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THE AVANT-GARDE AS MOVEMENT TOWARDS THE PRESENT

Abstract:

This text attempts to reconsider the threads of topicality and happening as the factors defining the artistic avant-garde movement, understood as a creative formation with identifiable common assumptions that transcend disciplinary divisions and historical classifications. I have decided to assume that a large part of modern art remains faithful to the distinctive avant-garde aspirations. It seems that today, as at the beginning of the 20th century, the present appears to the artists as still difficult to grasp. This phenomenon manifests itself in both the discussion of art's own borders in the contemporary context, and in its attempts to understand and interpret the changes in the modern life. The intensive focusing of art on the present can be viewed as a lack of reflection, but also as a response to the process of modernisation, i.e. as being unable to separate from it. Some philosophical and anthropological investigations concerning time and the idea of the present (including, above all, the concepts of the "absolute present" of Karl Heinz Bohrer, "modern Constitution" by Bruno Latour and the suspicions concerning the present of the so-called "philosophy of suspicion") will in turn allow for probative diagnoses of the potential causes for anxiety concerning the directions of the contemporary development of art, which can still be observed in its colloquial reception.

Keywords: avant-garde, eventness, happening, 'absolute present', shock, liquidity, modernism.

Human consciousness is a specific form of consciousness that creates a model of the world and then simulates it in time, by evaluating the past to simulate the future. This requires mediating and evaluating many feedback loops in order to make a decision to achieve a goal.¹

What is the avant-garde afraid of, so tightly clinging to the present? Is it the fear of its spectrality and transience as a formation? Can it mean the fear of marginalisation and erasure (in the context of the loss of clear metaphysical foundations) of its creators? Whenever I tried to devote some reflection to the attitudes of the artistic avant-garde as a whole, two issues struck me with equal strength: firstly,

¹ M. Kaku, *Consciousness - a Physicist's View Point in: The Future of the Mind. The Scientific Quest to Understand, Enhance and Empower the Mind*, Doubleday, New York 2014, p. 81 (e-book).

it was the emphasis that those artists seemed to put on capturing the actuality (or even ‘the presence’, if we decide not to limit the meaning of this term strictly to metaphysical-theological traditions) and the need to constantly renew this movement of capturing. Secondly, it was the absence – especially in the case of the avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century – of more defined visions of the future, which would constitute genuine, constructive suggestions for its development, utilising the skills of planning, forecasting, and various uses of imagination. Instead, it tended to limit itself to particular tests of subjective recognition, or attempts to trigger aesthetic changes through shock or novelty. In the writings of the avant-garde artists of the first half of the 20th century, we rarely encounter any traces of visions and thoughts concerning the future, which would be able to function at least as some alternatives to the commonly adopted version of reality. The most consistent such proposal which I have come across so far is the suggestion made by Malevich, who proposed² the following teleological concept: the goal of the technological progress is to liberate mankind from the need for practical reference to the world, and to provide people with as much free time as possible, to allow them to create art understood as something unique and characteristic only for humans. Such ‘pure’ inventiveness is further justified by the fact that the artist also creates things that even the most sophisticated and most purposeful mechanics can never create.³ Rosalind E. Krauss in her well-known book entitled *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*⁴ suggests the Hegelian inspirations of the concept of Malevich. Predicting the ultimate dominance of the spirit, Hegelianism would mean in this case the separation of the spiritual life (seen as a purely abstract principle of discovery, emotions connected with approaching the truth which must transcend reality) and matter (understood as ‘object-iveness’ in its concretisation and practical use), which could seem in these times quite a satisfactory solution to the majority of those who valuing highly their spirituality were additionally able to search for the philosophical foundations of their culture. Satisfactory, of course, under the condition that the grim spectre of the absence of universal emancipation and freedom (that old longing that can be inferred from Christianity) can be kept aside as impossible to be satisfied due to the still insurmountable violence of the ‘outer’ nature, as it was still quite widely believed before World War II. In turn, the artists of the first avant-garde movements, even if they were interested – as it was in the case of Constructivism – in social goals through a specific dialogue with science, they were interested in them in an *ex cathedra* mode, which allowed them to experiment disregarding the reac-

² In one of his theoretical texts devoted to suprematism. Ibid., p. 354-361.

³ Ibid., p. 357.

⁴ See: R.E. Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London 1986.

tions of the users, even if the process claimed to stand behind it was functionality and psychological needs; the spirit of experiment was floating over the waters of nature under the auspices of unnoticed violence. It seems that the most fruitful social role of the avant-garde artist of the time was to assimilate and translate the reality of the time to the others as – finally – perceived, filtered by his/her own sensibility, since reality in the common opinion was changing as fast as in one of Lewis Carroll's famous books (Alice had to put an increasing effort into staying in place, when the ground was constantly trying to escape from under her feet). Not everyone is able to perceive the reality that disappears and emerges so quickly, which has warranted the special role of the artist as a 'mediumic' translator already since the 17th century (I will return to these threads later on). Nevertheless, 'object-ivity', meant as the world of things and followed by a world of habits and interactions is changing faster and faster, and it is becoming more and more complicated mainly due to the development of technology and the implementation of the inventions transforming our everyday lives. This, in turn, is a source of constant amazement that refreshes the avant-garde's visions of what is invisible to others, creating new opportunities to interpret and domesticate the reality, staying simultaneously constantly focused on the exploration of the subtleties of the various forms of the spirituality of the artists themselves and the sensitivity of the creative others. Parallel to this initial diagnosis, we can and should continue asking about the reasons of the permanence of the (already being analysed for some time) legend of the particular originality and inventiveness of the avant-garde that neither was in the past nor is now able to provide the basis for the *essential* changes in the world. Artists, like ordinary bread eaters, must also usually find themselves in the role of more or less alienated 'translators' and rarely recognised 'domesticators' of modernity (and at the same time, they are the discoverers of many nuances of the spirit, which privilege I had never any intention to question). This doubt and this interrogation are disabled in a way, for obvious reasons, in the case of the avant-garde architects and utility designers. Of course, in the context of a consequent Platonic-Hegelian solution, the answer to the question formulated a few sentences ago should seem clear.

But now I would like to ask this question here again from today's perspective: is there a chance for us to believe in the myth that imposes the image of the uniqueness of the avant-garde as a formation also on its current strategies – in the sense of their irreducible value as a model or one of the possible models for contemporary art/culture? Or should we rather start to consider the avant-garde as a formation of a historical value? Treating this question as a permanently open one, I feel tempted to continue this argument by attempting to build my own interpretation of "the advantages and disadvantages of the avant-garde" from the perspective of our time.

The originality of the avant-garde has been questioned many times so far in the contexts of such concepts as aura, authenticity, uniqueness, or event.⁵ Still, the question of the functioning of avant-garde art in today's world can sound provocative. On the one hand, this is due to the ongoing sacralization of avant-garde and contemporary art, which is increasingly being included in museum collections. The other reason may be the high valuation of the art of the "classical" avant-garde – Adornian in its spirit – as one of the few reasonable strategies of resistance to the massification, commercialisation and mechanisation of life, associated in Adorno's thought with intellectual and moral/spiritual shallowness. At this point, the question of spirituality returns (in its second, but not its last configuration). To what extent the originality/shock effects and the contemporaneity of the avant-garde artists could have been initially provoked by economic calculation? Memoirs from Paris during the "period of prosperity"⁶ of the avant-garde in the first half of the 20th century show a world in which the struggle for recognition depends largely on the artists' inventiveness – some circus-like ability to exploit the effects of novelty and to self-promote. Looking at the relationship between art and life from such a prosaic side, we can also see the "background operation" of the paradigm already present in art at the time, prompting the artists to calculate the effects of their work. I cannot examine here in details the influence of the development of photography and film on the transformations that took place in modern art, emblematically manifesting themselves in the late 19th and early 20th century painting. I have to restrict myself to noting the growing need, on the side of painting as a genre, to compete with photography in the category of eventness.

At the same time, the already mentioned "background" of avant-garde art should be outlined more clearly: modernity and modernism saw a significant increase of the importance of the present time, especially when linked with such catchphrases as event, change and surprise – on the one hand in reference to the scientific, technical and economic revolution, and on the other – to the dream of overcoming the existing relations or revolutionary-eschatological events of the religious provenance (which, by the myth of the second coming, seem to be quite

⁵ To give a few rather well-known examples – Walter Benjamin diagnosed the disappearing of the aura of the work of art 'in the age of mechanical reproduction', Rosalind E. Krauss wrote i.a. about such phenomena as the inevitable repetitions and borrowings of some motifs by the avant-garde. Polish researcher Tomasz Załuski devoted an extensive publication to repetition in the context of artistic modernism; see: W. Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction*, transl. J.A. Underwood, Penguin Books, London 2008, R.E. Krauss, *The Originality...*, T. Załuski, *Modernizm artystyczny i powtórzenie. Próba reinterpretacji*, Universitas, Kraków 2012.

⁶ Cf. the book about Picasso by Brassad', which covers the period from the 1930s to the 1960s, with some trips back in time to *Les Femmes d'Alger*, and the interview with Picasso by Christian Zervos in 1933. See: Brassad', *Conversations with Picasso*, transl. J.M. Todd, University of Chicago Press, 1999; *Artysta o...*, p. 490-496.

closely related to each other). It is also important to note – in accordance with some historians and philosophers dealing with the transformations of the idea of time – that “the present” has been gradually shrinking in the common sense and the practice of labour regulations, starting with the beginnings of the agricultural civilisations, and continuing through the invention of the mechanical clock in the late Middle Ages. In turn, experiments of *magia naturalis*, increasingly released from social bans, and combined with the increasingly undisturbed (by the threat of excommunication or other drastic penalties) possibility of creating new objects (and thus related interactions) have been confirmed with some help of certain founding gestures of the modern order, invoked by Bruno Latour⁷, who symbolically marked “the beginning of the modern Constitution” (proposed by him and understood as still valid ontological grid of modernity)⁸ for the 17th century, pointing out⁹ the key role of two quite famous characters – Boyle and Hobbes. The first one was presented as the creator of the modern scientific method of verifying scientific facts by the consent of the eyewitnesses (not necessarily numerous) authorised to make decisions, while the second was shown as an influential thinker interested in uniting the systems of power and knowledge, which was supposed to guarantee social stability. This process seemed to require, on the one hand, a symbolic interpretation of the Bible, and on the other, the understanding of matter as mechanical and inertial. This was supposed to lead to the elimination of all forces, both of the nature and of spirit, which could help in the mediations with the decisions of the sovereign. Latour argues that the modern constitution remains ‘perfectly’ valid today, producing two powers: one of conceptual purification and the other of the work of translation from one to other of the three basic conceptual constellations. The work of purification laboriously assigns coexistent and influencing each other directly and indirectly (‘networked’) phenomena to separate ontological categories: to nature, which is inhuman, including both natural nature and widely understood man made products resulting from the transformation of the environment; and to culture, which is humanistic, and to which both social beings and individuals are delegated. God is preserved, but as, let’s say, an ‘external father’ who can be addressed only individually, beyond the law in force in everyday, palpable reality. All the beings later identified as uncanny (*das Unheimliche*) have lost their *raison d’être* since that time. In this point exactly, the concept of Latour reveals its vision of our perhaps irreparable non-modernity with all its sharpness; the uncanny is being preserved unconsciously as nothing less than the contents and forms of culture and simultaneously quasi-realities of the first and the second nature (technique), with the ontological ban in force. As

⁷ Cp. B. Latour, *We have never been modern*, transl. C. Porter, Harvard University Press, 1993.

⁸ Consisting essentially of three elements - culture, nature, and absent/impotent God.

⁹ B. Latour, *Nigdy nie byliśmy nowoczesni. Studium z antropologii symetrycznej*, transl. M. Gdula, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2011, p. 28.

a result, a large part of the experience of both individuals and the society has been closed to the possibility of understanding. This is an error the avant-garde has been trying to repair. However, its consequences are being supported, above all, by the much more popular and widely accessible types of creative human activities, such as literary horror or horror movies. According to Latour, also the distribution of things to the modern categories of subject and object (such as, for example, less or more advanced tools identified by him as 'actors' influencing our understanding and behaviour) forms a too rigid cultural division. As such, these actors are parts of 'collectives' – this term seems to correspond to the network of relations involving people and 'non-humans'. Although the methodology of possible 'negotiations' between people and 'non-humans' proposed by the French philosopher in order to refine the modern constitution and to 'restart' the process of modernisation seems a bit unclear, the effect of ontological reconsideration of the contemporary world and potential subsequent slowing down of its processes of changing builds the strong side of this conception. Perhaps Latour himself, being aware of the difficulty of the task of practical reconsideration, does not propose to us in *We have never been modern* a particular method, but rather slowing and congesting of the process of translation, which should cover introducing to people of what has been considered non-human and repressed, and human motivations to 'non-humans' – no matter how this process could look like today or in future (e.g. it is extremely difficult for a today's 'rational' man to notice and admit the existence of his own animistic reactions). Interpreted in the context of Latour's anthropology from *We have never been modern*, the avant-garde would, as it seems (in general), perform two types of actions – one would be the constant 'translation' of the modern world as a world modified and still being modified by the technique imposing itself on the nature into the languages of various types of subjectivity, which would facilitate if not understanding, then at least emotional experiencing of modernity (what is a form of domesticating the shock of the incomprehensible changes). The second type of action would be much more episodic but also much more influential 'translation' between the language of science and its findings (staying under the established rigors of the scientific procedures) and the sphere of the social reception expressing itself through 'experimental' avant-garde movements interested in the mass deployment of their 'discoveries'.¹⁰ Returning to the 'modern Constitution' from the side of the freedom and ban antinomy – we have, as it seems, a certain, if not the greatest problem with the freedom to create what is social, in contrast to the freedom of creation of things. If one decides to follow Latour's categorisation further, it may appear a logical

¹⁰ The quotation marks used here are not the signs of my distancing from the experiments of art and understanding them as illegitimate. My intention was only to highlight the differences between the two fields – art and science, while we can observe maybe even deepening convergence of their terminology.

consequence that we still live under the jurisdiction of the 'right of the sovereign' (the instance of absolute authority, which has the right to irrevocable decisions) - replaced later by the 'updating concepts', such as the nation, globalisation, economic law, or 'impossible to be eliminated threat of chaos' (and above all, the principle of the law in general, as maybe Franz Kafka could add here), which requires absolute submission despite its own mutability and with preserved principle of representation. Even momentary adoption of such a hypothesis, perhaps somehow clears out the thick fog hiding the causes of the 'banality of evil' - the phenomenon of 'ordinariness' of criminals who fit perfectly within the social standards of everyday life, and more or less professional decision makers who use the relative flexibility of the basic conceptual grid to keep the majority in obedience. This relative flexibility, allowing the possibility of personal change at the top, sometimes 'manifests itself unexpectedly' as the so-called 'human nature' causing scandals and fatalistic moods, when an individual or group periodically adopts the role of the sovereign using non-democratic methods. The philosopher Latour would probably say that it happens, as we still have to deal with the modern constitution in its unchanged form, which is being seen as nonnegotiable, just because some of its components have been established as such. Obviously, we should systematically think over the basic ontological categories, according to which (or under which) we live, and first of all, try to tame somehow the impetus of the processes of their purification, which according to Latour, is the main factor responsible for the production of the so-called hybrid beings - quasi-realities of things, phenomena, connections, and interactions that we do not see at all or see clearly mainly because we are not allowed to see them as real. Latour even lists in his book the recommendations for the modifications that could change the 'modern Constitution' into a more realistic one from his (anthropological) point of view. I do not intend to explore the issue of this particular proposed change, around which some philosophical discussions have already grown, further here. However, this ontological diagnosis of modernity itself seems to work surprisingly well in different contexts. It can be also assumed that the feeling of alienation and helplessness in the 'liquid world' of ever-changing relations is also emerging from the consequences of the work of the 'modern Constitution'. On the side of the spirit, constructive planning of the future has become for long, or until today (depending on the exegesis) extremely unpopular as potentially criminal, but still the production of new (also lethal) beings on the side of the matter or nature is being continued very dynamically. At the same time, the weightlessness of the social and economic significance of each particular individual (despite some improvements in the representation and political recognition of the specific groups) is still deepening, even if in some cases only in their own reception of the situation. The strategy of coping with the shock of liquidity, proposed by Zygmunt Bauman in his *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World*, and intentionally popularised, resembles the heroic strategy of existential individual resistance

'till the end' in the name of the values – the character of Sisyphus is depicted here, who, following the advice of Albert Camus, should be imagined as happy; "The struggle itself toward the heights is enough to fill the man's heart",¹¹ concludes Bauman. In such context, my mind is inevitably haunted by the spectre of Franz Kafka again as an artist's overwhelmed by the obsessive fear of objectification and marginalisation. Kafka is being often identified as one of the most convincing novelists in reaching the very essence of the modern life, as perceived by the unhappy consciousness. Is such a Nietzschean advice sufficient in the face of possible prevalence of Kafkian type of experience? And, first of all, is it the only possible strategy of resistance against deepening alienation, being raised as a matter of high importance by constantly reappearing in various forms philosophy of suspicion? A separate problem constitutes the 'free' technization (in the sense grasped by Latour and others¹²) – with time, we are able to see more and more of the global environmental and social challenges triggered by the shortcomings of the 'modern Constitution', such as global destabilisation, as it seems, caused mainly by the 'logic of production'.

I do not intend to depreciate the principle of artistic, individual expression and the attempts to speak one's own language. I would only like to stress that if the classical avant-gardes were delegated to disclose the complexities of the modern world and simultaneously the subject immersed in it, they have not revealed any kind of adequately complex future planning strategy, though they were seemingly promising to do it, deceiving by means of forward-looking rhetoric. In this situation, we should also take a closer look at possible patterns of formal, some stylistic and rhetorical strategies of the time. Of course, speaking of the avant-garde's methodology seems to be extremely risky in the face of the multiformity of its artistic realisation and the multiplicity of the distinctions used to classify it. Let me still defend the conviction that applicable in the majority of cases distinguishing features of this formation can be selected; the avant-garde method would consist of a form of self-affiliation to the present time and would look for the effect of radical eventness, aesthetic experience that could be perceived as 'new every time', what has been being achieved by these days by various means. Postulated emphasis on the present, actuality and momentum manifests itself both in the selection of the broadly understood 'object' and in the technique of creating the work of art, what is also expressed in the majority of the avant-garde texts of the first half of the twentieth century.¹³ Leaving the thread of freedom of

¹¹ Z. Bauman, *44 Letters from the Liquid Modern World 44*, Polity Press, Cambridge, Malden, 2010, p. 254.

¹² Comp. also with (e.g.): W.G. Sebald, *On the Natural History of Destruction, Modern Library*, New York 2004.

¹³ To some extent some painters looking for the uniqueness of their own, subjective artistic idiom, like e.g. Matisse, break away from this principle. Still Matisse was always, as he claimed in one of his rare comments concerning his art, following the striking experience of one leading

creating things as following the pattern established by science and technology,¹⁴ let's focus on some historical artistic patterns of eventness analysed by Karl Heinz Bohrer within the framework of his conception of the 'absolute present'.¹⁵ We will be interested here in those of them that are recognised as an image of the revolution introduced into art in the characteristic form of Romantic poetics, as well as the appreciation of the concept of 'the present' in the literature of modernist classics (as the most strongly influencing the rhetoric of the avant-garde). Bohrer goes even so far as to formulate a suggestion of the direct chain formed by the Romantic inspirations: "Under cover 'of the sign of the electric' and new, experimental, brave syntax 'revolution' became a durable ferment invented by romantic poets of the modernism."¹⁶ 'The sign of the electric' refers to the images and metaphors of the storm used by Romantic poets. Besides, "An always active [...] consciousness, which informs about the fundamental change of the paradigm, a sudden collapse in the presented time"¹⁷ can be noted. The 'brave syntax', along with some borrowings from ancient poetic, adapts to the content announcing the 'storm event' of inspiration equated with a divine anointing – "the imaginary revolution was transformed into the very work of art."¹⁸ In addition, it seems that the imagination relating such event to the transcendence has never been completely removed from it.¹⁹ One of the quotes from Hölderlin cited by Bohrer shows the structure of a poetic call to remain in a constant receptiveness to the present. This constant readiness to translate or rather transfer the message of the illumination seems to be the principle of the prophetic function or the function of the oracle delegated in modernity perhaps exclusively to the world of art. Adopting such a perspective seems to explain satisfactorily both the programmatic ambiguous-

colour adjusting to its dominance the relations of other colours and forms in the picture; thus each of his pictures was becoming a separate spiritual, subjective and perceptual event. Another case of quasi-exception could be Mondrian who was seeking for the balance of the elements of the image philosophically-metaphysically included in the theoretical description of the picture model. However Matisse strongly opposed to the symmetry, which allows assuming also in this case each time search for an idiomatic, intellectual and emotional harmony. See: *Artyści o...*, pp. 90-99, 366-368.

14 Latour might say that it is an unconscious quest, covered by the work of purification, sharing the modern world into the natural-'object-ive' and the spiritual parts. One of the contemporary artists who spectacularly breaks the ontological border between modern art and technology is Damien Hirst, and it is not the only hardly visible limitation that is easily crossed by him. We will come back to him for a moment later on, in the attempt to redefine the function of contemporary avant-garde art. Adding a short explanation of the sentence bearing footnote – it is not my definition of art, but only an observation concerning a specific historical phenomenon and the historical direction of the flow of inspiration.

15 Cp. K. H. Bohrer, *Absolutna terażniejszość*, Oficyna Naukowa, Warszawa 2003.

16 *Ibid.*, p. 32. Transl. M. P.

17 *Ibid.*, p. 30. Transl. M. P.

18 *Ibid.*, p. 26. Transl. M. P.

19 Cp. F. Hölderlin, *Selected poems*, transl. D. Constantine, *Bloodaxe Books*, Newcastle upon Tyne 1990.

ness of the messages presented by many modern artists and poets, and their focused, self-directed listening, the purpose of which is to establish some instructions for the audience to read 'the will of the gods' (now meaning rather such instances as fate, economy or technology), which, however, as in an ancient oracle, can never be read very clearly. It allows the modern creator to always retain at least the potential opportunity to catch a prophetic vision with the increased chance of avoiding the responsibility for the future, which, in turn, does not particularly serve well the collective future as such. However, this strategy may serve much better the personal future - what kind of sensible function has a chance to carry now the self-expressive attitude of the avant-garde artists? Does the avant-garde art retain its value primarily for the self-discovery function, or/and as a meeting of self-aware, aesthetically educated sensitivities close to the Kantian *sensus communis*? May it preserve for the artists (and as well the spectators) also the function of self-healing, domesticating the shock of the present? It seems that we can now state its functionality on each of these planes, which, of course, does not exhaust the list of possible questions regarding these issues. More elaborate answers to the above questions, as well as the formulation of new ones, are staying beyond the objectives and possibilities of this essay. We may, however, follow the track of the self-therapeutic function in Bohrer's book, as the one that should lead us to eventness produced by the collisions of sense and form in the avant-garde art and poetry. Bohrer describes on Baudelaire's example the state of suspension in personal timelessness (deriving it again from the romantic uncanniness), which does not want anything anymore, but it is satisfied with a kind of perverse imagination, in the aesthetically contemplative mode. This gesture, which Bohrer presents as Baudelaire's ultimate retreat from history, is then set up with the 'moments of being' of Virginia Woolf. The 'moments of being', while still disturbing and faulted states of emergency, have the same illuminative quality as the positive, totally spontaneous affirmation. Woolf describes the moments of ecstatic delight that shuts off her unhappy everyday consciousness. The term 'shock' is used by her to point out such a moment of illumination, impossible to foresee, which breaks the everyday mode of orientation in temporality, hijacking the author to the timeless time - the eternal present. It is also a metaphor for art in general - Woolf's female characters run away from the pressure of the banal demands of everyday life into the world of fiction in search of 'shock' - 'moments of being'. Art is a pass to the world of happy reality, even if the second one appears only in short flashes and in contact with perception or memory. Parallel to Woolf's books, but without any contact with them, was the work of Walter Benjamin (also mentioned by the German philosopher). He was methodically looking for the ways of participation in the 'messianic reality' through such inventions as the 'dialectical picture' (an image resulting from the collision of etymological and cognitive/associative meanings within the word or sentence), careful documentation of the perceptual and thought experiments with stimulants, vigilant attention devoted to the objects

preserving the remains of childhood's auras. The contradiction (says Bohrer, reconstructing the analysis of *Mrs. Dalloway* by Ricoeur) between providing a sense of unlimited inner time (which is constituted by the increased contemplativeness combined with the ability to easily traverse the broad land of individual memory), and the external time, called 'monumental', underlined in the book by the systematic tolling of Big Ben, carries a tragic tone with itself. The lovers of the internal time feel horrified in the face of the figures of authority, the representatives of external order, which must result, as it appears here, in a retreat from the universe of the ideas implementable in the external world, and therefore from the thought devoted to the future.

We can ask at this point whether for example Benjamin was thinking about using his own (individual) 'moments of being' as the means to strengthen both his own and potentially everybody's 'weak messianic power' understood not only as a theological-soteriological strategy, but also one which might be useful on the social level, even as a sum of individual attitudes. In other words, could he plan, given his serious interest in aesthetics (today we would say 'everyday aesthetics'), the common utility of domesticating the shock experience on the individual level through everyday aesthetic experience? By the way, one can note the obvious critical-feminist tone of Woolf's work and notice that Woolf's female characters are 'secular others', still condemned to eternal liquidity, without the ability to effectively decide about their fate, therefore 'their kingdom is not of this world', and their choices are characterised by the proneness to spontaneous escape. Doesn't the strategy of domesticating the shock of contemporary life nowadays 'pass the exam' in countless cases of the so-called consumers of culture on different levels of complexity and elitism as a strategy of not so much permanent escape as consciously applied self-regeneration, the potency of strengthening the feeling of subjective existence and self-calming, and also strengthening their ability to (sarcastically recalling Bauman's advice) roll the Sisyphus stone? Bohrer has come to some justifications, especially cryptologic, of the need to experience the absolute present as the 'experience of the essence of things' that lies beyond time. When referring to Proust's remarks, he could probably also include in his concept the respectable figure of Husserl, if he would allow himself in case of philosophy for such an amount of interpretative freedom, which was applied to the artists examined in the book about the 'absolute present tense'.

The sacral sources of the meaning of a work of art and its specific temporality derived from the sacral modi of time can be explored in fascinating contemporary interpretations, such as e.g. the ones of Hans Belting and Giorgio Agamben. Thus let me, inevitably approaching the end of this investigation, refer the reader to their works (especially *The Time That Remains* by Agamben). One should also mention here Hans-George Gadamer's concept of the special qualities of the holiday or festive time. The question of the possibility of interpreting hardly perceptible or invisible objects and relations in the context of Lacan is fascinating but too

complex to be recounted even very briefly in this essay. The 'social' construal of the systems of temporality as dependent on some types of cultures, sketched by some historians of ideas and sociologists such as, for example, Norbert Elias, reveals, like close reading of *Being and Time*, the arbitrariness of our 'inevitable' current everyday concept of time. I can only hope that I will find an opportunity to write about all these highly inspiring issues elsewhere.

Finally, let me return to the question that has been accompanying us from the very beginning, although not expressed explicitly so far: Is avant-garde art able to consider the future on the basis of its evaluation of 'many feedback loops'? I believe it is, additionally preserving its character of a unique event refreshing the perception of the individual, empowering the subject and providing the space for encounters. It seems that all these functions are often offered by the contemporary stylistically 'postmodern' art, extremely rich in its potential of meanings (cf. the art of Damien Hirst, or the Polish artists Zbigniew Libera and the duo Kijewski/Kocur). The contact with contemporary avant-garde art not only evokes aesthetic experience, reflection on the form of a work of art, and the existence and operation of what is usually invisible. It also enables potentially fruitful experience of thought movement in the context of the reflection on the future thanks to the abundance of references to the contemporary phenomena investigated in the contemporary philosophical-critical discourse. It seems that contemporary art is sufficiently densely 'networked' to allow us to engage in thinking about the future. On the other hand, the preserved (mainly on the level of meaning) eventness of this art, which usually leads to profound reflection on the contemporary world, also constitutes a constant series of potential breakthroughs from stiff ontology and existing interpretations, which could mean a step towards the ability to shape a more rational (in a good sense) future. To this end, however, it is also necessary to explore the historical and contemporary systems of meanings and knowledge with the accompanying capacity to emotionally domesticate the shock of the present.

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AWANGARDA JAKO RUCH W KIERUNKU TERAŻNIEJSZOŚCI (streszczenie)

Tekst stawia sobie za zadanie namysł nad wątkami aktualności i wydarzeniowości ujmowanymi jako definiujące artystyczny ruch awangardowy, rozumiany w związku z tym jako formacja twórcza o identyfikowalnych wspólnych założeniach przekraczających podziały dyscyplinarne i historyczno-filozoficzne klasyfikacje. Zakładam, że duża część sztuki współczesnej pozostaje w ten sposób wierna pewnym dającym się wyróżnić inicjalnym dążeniom awangardowym. Wydaje się, że także

obecnie, podobnie jak na początku XX wieku, terażniejszość jawi się artystom jako wciąż trudno uchwytna. Zjawisko to dotyczy zarówno komentarzy, które odnoszą się do własnych granic i charakteru sztuki (wypowiadającej się wciąż na nowo o sobie samej wobec zobowiązującego ją wciąż imperatywu nowości), jak i jej prób rozumienia i interpretowania przemian życia współczesnego. Natężone skupienie sztuki na tym, co obecne, może być klasyfikowane jako słabość refleksji, ale także jako reakcja na tempo modernizacji, nieodłączne od niej samej. Filozoficzne i antropologiczne ujęcia czasu i współczesności (m.in. i przede wszystkim koncepcje absolutnej terażniejszości Karla Heinza Bohrera, nowoczesnej Konstytucji Brunona Latoura i podejrzenia odnośnie współczesności tzw. "filozofii podejrzeń") pozwolą z kolei na próbne diagnozy potencjalnych powodów zaniepokojenia kierunkami rozwoju sztuki współczesnej, które daje się wciąż obserwować w jej powszechnej recepcji.

Słowa kluczowe: awangarda, nowoczesność, wydarzenie, absolutna terażniejszość, szok, płynność, modernizacja.