

**Course Title:****The Avant-gardes as Anti-Culture: A History of “Radicalism” and “Excess”****Course Description:**

This course examines the historical Avant-gardes’ aesthetic and ideological principles as expressions of a paradox-based mode of engagement with art and the world that has marked the last 100 years of theoretical, literary, and media production much more profoundly than generally acknowledged.

We start by examining Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Cubism, and Futurism through the lens of Deleuze’s definition of the paradox as not a contradiction but an enactment of the “genesis of the contradiction” – therefore, as an attack on disjunctive/ oppositional/ hierarchy-based modes of thinking and acting. We then discuss a number of philosophical and theoretical texts fundamentally wired into the logic of the historical Avant-gardes’ aesthetics and ideologies (by Deleuze and Guattari, Lacan, Hardt and Negri, Nail, and others). Finally, we examine a selection of contemporary plays, films, comedy shows, and other media products whose visual and linguistic components rely heavily on Avant-garde techniques and whose mass appeal may seem difficult to explain given their level of sophistication.

The historical Avant-gardes have been discussed in theory and criticism primarily as aesthetic and ideological modes predicated on rejection and negation, with the implication that these aspects preclude productivity and positivity. The notion of the ethical weight of the Avant-gardes’ attacks on an artistic tradition that had failed to resist the criminal march of history started to gain prominence in theory and criticism only towards the end of the twentieth century – and acknowledgements of the *constructive* aspects of a great number of historical Avant-garde works took even longer to emerge. (Voices like Adorno’s or Deleuze and Guattari’s remained fairly isolated, from this point of view, for decades.)

What I hope our class discussions can help us uncover is twofold: first, that there are intense forms of affirmation and joy in the Avant-gardes’ artistic and theoretical output, though they may emerge from unexpected places and take radically new forms; and second, that rejection and negation themselves can legitimately be described as “negative categories” only within a disjunctive/ oppositional/ hierarchy-based regime that values and rewards psychosexual, social, and economic acquiescence and full participation in processes of production that ensure systemic conservation.

It is, perhaps, the presence of these anomalous (non-hierarchical and antinormative) components behind every noisy, flamboyant Avant-garde negation that resonates so deeply with contemporary creators and consumers as they navigate a reality of increasing income inequality and digital control.

**Course Learning Outcomes:**

Successful students who complete the course will be able to:

- Recall the main aesthetic and ideological tenets of early twentieth-century Avant-garde movements such as Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Cubism, and Futurism;

- Analyze the impact of early twentieth-century Avant-garde movements on later developments in theory and criticism, as well as in the arts;
- Evaluate the aesthetic and ideological principles, as well as the cultural aims associated with the presence of Expressionist, Dadaist, Surrealist, Cubist, and Futurist elements in contemporary literary and media products;
- Develop skills for presenting academic material orally and debating on various academic topics in a seminar context;
- Expand skills for effective critical analysis and textual interpretation;
- Expand skills for writing logically organized and clearly argued essays on literary and theoretical topics;
- Expand research and documentation skills.

### **Readings:**

All the readings will be made available online OR included in a course reader.

### **Method of Evaluation & Marks Distribution:**

**Short Essay (20%):** A formal academic analysis of an Avant-garde (literary or visual) text discussed in our course in terms of its aesthetic and ideological underpinnings.

**Seminar Presentation (30%):** A 15-minute oral presentation on a theoretical topic covered in our course, followed by a 15-minute question period (the presenter will have to respond to questions/ comments from classmates & the professor). Seminar presentations can be scheduled, in consultation with me, on any week starting with Week 2. There can be no more than two presentations per week, so you should select your presentation date early.

**Research Essay (40%):** A formal research essay that engages critically with several relevant research sources in order to offer an original contribution to a theoretical/ critical debate related to one of our course topics.

**Participation** in class discussions (10%).

**A detailed description of the essays and the seminar presentation will be offered at the start of the term.**

### **Late Submissions:**

Essays are due on the day specified in the syllabus distributed in Week 1 (paper copy submitted in class & electronic copy submitted online).

Late essays will incur penalties of 5% per day (including weekends). Essays submitted more than 7 days late will receive a grade of 0 (zero).

If you need extra time on an essay for medical reasons/ on compassionate grounds, please submit a letter from a physician or from an academic counsellor of your home faculty documenting your situation.

### **Weekly Schedule:**

This is a tentative list of topics & readings. You will receive an **updated version** in **Week 1**. All the readings will be made available online OR included in a course reader.

### **Week 1: The Historical Avant-gardes as “Anti-Culture”**

“I am afraid we are not getting rid of God because we still believe in grammar.”

(Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols*, 19 iii.5)

**Introductory lecture** on Expressionism, Dada, Surrealism, Cubism, and Futurism.

**Class discussion** of one painting in each style.

**Brief introduction** to some major critical theorizations of Avant-garde art (Poggioli, Bürger, Calinescu, Innes, Deleuze and Guattari).

**Brief introduction** to Deleuze and Guattari’s work with the figure of the paradox.

**In-class reading and discussion:** Artaud, *Spurt of Blood* (short play – photocopies provided in class).

### **Week 2: The Paradox and the Socio-Historical Machine**

“Carroll, yes; Camus, no.” (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 71)

“New theologians of a misty sky (the sky of Koenigsberg) and new humanists of the caverns sprang upon the stage in the name of the God-man or the Man-god as the secret of sense. Sometimes it was difficult to distinguish between them.” (Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*, 71)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Artaud, *The Theatre and Its Double*; Camus, *The Myth of Sisyphus*; Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*; Deleuze & Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus*.

-Selection of short Dada and surrealist texts TBA.

**Lecture and discussion:** the figure of the paradox, black humour, machines, anti-production, and “microfascisms.” **Analysis** of the Avant-garde texts assigned as paradox-based engagements with art and the world.

### **Week 3: Intensity, Possession, and Confinement: Expressionist Desires and Fears**

“Yes, all my life I have gone in terror of festered wounds, I who never festered, I was so acid.” (Beckett, *Molloy*, 36)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Lacan, *Anxiety* (Seminar X) and *Encore: On Feminine Sexuality* (Seminar XX); Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*

-Rachilde, *The Crystal Spider* (short play)

**Viewings (in class):** Short clips from *The Cabinet of Doctor Caligari* (Wiene, 1920).

**Lecture and discussion:** Expressionist aesthetic and ideological principles related to sexuality, urban life, technological progress, socio-cultural indoctrination, and dreams.

### **Week 4: Cultural Debugging and Non-Linear Meaning-Formation: Dada**

“Reader, debug your brain!” (Voronca, “Aviograma,” in Kuenzli, *Dada: Themes and Movements*, 13)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Bergson, *On Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*; Forcer, *Dada as Text, Thought, and Theory*; Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense* and *Difference and Repetition*  
-Selection of short Dada texts TBA

**Lecture and discussion:** Dada narrative randomization, character deconstruction, iconoclasm, humour, “the Dada event,” and the Dada conceptualization of the relationship between art and reality (“realistic” vs. “real”).

### **Week 5: Surrealist Excess**

Pataphysics: “the science of that which is superinduced upon metaphysics, whether within or beyond the latter’s limitations, extending as far beyond metaphysics as the latter extends beyond physics” (Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*, 21).

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Jarry, *Exploits and Opinions of Dr. Faustroll, Pataphysician*  
-Breton, *Surrealist Manifesto* 1, 2  
-Ragland, “Dreams According to Lacan’s Reinterpretation of the Freudian Unconscious”  
-Selection of short Surrealist texts TBA

#### **Viewings:**

-Fragments from *An Andalusian Dog* (Buñuel and Dalí, 1929)

**Lecture and discussion:** Surrealist humour, approach to dreams, “dream logic,” compositional randomization, take on technology, and view on the modern metropolis.

### **Week 6: Shapes and Projections: Cubist Geometry and Futurist Hyperbole**

“Time and space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute, because we have already created eternal, omnipresent speed.” (Marinetti, “The Manifesto of Futurism,” 52)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Gleizes and Metzinger, *On Cubism*; Apollinaire, *Cubist Painters*; Perloff, *The Futurist Movement: Avant-garde, Avant-guerre, and the Language of Rupture*; Cottingham, *Cubism and Its Histories*.  
-Marinetti, “The Manifesto of Futurism”

**Lecture and discussion:** Cubist and Futurist aesthetic and ideological principles; Cubist and Futurist visual art works.

#### **Short Essay Due.**

### **Week 7: Postwar Meaning-Making I: Political Commitment**

“‘When I use a word,’ Humpty Dumpty said in rather a scornful tone, ‘it means just what I choose it to mean—neither more nor less.’

‘The question is,’ said Alice, ‘whether you *can* make words mean so many different things.’

‘The question is,’ said Humpty Dumpty, ‘which is to be master.’” (Carroll, *Through the Looking Glass*, 190).

#### **Readings:**

-Adorno, “Trying to Understand *Endgame*” and “Commitment”

-Fragments from Blau, *Reality Principles: From the Absurd to the Virtual*; Bradley, *Brecht and Political Theatre*

-Fragments from Beckett, *Waiting for Godot*; Brecht, *The Caucasian Chalk Circle* (dramas)

**Lecture and discussion** on the competing notions of ethical representation and political commitment that emerged during and after WWII. (One major theoretical and aesthetic direction relates explicitly to the Dada and Surrealist movements.)

### **Week 8: Postwar Meaning-Making II: Is Someone/ Anyone Watching?**

“The master in any case: we don’t intend (listen to them hedging), we don’t intend (unless absolutely driven to it) to make the mistake of inquiring into him. He’d turn out to be a mere high official, we’d end up by needing God. (We have lost all sense of decency admittedly, but there are still certain depths we prefer not to sink to.) Let us keep to the family circle, it’s more intimate. We all know one another now, no surprises to be feared. The will has been opened: nothing for anybody.” (Beckett, *The Unnamable, Three Novels* 374-75)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments on humour and irony from Deleuze, *The Logic of Sense*; Lacan, *The Formations of the Unconscious* (Seminar V); Critchley, *Very Little, Almost Nothing: Death, Philosophy, Literature* and *Infinitely Demanding: Ethics of Commitment, Politics of Resistance*.

-Fragments from Franklin, *Control: Digitality as Cultural Logic*

-Fragment from Sartre, *No Exit*; Beckett, *Play* (dramas)

**Lecture and discussion:** conceptualizations of authority, responsibility, and surveillance emerging during and after WWII.

### **Week 9: Deepening Generational Divides: Avant-garde “Radicalisms” Gaining Ground**

“[T] smell of smoke was where we were burning the grass that wouldn’t serve.”  
(Churchill, *Far Away*)

#### **Readings:**

-Two 2019 Pew Research Centre studies on generational differences and consolidating trends.

-Churchill, *Far Away* (short drama)

**Lecture and discussion:** Expressionist, Dadaist, and Surrealist elements in the play; discussion of correlations between Avant-garde ideological principles and the dominant socio-cultural values defining generations X, Y (“millennials”), and Z.

### **Week 10: Avant-garde Contestations of Gender and Race as Repression Machines**

“Why does everyone think that white artists make art and black artists make statements? Why doesn’t anyone ever ask me about *form*?” (Parks, interview)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Memmi, *Dominated Man*; Martinot, *The Machinery of Whiteness: Studies in the Structure of Racialization*; Lakoff, *Women, Fire, and Dangerous Things: What Categories Reveal about the Mind*.

-Fragments from Genet, *The Blacks* and Parks, *The America Play* (dramas)

**Lecture and discussion:** Genet and Parks’ use of Dada and Surrealist techniques to enact a radical decomposition of cultural notions of history, race, and gender; correlations between

Dadaist/ surrealist attempts to destabilize meaning and contemporary criticisms of the inscription of systemic racism and heteronormativity into language.

### **Week 11: Against Propaganda: Avant-garde Strategies of Resistance**

“Bus bench for humans only. Report non-humans. Beware: Non-human secretions may corrode metal!” (Sign on bus bench in *District 9*)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Herman & Chomsky, *Manufacturing Consent: The Political Economy of the Mass Media*; MacLeod, *Still Manufacturing Consent: Propaganda in the Information Age*.

**Viewings:** doctored videos recently discussed in the news; short fragment from *District 9* (Blomkamp, 2009).

**Lecture and discussion:** the Avant-gardes’ questioning of “photographic” representation and its relevance for contemporary debates surrounding “fake news.”

### **Week 12: Conclusion: Avant-garde “Radicalism” and “Excess” Today – Part I**

“Americans for a Better Tomorrow, Tomorrow” (The name of Stephen Colbert’s officially registered SuperPAC, 2012)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments on the revolutionary potential of the “multitude” from Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, *Multitude*, and *Commonwealth*

-Fragments from Nail, *Returning to Revolution: Deleuze, Guattari, and Zapatismo*.

-Franklin, “Notes on Digital Community and Revolution”

**Lecture and discussion** covering the readings listed; discussion of Avant-garde ideological principles in relation to contemporary notions of “revolution.”

### **Week 13: Conclusion: Avant-garde “Radicalism” and “Excess” Today – Part II**

“Lady garden. Hoo hoo. Hee hee. Haha. Department of the interior. She who shall not be named. The place where I keep my keys. The chamber of secrets. The envelope, please. FernGully. The canyon of heroes. The arc of the covenant. The velour Bouncy Castle. Mrs. Bojangles. The Hurt Locker. Tavern on the Green. Sam’s Club.” (Sam Bee, list of her nicknames for “vagina,” interview on *The Late Show with Stephen Colbert*, February 2016)

#### **Readings:**

-Fragments from Herman, *Story Logic: Problems and Possibilities of Narrative*

-Amin, “Can the Left Win YouTube?”

**Viewings:** Short clips from comedy shows and YouTube clips.

**Lecture and Discussion:** Avant-garde aesthetic and ideological elements in left-wing comedy shows and social media activism; cognitive “frames,” “scripts,” and “schemata” in relation to comprehensibility vs. indoctrination.

**Research Essay Due Date: TBA.**