only published in the late seventies by the Zentralinstitut für Literaturgeschichte of the Akademie der Wissenschaften der DDR: Karlheinz Barck, Dieter Schlenstedt, Wolfgang Thierse, *Künstlerische Avantgarde. Annäherungen an ein unabgeschlossenes Kapitel*, Berlin: Akademie-Verlag, 1979.

found in the avant-garde? The answer to the latter question is simple: no! During what some have called the “age of the avant-gardes”²⁰ we can find many decisively non- or even anti-avant-garde artists and authors, who also presented something new, a “new”, a “modern” art and literature that also appropriated (aspects of) new media, and also reflected on and recuperated elements of the “modern times” and culture in its widest sense.

Regarding the first question, the assumed novelty of several aesthetic practices of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century (and the accompanying claim by many of its representatives that they were creating a “new art”) seems rather doubtful. In a recent article in *Die Zeit*, Peter Bürger criticized the qualification “avant-garde” for the expressionist painter’s group “Die Brücke”.²¹ Already in 1974, Bürger had distinguished in a footnote of his *Theorie der Avantgarde* two essential traits of the “historical avant-garde,” based on his reflections on Dada and surrealism: “einen radikalen Traditionsbruch” and a turn “gegen die Institution Kunst, [...], wie sie sich in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft herausgebildet hat”. To this he added: “Mit Einschränkungen, die in konkreten Untersuchungen herauszuarbeiten wären, gilt dies auch für den italienischen Futurismus und den deutschen Expressionismus.”²² As he pointed out in *Die Zeit*, “Die Brücke” does not deserve the predicate of avant-garde since the painters were – among other things – not using new techniques, but working in a way already fashionable in mid-nineteenth-century France. What holds true for the *plein air* “free drawing” of “Die Brücke” holds true also for avant-garde novelties like collage and montage, visual poetry and abstract painting and sculpting. Whereas montage and collage originate in the eighteenth and nineteenth century²³, visual poetry can already be found in Europe in Roman and Greek antiquity.²⁴ Abstract artefacts are among the first cultural reminiscences of humanity – and avant-garde artists were well aware of that. As Hans Arp wrote in a note accompanying an exhibition of abstract works in 1915: “Die ‘neue Kunst’ ist so neu, wie die ältesten Gefäße, Städte, Gesetze, und wurde von den alten Völkern Asiens, Amerikas, Afrikas und zuletzt von den Gothikern geübt.”²⁵

²⁰ Birgit Wagner, *Literatur und Technik im Zeitalter der Avantgarden. Ein Beitrag zur Geschichte des Imaginären*, Munich: Fink, 1996; Klaus von Beyme, *Das Zeitalter der Avantgarden. Kunst und Gesellschaft 1905–1955*, Munich: Beck, 2005.

²¹ Bürger, “Rebellion am Badeseer” (as in note 2).

²² Bürger, *Theorie* (as in note 1), p. 44.

²³ Cf. for early examples: Kjeld Heltoft, *Hans Christian Andersen as an artist. H. C. Andersens billed-kunst*, Copenhagen: Rosenkilde og Bagger, 1977.

²⁴ Cf. Klaus-Peter Dencker, *Text-Bilder. Visuelle Poesie international. Von der Antike bis zur Gegenwart*, Cologne: DuMont, 1972.

²⁵ Cit. in: Alfons Backes-Haase, *Kunst und Wirklichkeit. Zur Typologie des DADA-Manifests*. Frankfurt a. M.: Hain, 1992, p. 35. See also: Lucy R. Lippard, *Overlay. Contemporary Art and the Art of Pre-history*, New York: Pantheon Books, 1983.

Probably because the criterion of novelty is rather problematic, some authors have introduced additional parameters, focusing on the formal dimensions of art, literature and manifestations of the avant-garde. However, when the avant-garde is narrowed down to one single aesthetic or programmatic principle, these other parameters also tend to exclude substantial sections of the isms summarized by Van Doesburg as “avant-garde” or by Arp and Lissitzky as “isms of art”. This is the case with Bürger’s additional criterion of an intended turn against the bourgeois institution of art or – formulated in positive terms – the avant-garde’s claim to reunite art and life. This latter aim was undoubtedly a widespread ambition of the avant-garde, but the rhetoric of pursuing a reunification of art and life can also be found before, after and concurrent with the avant-garde as well: consider Richard Wagner’s early revolutionary writings from the years 1848/49²⁶, or, a few decades later, naturalism and symbolism (accompanied by the claim to be young, modern and new). Many artists involved in the pre-1945 avant-garde – among them several undisputed protagonists of the avant-garde, like Kurt Schwitters – neither rejected the notion of autonomous art nor opposed institutionalizing art as something autonomous. Even Dada artists tried to win positions in the institutions of art academies and museums.²⁷

The alleged general political ambitions and ramifications of the avant-garde are problematic as well. No doubt, many avant-garde artists had political ambitions. Yet several major representatives of the “historical avant-garde” made a sharp distinction between politics and their aesthetic projects. Herwarth Walden and *Der Sturm* (both the gallery and the journal) in the period 1912–1920, Hugo Ball as manager of the Zurich based Galerie Dada (1917), as well as Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters and their respective reviews/projects *De stijl* and *Merz* voiced anti-political tendencies in the avant-garde. During the Great War, Walden and Ball were politically active *next* to their artistic and literary enterprises – the former in the German official propaganda apparatus²⁸, the latter in the radical-left and liberal opposition to the war and the German imperial regime.²⁹ However, in their avant-garde projects both refrained from politics.

²⁶ Cf. Richard Wagner, *Gesammelte Schriften*. Vol. 3, Leipzig: Hesse und Becker, 1911.

²⁷ Hubert van den Berg, “From a New Art to a New Life and a New Man. Avant-Garde Utopianism in Dada,” in: Sascha Bru, Gunther Martens (eds.), *The Invention of Politics in the European Avant-Garde (1906–1940)*, Amsterdam, New York: Rodopi, 2006, p. 134–141.

²⁸ Cf. Kate Winskell, “The Art of Propaganda: Herwarth Walden and ‘Der Sturm’, 1914–1919,” in: *Art History* 18, 1995, nr. 3, p. 315–344; Hubert van den Berg, “... wir müssen mit und durch Deutschland in unserer Kunst weiterkommen.” Jacoba van Heemskerck und das geheimdienstliche ‘Nachrichtenbüro Der Sturm,’” in: Petra Josting, Walter Fähnders (eds.), *“Laboratorium Vielseitigkeit”. Zur Literatur der Weimarer Republik. Festschrift für Helga Karrenbrock*, Aisthesis: Bielefeld, 2005, p. 67–87.

²⁹ Cf. Hubert van den Berg, *Avantgarde und Anarchismus. Dada in Zürich und Berlin*, Heidelberg: Winter, 1999, p. 205–227.

Walden propagated an aestheticist programme of pure art in *Der Sturm*: “Die Kunst und die Tatsache sind zwei Welten, die nichts miteinander zu tun haben. [...] Die Kunst hat kein Ideal. Die Kunst ist.”³⁰ When politicized German expressionist émigrés in Zurich demanded political engagement, Ball responded: “Politik und Kunst sind zwei verschiedene Dinge. Man mag Künstler als Privatleute anrufen; man kann und darf sie aber nicht dazu anhalten, propagandistische Kunst (zu deutsch Plakate) zu malen.”³¹ Likewise, Theo van Doesburg and Kurt Schwitters criticized the communist overtures of Russian and Hungarian constructivists in the “Manifest Proletkunst” in *Merz*.³² Although Van Doesburg qualified the socialist movement as the political wing of the same avant-garde he described in his “Revue der Avant-garde”³³, his Dutch version of the manifesto had the revealing title “Anti-Tendenzkunst”.³⁴ In this manifesto, co-signed by Hans Arp and Tristan Tzara as well, Van Doesburg and Schwitters rejected not only a communist politicization of (constructivist) art, but also any other form of politicizing the arts:

Soll nun die Kunst tendenziös proletarische Instinkte wachrufen, so bedient sie sich im Grunde derselben Mittel wie kirchliche oder nationalistische Kunst. So banal es an sich klingt, ist es im Grunde dasselbe, ob jemand ein rotes Heer mit Trotzky an der Spitze oder ein kaiserliches Heer mit Napoleon an der Spitze malt. Für den Wert des Bildes als Kunstwerk ist es aber gleichgültig, ob proletarische Instinkte oder patriotische Gefühle erweckt werden sollen. Das eine wie das andere ist, vom Standpunkte der Kunst aus betrachtet, Schwindel. Die Kunst soll nur mit ihren eigenen Mitteln die schöpferischen Kräfte im Menschen wachrufen, [...]. Nur kleine Talente können aus Mangel an Kultur, da sie das Große nicht übersehen, in ihrer Beschränktheit so etwas wie proletarische Kunst (d.h. Politik in gemaltem Zustande) machen. Der Künstler aber verzichtet auf das Spezialgebiet der sozialen Organisation.³⁵

Next to this rejection of politicizing, both Van Doesburg and Schwitters aimed simultaneously at a *Gesamtkunstwerk*³⁶, which would ultimately constitute a new world, or in terms used by Van Doesburg and *De stijl*: a “nieuwe wereldbeelding”, a new *beelding* of the world – *beelding* being an idiosyncratic neologism of *De stijl* that meant imagination, evocation as well as creation.³⁷ As such, apolitical stance and abstinence from involvement in conventional politics also possessed

³⁰ Herwarth Walden, *Einblick in Kunst. Expressionismus, Futurismus, Kubismus*, Berlin: Der Sturm, 1924, p. 36–38.

³¹ Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit*, Zurich: Limmat, 1992, p. 163.

³² Cf. Hubert van den Berg, *The Import of Nothing. How Dada Came, Saw and Vanished in the Low Countries (1915–1929)*, New York: G.K. Hall, 2002, p. 166–170.

³³ Van Doesburg, “Revue der Avant-garde [Frankrijk]” (as in note 4), p. 109–110.

³⁴ Theo van Doesburg, Kurt Schwitters, *Holland's bankroet door dada. Documenten van een dadaïstische triomftocht door Nederland*, Amsterdam: Ravijn, 1992, p. 34–36.

³⁵ Van Doesburg/Schwitters, *Holland's bankroet* (as in note 34), p. 37.

³⁶ Van Doesburg/Schwitters, *Holland's bankroet* (as in note 34), p. 38.

³⁷ De Stijl, “Manifest III. Naar een nieuwe wereldbeelding,” in: *De stijl* 4, 1921, nr. 8, p. 124–125. Cf. Van den Berg, *The Import of Nothing* (as in note 32), p. 131–132.

an obvious political edge. Nevertheless, cases like this show that political engagement cannot serve as a parameter for delineating the contours of the avant-garde.

The project of the early avant-garde as a network

The parameters discussed above may have some heuristic qualities. However, if we take the historical configuration of isms described by Van Doesburg, Arp and Lissitzky along with others as an interrelated whole, these commonly applied parameters of current-day avant-garde studies are either too broad, pointing at traditions in which the avant-garde itself is but a small dot, or too narrow to cover the heterogeneous character of the whole conglomerate of the early avant-garde. It could, therefore, be argued that we should not stick to one parameter but take rather several from different sets. Indeed, when we recognize that neither “avant-garde” as self-denomination or self-understanding, nor the other parameters mentioned above allow a precise demarcation of the contours of the avant-garde, one solution could be to regard the avant-garde as a project, as proposed by Wolfgang Asholt and Walter Fähnders in their preface to *Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*.³⁸ This project should be understood in the same way as Habermas’s *Projekt der Moderne*, not as an achieved unity but rather as an enterprise that still has (or in the case of the early avant-garde: still *had*) to be completed. It could be understood as a project that consists of a number of still partially isolated and incompatible fragments, as fragments indicating a future unity to come.³⁹ In the terminology of Félix Guattari and Gilles Deleuze, it could be viewed as a “rhizomatic entity” or “multiplicity,”⁴⁰ or, in terms of Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt’s work, as a “multitude” with some degree of cohesion, but marked, above all, by heterogeneity, diversity and to some extent by incoherence as well.⁴¹ It would be a non-hierarchical network with several nodes wherein various lines come together, but also with rips, rents and ruptures.

Whereas Guattari and Deleuze explicitly exclude the concept/notion of the “avant-garde” (as used in the Maoist *Tel Quel*) from their first version of *Rhi-*

³⁸ Wolfgang Asholt, Walter Fähnders (eds.), ‘*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*’. *Die Avantgarde und ihre Manifeste (1909–1938)*, Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1997, p. 1–9.

³⁹ Asholt/Fähnders (eds.), ‘*Die ganze Welt ist eine Manifestation*’ (as in note 38), p. 1–9; Wolfgang Asholt, Walter Fähnders (eds.), *Der Blick vom Wölkenkratzer. Avantgarde – Avantgardekritik – Avantgardeforschung*, Amsterdam, Atlanta: Rodopi, 2000, p. 69–120.

⁴⁰ Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Rhizome. Introduction*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1976; Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *Mille Plateaux. Capitalisme et schizophrénie*, Paris: Éditions de Minuit, 1980.

⁴¹ Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Empire*, Cambridge/Mass., London: Harvard University Press, 2000; Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, *Multitude. War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*, New York: The Penguin Press, 2004.

zome⁴², their critique of the “avant-garde” is overwritten by a plea for nomadism in the second version of the text in *Mille Plateaux*.⁴³ Deleuze and Guattari might not have been fond of the term and concept, at least in its Leninist version, but they certainly did not reject the aesthetic practice of the “historical avant-garde”. More important, the excerpts on the basic traits of the rhizome below indicate that as a model it allows for a better understanding of the avant-garde network, and its topography. This does not imply that the rhizome is the ultimate model for a description of the avant-garde. It is proposed here, first of all, as a provisional model to interpret the avant-garde as a network involved in a multifaceted, heterogeneous project. This may also hold when the relationship between poetic, aesthetic, political and other features are considered. And there can be no doubt that Guattari and Deleuze’s interpretation of the rhizomatic root offers an interesting model for such an understanding of the avant-garde:

1 et 2 Principes de connexion et d’hétérogénéité: n’importe quel point d’un rhizome peut être connecté avec n’importe quel autre, et doit l’être. [...] Un rhizome ne cesserait de connecter des chaînons sémiotiques, des organisations de pouvoir, des occurrences renvoyant aux arts, aux sciences, aux lutes sociales. Un chaînon sémiotique est comme un tubercule agglomérant des actes très divers, linguistiques, mais aussi perceptifs, mimiques, gestuels, cogitatifs; il n’y a pas de langue en soi, ni d’universalité du langage, mais un concours de dialectes, de patois, d’argots, de langues spéciales. Il n’y a pas de locuteur-auditeur idéal, pas plus que de communauté linguistique homogène. [...]

3 Principe de multiplicité: c’est seulement quand le multiple est effectivement traité comme substantif, multiplicité, qu’il n’a plus aucun rapport avec l’Un comme sujet ou comme objet, comme réalité naturelle ou spirituelle, comme image et monde. [...]

4 Principe de rupture asignifiante: contre les coupures trop significantes qui séparent les structures, ou en traversent une. Un rhizome peut être rompu, brisé en un endroit quelconque, il reprend suivant telle ou telle de ses lignes et suivant d’autres lignes. [...]

5 et 6 Principe de cartographie et de décalcomania: un rhizome n’est justiciable d’aucun modèle structural ou génératif. Il est étranger à toute idée d’axe génétique, comme de structure profonde.⁴⁴

As might be obvious, all these properties of the rhizome can be regarded as characteristics of (the network of) the early avant-garde as well. In combination with the social and political reflections on the multitude by Negri and Hardt and with the suggestions made by Asholt and Fähnders (drawing partially on later work by Bürger), the figure of the rhizome thus seems to offer a suitable framework for the understanding of the heterogeneous, hybrid character of the avant-garde as a (multiple) entity, as a set of fragments constituting a project in the sense of a common enterprise still to be realized. However, it offers no answer to the question of where the avant-garde began and ended. To answer this, the following

⁴² Deleuze/Guattari, *Rhizome* (as in note 40), p. 70 and 73.

⁴³ Deleuze/Guattari, *Mille Plateaux* (as in note 40), p. 9–37. The same rejection of the Leninist “avant-garde” is repeated in: Félix Guattari, Antonio Negri, *Communists Like Us. New Spaces of Liberty, New Lines of Alliance*, New York: Semiotext(e), 1990, p. 31.

⁴⁴ Deleuze/Guattari, *Rhizome* (as in note 40), p. 13–14, 16, 19.

two sets of historiographical-terminological considerations and practical historiographical observations might serve as a point of departure.

Historiographical considerations: lines and nodes

The metaphor “avant-garde” has no fixed historical or historiographical meaning when one applies it to specific sets of artists, movements or isms. If we decide, however, to save the term for the configuration of isms regarded by Bürger and many others as the “historical avant-garde”, the label should have some surplus value. This surplus can be an arbitrary label for the sum of these artists, movements and isms that is more than all of them regarded separately. As an umbrella term for groups, projects, currents, schools and movements like “Die Brücke”, “Der Blaue Reiter”, “Dada”, “De stijl”, “Bauhaus”, “Proun”, “Merz”, “futurism”, “cubism”, “expressionism”, “constructivism”, “surrealism” and “zenitism”, “historical avant-garde” can refer to a rhizomatic, heterogeneous entity at a “middle” level, i.e. “higher” than all these phenomena individually, yet “lower” than “modernity” for example or, in reflecting the rhizome, as some root structure in the landscape of modernity.

If this assumed entity is not to remain a “mere” historiographical projection or theoretical invention, but genuinely refer also to a past, the contours and properties of this entity must be based on demonstrable data. Assuming that the early avant-garde was indeed such an entity then the surplus of the term must provide some demonstrable cohesion in a collective dimension, in which the sum of artists, groups and isms is involved – each with their own formal-aesthetic features, thematic preoccupations and other (political and programmatic) peculiarities. Since the form and content of the artefacts, as well as the aesthetics and politics of these groups and isms, are marked by a profound heterogeneity and incompatibility, the main parameter for testing their collective dimension must be concealed in a momentum of cohesion. This momentum has to be derived from the relations and links connecting the single isms, projects and artists, as well as from the meeting points and occasions that highlight the collectivity of the “historical avant-garde”. In short, their cohesion has to be charted within the lines and nodes of a rhizomatic network, a nomadic, deterritorialized *locus communis* of the early avant-garde in the twentieth century.

In the “historical avant-garde” a mutual feeling of understanding or spirit of community can indeed be discerned. This communality can be seen in surveys like those of Van Doesburg, and Arp and Lissitzky, as well as in anthologies like Lajos Kassák’s *Buch neuer Künstler*⁴⁵, Herwarth Walden’s *Einblick in Kunst*⁴⁶ and

⁴⁵ Ludwig [i.e. Lajos] Kassák, *Buch neuer Künstler*, Vienna: Ma/Elbmühl, 1922.

⁴⁶ Walden, *Einblick in Kunst* (as in note 30).

Circle. An International Survey of Constructive Art.⁴⁷ It can also be found in the Zurich dadaists' understanding of Dada as a synthesis of all previous isms, notably cubism, futurism and expressionism.⁴⁸ The same communality can also be observed in the avant-garde press. Periodicals like *Der Sturm*, *De stijl*, *The Little Review* and *Ma* not only served as a platform for the ism(s) and projects of the editors, but also for other isms, often directing the attention of their readers to other avant-garde magazines as well. Even contemporary critics, both friendly and hostile, assumed the coherence among the different faces of the avant-garde hydra. The configuration thus laid bare is sometimes referred to, or rather qualified, as "avant-garde," for instance in Van Doesburg's "Revue der Avant-garde" or in the case of Clement Greenberg's essay "Avant-garde and Kitsch" in the *Partisan Review* from September 1939.⁴⁹ Yet other umbrella terms were used as well. In an article entitled "Art Chronicle" that immediately preceded Greenberg's essay, George L. K. Morris, for instance, presented the European "historical avant-garde" as "Recent Tendencies in Europe,"⁵⁰ without using the term itself. Other labels were "isms of art", "modern" or "new art" or just a *pars pro toto*: Dada, futurism or expressionism. The progressive and hardly uninformed German art historian Richard Hamann subsumed in his *Geschichte der Kunst* (1933) the entire early avant-garde under the notion "expressionism."⁵¹

The entity is marked by a considerable degree of heterogeneity, and by internal polemics and hostilities about the innovation and programs of specific isms, groups, movements and individuals. The "avant-garde" thus proves a synchronically heterogeneous and diverse conglomerate, marked by many diachronic fluctuations, such as artists going from one group or ism to another, or the rapid succession of isms. Occasionally, these fluctuations led to physical confrontations, for instance between the dadaists and surrealists at the Parisian *Soirée du Cœur à Barbe* in 1923.⁵² Nevertheless, the "avant-garde" continued to constitute a single entity.

A sense of belonging to this entity was articulated when those involved acted or manifested themselves in a collective way, through mutual collaboration,

⁴⁷ Ben Nicholson, Naum Gabo, J. L. Martin (eds.), *Circle. An International Survey of Constructive Art*, London: Faber and Faber, 1937.

⁴⁸ Cf. Van den Berg, "From a New Art" (as in note 27), p. 143–144.

⁴⁹ Clement Greenberg, "Avant-garde and Kitsch," in: *Partisan Review* 6, 1939, nr. 5, p. 34–49.

⁵⁰ George L. K. Morris, "Art Chronicle. Recent Tendencies in Europe," in: *Partisan Review* 6, 1939, nr. 5, p. 31–33.

⁵¹ Richard Hamann, *Geschichte der Kunst von der altchristlichen Zeit bis zur Gegenwart*, Berlin: Knauer, 1933. Hamann followed here the colloquial understanding of "expressionism" before the First World War, cf. Marit Werenskiöld, *The Concept of Expressionism. Origin and metamorphoses*, Oslo: Universitetsforlaget, 1984.

⁵² Cf. Evert van Straaten, "'Ze hebben Tzara bijna doodgeslagen!' Theo van Doesburg als ooggetuige van de Soirée du Cœur à Barbe," in: *Jong Holland* 3, 1987, nr. 4, p. 24–31.

in (collective) reviews, magazines, anthologies or surveys in book-form, at joint conferences, exhibitions, in collective projects like publishing houses, in the membership of certain organizations, through collaboration in soirées and other manifestations, in the publication and subscription of manifestoes and other proclamations, or in contributions to such enterprises (magazines, exhibitions etc.) by other avant-garde artists (often as a kind of mutual exchange). Last but not least, such a sense was displayed by gallery owners and art dealers such as Daniël-Henri Kahnweiler or Herwarth Walden, who often played a key role as “impresarios” and binding agents.⁵³ In the configuration of isms subsumed under the notion “historical avant-garde”, platforms like these can be regarded as nodes and lines in a fluctuating network of collaborating artists and writers, who would often pop up at one ism and then at another. Hans Arp, for example, can be found as signatory of dadaist, elementarist, constructivist, concretist and surrealist manifestoes.⁵⁴ In the case of Van Doesburg, who died earlier, the list is even longer.⁵⁵ Likewise, magazines served as platforms for many isms, as in the case of *Der Sturm* and the subsidiary association “Internationale Vereinigung der Expressionisten, Kubisten und Futuristen e.V.”⁵⁶ During the international avant-garde meeting and exhibition in Düsseldorf in 1922, at least one representative of the “historical avant-garde”, the Polish constructivist Henryk Berlewski, advocated the foundation of a “Constructivist International” with a “world-wide network of periodicals [...] propagating and arguing for new ideas and new forms.”⁵⁷

To get a grip on this fluctuating network, which had the properties of a rhizomatic multitude but no clear-cut hierarchical structure, the best option in search of a demarcation of the early avant-garde seems a mapping of the nodes and connecting lines between these nodes. The nodes can be found in places such as Paris, Berlin, Zurich, and Ascona, as well as in Amsterdam, Antwerp and Copenhagen, or in certain magazines and galleries, such as *Der Sturm*. An inventory of the writers and artists represented in the latter, or in *Sturm* exhibitions and in related organizations, reveals that artists working in a fauvist, cubist or expressionist way (*Die Brücke* no less than *Der blaue Reiter*) were integrated into

⁵³ Cf. Jan de Vries, “Impresario’s van de avantgarde,” in: *Kunstschrift* 45, 2001, nr. 2, p. 18–31.

⁵⁴ Cf. Wolfgang Asholt, Walter Fähnders (eds.), *Manifeste und Proklamationen der europäischen Avant-garde (1909–1938)*, Stuttgart, Weimar: Metzler, 1995.

⁵⁵ Cf. Els Hoek et al. (eds.), *Theo van Doesburg. Oeuvre catalogus*, Utrecht, Otterlo: Centraal Museum, 2000.

⁵⁶ Cf. Hubert van den Berg, “‘Übernationalität’ der Avantgarde – (Inter-)Nationalität der Forschung. Hinweis auf den internationalen Konstruktivismus in der europäischen Literatur und die Problematik ihrer literaturwissenschaftlichen Erfassung,” in: Asholt/Fähnders, *Der Blick vom Wolkenkratzer* (as in note 39), p. 270.

⁵⁷ Cit. in: Timothy O. Benson, Éva Forgács (eds.), *Central European Avant-Gardes. Exchange and Transformation, 1910–1930*, Cambridge/Mass., London: MIT, 2002, p. 64.

an avant-garde network that also housed the futurists and later the constructivists.⁵⁸ We could take, for instance, a series of tableaux in the Hungarian review *Ma* in the years 1922–23, each of which listed a dozen other avant-garde reviews from Austria, Belgium, Czechoslovakia, Germany, Italy, the Netherlands, the United States and Yugoslavia.⁵⁹ Set out on a map of Europe and combined with other comparable lists, such as that from Hendrik Nicolaas Werkman's review *The Next Call*⁶⁰, such instances could be combined to form the basis for a reconstruction of the historical network of the early avant-garde. By repeating the same procedure for other nodes, in tracking the different interconnecting lines as well as the loose ends and isolated pockets, the avant-garde as a collective entity could thus be reconstructed step by step.

Such a topography, which is only feasible in a collective and interdisciplinary enterprise, does not have to begin from scratch. The inventory is, in fact, made possible by several decades of avant-garde research.⁶¹ In its own time, the "his-

⁵⁸ Barbara Alms, Wiebke Steinmetz (eds.), *Der Sturm. Chagall, Feininger, Jawlensky, Kandinsky, Klee, Kokoschka, Macke, Marc, Schwitters und viele andere im Berlin der zwanziger Jahre*, Delmenhorst: Städtische Galerie Delmenhorst, 2000; Ursula Prinz, "Der Konstruktivismus und der Sturm," in: *Hervorath Walden und der Sturm. Konstruktivisten. Abstrakte. Eine Auswahl*, Cologne: Galerie Stolz, 1987, p. 10–22.

⁵⁹ Whereas previous volumes of this review, which was founded in 1917, only pointed to *Der Sturm* and *Die Aktion*, the back cover of the first issue of the eighth volume (1922) shows a tableau presenting *Merz* (Hannover), *De stijl* (The Hague), *Noi* (Rome), *G* (Berlin), *La Vie des Lettres* (Paris), *Der Sturm* (Berlin), *Ut* (Novi Sad), *Die Aktion* (Berlin), *Manomètre* (Lyon), *Het overzicht* (Antwerpen). A second tableau is found on the back of the cover of the first issue of the ninth volume (1923), which presents *De Stijl* (Weimar), *2x2* (Vienna), *Ça ira* (Bruxelles), *Ut* (Novi Sad), *Der Sturm* (Berlin), *L'Esprit nouveau* (Paris), *Broom* (Berlin), *Mécano* (Weimar), *La Vie des Lettres* (Paris), *Clarté* (Paris), *Der Gegner* (Berlin), *Die Aktion* (Berlin), *Zenit* (Zagreb). A third and last tableau was published on the back cover of the sixth issue of the same volume, presenting *L'Esprit nouveau* (Paris), *The Little Review* (New York), *La Vie des Lettres* (Paris), *G* (Berlin), *Het overzicht* (Antwerpen), *7 Arts* (Bruxelles), *Der Sturm* (Berlin), *L'Œuf dur* (Paris), *Das Kunstblatt* (Berlin), *Stavba* (Prague), *Noi* (Rome). This tableau is preceded on the same cover by a slightly different list of "interesting magazines": *L'Esprit nouveau*, *La Vie des Lettres*, *Der Querschnitt*, *Der Sturm*, *Das Kunstblatt*, *Het overzicht*, *Stavba*, *7 Arts*, *L'Œuf dur*, *Noi*, *La Biennale futurista*, *Contimparanul*, *The Little Review*, *Philosophies*, *Secession*, *Inicial*, *Les Livrets du Mandarin*, *Zona*, *Block*, *Gegner*, *Ars Una*, *Nyugat*, *Uj Kultúra*, *Magyar Irás*, *Diogenes*, *La Nuova Venezia*, *Le Disque Vert*, *Auto és Motorújság*. Cf. *Ma. Internacionális aktivista művészeti folyóirat* 8, 1922, nr. 1, n. p. [back cover]; 9, 1923, nr. 1, n. p. [back cover]; 9, 1923, nr. 6, n. p. [back cover].

⁶⁰ Van den Berg, "Übernationalität" (as in note 56), p. 271–272; Jurrie Poot, "Hendrik N. Werkman en de internationale avantgarde," in: Van den Berg/Dorleijn, *Avantgarde! Voorhoede?* (as in note 13), p. 37–66.

⁶¹ There are indeed quite some studies, which can be regarded as building blocks for a topography of the avant-garde, like recent publications addressing the avant-garde as a network as well: Benson/Forács, *Central European Avant-Gardes* (as in note 57); Marguerite Tuijn, *Mon cher ami ... Lieber Does. Theo van Doesburg en de praktijk van de internationale avant-garde. Een beschouwing over de avant-garde in de jaren 1916–1930, gevolgd door een becommentarieerde uitgave van de correspondentie tussen Van Doesburg en Alexander Archipenko, Tristan Tzara, Hans Richter en Enrico Prampolini*, Amsterdam: Universiteit van Amsterdam, 2003 [Diss.].

torical avant-garde” was often a rather marginal affair in the respective national and regional cultural fields of Europe.⁶² Today it is rightfully regarded as an important predecessor of current artistic practices, and as such it has received in the past decades much attention in publications and exhibitions. Most publications by the avant-garde, which were printed and released in their time often only in tiny numbers, have in the past decades been reprinted or published for the first time in numbers unthinkable in the early twentieth century. Archives have been disclosed. More and more source material has become available through the internet. This present situation allows for the topography proposed here. A few decades ago, it would have been unthinkable.

Advantages, objections and conclusion

The advantages of understanding the configuration of early avant-garde isms as a synchronically and diachronically fluctuating network are obvious. The focus on the organizational dimension of the early avant-garde offers not only an alternative to the parameters that turned out to be either too vague or too reductionist. It also offers also a possibility to demarcate this avant-garde as a corpus, without getting trapped in the hermeneutic circle that characterizes many theoretical assessments. In the latter, certain formal-aesthetic, political or programmatic features are employed as parameters to decide who and what might be regarded as the (hardcore of the) avant-garde, so as to present proof that these formal-aesthetic or programmatic features were indeed basic traits of the “avant-garde”. In contrast to this approach, the understanding of the avant-garde as a fluctuating heterogeneous network with rhizomatic properties allows the inclusion of fundamentally different and incompatible isms (as they are listed in Arp’s and Lisitzky’s *Kunstismen*, for example). At the same time, the network model provides a fitting tool in determining where the avant-garde as a historical formation began and ended: at points where the network met its outer limits or touched, overlapped and coincided with other contemporary networks. Since a rhizomatic network has to be envisaged three-dimensionally (and not as a “flat” two-dimensional map) these limits can be found everywhere. The “avant-garde” met its limits not only in Turkey or in Georgia on the Caucasus, in Norwegian Lapland, in Finland, in Santiago de Chile or Fukuoka, but also in Berlin, Paris, New York and Moscow; not only in the difference between the work of different artists, but also – virtually without exception – within the work of each avant-garde artist, both diachronically (hardly any artist started and ended in the avant-garde) and synchronically (both Schwitters and Mondrian produced figurative, conventional

⁶² Cf. Gillis Dorleijn, “Weerstand tegen de avantgarde in Nederland,” in: Van den Berg/Dorleijn, *Avantgarde! Voorhoede?* (as in note 13), p. 137–155.

painting alongside their *Merzbilder* and *Nieuwe Beelding*, for money or, as Schwitters suggested, as relaxation after the hard job of gluing abstract collages).⁶³

The concept of the fluctuating network could further incorporate moments of crisis (e.g. both World Wars and the fascist and Stalinist repression from the mid-twenties to the forties), moments at which many lines and nodes were severed or extinguished while others continued and new nodes emerged.⁶⁴ To keep to the image of the rhizome: at certain moments parts of the network were cut off and eradicated, while new sprouts emerged in other places, superficially resembling completely new plants, yet actually stemming from the same root complex. Finally, a wandering network with rhizomatic properties draws attention to the fundamentally international character of the avant-garde as well as its nomadic nature.

It could be objected that the proposed approach reduces the avant-garde to an organizational entity. The question is, however, whether any other all-inclusive binding agent existed among the early twentieth-century “isms of art”, which would allow us today to reconnect all segments of the network in a comprehensive way. The network was, however, more than just an organizational structure. First, it possessed an apparent strategic character, which we can understand in terms of Bourdieu’s sociological approach (in part as a collective, consciously trans-national position taking).⁶⁵ Secondly, the network had an undeniable programmatic dimension. These diverse isms, groups and individuals did not converge just to play chess, drink a bottle of wine or have a nice time on the beach (they did that too). They gathered primarily because they saw communal and common elements among themselves, be these in aesthetics or poetics, or in some programmatic congeniality in more encompassing domains, as, for instance, in the intention to revolutionize art and society either through art or through affiliation with some political movement or party. In the revolutionary movements at the end of the First World War and thereafter – notably in the Russia, Hungary and Germany – there was a particularly obvious convergence between avant-garde initiatives and political formations, especially between those of a radical-left provenance. These revolutionary movements and related artist

⁶³ Cf. Isabelle Ewig, *Kurt Schwitters. Schilderijen uit Noorwegen / Paintings from Norway*, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1996; Joop Joosten, *Piet Mondrian. Catalogue raisonné of the work of 1911–1944*, Munich: Prestel, 1998.

⁶⁴ For example, in the First World War Barcelona, Copenhagen, New York and Zurich emerged (temporarily) as new avant-garde centers: Véronique de la Fuente, *Dada à Barcelone, 1914–1918. Chronique de l’avant-garde artistique parisienne en exil en Catalogne pendant la Grande Guerre*, Cérét: Éditions des Albères, 2001; Dorthe Aagesen (ed.), *Avantgarde i dansk og europæisk kunst 1909–19*, Copenhagen: Statens Museum for Kunst, 2002; Francis M. Naumann, *New York Dada 1915–23*, New York: Abrams 1994; Gustav Huonker, *Literaturszene Zürich. Menschen, Geschichten und Bilder 1914 bis 1945*, Zurich: Unionsverlag, 1985.

⁶⁵ Cf. Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production. Essays on Art and Literature*, Cambridge: Polity, 1993.

organizations – for instance the “Aktionsausschuß revolutionärer Künstler” that existed only a few months in the Munich Council Republic (1919)⁶⁶, the Moscow and Saint Petersburg “Section for Fine Arts” (IZO) of Anatolij Lunačarskij’s People’s Commissariat for Cultural Education (Narkompros), or the reviews *Lef* and *Novyj lef* (Left Front of the Arts, New Left Front of the Arts)⁶⁷ – constituted major nodes in the avant-garde network as well.

In conclusion, it is important to keep in mind that the rhizome-like network of the avant-garde was not marked by one programme only. It cannot be reduced, therefore, to a single guiding principle, neither in the sphere of aesthetics and poetics nor, for example, in the sphere of politics. Whereas some pursued abstract art, others preferred a figurative one. Whereas some rejected artistic autonomy, others fostered autonomist aesthetics. Whereas some resolved conventional language as part of their poetic experiments, others kept to conventional forms. Whereas some focused on the new urban life and modern technology, others turned towards nature. Political radicalism – either on the left or the right – might be seen as a common trait of the avant-garde. However, a *tour d’horizon* of the political preferences and affiliations in the avant-garde will show that the political centre, moderate social-democracy and liberalism (in the European sense) were well represented; (political) revolution was certainly not everyone’s ambition, as, for example, Kurt Schwitters’s grotesque persiflage “Ursachen und Beginn der Großen Glorreichen Revolution in Revon”⁶⁸ indicates.

With one topography leading to another, the avant-garde has to be viewed as a fluctuating set of interrelated though often discontinuous programmes, as a programmatic multiplicity located in and around the different nodes of the network, with some sections barely connected to others (whether due to programmatic differences or long communication lines), while others worked closely together, in spite of major differences, particularly in the provincial periphery where the pressure from outside left little room for internal conflict. Yet even in this periphery – at least in the Low Countries, but the Low Countries were most certainly not that unique – plurality rather than unity predominated.⁶⁹ It was a plurality without a common programme, which might be termed as avant-gardes in the plural. As Hal Foster already observed more than a decade ago, the avant-garde cannot be comprehended by *one* theory of *the* avant-garde.⁷⁰ It has to be mapped from several directions and from divergent perspectives.

⁶⁶ Cf. Helmut Friedel (ed.), *Süddeutsche Freiheit. Kunst der Revolution in München 1919*, Munich: Lenbachhaus, 1993.

⁶⁷ Cf. Wim Beeren, Marja Bloem, Dorine Mignot, *De grote utopie. De Russische Avant-garde, 1915–1932 / The Great Utopia. The Russian Avant-Garde, 1915–1932*, Amsterdam: Stedelijk Museum, 1992, p. 72–3, 75.

⁶⁸ Van Doesburg/Schwitters, *Holland’s bankroet* (as in note 34), p. 95–108.

⁶⁹ Cf. Van den Berg/Dorleijn, *Avantgarde! Voorhoede?* (as in note 13), passim.

⁷⁰ Hal Foster, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?,” *October*, 1994, nr. 70, p. 5–32.