"Avant-Garde of What?": Surrealism Reconceived as Political Culture

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Stable URL: http://links.jstor.org/sici?sici=0021-8529%28200424%2962%3A1%3C37%3A%22OWSRA%3E2.0.CO%3B2-6

The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism is currently published by The American Society for Aesthetics.
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However we may judge avant-garde art when we meet it, for us the phenomenon and idea are so present and evident that we do not stop, even momentarily, to wonder if we might be dealing with an illusion or an appearance rather than a reality, with a myth or a superstition rather than a concept.

Renato Poggioli

1 INTRODUCTION

“Obituaries” of the avant-garde can be dated back at least as far as the 1950s. They seem to have reached their heyday, however, with the advent of discourses on postmodernism. Rosalind Krauss, for example, decisively coupled the notion of the avant-garde with the era of modernism in her essay, “The Originality of the Avant-Garde” (1981):

In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over. That seems an obvious fact.

Nevertheless, as an historical construct for discussing cultural production of the early twentieth century, the concept of the avant-garde remains virtually hegemonic, as is easily evidenced both by numerous recent titles (such as that of a 2000 conference at Notre Dame, “Rethinking the Avant-Garde”) and, perhaps ironically, by the proliferation of the obituaries themselves. Of course Krauss’s essay, even in arguing that “postmodernist” art “cannot be seen as avant-garde,” does not attempt to suggest that the model of the avant-garde can no longer meaningfully describe the cultural products of the historical moment in question. Indeed, a historian clearly does not abandon the sublime, for example, as a historical construct meaningful to romantic landscape painting simply because it may seem no longer relevant to the production of art today. The question here, then, is not whether there can still be an avant-garde in the twenty-first century, but rather, whether the theoretical model of the avant-garde is fully adequate to articulate the full spectrum of activities engaged by the individuals and groups defined by the term, who themselves might range from Tristan Tzara to T. S. Eliot, and Hannah Höch to Piet Mondrian.

Despite both the persistence of varying interpretations of the term within the discourse and the potentially problematic diversity of the examples cited above, I believe that one might reasonably posit that there has nonetheless been a relative degree of consensus in defining the avant-garde. Renato Poggioli was among the first to attempt a systematic theorization of the concept. He concluded that it can be described by the following terms: “activism, or the spirit of the adventure, agonism, or the spirit of sacrifice, futurism, or the present subordinated to the future, unpopularity and fashion, or the continual oscillation of old and new, finally, alienation as seen especially in its cultural, aesthetic, and
stylistic connections.” Poggioli then added to this list of criteria: “experimentalism,” “nihilism,” “antitraditionalism,” “dehumanization,” “iconoclasm,” and so on.5 While recent discourse has weighted some of these categories more heavily than others, most theories of the avant-garde seem in basic agreement that the avant-garde is “nihilist” in its systematic rejection of all existing aesthetic values, but simultaneously (and perhaps somewhat paradoxically) “utopian” in its belief in progress and its seemingly absolute faith in the power of aesthetic alternatives of its own design to reshape culture as a whole. In the end, though, it is this very sense of an overarching consensus (rather than a lack thereof) that I would like to pose as a problem. Indeed, I would posit that the concept of the avant-garde has not only served to homogenize what may have been very diverse projects, but that it has also heavily influenced and decisively restricted our concepts of such projects, allowing us to imagine a limited and predetermined set of possibilities in theorizing movements of the early twentieth century. Adopting the notion that surrealism, for example, is an avant-garde movement, means at least implicitly accepting the conditions outlined above as given. We would therefore imagine surrealism to have been above all an artistic movement, both nihilist and utopian in its earnest pursuit of the irreversible overthrow of artistic or literary tradition. In such ways, I would argue, the construct of the avant-garde, “so present... that we do not stop, even momentarily to wonder if we might be dealing with an illusion,” has inevitably affected and indeed limited the possibilities of which we have been able to conceive. Thus my ultimate purpose here is to suggest that perhaps we can begin to relinquish the idea of the avant-garde, not to abandon it completely, but to imagine for a moment that we might have other options.

II. A CRITIQUE OF THE MODEL OF THE AVANT-GARDE

Before proposing such an alternative, however, I would like to further expand upon the potential problems of the model of the avant-garde, specifically those that, in my opinion, make the possibility of alternatives especially desirable. In particular, these are the romantic origins of the concept and the apparent neglect of the term within so-called “avant-garde” movements.

Although the early twentieth century is the period most commonly described by the rhetoric of the avant-garde, Matei Calinescu has illustrated that the use of the term avant-garde as a cultural metaphor (rather than a purely military term) was already present in the late sixteenth century, when “French humanist lawyer and historian Etienne Pasquier” wrote, “A glorious war was then being waged against ignorance, a war in which, I would say, Scève, Bèze, and Pelletier constituted the avant-garde; or, if you prefer, they were the fore-runners of the other poets.”6 This military metaphor, however, seems not to have gained currency until the early nineteenth century, when the term was either revived or reinvented in a highly romantic work generally attributed to Henri de Saint-Simon (though Calinescu attributes the work to his disciple Oline Rodrigues):7

It is we artists who will serve you as avant-garde... the power of the arts is in fact most immediate and most rapid: when we wish to spread new ideas among men, we inscribe them on marble or on canvas... What a magnificent destiny for the arts is that of exercising a positive power over society, a true priestly function, and of marching forcefully in the [vanguard] of all the intellectual faculties...8

By contrast, however, as Calinescu would summarize, the early twentieth-century avant-garde’s “offensive, insulting rhetoric came to be regarded as merely amusing, and its apocalyptic outrages were changed into comfortable and innocuous clichés.”9 It is indeed difficult to imagine that the avant-garde envisioned by Saint-Simon and his followers would have consisted of “offensive, insulting rhetoric” or “apocalyptic outrages.” Nonetheless, Calinescu has written that “Etymologically,” one of the “conditions... basic to the existence and meaningful activity of any properly named avant-garde (social, political, or cultural) is... the possibility that its representatives be conceived of, or conceive of themselves, as being in advance of their time (obviously this does not go without a progressive or at least goal-oriented philosophy of history).”10 It seems reasonably clear that the Saint-Simonians may have indeed harbored such a progressive
concept of history, but with later "avant-gardes," dada, in particular, the original Saint-Simonian model, in all of its romantic splendor, seems rather pointedly inappropriate. Nonetheless, Poggioli would declare that establishing itself "as a function of the future, an anticipatory anachronism...is exactly what the avant-garde in general...does do." Even more explicitly accepting and perpetuating such a progressive model of history with reference to the avant-garde, Sally Everett would write, "The avant-garde is the ingredient that causes society to change. ...The agitating activity of the avant-garde is necessary in order for society to progress, since progress is dependent on movement from one state to another."

While the problem of assuming a progressive model of history may seem particularly acute in light of recent discourses of postmodernism, one finds that even in the nineteenth century, connotations of the term avant-garde were called into question, though on rather different grounds. One of the first to argue with the term was Charles Baudelaire, who protested both the metaphor itself and what he believed it stood for:

In this country every metaphor wears a moustache. The militant school of literature...the literatures of the avant-garde...This weakness for military metaphors is a sign of natures that are not themselves militarist, but are made for discipline—that is to say, for conformity—natures congenially domestic, Belgian natures that can think only in unison.

Thus, for Baudelaire, the problem of the military origin of the metaphor, as well as the sense of uniformity it implied, was an insurmountable one.

Although Baudelaire’s very allegiance to the notion of nonconformity might in fact lead one today to characterize him as all the more avant-garde, his statement suggests quite emphatically that he did not recognize himself within the model as he understood it. While Baudelaire may be a relatively isolated case among “avant-garde” artists and groups for actively denouncing the term, one might well question the degree to which other “avant-gardes” adopted it. Clearly, as Baudelaire’s quotation suggests, the term was in circulation, but was it used? Did the futurists understand, define, or call themselves avant-garde? Did the cubists, or the dadas? Did the surrealists?

While, as previously suggested, the avant-garde might be exemplified by nearly anyone who picked up a pen or paintbrush in the early twentieth century, my primary case study here will be surrealism, one of the most widely known and studied movements of the “avant-garde,” and indeed one that has even been conceptualized as particularly characteristic of its tendencies. Jürgen Habermas, for example, has suggested that “the spirit and discipline of aesthetic modernity,” which defined “various avant-garde movements...finally reached its climax in the Café Voltaire of the dadaists and in surrealism.” Similarly, Hans Magnus Enzensberger would declare, “Surrealism is the paradigm, the perfect model of all avant-gardist movements.”

The surrealists indeed provide a particularly compelling case study in that their documents, declarations, and manifestoes of the 1920s and 1930s, in particular, reveal that they fought a seemingly incessant battle against public misinterpretation of their intentions. If one considers just how loosely the term surreal is used in common parlance today, one can begin to have some sense of their position. That two or three other artists or groups were also attempting to appropriate Apollinaire’s neologism only made the surrealists even more guarded and determined to define surrealism in their own precise terms. Breton’s three surrealist manifestoes, as well as his essay, “What is Surrealism?” quite obviously have as their purpose the definition of the surrealists’ project. And yet one finds Breton describing the project, presumably to his own satisfaction, without recourse or reference to the concept of the avant-garde. Similarly, the communal “Declaration of 27 January 1925” states quite clearly the term with which the surrealists wished their project to be understood:

Regarding a false interpretation of our enterprise that is stupidly circulating among the public, we declare to the entire braying literary, dramatic, philosophical, exegetical and even theological body of contemporary criticism:

1. We have nothing to do with literature; but we are quite capable, when necessary, of making use of it like anyone else.
2. Surrealism is not a new or an easier means of expression nor even a metaphysics of poetry. It is a means of total liberation of the mind and of all that resembles it.
3. We are determined to make a revolution.
4. We have coupled the word surreal and the word revolution only to show the disinterested, detached, and even totally desperate character of this revolution.
5. We do not pretend to change the mores of men, but we intend to show the fragility of their thought and on what shifting foundations, what caverns, they have built their trembling houses.
6. We hurl this formal warning to society: Beware of your deviations and faux-pas; we shall not miss a single one.
7. At each turn of its thought, society will find us waiting.
8. We are specialists in revolt. There is no means of action which we are not capable, when necessary, of employing.
9. We say in particular to the Occidental world: surrealism exists. And what is this new ism that is fastened to us? Surrealism is not a poetic form. It is a cry of the mind turning back on itself, and it is determined to break apart its fetters, even if it must be by material hammers.  

While I acknowledge the document's highly assertive tone—and would freely allow for the possibility of overlooked exceptions elsewhere—what is striking to me about the surrealists' relationship to the concept of the avant-garde is that, for the most part, it seems not to have occurred to them to articulate the basis of their project with the terminology of the avant-garde construct.  

Perhaps this might be explained by the more overtly political—and Marxist—appropriations of the term. We have seen that Baudelaire objected to the term, at least in part because, in Calinescu's words, it "tended to point toward the type of commitment one would have expected from an artist who conceived of his role as consisting mainly in party propaganda." Indeed, in describing Lenin's theory of avant-garde literature, in which he referred to the "avant-garde of the entire working class," Calinescu has written:  

Reduced to the status of a little "cog," it is not difficult to understand that literature can have no independent claim at performing any sort of avant-garde role. Thus, since the early 1900s, but especially after the 1917 October Revolution in Russia, and with increasing emphasis during the whole Stalin era, the term avant-garde came to be almost automatically associated with the idea of the monolithic Communist party. That was true not only for the Soviet Union but for Communist orthodoxy all over the world.  

Certainly anyone familiar with the surrealists' largely painful relationship with the French Communist Party can easily understand the degree to which the surrealists did not wish to conform to a Soviet model of art as communist propaganda. Yet despite Calinescu's argument, clearly this was not the only context in which the term avant-garde was used in interwar Paris. According to Poggioli,  

[The] divorce of the two avant-gardes [the aesthetic and the political] took place in the 1880s, when expressions such as "the art, or literature of the avant-garde" came into vogue. Thus what had up to then been a secondary, figurative meaning became instead the primary, in fact the only, meaning: the isolated image and the abbreviated term avant-garde became, without qualification, another synonym for the artistic avant-garde.  

In a rare exception to the surrealists' apparent avoidance of the term avant-garde, conscious or unconscious as that avoidance might have been, Robert Desnos gave an indication that this was indeed how the term was used in France in the late 1920s. He did so in a rather scathing work of film criticism called "Avant-Garde Cinema," which he began on a sarcastic note: "Thanks to the persistent influence of Oscar Wilde and the aesthete of 1890, an influence to which we owe, among others, the interventions of Monsieur Jean Cocteau, a mistaken kind of thinking has created much inauspicious confusion in the cinema." Desnos then proceeded to generalize that "An exaggerated respect for art and a mystique of expression has led a whole group of producers, actors, and spectators to the creation of a so-called avant-garde cinema, remarkable for the rapidity with which its productions become obsolete, for its absence of human emotion, and for the risks it obliges all cinema to run." In defining his target more specifically, he would add: "Don't get me wrong. When René
Clair and Picabia made Entr’acte, Man Ray L’Étoile de mer, Buñuel his admirable Un Chien andalou, there was no thought of creating a work of art or a new aesthetic but only of obeying profound, original impulses, consequently necessitating a new form.” In concluding his essay, he would declare that, “In fact the avant-garde in cinema, as in literature and theater, is a fiction”, but then, seeming to reverse his position, he would state, “In fact there is no more avant-garde cinema than the French cinema in its entirety….The question is, avant-garde of what?” 22 This text, then, functions to suggest that for Desnos, and perhaps for the surrealists more generally, the term avant-garde was synonymous with a form of aestheticicism, which they found lamentable, and that the term was therefore not adequate to a description of their own project.

Yet of course the fact that the surrealists themselves seemed to have had little interest in characterizing themselves as avant-garde by no means compels historians to abandon the avant-garde as a theoretical model. Ingres certainly never described himself as an Orientalist nor spoke of the Male Gaze present in his work, though both terms can be very useful in discussing his paintings today. I do not propose for a moment that a historian should be limited to the vocabulary of the historical object. Indeed, it is with this point in mind that I would like to propose an alternative construct.

III. THE SPECIFICATIONS AND RAMIFICATIONS OF “POLITICAL CULTURE”

Here I would advance the model of “political culture,” as described most effectively by historian Keith Michael Baker. In addressing earlier uses of the term, he has written that his own use is more linguistic. It sees politics as about making claims; as the activity through which individuals and groups in any society articulate, negotiate, implement, and enforce the competing claims they make upon one another and upon the whole. Political culture is, in this sense, the set of discourses or symbolic practices by which these claims are made. It comprises the definitions of the relative subject-positions from which individuals and groups may (or may not) legitimately make claims upon one another, and therefore of the identity and boundaries of the community to which they belong. It constitutes the meanings of the terms in which these claims are framed, the nature of the contexts to which they pertain, and the authority of the principles according to which they are made binding. 23

In adopting Baker’s use of the term, Robert Gildea has similarly written, “By [political culture] I mean the culture elaborated by communities competing for political power, to define themselves against competing communities, to bind together their members, and to legitimate their claim to power.” 24 Baker’s work makes use of the dual nature of the term culture, as does Gildea’s. While Baker here refers to “political culture” as a “set of discourses,” he elsewhere uses the term political cultures to refer to the communities in question whose raison d’être is to engage themselves in such discourses. I would propose that the latter use of the term is potentially quite enabling for historians attempting to (re)theorize groups such as the surrealists. In other words, while I do not call for the abolition of the concept of the avant-garde, I do call for an envisioning of the prospect of beginning again with a new model.

One advantage of the political culture model is that it allows for a more subtle discussion of culture-making strategies, one that thus examines performative, rather than product-oriented, aspects of a movement. In adopting this model for understanding surrealism, one finds that it better articulates the surrealists’ relationship to historical sources than that allowed by the concept of the avant-garde. While the avant-garde model emphasizes the notion that the surrealists were antitradition, and always seeking new forms of expression, even a cursory glance at surrealist periodicals reveals that the surrealists, rather than emphasizing a severance from tradition, were actively authoring their own prehistory, a subversive alternative tradition, which I have elsewhere termed the surrealist “anti-canons.” 25 Very much against the grain of the avant-garde myth of originality, as most explicitly exemplified by the Italian futurists who advocated the destruction of libraries and museums, the surrealists celebrated and adopted as precursors a number of historical figures, ranging from the Marquis de Sade to Giuseppe
Arcimboldo to the Comte de Lautréamont, and so on. Indeed a lengthy roll call of such figures is featured prominently in the defining text of the movement, the Surrealist Manifesto of 1924: “Swift is Surrealist in malice, Sade is Surrealist in sadism,” and so on. Of course many of these appropriated proto-surrealists had been left out of conventional, classically biased histories of literature and art. Thus while the surrealists never authored an authoritative historical “textbook,” they opened the doors of history not only to the neglected, but to the mad, the criminal, the scandalous, the non-Western, and the untrained, each of whom problematized the narrow standards informing the conventional canon. Indeed, the surrealists’ revival of such figures functioned then to promote difference and to critique the ideological biases inherent in supposedly neutral accounts of history purporting to be based on ideals of “timelessness” and “universality.”

What is key here, however, is that the surrealists were hardly alone—or original—in their efforts to use history as a political tool. Indeed Gildea’s study, The Past in French History, is devoted to the topic of the political nature of historical appropriation and the proliferation of such appropriations in France since 1789. For example, he illustrates that the cult of Joan of Arc—which reached fruition precisely in the aftermath of World War I—was divided into many cults of both the right and the left, each of whom worked fervently to claim the Maid of Orléans as their own. She thus became a vehicle both in the service of and in opposition to the Catholic Church and the monarchy, depending upon whether her story was told by radicals, socialists, communists, liberal republicans, conservatives, monarchists, fascists, and so on. As Gildea’s work testifies, however, Joan represented just one of many hotly contested and deeply politicized historical moments. Similar debates would focus upon whether Napoleon was a genius and a savior, an opportunist and a tyrant, and so on. The surrealists in France in the 1920s were thus surrounded on all sides by politically motivated rewritings of history, and I believe it to be quite significant that they followed suit. Yes, clearly their anticanon was an avant-gardistic attack on mainstream cultural values, and an attack on conventional and conservative histories, but what interests me here is the process rather than the outcome, that this attack, in other words, was executed with widespread, even mainstream, culture-making strategies—the same strategies being used by organizations ranging from the French Communist Party to the Catholic Church.

It may be particularly telling that Poggioli seems incapable of assimilating this aspect of surrealism into his theory of the avant-garde, writing:

In the rare moments when avant-garde art seeks to justify itself by the authority or arbitration of history, in any one of the partial and infrequent fits of humanism or traditionalism that now and again inflict it, even it dares to look for its own patent of nobility in the chronicles of this past and to trace for itself a family tree of more or less authentic ancestors.

For Poggioli, this is a “regression that is particularly erroneous.” While Poggioli is correct in arguing that this error is based upon a process of “anticipatory anchronism,” his argument fails to recognize the political nature of history writing, as outlined above.

A second example of the surrealists working within the system involves the presentation and design of the journal La Révolution Surrealiste. Overseen by Pierre Naville, the journal’s design was modeled upon that of the scientific review La Nature, which presumably harbored few intentions of aesthetic achievement or innovation. Indeed, the surrealist journal’s very formal layout remained remarkably unremarkable from a visual point of view, particularly when considered in relation to the almost violent typographic experimentation of the dada and futurist journals that preceded it. In contrast to the latter’s nonlinear compositions and mismatched points and fonts, which seemed to stretch to the breaking point accepted standards of legibility, La Révolution Surrealiste consistently used a tidy and even formulaic layout, including its title in bold across the top, a boxed-off rectangular photograph in the center, and two columns of contents making up the bottom third of a very orderly composition. All elements are neatly centered, and the type is both linear and homogeneous. Interior contents were similarly coherent, in terms of their visual presentation and their content. (While the dream entries, for example, defied laws of rationality, in contrast
to many dada texts, they were generally written with conventional grammar and complete sentences.) In all, then, La Révolution Surréaliste, when considered as a visual object, defined notions of originality and aesthetic experimentation so closely associated with the concept of the avant-garde. Consequently, I would argue, the model of the avant-garde encourages very little discussion of such aspects of the surrealist project that do not conform to its norms. (Dada and futurist design have received considerably more attention.) While the surrealist journal may indeed be relatively uninteresting from an aesthetic point of view, I would maintain that its significance lies in potential insights into surrealist strategies for producing or infiltrating culture. Indeed, the apparent conservatism of the journal's cover would make an unsuspecting viewer less likely to categorically dismiss the journal on the basis of visual incoherence. I would contend, therefore, that the surrealists may have used design as a tool to strategically position themselves in order to more effectively participate in and diversify cultural discourse.

Another objection to the model of the avant-garde has to do with an understanding of the avant-garde as above all an (object-oriented) artistic endeavor. While in many ways the previously cited 1925 surrealist declaration conforms quite satisfactorily to many of the commonly accepted criteria of the avant-garde, one might do well to revisit the first of these statements: "We have nothing to do with literature; but we are capable, when necessary, of making use of it like anyone else." In a single statement, then, literature becomes a means rather than an end, as it is defined as a strategy, and one apparently to be accorded no greater worth than other surrealist strategies (scandal, games, manifestoes, history-writing, and so on). At this time, I would suggest that the concept of the avant-garde has been too entrenched in an understanding of "avant-garde" movements as projects of artistic—or even antiartistic—production. Janet Lyon, for example, in writing of "revolutionary discourse" and "avant-garde aesthetics," couples the term avant-garde with artistic production, simultaneously segregating it from discursive practice.39

In interrogating the notion of artistic production, so central to our definitions of the avant-garde, I do mean to emphasize the problematic nature of both the idea of art (as opposed to discourse) and that of products (as opposed to strategies). This is by no means to deny that the surrealists, as well as other movements characterized as avant-garde, were prolific producers of literary and artistic objects, and that those objects played a crucial role in the critique enacted by such movements. Bürger, in particular, has described these objects and their contribution to cultural criticism through the terminology of antiart, suggesting that the avant-garde adopted artistic practices that exposed their own means of production, in the process undermining the classical ("organic" in Bürger's terminology) assumptions that segregated the arts of a seemingly self-contained aestheticism from life, politics, and so on. As I will discuss shortly, Bürger believes this to be to the credit of the avant-garde.

Although I do not necessarily wish to deny art an appropriate—or even special—position as a uniquely condensed form of sociocultural discourse, I do wish to suggest, however, that even—or in some cases especially—when the surrealists are understood as antiartists, art has for too long had the first and last word. Indeed, Habermas would conclude that the surrealist "rebellion" was "hopeless" and a "failure" specifically on the grounds that:

In everyday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another.... A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere—art—and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes.32

Rather clearly implicit in this statement is the notion that the surrealists operated exclusively within the "cultural sphere" of art. Here, too, I would propose that the fatal limitation might not be that of the surrealists' operation only within the realm of art, but rather that perhaps it is endemic to a construct that allows us only to consider this aspect of their project.

In recognizing the existence of other aspects of "avant-garde" production, Poggioli has suggested that perhaps the (over)emphasis on the avant-garde's aesthetic production is unavoidable: "It may...be that the avant-garde is one of those tendencies destined to become art in spite
of itself.\(^{33}\) Whether or not this is the case, it is certainly true that one is significantly more likely to find surrealism taught in a course on twentieth-century art than in a course on twentieth-century France. The proposal of the model of political culture is not likely to change this. But it can begin to illustrate more clearly that we do have options for theorizing the surrealist project outside the boundaries of conventional art (or literature) history.\(^{34}\) Indeed, as the example of the surrealists’ history (re)writing suggests, “political culture” may well be better equipped to facilitate a discussion not only of products (that is, objects) but also of strategies.

Certainly once one has moved away from a conventional (high) art-historical model, one can begin to give serious consideration to those things dismissed by William S. Rubin as “mere cultural artifacts”: the tracts, posters, manifestoes, periodical designs, dress codes, events, inflammatory rhetoric, and other aspects of the project that cannot be readily assimilated by the concept of art.\(^{35}\) This breaks open a vicious cycle, in which one cannot see surrealism as more or other than an avant-garde, because only “high” art is considered; while at the same time, only “high” art is considered, because surrealism is nothing more or other than an avant-garde. In other words, not only does the model of political culture allow one to speak of other things, both discursive and material, but those other things furthermore have great potential to open up alternate interpretations of surrealism as a whole.

Specifically, I believe that the notion of discursivity enabled by the model of political culture may hold promise to powerfully upset our histories of the “avant-garde.” I would pose discursivity, therefore, as a potential alternative to the virtually inevitable conclusion of utopianism assumed—and, indeed, taken for granted—within the avant-garde model. Commenting on the seemingly inextricable relationship between the avant-garde and utopianism, Daniel Herwitz, for example, has remarked:

Nearly everyone has called attention to the utopian character of avant-garde art (and how could one not, when “utopia” is stamped across every page of every avant-garde manifesto, pronouncement, periodical, letter, and debate?).\(^{36}\)

As previously discussed, however, the goal-oriented and positivist concept of history implied by the very term is a product of the romantic origins of this model. By envisioning the surrealist group as a political culture, I wish to suggest the possibility of rethinking the implications of applying the model of the avant-garde to such groups. As I have suggested, these implications include an assumption that the surrealists necessarily harbored a utopian faith in the inevitability of their own revolution.

Indeed, a close reading of the manifestoes may suggest otherwise. In a passage at first glance suggesting what John D. Ericson has termed “a tendency to substitute new master narratives for the old,”\(^{37}\) Breton states:

I believe in the future resolution of these two states, dream and reality, which are seemingly so contradictory, into a kind of absolute reality, a surreality, if one may so speak. It is in quest of this surreality that I am going, certain not to find it but too unmindful of my death not to calculate to some slight degree the joys of its possession.\(^{38}\)

Thus, one finds in Breton’s articulation of his purpose an outright admission that its utmost ideals are unattainable. Similar tendencies emerge again in the group declaration of 1925. Though points 2 and 3 speak of “total liberation” and “[determination] to make a revolution,” point 4 describes the paradoxically “detached” and “desperate character of this revolution,” while point 5 denies outright that they believe they possess the ability “to change the mores of men.” We see, therefore, a pattern in which surrealist declarations offer up certainty, only to take it back. (One might even posit that a similar pattern motivates many of the artistic products of surrealism. “Magical realist” paintings, as well as Buñuel and Dali’s Un Chien andalou, offer up a semblance of conventional coherence, only to dramatically undercut it in the end.) Thus, it may ironically be psychiatrist Pierre Janet who best described the surrealists in a “Discussion” among those in his field concerned with the “attacks [the Surrealists were] making upon mental specialists” (this was defiantly republished as the opening to the Second Manifesto of 1929). According to Janet, the surrealists were “men obsessed, and men who doubt.”\(^{39}\) It is the subtlety of this apparent
contradiction that I believe the avant-garde construct has overshadowed. But a different model affords different possibilities.

Indeed, a reading of Hal Foster helps to further complicate our understanding, by introducing the notion that one might "speak of the avant-garde in terms of rhetoric." Responding to Bürger and Habermas and using Duchamp as his example, Foster elaborates: "For the most acute avant-garde artists such as Duchamp, the aim is neither an abstract negation of art nor a romantic reconciliation with life but a perpetual testing of the conventions of both. Thus, rather than false, circular, and otherwise affirmative, avant-garde practice at its best is contradictory, mobile, and otherwise diabolical." Implied here in the notion of rhetoric is the relative, as opposed to the absolute, implied within the model of utopianism. One might especially consider in this regard Breton's famous definition of the purest surrealist act, from the Second Surrealist Manifesto: "The simplest Surrealist act consists of dashing down the street, pistol in hand, and firing blindly, as fast as you can pull the trigger, into the crowd." No surrealist ever committed such an act, and one might thus conclude that what may appear to be imperative or absolute within surrealist documents may instead be understood as strategically inflammatory rhetoric, which would, to adapt Foster's terminology, perpetually test the conventions of discourse.

Foster, however, has additionally written of the avant-garde, "By now [its] problems ... are familiar: the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elitist hermeticism, the historical exclusivity, the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on." Foster's text, therefore, is part of an effort to fulfill "the need for new genealogies of the avant-garde that complicate its past and support its future." His project is thus one of imagining new possibilities by redefining the avant-garde, rather than by seeking an alternative to it. Other attempts to rethink the concept of the avant-garde have similarly been articulated by numerous scholars, but for the most part such other possibilities, though already present within the discourse of the avant-garde, have tended to remain displaced by the weight of conventional definitions of the avant-garde, and the problems burdening them, as described above. Without explicitly adopting the model of the political culture, Mann, in particular, has nonetheless emphasized its characteristics, by describing the "being-in-discourse" of groups such as the futurists or the surrealists: "For members of any given movement definition is partly a matter of publicity or propaganda...all such definitions are essentially strategic, means of positioning a movement in relation to real or potential allies, enemies, patrons, critics, etc." With reference to this concept he has noted that such groups are "completely immersed in a wide range of apparently ancillary phenomena—reviewing, exhibition, appraisal, reproduction, academic analysis, gossip, retrospection—all conceived within and as an economy, a system or field of circulation and exchange that is itself a function of a larger cultural economy.

As previously suggested, the concept of political culture allows for a foregrounding of these very ("apparently ancillary") strategies. And indeed it may well be only by investigating such strategies that one can begin to consider the alternative possibility of theorizing surrealism as a profoundly discursive project. This is to suggest, in other words, that perhaps above all, the surrealists were building an alternative subculture, which necessarily existed in relation to the "larger cultural economy" described by Mann, but that functioned as critique by performatively illustrating that mainstream cultural beliefs were themselves ideological constructs rather than universal truths. The model of political culture, then, enables the potentially radical possibility that that might have been enough. In other words, when theorized as a type of political culture rather than an avant-garde, it becomes possible to imagine that surrealism was a deconstructive rather than a utopian project. Indeed, to say that the surrealists were staging a site of protest, from which they could construct a platform resisting collusion with conservative ideology is not the same as saying that they genuinely believed that they would come to be recognized as the absolute saviors of humanity. It is to attribute to them a subversion of a deeper level: it is to say that they recognized that all culture is artifice—that all culture is discourse.

Again, the first manifesto is particularly interesting in this regard, specifically the segment titled "Secrets of the Magical Surrealist Art." While it begins with instructions for
automatic writing, which seem, based upon what we know of the practice, to be quite earnest, other directions, including "How not to be bored any longer when with others," "To write false novels," "How to catch the eye of a woman you pass in the street," and "Against death," seem rather patently ironic. The texts undermine the very authority that they appear to assume in seeming to present themselves within the trappings of a master discourse. (The effect is not unlike that of reading a list of Jenny Holzer's "truisms.") Particularly pertinent, however, is the segment, "To make speeches":

Just prior to the elections, in the first country which deems it worthwhile to proceed in this kind of public expression of opinion, have yourself put on the ballot. Each of us has within himself the potential of an orator: multicolored loot cloths, glass trinkets of words. Through Surrealism he will take despair unawares in its poverty... He will promise so much that any promises he keeps will be a source of wonder and dismay. In answer to the claims of an entire people he will give a partial and ludicrous vote. He will make the bitterest enemies partake of a secret desire which will blow up the countries. And in this he will succeed simply by allowing himself to be moved by the immense word which dissolves into pity and revolves in hate... He will be truly elected, and women will love him with an all-consuming passion.47

Thus, one finds in both the manifesto and the performative content of this text that politics, culture, discourse, and so on, have been exposed as "glass trinkets of words," as artifice.

In using the concept of political culture, however, one is also afforded an opportunity to reevaluate the subtleties of the "avant-garde's" relationship to mainstream culture. While clearly, in the case of the surrealists, the project may be defined as one of radical subversiveness, surrealist tactics may also be understood in terms of the construction of a relatively coherent subculture (subdiscourse), which was constructed specifically through the use of established culture (discourse)-making strategies. As previously discussed, these strategies would include history-writing and journal publication; they would also include manifestoes, inflammatory rhetoric, galleries and exhibitions, poetry and (tromp l'oeil) painting, dictionary and encyclopedia definitions of surrealism, and even the opening of a surrealist bureau of research, all of which might be appreciated as discursive strategies. Gregory Ulmer has written that "The error of the avant-garde... is to imagine that the system has an 'outside.'"48 But perhaps the "error" has been made by those who have defined the construct of the avant-garde as such, as an essentialized "anti," always trying to exist "outside" the "system." When refracted through the prism of political culture, however, it becomes possible to suggest that perhaps for such groups, discourse was not a means to the end of a utopia of anti-ism, but a deconstructive end in itself. In other words, such groups might be theorized in terms of discursive difference rather than the utopian nihilism of the anti.

Indeed, as this discussion has suggested, the "goals" of a political culture might be understood as quite different from those of an avant-garde. We have already seen that theories of the avant-garde occasionally evoke aspects of the political culture model only to repress them. Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde might be cited as another example, and one that furthermore can be used to illustrate the distinct goals of the two concepts. While he devotes the bulk of the text to the notion that the (utopian) goal of avant-garde groups was to "reintegrate art into the praxis of life,"49 in a brief remark in his introduction, Bürger states that "The category of art as institution... only became recognizable after the avant-garde movements had criticized the autonomous status of art in developed bourgeois society."50 I wish to suggest that in contrast to Bürger's stated definition of the goals of the avant-garde, the goals of a political culture might be defined by the implications of the latter quote, by the exposing of quasi-autonomous institutional structures, and by the complication of a cultural discourse that might otherwise appear hegemonic. Here, again, I would quote point 5 of the 1925 declaration: "We do not pretend to change the mores of men, but we intend to show the fragility of their thought and on what shifting foundations, what caverns, they have built their trembling houses."

In another passage, Bürger states that "The historical avant-garde movements were unable to destroy art as an institution; but they did destroy the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal
Envisioning the surrealist group as an avant-garde is to define its goals as the destruction of art as an institution; envisioning it rather as a political culture is to define its goals as the destruction of the possibility of claims to universal validity. This would indeed become the stated aim of Luis Buñuel who, late in his life, would declare:

In any society, the artist has a responsibility. His effectiveness is certainly limited and a writer or painter cannot change the world. But they can keep an essential margin of nonconformity alive. Thanks to them, the powerful can never affirm that everyone agrees with their acts. That small difference is very important. When power feels itself totally justified and approved, it immediately destroys whatever freedoms we have left, and that is fascism. My ideas have not changed since I was 20. Basically, I agree with Engels: An artist describes real social relationships with the purpose of destroying the conventional ideas about those relationships, undermining bourgeois optimism and forcing the public to doubt the tenets of the established order.

I would argue, furthermore, that this was the performative aim of a number of surrealist documents and practices. Publishing, for example, a (very unartistic) photograph of Benjamin Péret insulting a priest in La Révolution Surréaliste entered into circulation within the discourse the falsity of the myth that all of France was contentedly Catholic. Their public championings of "hysteria" and the irrationality of the unconscious mind functioned to subvert the authority of dominant positivist constructs of reason, while their celebration of L'amour fou and liberated sexuality worked to protest the apparent hegemony of bourgeois family values. Their glorification of chance functioned to undermine the notion of a teleological model of history as progress, and so on. Indeed, through such practices, the surrealists could, to adapt the words of Janet Lyon, "challenge the ostensible universalism that underpins modern democratic cultural formations." As I have indicated, however, one must be willing to give serious consideration to nonartistic aspects of surrealist production to arrive at, accept, or even entertain this conclusion.

While discursive is the issue with the broadest potential implications, two additional, and more pragmatic, aspects of the model of political culture should also be considered. The first is that it does not inherently imply a movement with artistic intent or ambitions. Indeed, this construct might easily describe groups that would not only include the surrealists, but also the reactionary fringe group Action Française and even mainstream political parties. In this way it may be a less specific model than that of the avant-garde, and perhaps one inadequate to discussions that wish to foreground the role of (anti-)art. As previously suggested, however, I would argue that one of the dangers of the avant-garde construct is that its specificity can become homogenizing. Groups ranging from the Italian futurists to the surrealists, to the German expressionists have their considerable differences effaced as they are lumped under a conceptual model, which includes them primarily because they created experimental art. In being general enough to avoid the homogenization of such different projects, however, the model of political culture does not become so general as to be meaningless. Indeed its specificity lies not in what the groups produced (art, discourse, and so on), nor in where they positioned themselves within the political spectrum. It lies rather in the term's ability to investigate culture-making strategies; the how, rather than the what, of the project.

I would also propose that political culture has the additional advantage of being a more pragmatic, and thus a more neutral, term. Avant-garde, by contrast, is a word that has become quite loaded. It clearly originated as a term of heroism implying admiration, yet since the declaration of the fall of modernism, in particular, it has taken on overtones of derision, being guilty by association of totalizing utopian ambitions and ultimately failure. Political culture, however, implies and necessitates no judgment, neither that of romantic ideals, nor that of a skepticism of modernist presumptions.

Furthermore, it is a more interdisciplinary model, allowing surrealism, for one, to be viewed as a project whose end does not have to be art—or utopianism. Indeed, as I have argued, a more interdisciplinary model may lead to a greater appreciation of the interdisciplinary and seemingly "ancillary" aspects of such projects, those facets, such as publicity and daily activity, which expressed and defined the project's
ideology but without conforming to the structures of institutional disciplines, segregating, for example, art from literature, literature from history, history from psychology, psychology from politics, and so on. Indeed, while exposing the artificiality of institutional disciplines, such practices problematize Habermas’s assertion that surrealism “[provided] access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes”: fine art.

Lastly, the introduction of such a model might also enable us to see beyond, or to propose the artificiality of, the apparent rupture separating the early twentieth century from our own era. The potential advantage of such a possibility is that it may enable a greater historicization of recent strategies of resistance, as embodied by Foucault and others, including those visual artists whom Foster has described as “neo-avant-garde.” Yet, what might be the most far-reaching—and ultimately challenging—of the potential implications of political culture is that it might require a rethinking of Krauss’s rift, the “historical divide” separating us from the age of modernism and the avant-garde. In other words, what is at stake is the very vantage point from which Krauss could frame herself as all the wiser, having learned the lessons of the errors of modernism and the avant-garde, from which she consequently distanced herself so emphatically. When such movements are reconsidered through the concept of political culture, however, new possibilities emerge, and ultimately, it may become more difficult to maintain that a rift divides us decisively from the age of modernism.

In conclusion, however, I would like to reiterate that in advocating the model of political culture, I am by no means calling for an end to the historiographic concept of the avant-garde, nor do I believe that the alternative I have described here will or even should become universally adopted or hegemonic. I do wish quite emphatically, however, to suggest that indeed we need to rethink the fact that for so long the construct of the avant-garde has seemed like our only option. More specifically, I would propose that we have too readily accepted and assumed that groups like the surrealists made the fatal “error,” articulated by Ulmer, of “imagining] that culture has an outside.” Perhaps, in the end, it may well be that they did make this very error. My purpose here is not to argue dogmatically that they did not. It is rather to question the state of discourse by which we can so easily take for granted that they did. I have argued, then, that the surrealists proposed alternatives to undermine the appearance of a hegemonic discourse. It is my hope that this paper has done the same.

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4. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
17. Breton did write in his 1946 preface to the Second Manifesto that “A human association such as the one which
enabled Surrealism to be built—an association such as had not been seen, as far as its goals and its enthusiasm were concerned, at least since Saint-Simonism—cannot help but obey certain laws of fluctuation about which it is probably all too human not to be able to know how, from within, to make up one’s mind.” Andre Breton, Manifestoes of Surrealism (University of Michigan Press, 1969), p. 114. Thus surrealism’s early “goals and its enthusiasm” were here retrospectively likened to those of the Saint-Simonians, though this indeed seems to be an isolated reference, and one that furthermore suggests that the surrealists were not ignorant of the concept of the avant-garde.

21. By this time, Destris had been expelled from the formal surrealist group, but his praise in the same text for Buñuel and Dalí’s Un Chien andalou suggests that at least on some level he remained sympathetic to the tenets of the surrealist project.

32. Habermas, Modernity—An Incomplete Project, p. 11.
34. Janet Lyon, in fact, provides a model in Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern, in which she discusses (artistic) avant-garde manifestoes in relation to manifestoes of suffragist and other (nonartistic) projects.
38. Breton, Manifestoes, p. 12 (emphasis added, excepting surrealism).
39. Breton, Manifestoes, p. 121.
41. Breton, Manifestoes, p. 125.
43. Ibid.
46. Michael Stone-Richards has even argued that surrealist absolutely was not a utopian movement, on the grounds that the surrealists privileged desire over pleasure, thereby invoking a temporality of displacement, in which the satisfaction of desire is never achieved and indeed is recognized as unachievable (Stone Richards, Introductory remarks to the panel “The Political Positions of Surrealism,” Rethinking the Avant-Garde: Between Politics and Aesthetics, Notre Dame University, April 14–15, 2000).