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### Introduction

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DOI:

[10.3366/nfs.2011-3.001](https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2011-3.001)

#### *Document Version*

Publisher's PDF, also known as Version of record

#### *Citation for published version (Harvard):*

Forcer, S & Wagstaff, E 2011, 'Introduction', Nottingham French Studies, vol. 50, no. 3, pp. 1-11.  
<https://doi.org/10.3366/nfs.2011-3.001>

[Link to publication on Research at Birmingham portal](#)

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Citation Information. Volume 50, Page 1-11 DOI 10.3366/nfs.2011-3.001, ISSN 0029-4586, Available Online 2011 at <http://www.eupublishing.com/toc/nfs/50/3> Copyright Edinburgh University Press

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# INTRODUCTION

STEPHEN FORCER AND EMMA WAGSTAFF

## Introducing the Avant-garde(s)

In the opening scene of Jean Cocteau's film *Orphée* (1950) there is a neat joke about avant-garde movements being taken to the absurd conclusion of their own logic: a new literary group has emerged under the name 'Nudisme' (yet another -isme) and its calling card is a review composed entirely of blank pages. Cocteau's scene takes on a more critical edge in the behaviour of the Nudistes at the Café des Poètes. Arrogant and contemptuous – especially of the eponymous Orphée (Jean Marais), a former Left Bank idol now become a reactionary hate-figure – the young poets get into an altercation that quickly degenerates (or develops, if one takes avant-gardists at their word) into a brawl, and the police are called. Beyond providing a lively start to the film, the drama of Cocteau's scene alludes to an actual event from avant-garde history: the infamous Soirée du Cœur à barbe of 1923 where, in something of a break from his type-casting as a cultural anarchist, Dada figurehead Tristan Tzara called in the police after a riot broke out between André Breton, Robert Desnos, Paul Eluard, Benjamin Péret and other young men with grand cultural ambitions.<sup>1</sup> '[Ce] café se croit le centre du monde,' remarks Orphée as he gets up to leave the Nudiste melee, extending Cocteau's wry extradiegetic commentary on the self-importance with which the avant-garde project was often conducted. With the Nudism-Dadaism-Surrealism analogy thus in play, the notion of Cocteau's opening scene as a knowing parody of the empty repetition of avant-garde performance and rhetoric is subtly restated in the playful phonology of the leading Nudiste poet: Cégeste (ces/ses gestes).<sup>2</sup>

Of course, Cocteau's film was itself a solipsistic allegory for his own status as a well-known but widely disliked 50-something poet working after the heyday of the 'historical' avant-garde in the 1910s-1930s. In satirizing and dramatizing arguments about derivativeness and life after the perceived end of the avant-garde, however, *Orphée* presciently evokes many of the issues that continue to drive lively debates in scholarship of the avant-garde.

1 Michel Sanouillet, *Dada à Paris*, ed. and rev. by Anne Sanouillet (Paris: CNRS, 2005), p. 336.

2 The way in which Nudiste poems are pulled out of a handbag on crumpled scraps of paper also recalls the informality and *désinvolture* of much avant-garde performance. Cf. Hugo Ball on Tzara's contribution to Dada's first night at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zürich, 5 February 1916: 'Tzara gave a reading of poems [...] which he rather endearingly fished out of the various pockets of his coat'; quoted in Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1965), p. 16.

One of the main such arguments involves the extent to which it is possible or useful to talk about ‘post-’ or ‘neo-’ avant-garde activity. For example, does a piece like Andy Warhol’s *Marilyn Monroe (Twenty Times)* (1962) represent the authentic picking up of the materials (pre-formed and mass-produced) and Dadaist tenets (‘Art could arise anywhere and be made of anything’)³ of Marcel Duchamp’s ready-mades?⁴ Is John Cage’s *4’33’’* – which caused an uproar when first performed in 1952,⁵ for the reason that it involves any number of performers playing no actual music – a valuable reworking of the stripped down playfulness of Francis Picabia’s ‘*La Nourrice américaine*’ (composed in principle of ‘trois notes répétées à l’infini’)⁶ and of the avant-garde taste for audience antagonism? Or are all attempts at extending the avant-garde legacy inherently pointless – given the highly specific set of cultural and historical circumstances in which avant-garde movements emerged – and thus doomed to the empty mimicry, recycling and *absurda reductio ad absurdum* of Cocteau’s *Nudisme*? If so, when exactly did the avant-garde end?

Will Self offers an instructive parody of this last question, alluding to fundamental ways in which contemporary approaches must qualify both their own relationship to the historical avant-garde and the nature of modern experimental work: ‘When did the avant-garde die? It sounds like a title for the sort of frothy filler you might find, nowadays, fringing the review pages of any mainstream newspaper – and that, in itself, confirms the avant-garde’s demise.’⁷ Inexorably, historical avant-garde culture has been commodified and assimilated within populist acceptance. Buñuel and Dalí’s *L’Âge d’or* (1930), for instance, created a furore on its release and was subsequently banned for up to 50 years in countries including France, Spain and the US. Today a copy of the film can be purchased in a crisp white and gold box set where it is paired, inevitably, with *Un chien andalou* (1929). We might think, in a similar vein, of Jean Genet’s homoerotic prison film *Un chant d’amour* (1950): made during a time of strict legal prohibitions against

- 3 Sarah Kay, Terence Cave, and Malcolm Bowie, *A Short History of French Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 265.
- 4 On Warhol and Duchamp, see Dietrich Scheunemann, ‘From Collage to the Multiple. On the Genealogy of Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde’, in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 38-43.
- 5 David W. Bernstein, ‘“In Order to Thicken the Plot”: Towards a Critical Reception of Cage’s Music’, in *Writings Through John Cage’s Music, Poetry, and Art*, ed. by David W. Bernstein and Christopher Hatch (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), p. 14.
- 6 Germaine Everling, *L’Anneau de Saturne* (Paris: Fayard, 1970), p. 124, quoted in *Dada. Circuit total*, ed. by Henri Béhar and Catherine Dufour (Lausanne: L’Âge d’homme, 2005), p. 323.
- 7 Will Self, review of Andrew Hussey, *The Game of War: The Life and Death of Guy Debord* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2001) and Alan Woods and Ralph Rumney, *The Map is Not the Territory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001) in *The New Statesman*, 27 August 2001 <<http://www.newstatesman.com/200108270031>> [accessed 30 June 2011].

homosexuality in France, and circulated clandestinely,<sup>8</sup> the film has its origins in a socio-legal context and ‘outlaw’ mindset that are some considerable distance from the tastefully packaged commercial copy produced by the BFI, which offers a beautifully atmospheric contemporary score by Simon Fisher Turner.<sup>9</sup> To extend Self’s point about the subsuming of avant-garde culture within a version of the middle-class mainstream that avant-gardists ostensibly set out to overturn: the avant-garde is dead, and the DVD is available on Amazon.

The presentation of the 2010 Turner Prize unintentionally underlined the drift between modern use of the term ‘avant-garde’, which is used frequently in writing about the Prize, and the highly politicized nature of much historical avant-garde art and rhetoric. The shortlisted artworks were all sensual and strikingly a-political pieces that invite individual contemplation; in the same building, students dressed in dunce’s caps protested noisily against the UK government’s plans to raise University tuition fees, almost drowning out the announcement that the £25,000 prize had been awarded to Susan Philipsz for her vocal recording of a sixteenth-century traditional Scottish song.<sup>10</sup> Terry Atkinson, who was shortlisted for the Turner Prize in 1985, raises an issue that further complicates claims to avant-gardism that might be made by, or on behalf of, contemporary prizes for experimental work by young artists:

Like all prizes the Turner Prize (TP) is an act of placement. It places artists, not only those that are on the TP list [...] but, by virtue of those who are on it, the TP also places those who are not on it. In this way the TP subscribes to perhaps the widest and most rampant fundamental capitalist formation – competition.<sup>11</sup>

One might say that the work of Tracey Emin or Gunther Von Hagens is closer to historical avant-garde interests in provocation, abjection, perversion, voyeurism and counter culture. The fact that Emin and von Hagens have become extremely wealthy as a result of their work does not in itself preclude connection with figures that Peter Bürger holds as authentically avant-garde in his seminal and polemical

8 Richard Dyer with Julianne Pidduck, *Now You See It: Studies on Gay and Lesbian Film*, 2nd edn (London: Routledge, 2003), p. 63; Jane Giles, *The Cinema of Jean Genet: Un chant d’amour* (London: BFI, 1991), pp. 5 and 27.

9 Cf. Leo Bersani: ‘Genet belong[s] to a radical modernity anxious to save art from the co-optive operations of institutionalized culture’; ‘The Gay Outlaw’ in *Diacritics*, 24.2/3 (1994), 4-18 (p. 18).

10 Owen Bowcott, Shiv Malik and Charlotte Higgins, ‘Student Protests: Turner Prize awards day sees Tate Britain Invaded’, *The Guardian*, 6 December 2010 <<http://www.guardian.co.uk/education/2010/dec/06/student-protests-turner-prize>> [accessed 30 June 2011].

11 Terry Atkinson, ‘The Turner Prize: Ordering the Avant-Garde’, *Third Text*, 16.4 (2002), 411-18 (p. 411).

proposition of a theory of the avant-garde.<sup>12</sup> Many avant-gardists came from well-off or even aristocratic backgrounds, and the widespread exchange, trade and collection of artworks among avant-gardists leaves an impression of moneyed, privileged individuals able to use their status and friendships to acquire cultural assets.<sup>13</sup> Avant-gardists' calls for left-wing revolution, and their nominal affiliation with Communism and Socialism, must also be balanced against the wilfully self-interested and exclusive nature of much avant-garde art. On the one hand, it could therefore be argued that subversive political engagement is actually antonymic to the historical avant-garde, with Michel Marty's suggestion that Surrealism was an unnecessary a-political luxury ('Si vous êtes marxiste vous n'avez pas besoin d'être surréaliste')<sup>14</sup> extrapolated to avant-garde art and literature as a whole. On the other hand, as Johanna Malt has superbly demonstrated, the overt political ideologies of individual figures or movements do not necessarily preclude political potency in avant-garde work itself.<sup>15</sup> In any event, the common use of 'avant-garde' in relation to figures such as Emin and von Hagens reinvoles factors referred to directly and indirectly by Cocteau, Self and Atkinson within the risk of a stretched logic between the historical avant-garde and contemporary practice: derivativeness, over-stated performance, commodification, profit, the absence of a collective aesthetic or political agenda, straightforward historical distance, and the question of why we should feel the need to agonize over implicitly validating modern practitioners with the epithet 'avant-garde'.

Over the last 15 years or so a wealth of publications have massively expanded the sheer volume and geographical spread of work that might in different ways be described as 'avant-garde'. There consequently arises a crucial further point in respect of 'the avant-garde': that is, the importance of thinking critically not just about the composition of avant-garde canons but about the essentialism and homogeneity implied by referring to 'the' avant-garde in the singular. Particularly significant within recent scholarship has been the beginning of a proper

12 *Theory of the Avant-Garde* [1984], trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).

13 For instances of the collection and exchange of paintings, see: Jacqueline Rattray, 'A Delicious Imaginary Journey with Joan Miró and José María Hinojosa' and Robert Havard, 'Rafael Alberti: Mind, Matter, Blood' in *A Companion to Spanish Surrealism*, ed. by Robert Havard (London: Tamesis, 2004), pp. 33-48 (p. 36) and 141-61 (p. 157) respectively. Common within avant-garde journals is a form of parallel text that further problematizes avant-garde politics: advertisements placed by dealers in oceanic art, objects 'recovered' from archaeological digs, and other high-value collectibles.

14 Quoted in Breton, 'Second manifeste du surréalisme', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 12 (15 December 1929), 1-17 (p. 6).

15 *Obscure Objects of Desire: Surrealism, Fetishism, Politics* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004).

assessment of work by female practitioners,<sup>16</sup> and of the nature of (proto-)avant-garde activity in Eastern Europe and Asia, in addition to traditional avant-garde ‘centres’ such as Paris, New York, Berlin and Zürich.<sup>17</sup> Lively research networks and dedicated series by publishers also testify both to the extraordinary volume of cultural works that can in one way or another be described as ‘avant-garde’ and to the diversity of scholars and practitioners interested in the area, who range from cultural historians and musicologists to architects and digital filmmakers. All of which indicates that, rather than conceiving of the avant-garde as a single if multi-sectioned monolith, it is more useful and accurate to conceive of ‘avant-gardes’ in the plural, to position different movements and figures in tension with themselves as well as with one another, and to think beyond the self-selecting male-based canon of orthodox avant-garde histories.

The notion of a ‘French’ avant-garde also requires delimitation. For while much European avant-garde production emanated from Paris as a global capital for the arts, with Montmartre and Montparnasse particular centres of activity at different times, a considerable number of the central players within the French experimental scene were born outside France. All the major movements in France also existed in one form or another in other countries. Indeed, one might say that the state of foreignness – involving a borrowed, unfixed relationship to language, culture and place – was absolutely fundamental to the character of avant-garde activity conducted in France and elsewhere, be it the ludic, exploded verse of Dada and Lettrism, the wild, impossible worlds of Surrealist painting, or the disconcertingly reductive language of the Theatre of the Absurd.

### **The French Avant-garde**

Individually and collectively, then, the words that make up the term ‘the French avant-garde’ are open to a range of possible interpretations that continue to be refined by new research. Clearly, the rationale and content of a volume proposing to deal with the topic require some explanation and delimitation.

The current issue originated in a series of research seminars on aspects of the avant-garde held at the University of Birmingham in 2007. Struck by the ways in

16 Key titles include: Penelope Rosemont (ed.), *Surrealist Women: An International Anthology* (London: Athlone, 1998); Whitney Chadwick, *Women Artists and the Surrealist Movement* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2002); Ruth Hemus, *Dada's Women* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 2009).

17 Particularly significant is the formidable *Crisis and the Arts* series produced under the general editorship of Stephen Foster (New York and London; Farmington Hills, MI; New Haven, CT: Prentice Hall, Thomson/Gale, 1996-2005). See also, for example: Miryam Sas, *Fault Lines: Cultural Memory and Japanese Surrealism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999); Elza Adamowicz (ed.), *Surrealism: Crossings/Frontiers* (Peter Lang, 2006); Tom Sandqvist, *Dada East: The Romanians of the Cabaret Voltaire* (Cambridge, MA and London: MIT, 2006).

which the papers pushed at the canon, character and periodization of avant-garde culture, we have selectively commissioned further contributions in order to showcase a cross-section of new work by UK scholars – from PhD-level through to full Professors – that is developing the field in several key areas: the reshaping of the avant-garde canon, particularly in terms of women avant-gardists and work by canonical figures that has been overshadowed by better known texts or simply ignored; the understanding of the textual, intellectual and philosophical scope of avant-garde work, beyond the necessary but potentially limiting issues of biography and history; and the critically minded (re)appraisal of characteristics often fetishistically over-determined in accounts of the avant-garde, such as discontinuity, nihilism, and sexual, cultural and political subversion. In turn, we have sought contributions that deal with painting, literature and film as media central to avant-garde production, but also in the areas of philosophy, thought and sexology, all of which remain in need of research less by avant-garde historians than by specialists in those fields.

Organizing articles in relation to a single country and language is by no means the only way in which the investigation of 20th-century experimental culture could be presented. As demonstrated by Stephen Foster's *Crisis in the Arts* series, however, it does allow for the coherent presentation of material within the general context of a national cultural history. Moreover, the use of a language-specific journal allows material to be discussed in its original form, thereby maximizing opportunities for the close textual commentary that we feel is vital to a developed understanding of avant-garde work, and for the discussion of issues that might be lost if texts are analysed in translation. To these ends, this issue deals primarily with practitioners who worked in French and who spent some or all of their careers in France (though not all were born in the country), and features contributions from researchers who have specific expertise in French Studies.

As regards debates about the historical coverage and definition of the avant-garde, in organizing the spread of articles we have been mindful of an issue raised by Hubert van den Berg: 'in many cases [...] studies pretending to be on *the* avant-garde are actually confined to the period before the Second World War'.<sup>18</sup> We also hold that it is not useful to conceive of modern cultural practice as 'avant-garde' in an unqualified sense, but that there are instructive lessons to be gained by carefully testing contemporary works against a history of experimentation and provocation that was supercharged by the historical avant-garde, and which itself drew not just on 'a radical break with tradition'<sup>19</sup> but on direct and indirect continuity with a huge and eclectic range of influences that included Vermeer,

18 'On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde', in *Avant-Garde/Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 63-74 (p. 63).

19 Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 109, n. 4.

Bosch, the Marquis de Sade, Arthur Rimbaud, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henri Bergson, Charlie Chaplin and *Fantômas*. We have therefore taken a line between the embracing of the avant-garde as an unbroken cultural legacy and the view that meaningful connections between different periods of experimental activity are inherently impossible. To these ends, the current issue seeks to avoid the false dichotomy of pre- and post-WWII avant-garde culture, offering a balanced collection of articles that is grounded in historical avant-garde movements but that also deals specifically with material produced after 1945. This is not to circumvent the debate about the relationship between historical, post- and neo- avant-gardes. On the contrary, the articles collected here underscore a crucial related point: nearly 40 years have elapsed since Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, but the fact that much avant-garde activity remains to be fully researched and understood – or even worked on – suggests that it is still too early to offer synthesized theories that attempt to describe the overall nature and function of the avant-garde and the validity, or not, of its relationship to later forms of twentieth-century culture.<sup>20</sup>

Indeed, the first article in this volume, by Eric Robertson, demonstrates the importance of thinking in terms of pre- as well as post-, dealing with experimental abstract activity in France that preceded landmark works (such as Picasso's *Demaiselles d'Avignon* [1907]), contexts (WWI) and events (the establishment of the Cabaret Voltaire) germane to accounts of the 'origins' of the historical avant-garde.<sup>21</sup> Robertson's discussion of colour music also brings out a fundamental quality of much avant-garde activity: the use of experimentation not in the service of iconoclasm and negation but to uncover and understand new processes, within a view of art and science as related forms of experimental activity that raise mutually relevant questions about knowledge, ontology and the relationship between human perception, consciousness, and the waves and particles of the physical universe. Martyn Cornick's piece underlines the importance of contextualizing the development of avant-garde movements within a history of ideas and intellectual inquiry. In this instance, Cornick traces the ways in which the personal and intellectual trajectories of Jean Paulhan, Roger Caillois, Armand Petitjean and others intersected with the emergence of the Parisian avant-garde, demonstrating that involvement and disagreement with the leaders of inter-war avant-garde movements formed a way-station *en route* to other forms of cultural, political and philosophical engagement. In so doing, Cornick demonstrates the intellectual ambition and capabilities of Caillois and Petitjean, which Dada and

20 Scheunemann, following Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster, underlines that the corpus on which Bürger bases his conceptualization of 'avant-garde' is somewhat narrow ('From Collage to the Multiple', p. 19), and that for Bürger 'avant-garde' applies 'primarily to Dadaism and early Surrealism but also and equally to the Russian avant-garde after the October revolution' (Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 109, n. 4).

21 See also David Cottington, *Cubism in the Shadow of War: The Avant-Garde and Politics in Paris, 1905-1914* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1988).



Surrealism helped to inform but which Caillois and Petitjean perceived as insufficient to the problems posed by the relationships between literature, thought, modernity, the French people at large, and the approaching inevitability of WWII. Chris Townsend further contextualizes the Parisian avant-garde, positioning the theory and practice of experimental film in relation to photography and proto-cinema, avant-garde and Modernist works in other media, philosophy, and the machine age. Townsend's discussion of 'intermedial' works of cinema also brings out the idea of film as a *langage*, as a signifying system very much in the process of being discovered through research by experimental filmmakers. In 1925, for instance, Blaise Cendrars suggested that 'You might say that there is a movie alphabet and that at the present time we know only very few of its minor letters'.<sup>22</sup> The breadth of Townsend's discussion indicates the sheer wealth of directions in which film leads as a function of avant-gardists' attempts to develop the medium's semiotic and semantic reach.

The historical and contextual grounding of the volume sets up three subsequent articles that deal in various ways with the revision of orthodox understanding of avant-garde canons and tenets, particularly in respect of gender and sexuality. Ruth Hemus firstly brings out questions and problems arising from the pursuit of new work on Dadaist Céline Arnould. What kinds of terms and taxonomy can be used to best understand the necessarily messy history of Dada, but without losing Dada's vital suspicion of academic criticism as a form of taxidermy that condemns its subject to the exhibition cabinet of fixed cultural history? And how can the contribution of women writers be restored without leaving them as 'adjuncts' to a homosocial executive, which would run the risk of reinforcing the self-selecting male hierarchy that produced their initial exclusion? In developing answers to these questions, Hemus indicates that progressive writing about the avant-garde must display some of the characteristics of avant-garde work itself: a critically minded approach to received ideas, a willingness to take risks, and an awareness of the political suppositions that may underpin problematic critical positions. Sabina Stent's piece is based on a standard critical practice that has a pivotal role to play in the continued development of research into women avant-gardists, but which can still be overlooked in work across all aspects of the avant-garde: the close reading of individual texts. By dwelling on the psycho-sexual semantics of Elsa Schiaparelli's dresses, Stent restates the importance of taking our cues from fine-level textuality. In turn, Stent's theoretically informed analysis makes for something of a contrast to the emphases of traditional studies of the avant-garde, which tend towards an interest in personalities, manifestoes, and who said what to whom. Lisa Downing and Robert Gillett test the extent to which the work of

22 François and André Berge, 'An Interview with Blaise Cendrars on the Cinema (1925)', trans. by Serge Gavronsky, in *Film Culture*, 67-69 (1979), p. 227, quoted in Richard Brender, 'Léger's Cinema on Paper and On Cellulose, 1913-25', in *Cinema Journal*, 24.1 (1984), 41-64 (p. 48).

Georges Bataille can be considered to prefigure queer theory. The variously aggressive, confrontational and explicit critical writing dealt with in their article is itself reminiscent of the emphatic and often uncomfortably direct styles employed by some avant-garde practitioners. Moreover, the provocative forms of language, thought and argumentation developed by Downing and Gillett are exemplary of critical positions that go beyond the fetishized memory of the avant-garde as subversive iconoclasm, and that bring into instructive relief the dogma, reactionism and blind spots of avant-garde theory and practice. In turn, the article suggests that the natural critical extension of avant-garde practice is not hagiographic histories but the careful delimitation and, where necessary, candid debunking of material that claims (or that is claimed) to embody sexual or political subversion.

The final three contributions deal with post-WWII material that does not often figure in work on the avant-garde. Focusing on two under-researched *livres d'artistes*, our own article offers an analysis of work produced after the salad days of the inter-war avant-garde movements, by which time interest in canonical figures had tended to fall away. Our readings of individual poems underpin the general argument that these texts represent neither the straightforward continuation or discontinuation of avant-garde practice, but rather an instructive counterpoint in which avant-garde stylistics comingle with contexts and themes that do not match the standard cultural memory of avant-garde activity. Indeed, in post-WWII France, experimentation, wilful difficulty, innovation, playfulness and politicized negation was the hallmark less of former Dadaists and Surrealists than of the literary and philosophical avant-garde formed by figures such as Roland Barthes, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze, Jacques Derrida, Michel Foucault, Julia Kristeva, Jacques Lacan and Philippe Sollers. Dealing particularly with Blanchot and Surrealism within a context of experimental French literature and thought, Leslie Hill's article sets out dense philosophical debates regarding the nature and future of literature that flow from gnomic, radical propositions of a sort that go beyond the Dadaists' mangling of impermanent language or the Surrealists' reclaiming of writing and speech as pathways to psycho-sexual discovery: literature produces its own disappearance, and any one book signals the absence of all possible books. Hill's discussion offers a finely-tuned example of the contestatory position that Blanchot encourages commentators to consider adopting in respect of Surrealism, the full philosophical and political potential of which both writers show to have gone unrealized. Nathalie Wourm's text demonstrates a principle that is at risk of becoming marginalized in the push for generalized theories or statements about the avant-garde: the exact strength, nature and usefulness of connections between contemporary culture and the historical avant-garde needs to be tested on a case-by-case basis, through the extended consideration of individual texts, and beyond gestural qualities such as provocation or resistance to conventional interpretation. In this case, through

patient, theoretically grounded commentary, Wourm presents an account of Pierre Alferi's *La Protection des animaux* that takes its agenda from the text itself, and that draws out classic avant-garde characteristics such as the negation and refusal of arbitrary relationship structures (particularly the family) and the pursuit of alternative modes of thought and being.

We have not attempted an all-encompassing account of avant-garde activity in France, and there are, inevitably, many individuals and groups that it has not been possible to deal with here. Obvious omissions include Rimbaud, Lautréamont, Cubism, the International situationiste, COBRA, and the Theatre of the Absurd. Recent scholarship has also demonstrated the importance of thinking beyond the left-wing radicalism with which the French avant-garde is traditionally associated. Mark Antliff, for instance, has developed the notion of 'avant-garde fascism', which denotes a highly politicized aesthetics in which traditional values and nationalist ideologies are merged with distinctly new 'avant-garde' forms of Modernist art. Thus, Antliff has shown how political writers and thinkers such as Philippe Lamour, Thierry Maulnier, Georges Sorel and Georges Valois envisaged and championed new forms of art as part of an ambitious fascist project to overturn the dominant structures of European capitalist democracies and constitutional monarchies.<sup>23</sup>

One might further argue that writers and artists who were contemporary with the historical avant-garde have a strong if implicit claim to counter-cultural radicalism, even if this was not a central objective in the way it was for the avant-garde *per se*. André Gide's *Corydon* (1924), for example, is more provocative and potentially dangerous than the male-female eroticism of many Surrealist works. Indeed, Breton actively condemned male homosexuality,<sup>24</sup> despite his position at the head an avant-garde movement ostensibly dedicated to liberation from sexual dogma. In practice, homosexuality and bi-sexuality were not uncommon among male and female avant-gardists. Revealingly, gay and lesbian writing was not formally part of the canonical avant-garde project, but it nonetheless constitutes a provocative form of counter-culture developing within and without movements that deliberately set themselves as marginal to mainstream society and culture.

In this respect Cocteau's *Orphée* is again instructive, for tucked away at the end of the opening credits is a dedication to Christian Bérard, a celebrated artist and designer who was also homosexual. *Orphée* is many things: a dramatization of antagonistic relationships between different styles and generations of artists; a moral allegory about life, death, loyalty and choice under the Occupation; and, as indicated by the reference to Bérard, from the very start a eulogy to gay cultural

23 Mark Antliff, *Avant-Garde Fascism: The Mobilization of Myth, Art, and Culture in France, 1909-1939* (Durham, NC and London: Duke University Press, 2007).

24 Breton et al., 'Recherches sur la sexualité', *La Révolution surréaliste*, 11 (15 March 1928), 32-38.

communities (as well as to Marais as Cocteau's lover) spoken under cover of an ancient heterosexual myth. In turn, the film implicitly points to the patriarchal censoring mechanisms not only of 1950s' France but of the historical avant-garde, within whose ostensibly counter-cultural project one might expect figures such as Cocteau or René Crevel to have found not hostility and expulsion but welcome and inclusion. This volume is intended to add to the understanding of the massive cultural, ideological and intellectual vitality of avant-garde practice, but it also aims to refine and qualify that understanding through a willingness to consider critically avant-garde aspirations to radicalism. 'Les vrais dadas sont contre dada', wrote Tzara.<sup>25</sup> Being prepared to turn scholarship against the avant-garde is authentic, as well as productive.

25 'Dada Manifeste sur l'amour faible et l'amour amer', *Œuvres complètes*, I, ed. by Henri Béhar (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 377-87 (p. 381).