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## **CAN WE TALK ABOUT CONTEMPORARY AVANT-GARDE OUTSIDE WESTERN CULTURES? THE CASE OF CONTEMPORARY ART IN THE REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA**

**Abstract:** The appreciation of the importance of the avant-garde, and of its re-thinking of the socio-cultural reality, ensues from its fundamental role for 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art practice and theory. However, in the contemporary global world, asking about the persistence of the avant-garde, we should take into consideration the different social/historical/cultural conditions of the specific geographical regions. In the following article, I focus on postcolonial art in the Republic of South Africa, relating to postmodernism, demonstrating a critical, emancipatory approach and an artistic responsibility for the partial view of the world which the artist co-constructs. I try to answer the question of whether we can talk about avant-garde ideas and approaches in South African art, though they have a different background and are not rooted in the tradition of western avant-garde.

**Keywords:** avant-garde formation, avant-garde attitude, postmodernism, post colonialism, South African art, critical engagement.

### **Introduction**

The appreciation of the importance of the avant-garde, and of its re-thinking of the socio-cultural reality, ensues from its fundamental role in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century art practice and theory. Whether continued, or enriched, or opposed, avant-garde with its ideas serves as a reference point for neo-avant-garde, post-avant-garde, and for more traditional art which is still being created. Its validity is confirmed by the dedication of this issue of *Art Inquiry* to it, in celebration of its centenary in Poland (with its beginning dated to the First Exhibition of Polish Expressionists in 1917). Contemporary reflection on the role of the avant-garde should first of all differentiate between its understanding as a specific cultural and historical movement, and as a set of assumptions, attitudes towards reality, and ideas that can be transformed and/or developed. I recognize this differentiation

thanks to the writings of Tadeusz Szkołut<sup>1</sup>, and I find it crucial for a well-based analysis of the avant-garde today, which needs to look beyond just European cultures. In this paper, the term “Avant-garde” with a capital “A” refers to the specific 20<sup>th</sup> century Western artistic formation; and “avant-garde” with a small “a” refers to the set (though not exactly fixed) bundle of ideas, wishes, and desires inspiring avant-garde artists.

The main problem I would like to tackle focuses on the question of whether we may talk about the avant-garde in Africa, and if so – in which sense? In what ways does it manifest its presence? I have chosen the art from the Republic of South Africa as my case study because I have had the pleasure and opportunity to learn about it in recent years through my participation in the international consortium of researchers co-operating on the project funded by the European Commission: “Technologies of Imaging in Communication, Art and Social Sciences”. I am obviously aware of the deficiencies of my individual viewpoint, but an all-encompassing presentation would go beyond the limits of this paper and calls for an extensive analysis of the avant-garde in its broader context (which will be hopefully carried out collectively in this issue of *Art Inquiry*). My ambitions here are more modest and I will be satisfied contributing to the overall construction.

In the first section of the paper, which remains predominantly within the framework of the Polish discourse in aesthetics, I argue for the clarification of some terms and concepts. This will allow me to use those as tools in my further analysis. In the second part of the paper I will give a short overview of contemporary art in the Republic of South Africa, taking into consideration the historical, cultural, and social conditions of each example of specific art practice, posing the question of whether we can call them avant-garde. This demands engaging in reflection on the complex relations between post-colonial, postmodern, and avant-garde art.

### **Avant-garde: a movement and an attitude**

I have mentioned above that I agree with Tadeusz Szkołut in differentiating between “the Avant-garde as a compact, militant artistic formation, playing the leading role in the modernist culture” and “the avant-garde attitude.”<sup>2</sup> Description of the avant-garde as an attitude towards the world can be also found in other publications, for example those of the eminent Polish art historian and critic Mieczysław Porębski, for whom the avant-garde is one of the artistic attitudes defined by pugnacity, intransigence, exclusivity, distance from contemporaneity, anti-traditionalism, polycentrism, interdisciplinarity, a spirit of revolt, and utopianism,<sup>3</sup> of the American

<sup>1</sup> T. Szkołut, *Awangarda, neoawangarda, postawangarda*, Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Marii Curie-Skłodowskiej, Lublin 1999, p. 229.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 223.

<sup>3</sup> M. Porębski, *Tradycje i awangardy*, in: *Sztuka i informacja*, Krakow: Wydawnictwo Literackie, 1986, pp. 171-176.

theorist Michael Kirby, interested mostly in avant-garde performance, who described the avant-garde as a worldview concerned with the historical directionality of art and social change;<sup>4</sup> of the Romanian critic Adrian Marino<sup>5</sup> and the American artist and critic Richard Kostelanetz,<sup>6</sup> who perceive avant-garde as timeless, an impulse that pertains to the past, the present, and the future.

The avant-garde attitude is characterized by radicalism, criticism, and intransigence that can be realized in a socio-political and/or cultural-formal manner. This attitude is opposed to the basic principles of postmodernism, as presented by its various theoretical reviews. Postmodernism in art has been regarded as an irresponsible, ungrounded, superficial play with forms and meanings, which is often commodified.<sup>7</sup> This perspective/image of postmodernism is not the only one, however, because, as pointed out by Wolfgang Iser, the main characteristic of postmodernism is the rejection of belief in any exclusive, totalizing vision of the world, and the acceptance of pluralism.<sup>8</sup> Therefore we may talk about various postmodernisms, similarly to the distinction between different variants of modernism.

The discussion concerning the continuing existence of the avant-garde in post-modern times takes into account the fact that the Avant-garde movement came into being within modernity (in connection with industrialization, democratization, and totalitarianism) and modernism (with its instrumental reason, utopias, and a search for new forms in thought, political action, and art) during the 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries in Europe and North America, and was based on the belief in the teleological character of civilizational progress, as “measured by the increasing homogenization, rationalization, and systematization of all spheres of life.”<sup>9</sup> “The decline of modernism” awakened doubts about the intrinsic value of progress and suspicion of any utopian emancipatory projects which promised a perfect world, without any evil, suffering, or conflicts. The mission of the avant-garde artist in the modern times (and in modernism) was to actively participate in creating a new man, society, and culture. The transition from modern to postmodern reality “had to cause change in the attitude of artists towards their cultural heritage.”<sup>10</sup> Post-modern art is seen as “a glass bead game,” conflating meanings and themes of cultural heritage, playing with ideas and forms taken out of their context. However, Szkołut inquires:

<sup>4</sup> M. Kirby, *The Art of Time*, New York: EP Dutton, 1969, p. 18.

<sup>5</sup> A. Marino, *Avant-Garde: Rupture, Renversement, Destruction*, in: “Zagadnienia Rodzajów Literackich”, 1978.

<sup>6</sup> R. Kostelanetz, *Introduction: What is Avant-Garde?* in: *The Avant-Garde Tradition in Literature*, ed. by R. Kostelanetz, New York 1982.

<sup>7</sup> S. Morawski, *Komentarz do kwestii postmodernizmu*, cz. II, “Nowa Krytyka” 1992, no 3 (4), p. 35.

<sup>8</sup> W. Iser, *Unsere Postmoderne Moderne*, Weinheim: VCH, 1987, pp. 78-79.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 92.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

Has postmodernism in art (...), giving expression to its disappointment with the ethos of modernism, nevertheless preserved some elements of the avant-garde tradition, or has it broken up completely with its artistic heritage (...), which becomes only an object of 'deconstruction', material for disobliging 'language games', parody, pastiche, etc.?<sup>11</sup>

Traditional philosophers, such as Stefan Morawski, understood postmodern art as stylistically eclectic, aesthetically superficial, accepting consumerism and conflating the difference between elite and popular art, aiming at flattering the common tastes.<sup>12</sup> In this perspective we have to agree that the trend of postmodernism is openly anti-avant-garde, without any ambition of changing the world or emancipating man. Alicja Kępińska also claims that the term "avant-garde" has lost its sense in postmodern times, and that we no longer feel the avant-garde impulse to participate in constructing a better world.<sup>13</sup>

However, as argued by other philosophers, such as Bogusław Bakula or Wolfgang Iser, postmodern art has not completely abandoned the main ideas of the avant-garde. Bakula writes that postmodern art belongs to the avant-garde formation, acting as its *rear guard*. It has not done away with the dreams of reconstructing the world's image based on tradition, but it is also conscious of the impossibility of belief in the vision of achieving any stable, irrefutable, universal sense of humanity and the world.<sup>14</sup> For Iser too, postmodern art is not casting away any attempts to construe an overall image of the world, but is rather oriented towards creating a whole which would not be closed, defined, and oppressive. For these reasons he stresses the importance of multiplicity liberated from the dominance of coherent unity.<sup>15</sup>

Some characteristics essential for the avant-garde attitude in the 20<sup>th</sup> century are obviously no longer there: the utopian visions of re-structuring the world and man of the future towards fuller justice; the belief that reason and civilizational progress inevitably lead to a better, more equal world; these have disappeared today. The causes of this abandonment are to be found not just in theoretical arguments, but in the observable effects of instrumental reason, moved by utopian political visions, on the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In this situation, Western artists and theorists

<sup>11</sup> Ibid., p. 96.

<sup>12</sup> S. Morawski, *Postmodernizm: jak go rozumiem i dlaczego nie lubię?*, in: "Integracje" 1991, no XXVII, pp. 37-42.

<sup>13</sup> A. Kępińska, *O zdejmowaniu ciężaru z ciał niebieskich*, in: "Akcent" 1997, no 1 (67), pp. 29-30.

<sup>14</sup> B. Bakula, *Człowiek jako dzieło sztuki. Z problemów metafleksji artystycznej*, Wydawnictwo "WiS", Poznań 1994, p. 184.

<sup>15</sup> W. Iser, *Postmoderna dla wszystkich: architektura postmodernistyczna*, transl. into Polish by A. Zeidler-Janiszewska and R. Kubicki, "Magazyn Sztuki. Kwartalnik" 1996, no 3 (11), pp. 192-194.

also had to revise the fundamentals of their thinking. However, the absence of a drive to propose and impose coherent utopian visions of culture in its social aspect, and on the artistic culture in particular, does not annihilate other avant-garde ideas, such as critical attitude towards the *status quo*, or the search for new forms to express new meanings. Szkołut calls for this kind of art, writing:

If postmodern art actively joins in the process of the revaluation of modern values, if it stimulates critical judgement of contemporary civilizational tendencies with the aid of its specific (formal-constructional) aesthetic means, if it takes up the task of uniting the broken world of the present culture around some new essential rules, it could smuggle the most valuable elements of 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde ethos, especially the pathos of the critical-emancipatory activity, into the postmodern era. Then it would acquire the status of unique 'postmodern avant-garde'.<sup>16</sup>

The absence of modernist characteristics in postmodern art stems from the belief in the power of reason and civilizational progress, no longer feasible in contemporary times. Nevertheless, while abandoning the belief in reason, there is no need to fall into irrationalism. It seems more fruitful to discern different kinds of rationalities, connected with and reflected by universal reason. As observed by Wolfgang Iser, "The new conception of rationality no longer permits the demonstration of ultimate unity and order," but this does not imply a complete rejection of reason. Opposing those giving a "farewell to Reason," as well as those believing that we no longer need reason, and rationality alone will suffice, because "throughout modernity we have developed a comprehensive range of rationalities able to cover all conceivable questions," Iser advocates a "transversal reason [that] makes clear to us the multitude of rationalities so that we can recognize their complex conditions as the real constitution of rationality."<sup>17</sup>

It is important to emphasize that in order to justifiably pose the question of the feasibility of the avant-garde in contemporary art practice in non-Western cultures, we should not adopt a simple multicultural perspective, acknowledging the existence (and equality to a certain extent) of different cultures, because that does not allow us to focus on the interrelations between those cultures. This focus is possible if we adopt an intercultural perspective, searching for mutual relations, influences, convergences. This creates space to address my primary question: Can we talk about the avant-garde in contemporary art practice in the Republic of South Africa?

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<sup>16</sup> T. Szkołut, *Awangarda, neoawangarda, postawangarda...*, p. 106.

<sup>17</sup> W. Iser, "Rationality and Reason Today", in: *Criticism and Defense of Rationality in Contemporary Philosophy*, ed. by D.R. Gordon, J. Niznik, Amsterdam: Rodopi, 1998, pp. 17-31.

### The avant-garde in the postcolonial Republic of South Africa?

Contemporary art practice in the Republic of South Africa is conducted – first of all – within the context of the relatively recent decolonization and the consequent development of postcolonial discourse. If we take into account the fact that apartheid politics formally ended just 23 years ago (the new constitution was written and the first free elections took place in 1994) then we realize that in such a short time the process of long-term changes in society would have just commenced, and such changes are not yet fully implemented. Of course the criticism of colonialism started before 1994, and the dismantling of the legal arrangements of apartheid went hand-in-hand with the work by the African National Congress and Nelson Mandela starting in the 1950s. Anti-colonial discourse contributed to the decolonization of Africa, stressing the importance of Africa in the modern world and working for the de-marginalization of Africa in a global perspective.<sup>18</sup> The post-colonial discourse drawing on anti-colonialism has brought to light many problems of the social system. Windsor Leroke, a South African philosopher, writes:

Post-colonialism has brought to the foreground issues of identity, gender, race, ethnicity, writing, representation, orality, difference, marginality, multiplicity, and heterogeneity. Post-colonialism positions itself as a critique of issues of totality, unity, and sameness. It emerges as a critique of Enlightenment ideas and views. (...)

Post-colonialism emerged in the context of politically independent countries. However, unlike the previous anti-colonial discourse, post-colonialism wants to provide an internal critique of the independent Third World and the relationship that it has with the First World. It came to question the viability of certain socio-economic, cultural, and intellectual developments within the Third World. What is distinctive about post-colonialism is that it is not an economic critique, or political critique in a narrow sense. Its political critique is broad. In fact, the politics of post-colonialism are embedded in the critique that it makes of post-colonial conditions in the Third World.<sup>19</sup>

The above brief description of post-colonialism in South Africa, which can be considered a specific extension of international post-colonialism,<sup>20</sup> shows some convergence with postmodernism, though it should not be confused with it. Of course, the “post-“ in “post-colonialism” does not just mean a new moment in

<sup>18</sup> W.S. Leroke, *Post-colonialism in South African social science*, in: *Theory and Method in South African Human Sciences Research: Advances and Innovations*, ed. by Johann Mouton, Johan Muller, Peter Franks, Themba Sono, Pretoria, HSRC Press: 1998, p. 55.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 55-56.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 57.

history, *after* colonialism; it refers instead to the critical inquiry, engagement, re-thinking of colonialism, overcoming it or leaving it behind, which brings post-colonialism closer to postmodernism. Focusing on the art world, we acknowledge that not all art created during the post-colonial period is postcolonial or post-modern. We may also find examples of neo-traditionalism, especially if we look at the African countries that won independence in the 1960s (one interesting example is analyzed by Kwame Anthony Appiah: the sculpture *Man with a Bicycle*, shown in 1987 at the exhibition *Perspectives: Angles on African Art*, presented at the Center for African Art in New York).<sup>21</sup> The particular history of each African country matters. The Republic of South Africa overcame apartheid in 1994, and young black artists who appeared on the global postmodern and consumerist scene, based on multimedia images, found themselves in a world quite different from half a century earlier.

We should then try to see post-colonialism as both a historical succession and a specific perspective, or a paradigm in theory and in practice. The main presumed feature of post-colonialism, critical engagement, is becoming visible in different guises after the decline of the concept of one “right” identity, defined in an Eurocentric way and rooted in the Enlightenment. The self-contained, coherent, and rational identity surely has not disappeared, but has become only one of the many possible forms of identity – the identity of the Other, the other to many marginalized blacks. The clue to this otherness is the thematic thread of post-colonialism: interested in multiplicity, hybridity, and different ways of writing, speaking, and representation by persons of different genders, ethnicities, ages, professions, social status, and... *others*.<sup>22</sup>

Post-colonialism can be thus understood as an emerging paradigm in the humanities,<sup>23</sup> but is also underlying the artistic practice of various South African artists, including Kitso Lynn Lelliot, Lauren Mulligan, and Palesa Shongwe from the young generation. Kitso Lynn Lelliot, Johannesburg-based audio-visual artist originally from Botswana, is working simultaneously on academic and artistic levels using the multimedia: bringing into existence the ghosts of her ancestors, visualizing and analyzing the modes in which those ghosts are haunting the present mind/body/identity of the artist herself. This is her way of making visible and audible “the enunciations and knowledges produced as marginal through processes of disavowing the legitimacy, value, or presence of the ways of knowing and being that are <other> as they are different from hegemonic norms.”<sup>24</sup>

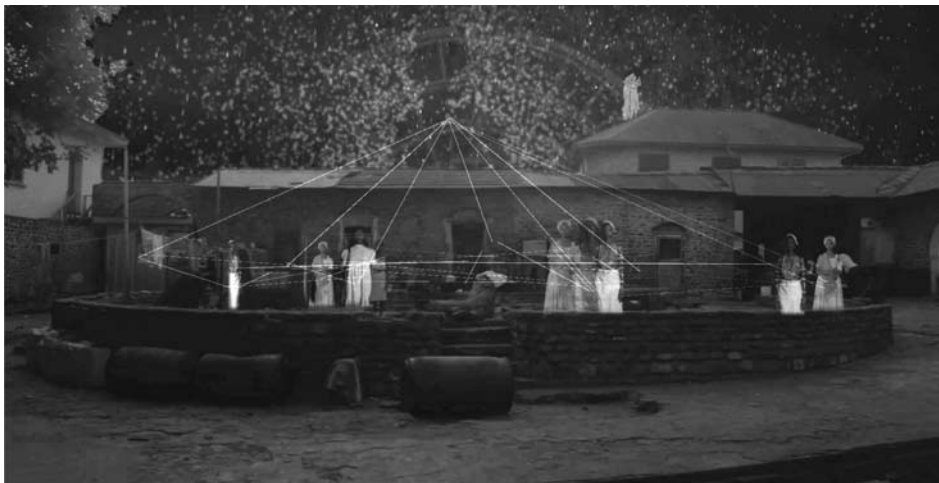
<sup>21</sup> K.A. Appiah, *Is the Post-in Postmodernism the Post-in Postcolonial?*, “Critical Inquiry”, Vol. 17, No. 2 (Winter, 1991), pp. 336-357.

<sup>22</sup> W.S. Leroke, *Post-colonialism in South African social science...*, p. 60.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 58.

<sup>24</sup> K.L. Lelliot, *South Atlantic Hauntings: Geographies of Memory, Ancestralities and Re-Memberings*, in: *Theoretical Basis of Visuality from Intercultural Perspective*, ed. by A. Lukaszewicz Alcaraz, PUNO Press, London 2018 [in print].

The video work *My story, no doubt is me/older than me* from 2015, presented at the Kampala Art Biennale, is part of Lelliot's broader artistic and academic research on socio-cultural formations that took shape over the Atlantic during the African slave trade in the Global South (a project she initiated during her residency with the Sacatar Foundation in Brazil). The video shows a view of a small town or suburbs with a few low houses, trees, and kids playing, in front of which we see a stone circle where slaves were put on display to be sold. A woman wearing a white gown and headscarf, is standing there, unmoving, subjugated, sometimes irregularly multiplied. A network of light rays starts connecting various points on the bodies of the multiplied woman. Sometimes this net hangs in the air, with the single woman partly caught in it, and sometimes it appears against the backdrop of the starlit sky, the star-like symbols inside the rolling circles.



II. 1. Kitso Lynn Lelliot, *My story, no doubt is me/older than me*, video still, 2015, from courtesy of the artist

The attitude presented by Lelliot is obviously post-colonial, focusing on the marginalized subject of the past and of the present. It shows the imaginary but living presence of the slave ancestors in the life of a black woman artist making her way in the contemporary social and art world. Lelliot calls this presence “a haunting”, after Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak and many other writers, such as Michael F. O’Riley, Alfred Lopez, Avital Ronell, and Avery Gordon.<sup>1</sup> It is a real presence,

<sup>25</sup> Avery Gordon states that “haunting rather than history (or historicism) best captures the constellation of connections that charges any <time of the now> with the debts of the past and the expense of the present” – A. Gordon, *Ghostly Matters: Haunting and the Sociological Imagination*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997, p. 142.



beyond Western metaphysics maintaining the division between being and non-being. The ghosts of the ancestors are real, though deprived of their separate material form – they inhabit present-day people. Lelliot rightly claims that this presence and its effect on the constitution of the subject should be taken into consideration in the process of defining the identity of contemporary black people with the experience of slavery in their family past. This identity has to be newly construed, as black slaves were subjugated by the imperialist and racist discourse.

The newly changed circumstances after the abolishment of the apartheid demanded the expression and transmission of the unspoken experience of the Others to European culture in order to reclaim a voice. In the late 1980s, Gayatri Spivak tried to answer the question: “Can the subaltern speak? Does s/he have a history and a voice?” Time has shown that the subaltern can express their own experience in their specific way, relating to the past without entering the hegemonic Western discourse but rather expressing their perceptions, feelings, and reflections. This was not so possible during colonialism, and this is reflected in Spivak's answer: she concludes that in the colonial, imperial reality subalterns cannot speak, their voices fade, their role is erased, and they do not participate in the process of representation.<sup>26</sup>

Spivak was devoted to deconstructionism, feminism, and post-colonialism, and her focus was on disavowing epistemic violence while she was criticizing colonialism and imperialism. To be frank, it is quite common in the discussion on representation that visual representations co-construing identity are hardly ever reflected upon. Talking about representation, Spivak marks out “speaking for” as political representation and “speaking about,” or re-presenting, as showing a “portrait” of people. Favoring speech, language, and knowledge is a vestige of the linguistic turn characteristic of a large section of the humanities in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also characteristic of structuralists and deconstructivists like Foucault and Deleuze, whose thought Spivak was drawing from in her analyses of knowledge(s), language(s), ideology(ies), and discourse(s).<sup>27</sup> However, works like Lelliot's clearly express and co-construe the present-day identity of a black woman in South Africa.

The images in the video *My story, no doubt is me/older than me* show black woman/women in the slave circus inscribed in a dynamically changing geometric structure of light lines and geometric symbols inscribed in illuminated circles rolling on the starlit sky. These images enter into a visual dialogue with the image of the Vitruvian man/male, not trying to reconstruct it, but proposing a completely different vision of a different subject – who is the Other to the European subject.

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<sup>26</sup> G.Ch. Spivak, *Can the Subaltern Speak?*, in: *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*, ed. by C. Nelson and L. Grossberg, University of Illinois Press, Urbana 1988, p. 28.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

This Other is not the same as in colonial times, when the First World appropriated and re-inscribed the Third World as an Other, which “can result in an exoticisation and <orientalisation> of the Third World, an approach to the margin <as a tourist> which in turn advances the project of knowing the Third World to control it.”<sup>28</sup> This Other in Lelliot’s work expresses herself, although not in a clearly defined way, as transparent and coherent as the Man painted by Leonardo da Vinci, but as a multiple, fading and appearing, immersed in the moving light structure. In other South African works we may find specific examples of (co-)construing identities different or (O)ther than the Western ones, not just situated in the opposition between the African and the Western World. The proposals of those artists offer more complex insight in terms of roots, cultural background, gender, and sexual orientation.

Palesa Shongwe is a young director, writer, and cinematographer from South Africa, who also searches for places of elision, in which the subjugated experience can be enunciated. This experience expressed in words and images, phrases, and montages, contributes to the quest for the construction and representation of the identity of black people. In her video film *Atropy and the fear of fading* from 2010,<sup>29</sup> Shongwe researches spontaneous and ritual dance, animating the whole body and connecting the dancers with their selves, their community, heritage, and god(s). This and Shongwe’s other videos are hard to categorize and ascribe to any specific cinematographic genre. It is neither a feature film, nor another documentary. She uses fragments of different film materials, some she recorded herself and some archival photos and footage material from Rapid Blue, SABC, and The National Film Archives, and she edits them into a very personal story. Thanks to its anthropological core, this film speaks to a broader public with not only black experience, conveying profound meaning that was suppressed and that finds its place in the elision of the moving body. The artist’s poetic narrative complements the images, blending with them, especially when her voice changes into an image of the written text.

As argued by Trinh T. Minh-ha in her essay *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, a statement that goes in accord with Shongwe’s video, “there is no such thing as a documentary,”<sup>30</sup> that would be objective and natural, and films (good films or videos) are original art forms.<sup>31</sup> Shongwe presents archival images without subtitles, which enables the transformation of the representation into a concrete fact

<sup>28</sup> V. Andreotti, *An Ethical Engagement with the Other: Spivak’s ideas on Education*, “Critical Literacy: Theories and Practices”, Vol. 1, no 1, p. 73.

<sup>29</sup> P. Shongwe, *Atropy and the fear of fading*, video, South Africa, 2010: <http://impakt.nl/channel-2/videos/palesa-shongwe-atropy-south-africa-2010-745-mins/>

<sup>30</sup> T.T. Minh-ha, *The Totalizing Quest of Meaning*, in: *Theorizing Documentary*, ed. by M. Renov, Routledge, New York 1993, p. 90.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 94.

located in time and space. Images of the girls and women from the past dancing, and of contemporaneous men and women also dancing, appear not as scientific data, but as examples and evidence of some broader practices – of ritual and of youthful free-play – in each case allowing one to regain “the memory of one’s past lives” in a communion with the community, or in the young-and-free’s glamorous movements in a confined space. Shongwe perceives these practices as part of the game of power and the politics of space, which is negotiated by the movements that shatter the confining suburban environment. The expression present in her video is external to the Western metaphysics of the subject, descending to the anthropological core, giving it the value of (limited, relative) universality. The sincerity of the artist, not the search for objectivity, allows us to feel a common truth about our body/mind/soul connecting us with the past, with our ancestors and community, but also to reflect on the specific bodily experience and its expression by the young black people in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century.



II. 2. Palesa Shongwe, *Atropy*, video still, 2010, courtesy of the artist

The question of identity is asked by many other South African artists, to name just one more – Lauren Mulligan, photographer and video-artist from Cape Town, also based in Johannesburg. Many of her photos are single and multiple portraits of modern black people; she is interested in the non-normative subject and its representation in South Africa, especially in the non-heteronormative subject of color from modern big cities.



II. 3. Lauren Mulligan, *Vintage Crew*, digital print, Maboneng precinct, Johannesburg, 2013, courtesy of the artist

Her video work *Hello... Megan* made with Brett Hirson in 2016<sup>32</sup> directly invokes the issue of name and of communication. Who is contacting me? Why? Is this my name? In a clearly modern apartment, we see a young woman serving herself tea in the kitchen and peeking into a fridge, when somebody contacts her on her computer. She moves onto a sofa with the computer, where she sees that an unknown person is writing to her on Facebook. At the same time she receives a mute phone call and the computer screen turns black, with a central green dot. She closes the computer. We see the words appearing on the closed screen: *Hello... Megan*.

There are many more interesting examples of South African art we may wish to analyze, but I would like to propose my answer to the question: Can post-colonial art be considered as avantgarde? In what sense? The pieces I have mentioned above are of course not a large enough corpus on which to base strong conclusions. They represent the work of a group of young, successful South African artists, affiliated with the Wits School of Art at the University of Witwatersrand, presenting their works at biennales and festivals, receiving grants and inscribing themselves in the broader art scene of South Africa. These examples are thus not

<sup>32</sup> L. Mulligan, B. Hirson, *Hello... Megan*, video, 2016 <http://www.laurenmulligan.com/2017/4/5/hello-megan>

fully representative of all artists, and my own conclusions should be understood as approximations.

On the one hand, it is noticeable that the pieces mentioned here (as well as all other current works that I know) lack any utopian vision, which was one of the essential characteristics of avant-garde art. New South African art does not seek to create a utopia; instead, it is looking for novel forms of representation (with a critique of Eurocentric representations in the background, but with a broader focus than just that) allowing for the expression of the discriminated/invisible black experience (and also the experience of homosexual people of color). On the other hand, the artists use novel forms of artistic expression, allowing them to speak for the new subject – the Other for the Europeans – and this drive to represent the Other, combined with the drive to experiment with form, are the characteristics which can be described as avant-garde. Experimentation, which is important not just for its own sake, but as an exploration oriented towards a better, more just future, without the imposition of a fixed, desired new world order. I recognize this as an avant-garde impulse – but one that is now mitigated, contextualized, and partial – which are supposed to be the general characteristics of avant-garde art in our postmodern times.

### **Conclusions: When, how, and why should we talk about the avant-garde in non-European cultures?**

The question of the persistence of avant-garde ideas and attitudes cannot be approached in the same way as we ask it about contemporary art in Europe and on other continents. My examples of South African postcolonial art show that although we may find there the avant-garde ideas of criticism and orientation towards the social change, the ground on which this art has developed is very different from the Western tradition of the avant-garde. Therefore, using the term “avant-garde” to describe South African art can only be partly helpful, at best, in discussing its radical critique and its experimental attitude aiming at changing the world of representations as well as the socio-political world. There is no need to use the concept of the avant-garde as a skeleton key to interpret all contemporary art outside Europe, even if we may find some superficial similarities (but arising from different causes).

Although the argument proposed here may lead one to doubt the need for the continued use of the term “avant-garde” in all geographical contexts, I am of the opinion that the direction set by the avant-garde ideas is distinctive and valuable not only in terms of aesthetics, but also from the epistemological and ethical points of view. Thus we should and will still enjoy avant-garde art, thoughts, and actions.

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## **CZY MOŻEMY MÓWIĆ O WSPÓŁCZESNEJ AWANGARDZIE W INNYCH KULTURACH NIŻ KULTURA ZACHODU? NA PODSTAWIE WSPÓŁCZESNEJ SZTUKI W REPUBLICIE POŁUDNIOWEJ AFRYKI (streszczenie)**

Doniosłość rozważań poświęconych awangardzie i jej przemyślenie w zmieniających się warunkach społeczno-kulturowych wynikają z fundamentalnej roli tego ruchu dla praktyki artystycznej i teorii sztuki w wieku XX i XXI. Jednakże we współczesnym globalnym świecie, pytając o trwałość awangardy powinniśmy zastanowić się nad różnymi społeczno-historyczno-kulturowymi uwarunkowaniami w poszczególnych miejscach geograficznych, które bierzemy pod uwagę. W artykule koncentruję się na sztuce Republiki Południowej Afryki, która jest postkolonialna, powiązana z postmodernizmem, która ukazuje podejście krytyczne i emancypacyjne oraz odpowiedzialność artysty/artystki za częściowy obraz świata, który on/ona współ-konstruuje. Zatem, staram się odpowiedzieć na pytanie, czy możemy mówić o ideałach i postawie awangardowej w sztuce Południowej Afryki, choć wyrastają one na innym podłożu i nie mają korzeni w formacji zachodniej awangardy.

**Słowa kluczowe:** formacja awangardowa, postawa awangardowa, postmodernizm, postkolonializm, sztuka Południowej Afryki, krytyczne zaangażowanie.