

**“Authorship: Origin and Originality” at the *Writing Aesthetics* Conference
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Organised Panel Session: Originality and the Avant-Garde**

Abstract

My aim in this paper is to consider two related questions concerning the authorship of avant-garde literature. First, how should we understand the originality that is thought to be characteristic of the avant-garde? Second, how is avant-garde originality related to the notion of origin and, particularly, the notion of the author as origin?

In answer to the first question, I argue that originality cannot be treated as a criterion for avant-garde work. This is because originality is one criterion, within the institution of art, for identifying what constitutes art and for evaluating art, but Avant-garde work questions, modifies, rejects, changes and introduces (etc.) criteria for what constitutes art and for the evaluation of art. This means that Avant-garde work continuously alters our concept of originality as a criterion for identifying and evaluating art. Therefore, originality cannot be treated as a stable criterion for identifying or evaluating avant-garde work.

In answer to the second question, I argue that, despite the problematic notion of an origin that has resulted from certain views of avant-garde originality, it is nonetheless possible to see the author as the origin of avant-garde literature, and furthermore there are reasons why we would want to do so.

Introduction

My aim in this paper is to consider two related questions concerning the authorship of avant-garde literature. First, how should we understand the originality that is thought to be characteristic of the avant-garde? Second, how is avant-garde originality related to the notion of origin and, particularly, the notion of the author as origin?

My arguments are schematic and conceptual, rather than involving detailed discussion of illustrations of avant-garde literature. This is because my paper is in part a diagnosis of the frustrations I felt when trying to wrestle with the both the concept of originality and the concept of the avant-garde, frustrations resulting from divergent views about these topics that I encountered in the critical literature. My hope is that others who have suffered similar perplexity might share my impressions about why this issue is necessarily problematic and why it will continue to give rise to widely divergent views as

the debate continues.

To answer the first question, I will argue that originality cannot be treated as a criterion for avant-garde work. As a very brief overview, my main argument runs as follows:

- P1)** Originality is one criterion, within the institution of art, for identifying what constitutes art and for evaluating art.
- P2)** Avant-garde work questions, modifies, rejects, changes and introduces (etc.) criteria for what constitutes art and for the evaluation of art.
- P3)** Avant-garde work continuously alters our concept of originality as a criterion for identifying and evaluating art.
- C)** Therefore, originality cannot be treated as a stable criterion for identifying or evaluating avant-garde work.

To answer the second question, I will argue that, despite the problematic notion of an origin that has resulted from certain views of avant-garde originality, it is nonetheless possible to see the author as the origin of avant-garde literature, and furthermore there are reasons why we would want to do so.

1) How should we understand the originality that is thought to be characteristic of the avant-garde?

It might be helpful to distinguish two uses of the term 'avant-garde'. It is used as a historical label for certain art movements and artists, distinguished from other art movements by a positive manifesto of its aims, albeit that sometimes the aims are negative.ⁱ In this respect the avant-garde can be distinguished as an art movement separate from, for example, modernism. However, 'avant-garde' is also a term used for description and evaluation that can be applied to other art movements. In this respect it is possible to say that many modernist works are also avant-garde works. I am mainly interested in the avant-garde in the latter sense – as a descriptive or evaluative term. We can choose to say of any work that it is avant-garde even if the artist does not subscribe to the avant-garde movement in any positive sense. But what does it mean to say that a work is avant-garde? What do we look for to be able to judge that a work merits the description of avant-garde or can be

evaluated as avant-garde? One key notion that appears to be involved in distinguishing a work as avant-garde is the notion of originality. But what do we mean by original?

Further to some of the concluding points of Julia Jansen's paper, I suggest that 'originality' and its cognates, is a term that is criterial for answering the question "is this art?" and criterial for answering the question "is this good art?"ⁱⁱ Originality is not the sole criterion, it is one tool amongst many. I can justify my claim that a particular work is good art by pointing out that it is interesting, profound, emotive *and original* etc. and I can justify my claim that a particular work is poor art by pointing out that it is dull, shallow, unstimulating *and derivative*. This is my first premise: originality is one criterion, within the institution of art, for identifying what constitutes art and for evaluating art. What I will go on to claim is that originality can be used as a criterion for identifying and evaluating ordinary art, i.e. traditional or conventional art, but not for identifying and evaluating avant-garde art.

There are many senses in which it is appropriate to call Thomas Hardy's *The Trumpet Major* an original work: it is original insofar as it was not a copy of a book that had been written before; it is original insofar as it was genuinely written by Hardy and is not a fake. It may even be called original insofar as it expresses particular ideas that are new and uses stylistic devices that have never been used before. Yet it remains the case that in all of these senses of original, the work is still only an original *of its kind*. Within the category of 19th Century novels, *The Trumpet Major* is an original work, and this is one reason that we identify it as a literary work of art, and might be a reason for us to claim that it is a good work of art, but it is not original in a way that would make us judge that it is avant-garde art.

It seems that an avant-garde work needs to be original in more than the minimal sense of original, not merely original with respect to a particular category within the institution of art, but original insofar as it is not covered by an existing category and therefore stands outside of, or at the limit of, the institution of art. Seen in this way, the challenge for avant-garde work is to escape all existing categories, perhaps including categories that had previously been considered to be avant-garde. It seems reasonable to say that once surrealism became established as an art movement, new works of surrealist literature may now be considered only original work *of its kind*. Hence, calling a work 'avant-garde' is sometimes simply a historical claim, to the effect that the work was at a

particular time avant-garde, but this is not the same as saying that it would presently be judged to be avant-garde.

I think that this difference is significant because I want to problematise the use of originality as a criterion for judging that a work is avant-garde at the present moment. I do not see a problem with art critics and art historians applying the term 'original' to make a historical claim about avant-garde works. It is appropriate to say that *Finnegan's Wake* was avant-garde because it was original, and *The Trumpet Major* was not avant-garde because it was not original. In both of these cases it is possible for the art critic to categorically define what they mean by originality – and hence it is possible to see whether the same standard of originality is being used in both cases and to debate which standard of originality is most relevant; for example we might not care whether the work was genuinely written by Hardy, whilst caring very much to determine whether it is a reproduction of previous work. These issues are not ones that I see as being problematic. However, the problem that does concern me is the possibility of using originality as a criterion for judging whether a new or future work is avant-garde or not. I believe that in this instance it is not possible for the art critic to categorically define what they mean by originality, nor to see whether a particular standard of originality is being applied consistently when comparing works. Most importantly, it is not possible to know whether the particular standard of originality is appropriate. My point is that it is not possible to say that a future avant-garde work will be one that fulfils a specific notion of originality, a notion that can be defined here and now and yet can be applied to adjudicate future cases of the question "is this (avant-garde) art?".

So, why is this the case? As I mentioned, avant-garde work occupies a unique place with respect to the institution of art, standing outside of, or at the limit of, the institution of art. Talking about avant-garde art, Clement Greenberg has argued that "the issue for art is not merely to extend the limits of what is considered art, but to increase the store of what's experienced as good and better art".ⁱⁱⁱ The task of the avant-garde is not merely to challenge and extend our views of what is art and non-art, but to do the same for our views of how to evaluate art. Thus my second premise is that: avant-garde work questions, modifies, rejects, changes and introduces (etc.) criteria both for what constitutes art and for the evaluation of art.^{iv} Although this is a view that accords with what Greenberg and others have said about the avant-garde, these critics have been keen to associate this characteristic with the notion of originality, even to the extent of seeing this function as equivalent to originality. But this

leads to problems because critics seem unable to find an adequate and stable account of originality that will provide a criteria for distinguishing the difference between avant-garde work and non-avant-garde work. Moreover, the problematic status of originality gives rise to problems concerning the notion of authorship and I will discuss this in the following section.^v

For example, Rosalind Krauss has argued that the cult of originality associated with the avant-garde is a modernist myth.^{vi} She deconstructs the notion of originality as a literal origin, originality which demands that the work is not a copy of anything that pre-existed the work and shows that the condition for the possibility of originality is repetition. Whilst I am convinced by this argument, I think that Krauss only undermines one particular, modernist, definition of originality, which opposed origin to repetition. But, there are many other notions of originality that do not require it to be privileged against repetition, so it might be thought that it is possible, indeed desirable, to seek a definition of originality that will stand up to criticism and that will allow us to identify and evaluate avant-garde work. The temptation is to think that we may stand within the institution of art and use the term 'originality' to identify and evaluate avant-garde art. But I believe that the two claims I have already made entail that the avant-garde is necessarily a moving horizon that undermines precisely this possibility. The combination of my first two claims produces my third premise. If originality is a criterion for judging art and avant-garde work continuously alters our criteria for judging art then it follows that avant-garde work continuously alters our concept of originality as a criterion for identifying and evaluating art.

Avant-garde literature challenges our expectations of originality as well as other aesthetic and artistic values. It challenges us to consider why we value originality and stretches the concept of originality. For example, it is possible for an author to produce a work that is not original in the ordinary sense, yet it still be original in the avant-garde sense. E.g. an author who submits an exact copy of *The Trumpet Major* as an avant-garde work may thereby challenge the requirements for originality typically employed within the institution of art.^{vii} The possibility of such a challenge to our concept of originality is presented by Jorge Luis Borges' *Pierre Menard: Author of Don Quixote*, although one of the remarkable features of this work is that the concept is challenged by the possibility described within the literary work, rather than by the work itself. Originality is a term that *must* itself remain open to debate. The avant-garde is possible precisely because of the flux,

indeterminacy, change, permanent possibility of rupture in the rules that are both criterial for art and criterial for art appreciation, and originality is one such notion.

This is my diagnosis of why I found that in the critical literature on the avant-garde the issue of originality is far from settled, and furthermore my impression is that an ongoing debate about the concept of originality is central to the vitality of the avant-garde, even perhaps the possibility of the avant-garde. If it were possible to determine 'originality' as a criteria for judging artwork in any fixed or permanent sense, as it were, to define the necessary and sufficient conditions of originality, then it might close the very openness that is minimally required for avant-garde work to be possible. To define avant-garde originality once and for all would be effectively a self-referential paradox. By its very nature, avant-garde development cannot be constrained in advance – we cannot here and now dictate the terms by which avant-garde literature will be judged, as the role of the avant-garde is to advance and expand the range of concepts that can be used to judge literature.

So, in response to the question “How should we understand the originality that is thought to be characteristic of the avant-garde?” My answer is that it is not possible to establish a appropriate notion of originality that would fulfil the role of a criterion, therefore, originality cannot be treated as a stable criterion for identifying or evaluating avant-garde work.

2) How is avant-garde originality related to the notion of origin and, particularly, the notion of the author as origin?

In the remaining section of the paper I will argue that, despite some well-known problems with the notion of treating an author as an origin, it is nonetheless possible to see the author as the origin of Avant-garde literature, and furthermore there are reasons why we would want to do so. I will not attempt to present a detailed argument, rather what follows is effectively an outline of the shape that I think such an argument could take.

In the previous section, I claimed that avant-garde work continuously alters our concept of originality as a criterion for art and art appreciation. As a result we have available several different accounts of originality and also accounts of the relation between originality and origin. Amongst these accounts we find the following dichotomy: A work of literature either has an origin (culture, tradition, language, author etc.) or it has no origin. This dichotomy has produced the following argument: If a work of art has an origin outside

itself then it cannot be truly original because the status and or meaning of the work is in some sense determined by the external origin. A work of avant-garde art is original because it is its own self-origin. Therefore the origin of a work of art cannot be the culture, tradition, language or author etc. As Rosalind Krauss puts it: “more than a rejection or dissolution of the past, avant-garde originality is conceived as a literal origin, a beginning from ground zero, a birth” (Krauss, 1994 p.157). We have already seen that Krauss sets out to challenge this conception of originality as a modernist myth, but it is also interesting to see how the way that originality is characterised in this quote is in tension with a later claim that Krauss makes. She says: “we have already seen that the avant-garde artist above all claims originality as his right – his birthright, so to speak. With his own self as the origin of his work, that production will have the same uniqueness as he; the condition of his own singularity will guarantee the originality of what he makes” (Krauss, 1994 p.16). Here we notice that the idea that the author is the origin is in tension with the previous idea that the work of art has no origin. I will not go further into this particular debate, but simply want to highlight that different notions of originality available to us generate varied and problematic accounts of the authorship of avant-garde work. Most importantly, the continuously changing concept of originality keeps in flux both the idea that the work is from a particular origin and from no origin.

If I have been right to suggest that the concept of originality is subject to continual alteration as a result of avant-garde work, then it is reasonable to think that the relationship between originality and the author as origin can also be subject to change and alteration. Hence we should expect to see changing conceptions of this relation throughout the history of the avant-garde. I think that the ‘death of the author’ was one such conception. It is my view that the ‘death of the author’ served a valuable critical purpose, namely to undermine a previously over-inflated conception of the role of the author, a conception which held that an ideal author is able to control the meaning of their work in any future context. But the ‘death of the author’ has proved to be unsatisfying as a positive thesis and can profitably be superseded in the light of changing conceptions of originality and origin. I would want to argue that the ‘death of the author’ was, at least in part, a response to a particular view of the rules governing language-use, a view that imagined that it was possible for there to be rules that determine future uses of language in advance of those future contexts. This is the idea that the meaning of a word can be laid down once and for all, and it will carry its sense

into every context where it appears. Wittgenstein has been influential in undermining this picture through his investigations into language.^{viii} An author does not determine meaning in advance of the contexts in which the literature is to be disseminated, but the idea that the author even *could* determine the meaning arises from a misguided notion that it is possible to lay down rules for meaning in advance of future uses of language. If we adopt a different view of the rules of language then it will become clearer why an author can be responsible for the work, without determinately controlling the meaning.

To appreciate this idea it is helpful to see a parallel between the use of originality as a criterion and the role of the author as an origin. Our existing concept of originality can be used as a criterion, as a rule, for identifying and evaluating art, but the criterion (the rule) does not dictate in advance of all future cases how it may be applied as it may be subject to change. In the same way the rules of language enable an author to use language meaningfully, but this does not mean that the author controls the rules such that they will always be applied the same way. Hence this changes the force of the dichotomy I mentioned at the start of this section. There is no longer a dichotomy between an origin that determines the meaning once and for all and an origin that is self-origin. Instead language is an origin that makes meaning possible, but that cannot determine meaning once and for all. Accordingly, the author, as a user of language within a community of language users, can be seen as the origin of certain original uses of language, without committing us to the view that the author has complete control over the meaning of those uses of language.

As a final point I want to say that this way of changing the notions of origin and originality would help us to fulfil our shared common-sense wish to rehabilitate the role of an author – and to recapture the idea that an author is in some sense important for the originality of a work. In addition to the central questions that we have already confronted, namely “is this art?” and “is this good art?” we also feel the need to ask many other questions, including “who wrote the work?”, “who was responsible for the originality of this work?” It also seems relevant to ask “who were the influences on the author”? And “how have changes over time in the way we evaluate art changed our view of this particular work?” Critical theory aside, for most people, it does add something to one’s aesthetic appreciation of a work to know whether the poem has been produced by a person or a randomising programme on a computer. We do not have to see the author as the final authority figure for the meaning, but it is desirable to see the author as an originator of

original artwork, even in the knowledge that the notion of an author, like the notion of originality is a term of art that will be challenged and supplemented and altered in the light of future developments.

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ⁱ Avant-garde aims “to make art ‘pass desublimated over into life’” (Habermas quoted in Burger xxxv). “Avant-garde artists were actively attacking the institution of art. Their effort was not to isolate themselves but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life” (Schulte-Sass in Burger xxxvi).

ⁱⁱ Jansen, Julia (2003) “Genius: Between Madness and Originality” Conference Paper at the IAPL *Writing Aesthetics* conference

ⁱⁱⁱ Greenberg, Clement (1973) “Counter-Avant-Garde” in M. Rader (ed.) *A Modern Book of Esthetics: An Anthology* (New York et al.: Holt, Rinehart and Winston Inc.) p.440.

^{iv} According to Lyotard: “the investigations of the avant-gardes question one-by-one the constituents one might have thought ‘elementary’ or at the ‘origin’ of the art of painting” Lyotard, Jean-Francois (1991) “The Sublime and the Avant-Garde” in A. Benjamin (ed.) *The Lyotard Reader* (Oxford: Blackwell) p 208

^v “‘Originality’, the necessary and enabling concept that underlies the notion of a proprietary author, is at best a problematic term in current thought, which stresses rather the various ways in which, as it is often put, language speaks through man”. (Mark Rose 1988 p.78)

^{vi} Krauss, Rosalind (1994) “Originality and the Avant-garde” in her *The Originality of The Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: MIT Press) pp.151-170

^{vii} “In a famous opinion in which he distinguished ‘originality’ from ‘novelty’ as the test of copyrightability, Judge Learned Hand somewhat impishly remarked in 1936: ‘If by some magic a man who had never known it were to compose anew Keat’s Ode on a Grecian Urn, he would be an ‘author’ and if he copyrighted it, others might not copy that poem, though they might of course copy Keat’s’.” (Mark Rose 1988 p.77).

^{viii} Wittgenstein, Ludwig (1953) *Philosophical Investigations* (Oxford: Blackwell) (Trans.) E. Anscombe