

THE AVANT-GARDE AND THE CHALLENGES OF RESISTING PAROCHIALISM

My understanding of the avant-garde—and the state of avant-garde studies—was cast in stark relief by the social, political, military, and legal events that coincided with the period during which I was revising the manuscript of my first book. What those events were is no surprise: 9/11 and its various aftermaths. Many of this journal's readers have experienced a similar shift in perspective on their work—be it ethical, epistemological, or archival—leading them to reassess both their scholarly subjects and their methods in the face of what may well be a profound reconfiguration of power and knowledge.

The book on which I was working, *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism*, was the result of a decade I'd spent intensely studying the theatrical, performance, visual-artistic, and cultural avant-gardes as well as their relationships to the institutions and methodologies of academic historiography, theory, and criticism.¹ The central concern of that book—the limits of understanding and critique in the face of movements moving in conscious assessment of those limits—took on a new edge at that moment. I realized, after the initial shock of the violence had passed, that avant-garde studies was something not about the past—nor only about art—but about persistent political, social, and economic conditions that both demand and enable “minoritarian”² and elite modes of cultural activism like al-Qaeda. That realization has led me, ultimately, to demote most of the vocabulary of avant-garde studies—specifically, the romantic vocabulary of “transgression,” “originality,” “authenticity,” “innovation,” and the like—as too bound to Euro-American ideas of modernity, too wrapped up in the internal struggles of Europe and the United States, ultimately too little informed by sociology, for example, too little aware of the global movements of people, things, and ideas. As James Clifford, Ella Habiba Shohat, Robert Stam, Guido A. Podestá, Michael Richardson, and others have

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shown, we need to stop fetishizing a certain symbolism, a certain dada, a certain futurism and surrealism. The commonalities to be found among avant-gardes don't just concern modernity or internal developments in the West—and don't always concern art, either.³

However, I'm putting the cart before the horse and should get back to 9/11. While the towers burned, I couldn't help but feel that I knew exactly what was happening. This was a vanguard insurgency, plain and simple, and the attack on the Trade Towers was an act that intertwined the symbolic, the performative, the economic-infrastructure, and the ethical in a style seemingly straight from the rule books of symbolism, dada, surrealism, or futurism. But with that feeling of absolute familiarity came another, a feeling of just-as-absolute ignorance. September 11 was, in sum, a classically “uncanny” experience, very much like what Sigmund Freud described a century or so ago: a cultural event “dating back to a very early mental stage, long since surmounted—a stage, incidentally, at which it wore a more friendly aspect. . . . [whereas now it has] become a thing of terror, just as, after the collapse of their religion, the gods turned into demons.”⁴

That sense of the uncanny intensified when I looked more closely at two groups that had played key roles in the events. Though it was clear from the start that al-Qaeda was a conspiratorial organization not unlike those at work before and after the French Revolution (for example, the “Conspiracy of Equals”), I didn't realize how explicitly vanguardist it was until I read the translation of a video statement released by Osama bin Laden that praised the nineteen hijackers as “a group of vanguard Muslims, the forefront of Islam.”⁵ I initially disregarded the reference to “vanguard” as most likely a cavalier translation; however, after reading Paul F. Berman's 2003 feature article in the *New York Times Magazine* on the radical Egyptian theologian Sayyid Qutb, I began to suspect that the translation had been right on target.⁶ After contacting Berman and following up with the writings of Gilles Keppel, Adnan Musallam, and others, this suspicion was confirmed.⁷ More than just an *à propos* translation, the term *taliah* was the telltale of a relationship between Islam and the avant-garde that is long-lived, complex, and virtually unremarked by critics and historians of the avant-garde.

The history of Islamic vanguardism opens a new reading of avant-garde history, a reading that overturns two old saws: first, that the avant-garde is a European invention; second, that it is a creature of modernity. On the contrary, the avant-garde may be an invention of “premodern” Arabs, an invention upon which various myths and conventions of European origin have been imposed. For Qutb and bin Laden, the originary myth is Muhammad and his Companions. In flight from Mecca, the Prophet and his small band of followers carried with them a strong sense of cultural identity, an equally strong sense of minority status, and an effective guerrilla strategy. As anyone who has read the Romantics knows, Islam was a constant theme for disaffected, aesthetically inclined youths in Europe. This mythic Arab vanguard opened crucial imaginative, spiritual, and racial dimensions for French and British Romantics who found insufficient the technocratic model of the avant-garde propounded by Henri de Saint-Simon and the young technocrats at the *École Polytechnique* during the 1810s and 1820s.

Fortunately, I am not alone in seeking a more holistic sense of the vanguard tendency, including a bit more self-consciousness about acts of critical and scholarly “looking.” In addition to those I’ve already mentioned, I would count the contributors to the Summer 1999 issue of the *Stanford Humanities Review*, edited by Joy Conlon and Esther Gabara; the new University of Michigan Press anthology edited by James Harding and John Rouse; a special double issue that I edited for the journal *Works & Days* (2002), which discusses the relationship of global radicalism and translation in the 1960s; Anna Balakian’s inspired 1984 compilation *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages*; and Duane J. Corpis and Ian Fletcher’s recent special issue of *Radical History Review*, devoted to transnational movements of the past century.⁸ These critical interventions fully embody Marvin Carlson’s call, two years ago in the pages of this journal (*TS* 45.2: 177–80), for us to “Become Less Provincial” in all that we do. Speaking specifically to the theatre arts, Carlson concludes, “There is . . . a sense in which all theatre is local; but in an increasingly interconnected world, neither theatre nor politics can be viewed as only local without a serious distortion and misunderstanding of each. Local and regional concerns have not ceased to exist, but in the new millennium they seem inevitably to be more and more imbricated with the international and indeed the global” (180).

The attentive reader will note that theatre hasn’t played much of a role in this essay, local, global, or otherwise. And this relates to the nub of my concern: I wonder whether, in fact, there is a parochialism in play in our disciplines that even Carlson hasn’t called out. Consider another avant-garde group that played a significant role in 9/11. Around the same time that bin Laden’s statement appeared, an Associated Press photograph depicted a U.S. special forces soldier, bearded and flecked with horse sweat, playing a wicked game of Buzkashi—a kind of horseback tug-of-war with a beheaded carcass of a calf or young goat as the object of the tug—with the fierce inhabitants of northern Afghanistan.⁹ Those macho U.S. soldiers have been correctly credited with swaying a key group of Afghans against the Taliban administration and did so, in part, by knowing how to interface perfectly with the culture of a key strategic population. In this sense, they were playing one of the oldest roles in avant-garde history: the forefront of an army, the van.

I’ve been studying special forces since then and have been struck by three things. First, there has been almost no consideration of military culture in the humanities, even less in theatre and performance studies (as John Rogers Harris has pointed out to me). So, while there has been much work on the response of *artists* to war and to the militarization of society, the cultural productions of the military itself, particularly those cadres that self-consciously shoulder the burden of vanguard action, remain largely a kind of terra incognita for the humanities and social sciences. Second, I’ve discovered that those same military vanguards are quite aware of what we’re doing. A draft revision of the U.S. Marine Corps’s *Small War Manual*, posted online in 2005 but no longer available to the general public, explicitly calls for the use of cultural studies in the preparation of counterinsurgency strategy. Its description of the ideal counterinsurgency soldier

reads like the ideal undergraduate as described in university and departmental mission statements: flexibly thoughtful, creatively critical, culturally aware.¹⁰ The third surprise comes from Dana Priest in her book *The Mission*, where she demonstrates that, beginning in the early 1990s,

[t]he military simply filled a vacuum left by an indecisive White House, an atrophied State Department, and a distracted Congress. After September 11, however, the trend accelerated dramatically with the war in Afghanistan and the likelihood of U.S. military operations elsewhere. Without a doubt, U.S.-sponsored political reform abroad is being eclipsed by new military pacts focusing on anti-terrorism and intelligence-sharing.¹¹

U.S. special forces—a minority within the military, one noted for its unique, cloistered culture—has played a central role in pacts forged in the loopholes of political, economic, and military treaties and the grim camaraderie of military advise-and-train environments.

The point here is this: Carlson's call for less parochialism is one I second wholeheartedly; but parochialism isn't just a matter of geographical reach and cultural literacy—it's also a matter of academic discipline and institutional insularity. September 11 has convinced me that the current state of avant-garde studies, particularly in theatre, drama, and performance circles, is profoundly constrained in its scope because it is essentially belletristic even at its most politically engaged, and generally lacks a systematic sense of the relationship between its object of study and its own disciplinary and institutional position. The need for interdisciplinary approaches to the avant-garde has never been more necessary than now.

I am not implying that the methodologies of theatre, drama, and performance studies are illegitimate or relevant only to a little corner of avant-garde studies. In fact, quite the contrary. Nor do I think that those discourses offer a magic solution to the structural problems of liberal democracy in an age of terror. I note, too, that I don't feel particularly sanguine about getting involved with federal and military authorities in their new cultural studies project. I'm thinking of something a bit more humble, something that acknowledges both the limits and possibilities of the discourses of theatre, drama, and performance studies.

In my current research, I emphasize breadth. A chapter on war is taking me from the familiar European precincts of *dadas* and futurists, to the attempted putsch of French military commanders commanding the Algerian counterinsurgency in the late 1950s, to Friedrich Hayek, to surrealist defeatism, to the remarkable theory of culture and armed revolution posed by Amílcar Cabral. The problem with this expansively interdisciplinary, international, intercultural approach is that it can tend toward uncritical kinds of collage. To be sure, these are all avant-garde according to my working definition: minoritarian/elite, nonparliamentary movements that instrumentalize culture for social and political ends, most generally in response to the insufficiency of political processes available to them. But so what? Just because I've recognized that there

is more in the world than allowed by our philosophies does not mean that anything significant has happened to those philosophies.

I can't help needing some principle, some theoretical or narrative line, some methodological consistency that can afford commonality, a kind of functional unity to the diversity of activist tendencies that I'm studying. But I'm enough of a postmodernist not to attempt any kind of "grand narrative" to tie it all together. Rather, I'm trying to describe common features in the midst of an expansive diversity of objects of inquiry. Claude Lévi-Strauss provides a useful metaphor for what I'm attempting: "However it is approached, it spreads out like a nebula, without ever bringing together in any lasting or systematic way the sum total of the elements from which it blindly derives its substance;" yet "as the nebula gradually spreads, its nucleus condenses and becomes more organized. Loose threads join up with one another, gaps are closed, connections are established, and something resembling order is seen emerging from chaos."¹²

And this is where theatre, drama, and performance studies come into play. The connections that I'm trying to establish—the condensation in the nebula—while taking me far beyond the things that we might typically consider theatre, drama, or performance, are very much informed by the concerns and methods of theatre, drama, and performance studies. In fact, avant-garde studies is best served by the methods and concerns familiar to readers of *Theatre Survey*. How, for example, does such-and-such an organization or movement manifest in space and time the theoretical and narrative constructs of its theory? How does such-and-such a community take a sociocultural event and transform it into a moment in a drama of self-empowerment? How does this-or-that individual produce the illusion of essence out of a congeries of twice-performed behaviors—or vice versa? And how do all of these negotiate the legalized and/or naturalized boundaries that determine their "politics" as a visible, audible force in our world? These are questions well-suited to the readers of this journal.

There is a lot of vanguardism in the world right now—and a lot that went on in the past that we've yet to consider adequately. In this respect, I'd like to see us abandon one last outpost of parochialism in avant-garde studies: ideological parochialism. For example, I find myself consistently amazed by the apt and conscious use of vanguardist strategy by evangelical Christians in the United States, especially after they became bedfellows of neoconservatives. There are any number of right-wing (not to mention extremist left-wing) vanguards that have enabled horror through extraparliamentary cultural activism. Theatre, drama, and performance studies can help us to understand better the limits of democratic process and how these limits provide and provoke opportunities for political change outside the institutions and discourses of democratic reform. Likewise, a theory and history of vanguardism informed by theatre, drama, and performance can assist those who have been minoritized and marginalized by liberal democracy in conceiving and implementing strategies that expand the scope of justice and communication. And such a theory and history can help us conceive of or criticize strategies for defeating those avant-gardes that are seeking to impose injustice and silence by refusing democratic process and community standards. There is no doubt that our world has been shaped by

avant-gardes and is being shaped by them right now. The goal here is to know both how an illusion can be dispelled and how it can be made to appear so real that it suggests an essential, ineradicable identity. What more important tool can vanguards, their scholars, and their critics have at their disposal?

ENDNOTES

1. See my *Avant-Garde Performance and the Limits of Criticism: Approaching the Living Theatre, Happenings/Fluxus, and the Black Arts Movement* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2005).
2. "Minoritarian" is a word intended to describe social formations that are minoritized, either by force or by choice, and that premise their aesthetic, cultural, and political work in a positive and empowered understanding of that minority status.
3. Clifford, "On Ethnographic Surrealism," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23.4 (October 1981): 539–64; Shohat and Stam, *Unthinking Eurocentrism: Multiculturalism and the Media* (New York and London: Routledge, 1994); Podestá, "An Ethnographic Reproach to the Theory of the Avant-Garde: Modernity and Modernism in Latin America and the Harlem Renaissance," *MLN* 106.2 (March 1991): 395–422; Richardson, Introduction to *Refusal of the Shadow: Surrealism and the Caribbean*, ed. Richardson; trans. Richardson and Krzysztof Fijałkowski (London and New York: Verso, 1996): 1–33.
4. Freud, "The Uncanny," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works*, ed. and trans. James Strachey, 24 vols. (London: Hogarth Press, 1955), 17: 236.
5. "Bin Laden's Statement: 'The Sword Fell,'" *New York Times*, 8 October 2001, A1. The speech is online at www.pbs.org/newshour/terrorism/international/binladen_10-7.html.
6. Berman, "The Philosopher of Islamic Terrorism," *New York Times Magazine*, 23 March 2003, 24–9, 56, 59, 65–7.
7. Kepel, *Jihad: The Trial of Political Islam*, trans. Anthony F. Roberts (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2002); Musallam, "Sayyid Qutb's View of Islam, Society, and Militancy," *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Societies* 22.1 (Fall 1998): 64–87.
8. Conlon and Gabara, eds., "Movements of the Avant-Garde," special issue of *Stanford Humanities Review*: 7.1 (Summer 1999); Harding and Rouse, eds., *Not the Other Avant-Garde: The Transnational Foundations of Avant-Garde Performance* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2006); Sell, ed., "Vectors of the Radical: Global Consciousness, Textual Exchange, and the 1960s," double issue of *Works & Days* 39–40 (20.1-2) (Spring–Fall 2002); Balakian, ed., *The Symbolist Movement in the Literature of European Languages* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1982); Corpis and Fletcher, eds., "Another World Was Possible: A Century of Movements," special issue of *Radical History Review* 92 (Fall 2005).
9. Associated Press photograph, 18 December 2001; accessed online (1 July 2006) at both [www.afghan-network.net/Culture/buzkashi.html] and [newafghanistan.tripod.com/Customes.htm].
10. U.S. Marine Corps, *Small Wars Manual*, draft rev. ed., [<http://www.smallwars.quantico.usmc.mil/index.asp>] (accessed 20 February 2005).
11. Priest, *The Mission: Waging War and Keeping Peace with America's Military* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2003), 14.
12. Lévi-Strauss, *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. John and Doreen Wightman (New York: Harper & Row, 1969), 2–3.