

Cultural Ruptures: Avant-Gardes in Context  
CSLC 603  
Spring 2022

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Office hours: Tuesday, 2:00-4:00 p.m.

Seminar: Thursday, 2:00-4:50 p.m.

This seminar explores the cultural and political contexts of avant-garde communities and their formal practices between the late nineteenth century and across the twentieth. We will draw upon the concept, theories, and forms of “rupture” to query the impact of historical events on creative practices, and to examine the conditions whereby (often radical) politics become aligned with (often radical) creative practices. Even as much of our focus will be trained on France—beginning with the photographic, artistic, and other sociocultural contexts surrounding the 1871 Paris Commune—the intellectual and historical horizon of the seminar aims to be global: in our study of the Dada Movement within the context of World War I, for example, we will not only consider the movement’s efforts to dramatically rupture the coherence of art and aesthetic experience. We will also examine how Dada’s premise and aspirations to be “global” constituted a decisive rupture early on within the discursive field of the “national,” one whose consequences might be mapped out with respect to post-colonialism, global capital, or even “the planetary.”

Furthermore, new research on Dada, Surrealism, Situationism, and the neo-avant-gardes more widely have demonstrated the urgent need for more rigorous consideration of the broader intellectual and political contexts that remain obscured in canonical accounts of vanguardism. How does avant-garde history transform when the historical contexts of anti-colonialism and decolonization, the Algerian War, or the *Négritude* movement, for example, drive the historical inquiry? How do works of art—their materials and formal attributes—assist in this enterprise? This seminar seeks to generate new knowledge and student research in these and other domains in avant-garde history and theory. Although our focus will largely be on primary materials, our reading of secondary texts are opportunities for in-depth discussions on interdisciplinary research methods and historiography.

Insofar as the intellectual and cultural history of “rupture” extends to philosophy and epistemology, uprising, war, and de/colonization, it also describes the formal procedures of avant-garde art and later modernist aesthetics (collage, photo/montage, *détournement*, chance, shock, appropriation, institutional critique, installation, happenings). This seminar proceeds from the claim that the study and careful description of form is not a neutral or a-political endeavor. On the contrary, this class understands formal inquiry—whether of film, literature, visual art, or historical actions and events—to be crucial to an understanding of the avant-garde’s engagement with its historical contexts; its expression of political subjectivities; and its ongoing utility for contemporary artists and writers (Afro-Surrealism; Black Dada).

**Primary texts, objects, films, and art works** include those by Aragon, Baudelaire, Braquehais, Breton, Broodthaers, Césaire, Debord, Godard, Isou, Jarry, Lam, Léger, Mallarmé, Man Ray,

Marker and the Medvedkin Group, Pawlowski, Perec, Picabia, Raynal, Tzara, Sarr and Vieyra, Soupault, J. Vigo, Vaneigem, Varda, Vautier, Villiers.

**Theoretical and philosophical texts** include those by Bachelard, Bataille, de Beauvoir, de Certeau, Deleuze, J. Epstein, Fanon, Glissant, Lefebvre, Rancière, Senghor.