

The Return of the Inter-War Period Avant-Garde in Danish Poetry around the Year 2000

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While Peter Bürger in *Theorie der Avantgarde* from 1974 looks at the avant-garde as a historical chapter, Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* from 1996 describes the avant-garde as an innovative power, which, at all times, expresses itself in the art. Foster focuses on the “recycling” of previous aesthetic strategies from the avant-garde that has been (re-)emerging in the art over the last couple of years.

In my article, I will mention some of the most important ways in which this phenomenon occurs, namely: 1) Poetic works which use aesthetic strategies from the inter-war period avant-garde, 2) Essays and literary criticism discussing the inter-war period avant-garde art, and 3) Translations of poetry from the inter-war period avant-garde.

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When we look at Danish literature around the 20th century we clearly see a tendency of re-actualisation of the inter-war period of the avant-garde. Many aspects of this topic can be explained in the light of the theory of the avant-garde from the latest decades. While Peter Bürger in *Theorie der Avantgarde* from 1974 looks at the avant-garde as a historical chapter, Hal Foster in *The Return of the Real* from 1996 describes the avant-garde as an innovative power, which, at all times, expresses itself in the art. Foster focuses on the “recycling” of previous aesthetic strategies from the avant-garde that has been (re-)emerging in the art over the last couple of years.

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We find a number of important examples of Danish poets who, within the last couple of years, have reflected upon aesthetic strategies from the inter-war period avant-garde. Among these poets are Lars Bukdahl and Carsten René Nielsen. In the poetic practice, where the poet revives former aesthetic positions, the idea is in no way to imitate or plagiarise but to challenge and develop former discourses and ways of thinking and writing.

The rewriting of the inter-war period avant-garde aesthetics is evident in Lars Bukdahl's poetry. His debut collection of poems, *Readymade!* from 1987, consists of ekphrasises of works from artists within Dada, Surrealism and Readymade-art. The collection *Readymade!* begins with the following poem:

L.H.O.O.Q.

Look

Look

Look

Look

her arse is on fire

off she goes and bang! bang! bang! bang!

[L.H.O.O.Q.

Look

Look

Look

Look

hun har ild i røven

afsted og bang! bang! bang! bang!]

The poem plays knowingly upon Marcel Duchamp's *Mona Lisa L.H.O.O.Q.* from 1919, in which the attack of the Dada movement on the institution of art is expressed by giving Mona Lisa a moustache and using the pun as the title *L.H.O.O.Q.* = 'elle a chaud au cul'. In the elegant ekphrasis of Lars Bukdahl, the vulgar pun of Duchamp is further translated, in a twisted way, to a Danish pun ("ild i røven"), which does not describe Duchamp's erotic connotations but simply conveys a meaning of a busy lifestyle. Furthermore, the poem has a humorous metapoetic point. The graphic form of the poem visually imitates the first letter in the poem, the "L", and the word "look" is repeated four times, in a way that is giving the reader associations in the direction of a common Danish cigarette brand called "Look".

Other texts from Bukdahl's collection of poems *Readymade!* that relate to the inter-war period avant-garde are poems like "Man Ray 1921", "Dali 1931", "Ernst 1921", "De Chirico 1914", and "Duchamp 1913". The main point in Bukdahl's poems is that, on the one hand, we have a very close initiated relationship to the inter-war period avant-garde and, on the other hand, we have an attitude in the poems that differs greatly from the one you find in original avant-garde works. Avant-garde works of Duchamp, De Chirico and Dali have a very provocative effect and they were meant as an aggressive attack on society and the institution of art. Bukdahl's post-avant-garde 'rewritings', or ekphrasises, are different. Here, we find a great dose of self-irony and subtle humour. Like his predecessors, the 19-year old poet Bukdahl had no idea that his poems would change the history of art. But Lars Bukdahl's 'return of the avant-garde' also has a critical potential since the ekphrasises of Bukdahl can be read as allegories on the evolution in modern Danish literature. Right from the beginning of his authorship, Lars Bukdahl sees himself as an opposition to the symbolist and modernist tradition in Danish literature, where the poetic style and attitude of the poet is often quite ceremonious and exaggerated. In the beginning of Bukdahl's authorship in the 1980s, this tendency is very clear and, in that way, he is very much in opposition to symbolist-oriented poets like Michael Strunge, Pia Tafdrup, and Søren Ulrik Thomsen.

Carsten René Nielsen takes as his starting point a surrealist poetics. In his poetological essay "Unstable Paper Boats" ("Ubestandige papirsbåde") from 1996, Nielsen states that "the method he used may seem surrealist", but "the ideology is not surrealist". With reference to Lautréamont's surrealist credo, he adds that he has always used objects like the "sewing-machines and the umbrellas to express something about life and the world", and that the images of his poetry are always "produced in a rational way" (Nielsen 1996: 33). This interpretation of the surrealist poetics is evident if we take a look at the tendencies in Carsten René Nielsen's poetry. We will focus on the poem "Skyggernes infektioner" ("The Infections of the Shadows") from the debut collection *Mekaniker elsker maskinsyverske* (Mechanic Loves Sewing Machinist) from 1989:

She was closed like blood
and machine factory
implacable like inflammation
of the iris
until he drowned her
senses in sex
cut her open with soft scissors
and pulled the knick-knacks and garbage
of the bourgeoisie
out of her
opened the infections of the shadows
and let hope flow out onto
the operating table

[Hun var lukket som blod
og maskinfabrik
uforsonlig som betændelse
i regnbuehinden
indtil han druknede hendes
sanser i sex
skar hende op med bløde sakse
og trak borgerskabets
nipsgenstande og affald
ud af hende
åbnede skyggernes infektioner
og lod håbet flyde ud over
operationsbordet]

“The Infections of the Shadows” is constructed in relation to two levels of images or parallel stories which have a dissonant connection to each other. One part concerns a state of disease (“inflammation of the iris”, “infections”) which is supplemented with a surgical interference (“cut her open with soft scissors”, “pulled” “out of her”, “let” “flow out onto the operating table”). The other part concerns a psychological trauma (“closed”, “implacable”), which is released through a strong sexual experience (“drowned her / senses in sex”) and leads to a new positive comprehension (“let hope flow”). The course of the poem is chronological and the text can be divided into two parts: a state of ‘before’ and a state of ‘afterwards’, between which we find the main verse “cut her open with soft scissors” that contains the highlight of the poem: The surgery or the sexual act relieves the person from an unpleasant physical or psychological state.

It seems reasonable to understand the text as a traditional surrealist ‘story’ about the liberation from suppression through sexual release. The title, “The Infections of the Shadows”, and expressions such as “the knick-knacks and garbage / of the bourgeoisie” certainly point in that direction. This interpretation is also supported by the poetic strategy of using figurative language where we, like in André Breton’s dictum, have to do with levels of images that are as far away from each other as possible – yet are held together in a sudden and striking fashion. In the poem, we also find a reference to the important emblem of Surrealism: the operating table.

At the same time, we notice that the poem does not express any kind of programmatic surrealist ideology. On the contrary – with Hal Foster’s expression – we find a ‘strategic’ use of and personal view on Surrealism. Absent is, as Nielsen has pointed out in his essay “Unstable Paper boats”, the idea about poetic images as a reservoir for some kind of revolutionary potential, and the view of the poet as a prophet and a revolutionary, which is quite common in the period of Surrealism. On the contrary, we could say, that “The Infections of the Shadows” is a personal story about the connection between death and sexuality, which was a very hot topic in the late 1990s in Denmark as AIDS was a main topic of discussion at that time.

The ‘return of the inter-war period avant-garde’ in Danish literature around the year 2000 is also visible in other works than the poems of Lars Bukdahl and Carsten René Nielsen. This is remarkable in a number of essays and works on literary criticism by several older poets who have been role models for the poetic generation of the 1990s; namely Per Højholt, Poul Borum, Peter Laugesen, and Niels Frank.

In Per Højholt's case an important point has always been Højholt's fascination for Marcel Duchamp's work and the readymade as a phenomenon. The discussions of Duchamp can be recognised in most of Højholt's work and especially in his latest work *Auricula* from 2001.

The author of criticism and poetry, Poul Borum, has amongst many other things written the very influential book *Poetisk modernisme* (Modernism in Poetry) from 1966. This book, in which the inter-war period avant-garde plays a significant role, has had strong influence on several poets in Denmark in the last decades.

Another important person who has introduced the inter-war period avant-garde art is Peter Laugesen – the author of the essay collection *Kunsthistorier. Det indre rum kosmonauter* (Histories of Art. Cosmonauts of the Inner Space) from 1991. In this book, Laugesen discusses numerous important artists and works from the inter-war period avant-garde such as Kasimir Malevich, Gertrude Stein, Hugo Ball, Kandinsky, Arp, Breton, Robert Desnos, Khlebnikov, Gustaf Munch-Petersen, Gunnar Björling, and Antonin Artaud. Laugesen also focuses on American neo-avant-garde and the works of the beat generation poets and artists such as William Burroughs, Jack Kerouac, Charles Olson, John Cage, Robert Creeley, Robert Smithson, and Jackson Pollock. Since the 1960s, all of these poets and artists have been an important source of inspiration for the most recent generations of Danish poets from Klaus Høeck and Dan Turèll to Ursula Andkjær Olsen, Martin Glaz Serup and Mette Moestrup.

In the last decades, poet and critic Niels Frank has advocated a new interpretation of the inter-war period avant-garde. Niels Frank has consistently worked with poetic role models that were different from the canonised modernist role models, which you find among the Danish poets of the 1980s. Niels Frank's poetic idols are esoteric avant-garde poets such as Wallace Stevens and Gunnar Björling and, from American neo-avant-garde, John Cage and John Ashbery.

We also find another type of return of the inter-war period avant-garde in Danish poetry around the year 2000, namely the translations of poets from the time of Dada, Futurism, and Surrealism who have not previously been translated. A characteristic example is the series in 12 volumes called *Verdenslyrik* (World Poetry), edited by Erik Skyum-Nielsen and Niels Frank, in which we find a number of poets who has never been translated before. Here, we have some of the most experimental poets of the early European avant-garde such as Gertrude Stein, Max Jacob, and Kurt Schwitters. The reason for the translation of the works of these poets in recent years is that the poetry and the critique in these years in many ways correspond with the aesthetics of the inter-war avant-garde compared to earlier years.

The last example on how the avant-garde strategies of the inter-war period have had a revival around the year 2000 has to do with the use of the literary montage form. In the montage form, stylistic elements associated with different contexts are installed in one piece of art and the aim is to undermine the notion of an authoritative, monologic enunciation. A characteristic feature of the avant-garde montage is its multivoicedness as exemplified by, for instance, Peter Laugesen, Klaus Høeck, Per Aage Brandt, Claus Carstensen, Peter Nielsen, Viggo Madsen, Ursula Andkjær Olsen, Martin Glaz Serup, and Mette Moestrup.

Unfortunately there is not enough space here to discuss all aspects of the return of the inter-war period avant-garde in new Danish poetry. However, I hope that this article has given you an idea and understanding of the topic, which of course can be followed up by further discussion.

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