

DECIPHERING THE CONCEPT OF AVANT-GARDE (IN ART AND ARCHITECTURE)

Gökçeçişek SAVAŞIR*

ABSTRACT

This study is an attempt to draw a conceptual framework, constructed through the etymological elaboration of avant-garde. It is not only an attempt to unfold a map for understanding this concept in art and architecture, but also to open out 'a general space of knowledge' on architectural avant-garde that can also open a space for different possible interpretations. Grounded on the existing knowledge derived from architectural theory, history and criticism, this study deciphers and conceptualizes avant-garde to accommodate novel perspectives in art and architecture. Based on deciphering and destructing a concept, the methodology in this study merely introduces archaeology of avant-garde as a word.

Keywords: Avant-garde, Conceptualization, Etymology of avant-garde, Taxonomy, Avant-garde in architecture

1. INTRODUCTION

Good afternoon dear guests and speakers! Here, we get together as a part of the International E-Congress of Architecture and Planning with a specialized topic on 'Space & Process'. Within the program of this congress, our session is defined with the theme 'Architectural/Urban Design, Art and Aesthetics', which pinpoints four umbrella concepts that cover vast areas of studies within four disciplines. The difficulty of thinking within the framework of these concepts that delineate this session creates both a challenge and an opportunity for laying a common ground for these four presentations focusing on different topics. I see these concepts as common denominators of the session theme and papers. I believe that focusing on the concept of the avant-garde will open up a different dimension for relating the session and the presentations. Although I have been always inclined to think through concepts as a form of understanding and interpretation, I had the chance to dwell more systematically on the concept of avant-garde in my PhD dissertation with the title "Re-thinking the Limits of Architecture through the Avant-Garde Formations during the 1960s: Projections and Receptions in the Context of Turkey" (Savaşır, 2008).

* Assoc. Prof. Dr., Dokuz Eylül University, Department of Architecture, İzmir, Turkey, gsavasir@gmail.com

Accordingly, I will introduce you a conceptual framework with a title 'Deciphering the Concept of Avant-Garde (in Art and Architecture)', that focuses briefly on the etymological dimension of the concept of avant-garde. Yet, I should note that different dimensions of this concept could also be elaborated through this framework: For instance, some of the avant-garde subjects and their productions could be inquired in more detail. The possibilities could be increased by focusing independently on the discursive or physical production of these subjects, their reception of it and attributions by different subjects. This framework could also be appropriated for reflecting on different topics, periods or geographies.

Throughout history, some subjects and their productions have become activators of architecture and art, or transformed the boundaries of discipline. The architectural production of each period refers to its preceding for following or seeking the traces. In the art and architecture of the 20th century, we can figure out certain similarities and continuities by dominant tendencies, discourses and practices. Within these continuities, certain interruptions, ruptures and accompanying paradigm shifts can also be detected. For instance, bifurcations, ruptures, dispersions in the main route, or the leaps in the continuity of social, economic, political and cultural fields converged especially in the 1920s period, which is mostly called as 'historical avant-gardes' within the fields of art and architecture.

Here, I should note that this attempt does to seek the truest definition of avant-garde; nor inquires to reflect the surface appearance of avant-garde in art and architecture. Contrarily, I intend to draw a conceptual framework, constructed throughout the etymological elaboration. Therefore, this study is not only an attempt to unfold a map for understanding the concept of avant-garde in art and architecture; but also to open out 'a general space of knowledge' on architectural avant-garde that could lay a ground for different possible interpretations. I believe that such a conceptualization, grounded on the existing knowledge derived from architectural theory, history and criticism, could help to accommodate new perspectives. The methodology I propose is based on deciphering and destructing a concept, or dealing with an archaeology of a concept, in Foucaultian sense. However, in this presentation, I will very briefly reflect on this conceptualization that merely introduce archaeology of avant-garde as a word.

2. ETYMOLOGICAL ELABORATION OF AVANT-GARDE

In order to comprehend and unfold 'avant-garde', etymological elaboration of the word would be helpful. Etymologically, the word 'avant-garde' has its roots in the French word 'vanguard' dating back to the fifteenth-century, as an advance group in military or forefront of any field. The word 'avant-garde' refers to "1. (n.) the advance group in a field, especially in the arts, whose works are unorthodox

and experimental; 2. (adj.) characteristic of or belonging to the avant-garde" (Oxford Lexico, 2008a). 'Vanguard', on the other hand, refers to "1. the front part of an advancing army; 2. the forefront in any movement or field; 3. the leaders of any intellectual or political movement" (Oxford Lexico, 2008b). Matei Călinescu gives a full reference to the origins of avant-garde as follows:

The word 'avant-garde' (fore-guard) has an old history in French. As a term of warfare it dates back to the Middle Ages, and it developed a figurative meaning at least as early as the Renaissance. However, the metaphor of the avant-garde - expressing a self-consciously advanced position in politics, literature, art, and religion, etc. - was not employed with any consistency before the nineteenth century. Among other things, this fact accounts for the indelibly modern appearance of the label 'avant-garde' (Călinescu, 1987, p. 97).

Similar to Călinescu, Hilde Heynen accentuates the etymological origins of avant-garde pointing out as "the word has been used from the nineteenth-century onwards to refer to progressive political and artistic movements, which considered themselves to be ahead of their time. The avant-garde radicalizes the basic principle of modernity: the urge towards continual change and development, the rejection of the old and the longing for what is new" (Heynen, 1999, p. 129).

Through the lexical inquiry, it is clear that dictionary definitions of avant-garde point out two functions of meaning accorded to the word: 'Avant-garde as an adjective' and 'avant-garde as a noun'. The former refers to "of, relating to, or being part of an innovative group, especially one in the arts" (Harcourt, 2020). The latter indicates that "a group active in the invention and application of new techniques in a given field, especially in the arts" (Harcourt, 2020). The adjective 'avant-garde' is used as a synonym for "unconventional, having synonyms of beat, experimental, far out, far-out, head, hep, hip, innovative, lead, leading edge, liberal, new, new waves, pioneering, progressive, radical, state-of-the-art, vanguard, way-out". Moreover, the noun 'avant-garde' is given as synonyms of "advanced, camp, exotic, imaginative, innovative, intellectual, inventive, liberal, modern, novel, odd, original, pioneer, progressive, radical, singular, underground, unconventional, and up-to-date" (Dictionary.com, LLC., 2020). The 'avant-garde' is used as a synonym for many words in its adjective and noun form.

On the way to decipher the word within architectural discourse, some synonyms appeared as the foremost and these synonyms are grouped into four: If 'avant-garde' is taken as an adjective, these synonyms are grouped as 'radical', 'new', 'experimental' and 'unique'. On the contrary, the word, in its noun form, brings forth 'radical', 'innovator', 'pioneer', and 'unusual' for discussion (Table 1). This taxonomy is derived from dictionary definitions of the word and its synonyms,

namely 'radical', 'new', 'experimental', 'unique', 'innovator', 'pioneer', and 'unusual' are brought forth for its conceptualization.

Table 1. The taxonomy of synonyms and antonyms of 'avant-garde' - within art and architecture

A. 'avant-garde' as an adjective			
Radical	New	Experimental	Unique
Irreconcilable	Fluent	Exploratory	Odd
Marginal	Ephemeral	Trailblazing	Unusual
Heterodox	Transitory	Ahead	Alluring
Destructive-Creative	Novel	Advanced	Exotic
Revolutionary	Innovating	Inventive	Mysterious
Promethean	Mysterious	Creative	Singular
Unconventional	Contemporary		Underground
Liberal	Original		Alternative
Provocative	Imaginative		Different
Cutting-Edge	Current		Unexpected
Extreme	Modern		
	Up-To-Date		
	innovating		
X	X	X	X
Conventional	Old	Conservative	Familiar
Mainstream	Obsolete		Ordinary
Orthodox			Mediocre
B. 'avant-garde' as a noun			
Radical	Innovator	Pioneer	Unusual
Revolutionary	Originator	Explorer	Alternative
Militant	Intellectual	Trailblazer	Underground
Provocative		Advance-Guard	Way-Out
		Vanguard	
		Forerunner	

It can boldly be stated that none of the mere definitions of avant-garde is enough to understand this 'umbrella word'. It conveys different connotations in different contexts. It refers to a number of synonyms and metonyms. By definition, the meanings attributed to avant-garde have been continuous and ever changing throughout its history. In spite of the dictionary definitions of the word, a number of connotations could help to conceptualize the meaning attributed to the word. Neither dictionary definitions, nor lexical inquiry is satisfactory to decipher avant-garde. Rather, for further elaborations, 'avant-garde' should be conceptualized in different aspects.

5. CONCLUSION

The fully loaded discourse on 'the Avant-Garde' reveals that avant-garde fluctuates between a set of meanings and labels, mainly between destruction of the institution of avant-gardism and reconstruction of the concept of avant-garde with respect to the contemporary situation, between modern and anti-modern, between experimentation and convention, and between estrangement and familiarization. It could be stated that the concepts of modern, modernism, and modernity have their own domains in various disciplines, and own autonomous realms within the theoretical studies on avant-garde. Hence, the relationships between these concepts are mostly comparative rather than inclusive. That is to say; avant-garde does not necessarily mean modern, or modernist, or does not necessarily refer to modernism; thus, it's better to understand a concept within its context.

The issue of deciphering avant-garde raised some statements as follows: Putting aside all the pre-established discourses on avant-garde laden with a number of statements, there is no unanimity on *the* definition of avant-garde. Therefore, the limits of avant-garde are *indefinite*. Describing, comprehending, defining, and delimiting the concept and phenomenon of avant-garde is a hard issue; so does constructing a theoretical framework. The boundaries of avant-garde are *ambiguous*. As a concept and phenomenon, it is 'evaporative', 'ever-changing', 'trans/forming', 'meta/morphosing', 'fluid', 'erratic', 'dynamic', and 'free-floating'. Even though it addresses a number of movements and subjects, with diverse position, strategy, ethos, technique, or vocabulary; they all have some attributions, which allow us to mark out avant-garde among the others. Indeed, avant-garde refers to a coherent group of creative-subjects and the characteristics of their productions through the dissociative and productive imperatives. Focusing on an etymological elaboration, this paper claims that the conceptualization of architectural avant-garde could be fourfold: *Avant-garde is characterized as a provocative search for the shock of new; a radical formation for the redefinition of*

artistic/architectural conventions; a courageous experiment utilizing new artistic/architectural tools and techniques; and a unique statement delineating the nature of art/architectural object. Having an inherent energy for transforming the pre-established aesthetical and social values, or political structures, avant-garde creates 'the new' with a social function, and constructs 'the new' for a revolutionary culture. Proposing a controversy or a critical stand, the medium for 'avant-garde' could be anything introducing a new thing, venturing an objection, or being appropriate for de-familiarization.

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