

ALICJA RYBKOWSKA *
(Jagiellonian University)

The Art of Making War and Art as a War

ABSTRACT

This text is dedicated to the influence of war on modern and contemporary art in Western Europe. The idea of war and the military conflicts of the 19th and 20th century are presented as having affected both the themes and the forms of art. They have also made an impact on art theory, providing it with the notion of an avant-garde which served as a metaphor for numerous artistic experiments undertaken in the early 20th century.

The text aims to describe the similarities between the rebellious and ingenious art of the first half of the 20th century as well as the differences between the art of that time and contemporary art, which opposes it in many ways, also in the way it treats the phenomenon of war.

KEY WORDS

war, avant-garde, art, art theory, conflict, power

This essay is devoted to the idea of war and its consequences for modern Western European art and art theory. Although war had been of a great interest for philosophers since the very beginnings of philosophy, it became important for the theory of art only in the early 19th century. However, the long history of the concept of war had its influence on its modern application to art.

When we undertake a historical analysis, it turns out that war has been a normal condition throughout the ages. It is constantly present in culture as well as in nature since conflict is a basis for many natural processes. This fact puzzled the early Greek philosophers: is the world as we know it a result of

* Jagiellonian University in Kraków, Poland
e-mail: alicja.rybk@gmail.com

constant war (e.g. between the elements) or of an interim peace? This puzzle can be clearly seen when we compare the theories submitted by Parmenides and Heraclitus: while the first thought that everything that truly is has to be stable, the latter opposed him with his belief that “war is king of all and father of all”: “We must recognize that war is common, strife is justice, and all things happen according to strife and necessity”¹. The essence of all existence is movement and change. Moreover, if something changes, it means that one thing dies and a new form lives: destruction always leads to construction, while construction always stems from destruction.

War was inevitable and inalienable from human life according to many Greek thinkers. Therefore, even in Plato’s utopian *Republic* there was an army of soldiers. The ancients did not try to question war itself; rather, they raised a question about legitimate warfare. Cicero, referring to Plato’s and Aristotle’s notion of the animal soul, thought war and any other acts of violence to be animal-like: for him, the aim of war is only fair when it imposes peace. War can be just only when it helps to avoid further injustice.

It is not necessary to multiply further examples of the understanding of war in philosophy. It is clear enough that since the very first reflections on war, it was conceived through oppositions: oppositions of construction and destruction, order and disorder, movement and stillness, justice and injustice. Thus, the concept of war, denoting opposing sides, incorporated these aspects, becoming a conglomeration of antithetical ideas. It was not until the modern times when the tendency to understand war as only one-sided (this side being usually negative) appeared. Since the 17th century, when Thomas Hobbes published his famous and influential book *Leviathan*, in which he proposed the idea of *bellum omnium contra omnes*, the war of all against all, we can observe a trend to treat war not as a constructive activity but as a destructive force. This is partially facilitated by defining war not in terms of actual fighting but as a known willingness to fight² which distracts people from other activities. Thus, war becomes one of the most significant manifestations of social and political power. Yet, power itself changes its meaning. As the question of power was also one of the first questions of philosophy (namely, the origin of beings and what unites the elements and makes them appear and act together), it was at first understood as a constructive force. However, modern times have placed

¹ Quotations after: D. W. Graham, *Heraclitus*, [in:] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E. N. Zalta, Summer 2011 Edition, [online] <http://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum-2011/entries/heraclitus/> [accessed: 16.05.2015].

² See: G. S. Kavka, *Hobbes’s War of All Against All*, “Ethics” 1983, Vol. 93, No. 2, p. 292.

violence, which is actually the opposite of this understanding, in the heart of power. War, conflict, power (or will to power): they all constitute a conceptual network of modern times and the modern search for order and authority. Thus, numerous military conflicts of the 19th and the 20th century are presented in this essay as having influenced both the themes of art and the forms of its creation and exhibition. Such an interpretation of the meaning of war regarding modern art remains close to the concept of the avant-garde, which will be examined in this essay as well. I will begin with the idea of war in European philosophy, concentrating mainly on its similarities to the idea of art, and then move on to avant-garde art which, in my opinion, is the most appropriate and interesting example of paramilitary thinking in art.

Not only the abstract idea of war, but also specific wars per se are of great importance to our way of thinking in terms of men, society, culture, and what it means to destroy and create. Therefore it affects all spheres of human activity, including art and artistic expression. War is extraordinary in a very basic sense: it renders all kinds of order invalid. It is a state of emergency and it was indeed called so by the German philosopher Carl Schmitt, who described it as a state that may be declared by a sovereign (a president or a king), with this declaration leading to the suspension of basic civil and human laws. A state of emergency is supposed to lead to the establishment of a new order, but is it essential that this establishment stems from the disorder of war? Another German philosopher, Hannah Arendt, said that in a totalitarian reality everything is permitted (although there may exist hundreds of suppressions), and where everything is permitted, nothing is true. War, usually preceded or accompanied by some form of totalitarianism is a time of an absolute arbitrariness. Isaiah Berlin in his essay *The Sense of Reality* pointed out that during war things that we neither believe nor want to be possible may become not only possible but even real. The astounding flexibility of human beings is not always a good thing because it may also indicate a lack of a core, a moral fibre, and war shows this distinctly. Christopher Lasch, American social critic, proposed the conception of a minimal self – a result of mechanisms of “psychic survival in troubled times”. These mechanisms are based on shedding all the elements of the self which are not necessary to survive (even though they may be elements that constitute a particular person) and living only in the immediate present, without referring to the past or future. As opposed to Victor Frankl’s famous “logotherapy” and “will to meaning”, a minimal self is not interested in any meaning because it has lost a sense of meaning. Facing the ideal of *Übermensch* adopted by the Nazis, the minimal self seems to be the last chain between the man and the animal

rather than between the man and the superman. Perhaps war brings out the best in some people: courage, heroism, dedication, devotion; for sure, it can bring out the worst: cruelty, cowardice, opportunism.

Nevertheless, war can be also understood as a new beginning: it is a destructive power but on the debris of the old something new can be built. I believe that it was Descartes who first used this metaphor, saying that only after dismantling an old house are we able to lay a sound foundation for a new building. This thinking, similar to Heraclitus's, stresses the two-fold character of war and destruction: it is bad when it leads only to decay, but it can have many good outcomes when it means giving way to something new. It is questionable here if we can equate new with good but such progressive thinking was typical for modern times. Georg Wilhelm Friedrich Hegel, who was very much concerned with the theme of the end and the beginning, understood the end (also the end of art) as indispensable from a certain state of knowledge. Knowledge here is (as usual) very positively evaluated and hence the end itself seems to be something rather positive. It is typical of Hegel that every single moment of decadence is a moment of triumph at the same time. A certain form of the Spirit reaches a culmination and its excellence and from this point it is able to see that there is nothing more for it to achieve. Applying this thinking to war, we notice that it destroys peace but thanks to that it allows things to be seen from a new and different perspective. To me, this is exactly the *modus operandi* of modern art: it breaks the rules of traditional art and abandons old habits; it is powerful, rebellious and disturbing. By aesthetic shock, it aspires to make people rethink their standards and principles. Pablo Picasso said, for instance: "No, painting is not made to decorate apartments. It is an offensive and defensive weapon against the enemy"³. But he was not the first to recognise art's political power. In a pamphlet originating from the 19th century, ascribed to the French socialist Henri de Saint-Simon, we find the following sentences:

Let us [artists] unite. To achieve our single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas. [...] We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive"⁴.

³ See: H. B. Chipp, *Theories of Modern Art*, Berkeley–London 1984, p. 487.

⁴ Quotation after: *The Challenge of the Avant-Garde*, ed. P. Wood, New Haven–London 1999, p. 36.

According to this manifesto, artists should be warriors, fighters for new ideas which, thanks to their efforts, will permeate people's minds and open a new epoch not only in art history, but in the broader history of mankind. It is, by the way, interesting that this passage, very often quoted as an early example of avant-garde thinking of art, is in fact an expression of how art may be treated as a tool and not as an autonomous goal in itself. However, the notion of an avant-garde, used here for the first time in history with reference to art, has an obvious military connotation and is strongly linked to war. It is of course a metaphorical use of this notion but examining its original and literal meaning may help us understand this metaphor better and thus grasp the similarities between art and war.

The term "avant-garde"⁵ comes from French and means a fore-guard or a front-guard, that is a group of soldiers (usually from the 1/4 up to the 1/3 of the whole troop) sent about 20 miles away from the main forces in order to conduct reconnaissance. It is designed to defeat small enemy forces and inform the main unit about larger ones. Two elements of this definition are most significant: that the avant-garde is relatively numerous and that it marches unassisted for a relatively small distance. Hence the Polish critic Ignacy Fik wrote:

The fore-guard has to for-see, but not for itself. From its nature results a tactical recommendation: the avant-garde is obliged to make discoveries. It has to hack through the most overgrown thickets, exploit every idea. Even negative experiences are valuable. The avant-garde explores, errs, experiments – but as a victory it takes only apt and utile experiences. Fully autonomous fore-guard turns into a partisan detachment. Its only success then is a beautiful adventure⁶.

This means that, although the avant-garde's tasks are important and necessary, it is obliged to stay connected with the main forces all the time and it is not fully independent. It is a part of a larger company and as such it works to its advantage. During war manoeuvres, breaking the chain between the main forces and the avant-garde is a failure of the latter. In no army of the world would such a disconnection be desirable.

This is different from an artistic avant-garde which, I think, usually aims at disconnecting from traditional art. Being an institution inside an institution (as

⁵ I used the following works on military services: J. Bordziłowski, *Mała encyklopedia wojskowa*, t. 1, Warszawa 1967; S. Koziej, *Teoria sztuki wojennej*, Warszawa 2011; *Leksykon wiedzy wojskowej*, red. M. Laprus, Warszawa 1979.

⁶ Quotation after: S. Jaworski, *Awangarda*, Warszawa 1992, p. 282–283 [translation mine].

Mieczysław Porębski called it)⁷, the avant-garde wants to liberate itself from any form of dominance and rule. Like a military avant-garde it is a group of brave, courageous people but, unlike it, it is not interested in the good of the main forces. For the artistic avant-garde, the art of the past is a mortal enemy that should be destroyed. Neo-impressionist painter Paul Gauguin said once that art is either revolution or plagiarism, thus expressing the belief common among modern artists that only innovative art is worthy and should overcome traditional academic conservative art. The avant-garde should be interested in movement over stillness, in transgression rather than a simple progression, in achieving more than just achievements. (It is important to remember that this applies not only to the achievements of the art of the past but also to the achievements of the avant-garde, which should not turn into a repeated model of creation). The artists of the late 19th and the early 20th century were very much concerned with gaining independence from academies and searching for their path towards artistic autonomy. It should be noticed that independence and autonomy are very often presented both as a reason and justification of war, which aims at establishing new political, social, cultural and economical order. Theda Shapiro described the similarities between the 20th century thinking of art and war in following words:

In attacking middle-class taste and academic rigidity, many painters employed such words as “revolution” and “struggle” which were common to contemporary leftist rhetoric as well. Their conception of the connection between art and revolution would become clear only later, and in response to world events; now they were convinced that they were revolutionizing the arts and sensed their artistic revolt would set them up against society at large⁸.

Picasso, describing his famous painting *Guernica* (which was in fact an anti-war manifestation), said: “I make paintings that bite. [...] A good painting – any painting – ought to bristle with razor blades”⁹. Art is not – and should not be – an innocent and ineffective practice. It should be powerful and influential. It can be seen that such declarations, exhorting artists to a constant fight and overcoming outdated forms of art, often resemble the rhetoric of army commanders’ speeches, and indeed their main task was to encourage

⁷ M. Porębski, *Sztuka a informacja*, Kraków–Wrocław 1986, p. 170.

⁸ T. Shapiro, *Painters and Politics. The European Avant-Garde and Society, 1900–1925*, New York 1976, p. 89.

⁹ See: H. Gardner, *Creating Minds. An Anatomy of Creativity Seen Through the Lives of Freud, Einstein, Picasso, Stravinsky, Eliot, Graham, and Gandhi*, New York 1993, p. 170.

and inspire soldiers for a battle. It is perhaps not a coincidence that the artistic avant-garde emerged at a time when the Western world stood on the threshold of war. However, such a forceful, sudden revolt against the prevailing art and eager search for something absolutely new was a fresh phenomenon itself. None of the earliest centuries had experienced such an explicit notion of artistic revolution, perhaps partly because none of the earliest centuries had experienced revolution on such a scale. This deep crisis within old Europe and its culture would in turn somehow affect the art of that time. Oswald Spengler thought modernistic art to be one of the signs of the decline of the West but it seems to me that he mistook effects for causes. It was rather the decline of the Western culture that translated into a decline of some traditional forms of art and artistic expression, rather than the corruption of the art contributing to the general decay. Only a few decades earlier, the Franco-Prussian war did not find its reflection in the art of the French Impressionists, even though they were truly interested in their contemporaneity. In 1870 and 1871 they painted sunny landscapes, women and men enjoying themselves and children playing, just as they had done before and after the war. The dark and pessimistic experience of war did not match their light and joyful style. They were also uninterested in the social critique which underpinned only a few impressionist paintings (such as Manet's *The Absinthe Drinker* or Degas's *Glass of Absinthe*, clearly the examples of an interest in social problems unconnected with war). It was only the avant-garde that considered war an important stimulus for artistic practice.

This could have had either a positive or negative influence on art. For the Italian futurists, who established their movement in 1910, it was a favourable circumstance for their work. Having proclaimed the aesthetics of war and power, they praised war as “the only hygiene of the world”¹⁰ in their manifestos. “We want no part of it, the past, we the young and strong futurists”¹¹, they declared. For them, art was a war, a war against tradition and stagnation, a war that was going to open a new era in the history of art. Therefore they thought that “art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty and injustice”¹². When the First World War broke out, they welcomed it enthusiastically and a lot of them participated in it, while some of them died. We find a very characteristic

¹⁰ F. T. Marinetti, *Futuristic Manifesto*, [online]: <http://vserver1.cscs.lsa.umich.edu/~crshalizi/T4PM/futurist-manifesto.html> [accessed: 16.05.2015].

¹¹ Quotation after: M. Gayford, K. Wright, *The Grove Book of Art Writing. Brilliant Writing on Art from Pliny the Elder to Damien Hirst*, New York 2000, p. 201.

¹² F. T. Marinetti, op. cit.

passage in the diary of Umberto Boccioni (who died in 1916 after he fell from a horse during war manoeuvres):

Marvellous! Ten days of march in the high mountains with cold, hunger, thirst! [...] Sleeping in the open under the rain at 1400 meters. [...] The enemy tried to stop us with a terrible crossfire. [...] 240 shrapnels fell on my detachment! They were greeted with ironic laughs. [...] The war is a beautiful thing, marvellous, terrible! Later, in the mountains, it seemed like a battle with the infinite. Grandiosity, immensity, life and death! [...] I am happy and proud to be a simple soldier and humble co-operator in this grandiose work! Viva l'Italia!¹³

Of course, not all the artists were so enthusiastic about the war. The Dadaists, another radical avant-garde formation, were deeply disgusted with the war and they fled to Switzerland, which remained neutral in the conflict, to avoid recruitment. They did not want to take part in what they called a slaughter. The World War – or the Great War, as it was then called because no one knew that there would soon be another war – was for them an ultimate sign of the crisis of culture. Facing this crisis, they felt entitled to mock this culture and provoke it. In their works and actions, constructive tendencies, as well as destructive, manifested themselves - destructive, because some old myths and rules were rejected; constructive, because new ones were established. Here, I believe, it is apparent that we can understand Dada – and the whole European avant-garde of the first half of the 20th century – both as the end of art and as its renewal. Dadaist art was mischievous, humorous, witty and very often politically aware. This is especially true of the *Berliner Dada*, a group of artists who explicitly expressed their political engagement and objection to the system. Their 1920 exhibition “Berlin Dada Fair”, where the artists suspended a pig-headed puppet of a Prussian officer from the ceiling, became notorious. The work was entitled *Prussian Archangel*. It was accompanied by a sign saying “In order to understand this work of art completely, one should drill daily for twelve hours with a heavily packed knapsack in full marching order in the Tempelhof Field [a military training ground in Berlin]”¹⁴. The Dadaists opposed the futurists in almost every way possible but their artistic and social activity was as much affected by the war as the futurists’. Moreover, both futuristic and Dadaist artists (along with the cubists, the expressionists,

¹³ T. Shapiro, op. cit., pp. 137–138.

¹⁴ See the description of the event at the website of the National Gallery of Art in Washington, [online] <https://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2006/dada/cities/berlin.shtm> [accessed: 16.05.2015].

the surrealists, and others) employed some war strategies in their work, such as aggressive offence and unexpected attack. The avant-garde artists wanted to take their public by surprise, to make them feel insecure.

Since the avant-garde art was co-formed, influenced and inspired by the ideas of power and war and the war itself, how did it react to the end of war? Here I want to quote Fernand Léger, one of the most prominent painters of the first half of the 20th century:

1918: peace. Man, exasperated, tensed, depersonalised for four years, finally raised his head, opened his eyes, looked around, relaxed, and rediscovered his taste for life. A frenzy of dancing, of spending... able at last to walk upright, to shout, to fight, to waste. Living forces, now unleashed, filled the world. The yellow canary and the red flower are still there, but no one longer sees them: through the open window, the wall across the street, violently coloured, comes into your house. Enormous letters, figures twelve feet high, are hurled into the apartment. Colour takes over. It is going to dominate everyday life. One will have to adjust to it¹⁵.

In the writings of Léger we can find a half-fictitious, half-humorous story: in the entrenchments of the world war he spent hours gazing at his rifle and this made him understand the beauty of a mechanism, of a machine – a true beauty of the modern world. The war served as a source of inspiration for the artist. It could be a negative inspiration, which did not free one's creativity and innovativeness but one's fear and deep need for the expression of this fear. Nevertheless, it could find its depiction both in the themes and forms of art. Not only were pictures of war (as Otto Dix's well-known portfolio of fifty etchings called *Der Krieg – War*) influenced by the conflict, but also pictures of machines, of people, of every-day life – because machines, people and every-day life were also deeply influenced by the war. War experiences translated into an altered perception of the world as unstable, unpredictable, unbelievable. The rather long passage cited above expresses Léger's belief that one should live and create in a state of constant tension and anxiety, war being a perfect example of such a state. But Léger's work did not change much after the war: it always used to be colourful, energetic, vivid. This raises the question of peace time for artistic creativity. The world wars are over and for the last seventy years we have been living in a relatively harmonious and stable environment. There are no actual military conflicts in Western and Central Europe. Although the European societies are constantly horrified by the apocalyptic vision of World War III, it is still only a vision and now the fourth generation of

¹⁵ F. Léger, *Functions of Painting*, ed. E. F. Fry, London, 1973, p. 120.

people is growing up without experiencing the war. It is experienced only in a mediated way, by studying history or learning about current foreign conflicts. The war seems to be something distant, both historically and geographically. It may be said that it is this state of peace and stability that enables artists to be truly creative and gives them opportunities to work without any obstacles, to exhibit their works without any censorship, and to exchange ideas without any political restrictions depending on their nationality. However, there is no war in a literal sense that can inspire Léger's and the futurists' contemporary successors. This raises two questions: firstly, if there is anyone who could be Léger's, the futurists' and the avant-gardists' successor? Secondly, if there is no external war which co-forms art, can we perhaps talk about war in art?

To answer these questions, we should first notice that there are virtually no artists who openly admit that they are continuators and imitators of the art of Léger, futurists and other avant-garde artists who were inspired by their contemporaneity. The art of the 21st century, although deeply rooted in its times and very often socially engaged, understands this engagement in a completely different way. It does not praise the war nor does it apply military categories to the sphere of art. Rather, it is pacifistic and non-violent. Even the most radical depictions of cruelty and horror aim at a critique of it and not a justification. For contemporary artists, the question about the legitimacy of war is plain nonsense. On the other hand, it seems to me that the contemporary world of art, after long decades of radical artistic practices, resembles nowadays the world that Hannah Arendt described: a world where everything is permitted. But, unlike Arendt's totalitarian world of warfare, it is not true that in the world of art nothing is true. Although today almost everything can be presented, perceived, sold and bought as art, there are still art critics who judge it and refer to it as good or bad art. A real war may make all moral arguments invalid but in the artworld we still can use aesthetic arguments. I cannot argue with the fact that something is exhibited in a gallery as art but I am not indignant with modern art, even with its most radical, violent, abrupt forms because I am still capable of disqualifying them as poor art when they do not meet some standards; for example, they are not interesting, innovative or clever. We cannot condemn something just because we do not understand it. We cannot say that things are getting worse than they used to be just because we are not able to see why they are in some respects better (or just as good as they were). However, as I have written before, almost everything can be presented as art. The fight for aesthetic freedom ended in victory many decades ago. This is why Zygmunt Bauman thought the avant-garde to be impossible in a postmodern world. He wrote:

The paradox of the avant-garde is that it took success for the sign of failure, while defeat meant to it a confirmation of being in the right. The avant-garde suffered when public recognition was denied – but it felt tormented even more when dreamt-of acclaim and applause finally arrived. The rightness of its own reasons and the progressiveness of the steps it took, the avant-garde measured by the depth of its own isolation and the power of resistance of all those whom it set out to convert¹⁶.

When artists can be whoever they want and create whatever they desire, we can no longer apply the idea of war to the sphere of art. However, for a long time we could, and I believe that it is interesting and informative to examine the mutual influence of our understanding of art and war. The main similarities between war and modern art are unquestionable: they are both strongly connected with the ideas of power and influence, both have deep social consequences, both are set in the present but they also result from the past – they are conducted here and now, but they can be understood only through the understanding of previous historical events. During the war, just as with the artistic avant-garde, every order is transitional and temporary. Art is only one of the examples of applying the idea of war to non-military spheres of human activity but I am strongly convinced that art theory was the first and original field of this application and that it can still be inspiring. Moreover, it makes contemporary art still more powerful and thus art may be an inspiration for powerful social acts and manifestations. Nothing in the world of art could remain exactly the same after the avant-garde (which was once compared to a furious storm that gave it a good lashing). Everything was to change. The avant-garde showed that a development of art is an endless process of destroying old forms and habits and establishing new ones. It showed that the end of art as a very humane practice is just impossible; everything else in art is possible. As long as we stay human despite the de-humanising effect of wars, we will continue to have art and artistic experiences.

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