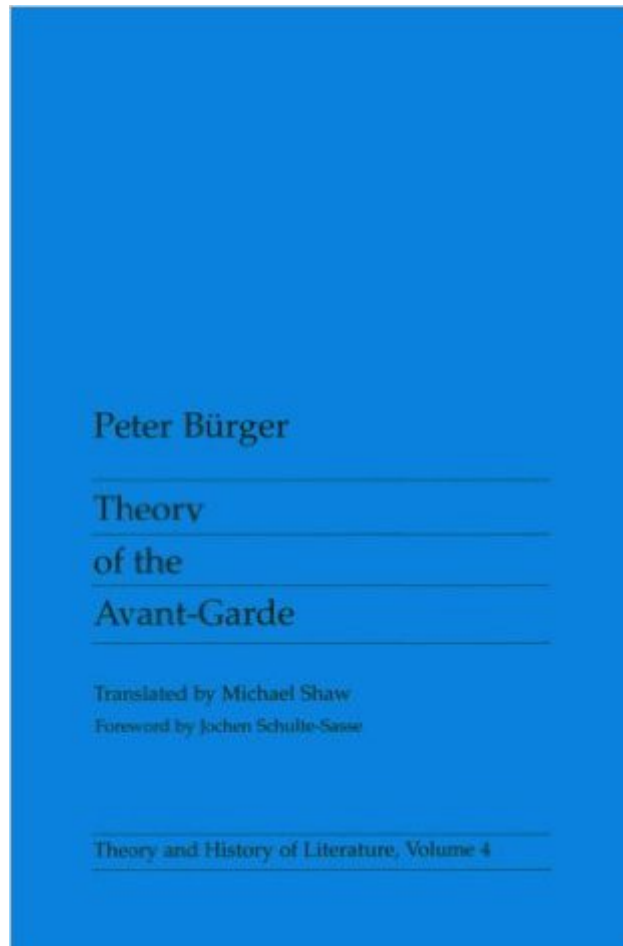


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Theory Of The Avant-Garde (Theory And History Of Literature)



Synopsis

Suggests a theory of art, tests against the French and German avant-garde movements of the twenties, and discusses hermeneutics, ideology, aesthetic categories, and the autonomy of art."

Book Information

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Customer Reviews

This book argues a clear difference between two often confused terms: Modernism and the Avant-Garde. According to Peter Burger, Modernism dealt with formal evolution of style (in visual arts as well as in literature), while the Avant-Garde project involved radical change of the way of life. Consequently, the greatest Modernist movements of the 20th century, according to Burger, must be Cubism and Abstractionism, as they were mainly about visual distortion, and the relevant masters were Picasso and Kandinsky. On the other hand, the Avant-Garde produced its own most ambitious projects with the Russian Constructivism and Surrealism, and its geniuses must be Tatlin, Rodchenko, or Marcel Duchamp. All this is argued quite intellegently; the only reason for my 4 stars instead of 5 being that Burger brings on too much polemics with Marxist or semi-Marxist theorists (Lukacs, Adorno, etc.) and his own view is sometimes hard to disentangle from what he criticizes.

Theory of the Avant-Garde is probably the best book on aesthetics I've ever read. Burger argues that aesthetic theory has previously neglected to deal with art as an institution in bourgeois society. Unlike medieval works, art under capitalism is relatively autonomous from various social institutions. While sacral art was integrated into the church, and courtly art into the court, art under capitalism

develops into its own sphere, to be judged exclusively by aesthetic criteria. At the same time, art is separate from the praxis of life; its value consists precisely in its ability to take one away from everyday experience. Drawing from Marcuse's classic essay "On the Affirmative Character of Culture," Burger argues that art's aesthetic unity combined with its autonomy from the praxis of life serve to negate the political engagement of any individual work. This palliative effect in turn exposes the partiality of autonomous art; its autonomy actually serves a deep structural function of a cultural anodyne. The avant-garde comes in as the first moment that artists became self-conscious of the effects of art's autonomy and sought to destroy it. Burger uses a Hegelian-Marxist framework (although he is sensitive to the Althusserian critique) to argue that the avant-garde constituted the moment of self-criticism of the institution of art which revealed the truth of the institution's past, just as Marx's self-criticism of bourgeois society produced historical materialism, making possible a generalized science of history. This summary only scratches the surface of Burger's 100 page essay. In developing this central argument, he has fascinating arguments regarding Benjamin, Adorno, Lukacs and Brecht, and thought-provoking readings of various avant-gardiste techniques. I'd venture to say there are few books triple the length of this one that contain the same amount of careful, creative, and exciting writing.

Burger's concise text on the theory of the avant-garde is a particularly lucid and well argued explication of the meaning and lasting significance of the avant-garde as movement, and it manages to develop a position in relation to the history of art in a very few strokes. Burger interrogates the rise of modernism and the increasing "autonomy" of the arts in the bourgeois era, and argues that the avant-garde was a critical response to art as an institution and its strictures. While the avant-garde was largely constituted by a false sublation of the autonomy thesis, it was successful in exposing the elements of artistic production that make up the art world as an institution. While the text is not without its problems, it is an excellent work of aesthetic theory, and among the best historical assessments of the avant-garde we have.

One of the pieces of the puzzle that completes the picture of what some call "modernism" or "avant-garde". Full of erudition and (at times difficult to follow) literary examples of both worlds, this book is to be included in anybody interested in the study of the aforementioned periods.

The theoretical proposal of Burger on the Avant-Garde has critical and reflective depth not only regarding the movement(s) as such but also regarding its historian and society as complex

multi-entity of discursive actors. Best thing on the subject in the academic book market.

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