IV  The Politics of Participation
Avant-Garde for People’s Sake: A Misrecognition or a Game?
Yuan-hong Chu and Shih-ming Li
Tungli University, Taipei

In August 1988, an avant-garde theatre announced an open air theatrical event on a barren ridge near Taipei. The circular listed the prices of admission:

The People: NT 150

Members of the bourgeois art circle: NT 1000

At the performance, about one hundred people showed up. Among them were professors of the theatrical circle, college students of art, media reporters, and opposition party members of the legislature. A handful of local people appeared but did not stay long, absolutely puzzled by the bizarre show on stage, which was "an aesthetic abomination, a shocking challenge to the moral and political taboos of the day," according to an art columnist in a Taipei newspaper.

Except for the few posing local people, there was in this event nothing unusual for Taiwan’s avant-garde theatre of the late 1980’s. The populist rhetoric, the anti-bourgeois gesture, a subversive show as an attack, a selection of supercompetent theatre-goers, and even the political looking for possible collators for an 'election theatre', i.e. a new genre which would serve the coming election campaign. If the event had taken place instead in a small playhouse in downtown Taipei, the only difference would have been the absence of the posing local people.

But who were the members of a collectivity called the 'People', beloved of the avant-gardists? Who were those avant-gardists feeling authorised to perform 'for the people'? These questions become more intriguing if we add several more observations.

The avant-garde theatre producers and critics not only frequently denounced the vulgarity and indifference of the bourgeois or mass audience - quoting Peter Brook’s comic remarks such as "passive vigile", "creeping to be raped" etc. (Zheng, 1989:155) - but also often condemned their own audience as incompetent and passive (Wang, 1990:332). The avant-gardists hate their audience who behave so much like the spectators at bourgeois entertainments: calm, ritualized, with obligatory applause, and sometimes shout of enthusiasm at the end, or even perfectly silent. However, the audience capable of constant participation - manifest boccio and whistles, sometimes direct pitch or playing field invasions - seem beyond the reach of their art and turn to other popular entertainment such as wrestling, circuses, soccer matches and baseball games. For Pierre Bourdieu this is the most radical difference between popular entertainment and bourgeois entertainment (Bourdieu, 1984:487-8).

Examining the social origin of these avant-garde artists, we find most of them, especially their leaders, are sons and daughters of intellectuals, professionals, middle to high ranking military and civil bureaucrats; almost none of them comes from families of the working class or the peasantry. Most of the artists themselves come from prestigious colleges; many of them had even studied abroad. This observation does not question the truthfulness of their vowed identification with "the people who came from below". It only reminds us that, truthful or not, beneath the conscious conversion and declared solidarity, the avant-garde artists do not share the same 'habitus' (in Bourdieu’s sense) of the people 'from below'. There is a significant difference between the artists' lifestyle and the life of those they proclaim to side with.

The ambiguous relationship between the avant-garde movements and their populism is, of course, not a phenomenon specific to Taiwan's theatre movement. Raymond Williams' genealogical study shows that populism has entangled the historical avant-garde movement since its very beginning. August Strindberg decided to side with those "who came, weapon in hand, from below". The Futurists bailed that "we will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure and by riot ...

(Williams, 1989:49-50).

However, the rhetoric of populism has no predictable direction. The emphasis on 'the people', the populace, the working classes, proletariat or nation, Volk) could lead to opposite identifications. The Futurists had split after 1917. Marinetti to his support for Italian Fascism; Malevsky to his campaigning for a popular Russian culture. With the coming of Hitler, writers within Expressionism had positioned themselves on the extreme poles of politics: to both Fascism and Communism. During the Popular Front of the 1930s, the majority of the Surrealists moved towards resistance against Fascism (Williams, 1989:50-59). What then is the politics of avant-garde populism?

Even though it led to radically different positions, to Fascism or to Communism, to social democracy or to conservatism and the cult of excellence, avant-garde politics had at least one general property in common; all were anti-bourgeois revolts. This was also the basis upon which the artists could join or support a wider movement aspiring to overthrow bourgeois society. The anti-bourgeois revolt could take the form of a negative identification, between the artists and workers, each group being practically exploited and oppressed; or a positive identification, in which artists would commit themselves, in their art and out of it, to the larger causes of the people or of the workers (Williams, 1989:155).

However, Williams argues that the politics of the avant-garde cannot be understood unless the dyadic range of anti-bourgeois positions is observed within a generic range of the actual bourgeoisie:

"(...) may respects a main element of modernism was that it was an authentic avant-garde, in personal dislike and relationships, of the successful and existing bourgeoisie itself. The desperate challenges and deep shocks of the first phases were to become the statistics and even the conventions of a later phase of the same order. Than what we have observed synchronically in the range of positions covered by the anti-bourgeois revolt we observe also, dialectically, within that evolution of the bourgeoisie which in the end produced its own succession of distinctively bourgeois dissidents. (Williams, 1989:56-7)"
There are different moods in which this historical reality is acknowledged. For Jürgen Habermas, the avant-garde movement has not only radicalized the autonomy of bourgeois art vis-à-vis contexts of employment external to art, but also produced, for the first time, a counter-culture, arising from the center of bourgeois society itself and hostile to the possessive, communalistic, achievement-oriented lifestyle. In this sense, bourgeois art has taken up positions on behalf of the victims of bourgeois rationality (Habermas, 1975:86–8). Peter Bürger, while admitting that the historical avant-garde movement were unable to destroy the institution of art, highlights the fact that the avant-garde’s attack not only first made recognizable this bourgeois institution that is art, but also liquidated the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones (Bürger, 1984).

On the other hand, there are those who recognize that any avant-garde practice, rather than being a progressive political force, inevitably enters into a relation of support with the system of values and economic relations it seeks to undermine. Galvano Della Volpe considers the avant-garde as a ‘legitimate offspring’ of Capitalism: the antagonism, represented by the avant-garde, includes the conflict of lifestyle between the conforming traditionalist and the Bohemian artist-‘anarchist’, remain internal to capitalist, individualist culture and civilization. He thus concludes that ‘the term and concept of the avant-garde can be of no further use to us Marxists’ (Della Volpe, 1978:265). The Art Strike, as a recent example, attempted to de-moralize those artists who believe their work to be oppositional or subversive, and contended that the avant-gardist demands for ‘free creativity’ and ‘imagination’ were only a further version of bourgeois dreams imposed on a disinterested proletariat (Plaut, 1992:176–91). This somewhat vindicates Baudrillard’s view:

Modern art wishes to be negative, critical, innovative and a perpetual surpassing, as well as immediately (or almost) assimilated, accepted, integrated, consumed. One must surrender to the evidence: art no longer consists anything, if it ever did. . . . It can parody this world, illustrate it, simulate it; alter it; it never disturbs the order, which is also its own. (Baudrillard, 1981:110).

The avant-garde movements have indeed destroyed the possibility that a given aesthetic norm can present itself with the claim to universal validity. However, there is no longer a need for valid aesthetic norms because a play of successive differences has become the norm. The avant-garde enacts a kind of symbolic auto-destruction of the art system. But this auto-destructive negativity of art is also the ‘fatal’ process of integration and consumption. It is in this sense that Baudrillard characterizes art as ‘ midway between critical terrorism and the fact of structural integration’ (Baudrillard, 1981:110).

The avant-garde is always a process of contests and struggles, thus it has its historicity. Yet it has now become a ‘moving’ situation in a kind of circular gravity. In contemporary art, for Baudrillard, there is no more danger as there is no more history: art has increasingly become a fashion, a game, or a recurrent circulation of forms (Baudrillard, 1995:92–9).

Pierre Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field provides a sociologically sophisticated scheme which allows him to grasp the historicity of such artistic struggles in a complex, somewhat trans-historical, network of social relations (Bourdieu, 1993).

Following his map, in Figure 1, the artistic field (3) is contained within the field of power (2), while possessing a relative autonomy with respect to it. It occupies a dominated position (at the negative pole) in this field, which is itself situated at the dominant pole of the field of class relations (1) (Bourdieu, 1993:37–4).

![Figure 1](image1.png)

**Figure 1. Trajectory of the avant-garde (B) added to the artistic field (3) contained in the field of power (2) which in itself situated within the field of class relations (1). (+) = positive pole, implying a dominated position (+) = negative pole, dominated position. (See P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 38.)**

![Figure 2](image2.png)

**Figure 2. A more detailed diagram of the avant-garde trajectory (0) and the artistic field (0) from Fig. 1. (See P. Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, p. 68.)**
creating a new position beyond the positions presently occupied, ahead of them, in the avant-garde (Bourdieu, 1993:105).

In claiming a heroic break with the prevailing artistic traditions, the avant-garde only fulfills its traditional role of helping to keep the game functioning. Between the connected avant-garde and the avant-garde, the established figures and the newcomers, i.e. between artistic generations, often a few years apart, between the young and the old, the new and the old, the current and the outmoded, etc., the immemorial struggles produce the trajectory of leading from the avant-garde to its reconscription and thus reproduce the fundamental oppositions of the artistic field of the bourgeois order. Isn’t Bourdieu’s theory of the cultural field a specific way of talking about the ‘fatality’ of modern art? It takes one to consider the historicity of artistic struggles relationality within the dynamics of the fields. Yet does not this radical model of atomization only rehabilitate the avant-garde as a case of fashion?

Bourdierlized characterized this form of Bourdieu’s discourse as tautological (Bourdierl, 1995:83). Bourdieu himself often acknowledges that his view of art as a supreme fetish is a barbaric or vulgar critique (Bourdierl, 1984:253-415; 1986:253-415). Nevertheless, this barbaric perspective is of great help for our reading of a tautological game, at least in the case of Taiwan’s avant-garde theatre movement, of which the aesthetic and practice would otherwise be elusive.

In Taiwan, actually in Taipei, the avant-garde theatres attract a small band of young and ‘intellectual’ audiences to relatively inaccessible shows that defile ethical and aesthetic conventions. The position of their most bitter enemies, for instance, the Cloud Gate and the Performing Workshop, which were themselves avant-garde a few years ago, and which have become good and successful bourgeois art and even achieved international fame, is perhaps also their future. The ‘people’ could they be invited to identify themselves with an aesthetic movement? Perhaps, just as a fashion could reconsider a people for a context. Not only the positive form of the ‘people’, the glorified, is useful, as a mirror for the avant-garde ethnocentricism, but the negative form, the ‘vulgar’, is also needed, as a foil against which their products can be consecrated. Surely, the ‘real’ people remain, as ever, beyond the reach of the avant-garde creativity.

References


Burger, Peter

Lewin, Volker

Habermas, Jürgen

Plant, Sarah

Wang, Mo-Lin

Williams, Raymond

Zhong, Ming-De
1989 Zaizai Huanxiu (Zaizi de Zenbu Zhong (In the Postmodern Nine)). Taipei.