There are almost as many different sorts of biography, as there are biographies. Each has its own conception, its own style and its own wording. A theoretical framework is seldom mentioned explicitly in a biography, but the critical reader will be interested in the choices that a biographer made to tackle his subject, the way he treated his sources or how his work differs from that of others. In recent theoretical literature on biography, a division is made between high and low biography. In high biography, the author engages critically with his sources, whereas in low biography, he just reproduces the story that someone has made up during his life. Furthermore, in low biography, the research starts with the presumption that the person under scrutiny made a set of unique choices, which made him famous, important or exciting. The question why his life is worth a biography is not addressed. In high biography, then, the unicity of a life is related to its representativity: how much can we say about the time or group in which someone lived, by describing the individual choices someone made during his life?

Questions regarding the representativity of a single life are also addressed in microhistory. In this methodology, observations on a small scale are made in order to comment upon larger developments. The participant’s perspective is central in this approach: how do individual choices or interpretations correspond with or deviate from a normative group? Whereas the socio-economic historian is often focused on developing concepts that he wants to apply to historiography from the top down, the microhistorian is mainly concerned with the process of conceptualizing itself. Microhistory is therefore not about research on tiny objects. By reducing the scale of the observation, the microhistorian can say something about bigger developments. The research into the

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individual life can offer a *corrective* to a well-established view we have of history.\(^4\) It all depends on the narrative or style of the biographer: is he able to connect the individual life to large scale developments in a convincing way?

Microhistorians prefer to use new sources in their description of cultural history. In his seminal study *The Interpretation of Cultures*, the anthropologist Clifford Geertz introduced the concept of *thick description* to show that an existing interpretation of a cultural practice should be tested by theories from different scientific disciplines. The result of this analysis would be a ‘historically transmitted pattern of meanings embodied in symbols, a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which men communicate, perpetuate and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life’.\(^5\) The symbolic embodiment of meanings is important here. Geertz invented the so-called ‘drama analogy’ to describe the meaning of various symbols and rituals in the Balinese tradition of the cock fight. In his view, this ritual could be compared with a role playing game: when different roles are carried out, people search for resemblances between their practices. This convergence leads to the formulation of new rules or protocols that can govern the social setting in which the individual is playing his role.\(^6\) It is up to the biographer to untangle the convergence of different roles: why does someone act like a father figure, for example, or as a prodigy? The biographical subject tries to give a coherent image of himself, but the biographer is capable to view this image from different angles, in order to show internal discrepancies in his self-representation.

The drama analogy also points to another aspect of microhistory: the biographer’s commitment to the participant’s perspective requires special attention to the ‘stage’ on which the action takes place. Microhistory shows in which environment the behavior and choices of the individual are fully accepted, no matter how much these deviate from our usual perception of history. In microhistory this principle is referred to as the ‘normal exception’.\(^7\) In different

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\(^6\) Clifford Geertz, ‘Thick Description. Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture’, p. 25.

domains (such as the family, or politics) people may have related differently to the existing norms in society. The biographer is able to show how different domains pertain to each other in the life of the individual. This way, individual choices can increase our understanding of the various domains in which the individual was active.

In what follows, the principle of ‘normal exception’ will be applied to the Belgian ‘constructivist’ avant-garde of the 1920s. I will argue that this avant-garde group can be seen as a normative group, which influenced the mentality of its members in a profound way. To narrow my subject, I will look at the way the theoretical treatise Über das Geistige in der Kunst, published by Wassily Kandinsky in 1912 was interpreted by one Belgian artist, Felix de Boeck (1898–1995). Artists belonging to what we now call the avant-garde of the 1920s almost never described themselves as ‘avant-garde’ – they preferred to use terms such as ‘pure’, ‘communal’ or ‘constructivist’ artists, although they all gave a slightly different meaning to these terms. But one can say that they were all profoundly influenced by Kandinsky’s art theory. For example, artists and writers like Jozef Peeters, Jos Leonard and Paul van Ostaijen were under his spell for a period of time. This influence can only be recognized fully once you have made yourself familiar to Kandinsky’s theoretical writings. The same is true for biographies of these artists: the life of many artists that belonged to the avant-garde of the 1920s, was modelled after Kandinsky’s theoretical viewpoints. Not only the artists themselves were responsible for this modelling, but also their biographers: for a long time, they took the narrative for granted that an avant-garde artist should live like a visionary hermit, as someone who is ahead of his time and his people. According to this narrative, members of the avant-garde were not influenced by others, nor did they make artistic work to make a living out of it. Although the avant-garde of the 1920s is now part of ‘high’ culture, the biographies that are written about the individual artists that belonged to this group, can often be considered ‘low’ in the sense that they do not question their self-representation.

Felix de Boeck argued that the reason Kandinsky’s Über das Geistige in der Kunst was so widely approved of by those of his generation, was because it was seen as a justification of the earlier cubist, fauvist, and futurist develop-

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ments in their work. For that reason he claimed that his first abstract work, which he created in 1919, was an 'oeuvre créatrice d'une génération spontanée': something that had spontaneously developed in his artistic evolution. The new approaches to art, as practiced by various members of the avant-garde, invoked various practices in De Boeck's own life, as well in his art. Especially after four of his five children died at a young age, De Boeck wanted to provide a spiritual value to his paintings. By comparing his artistic practice with a form of prayer – he could only work on his paintings on Sundays – he was able to cope with his grief over this loss. This conviction lead him to believe that the spirit of his dead children was present in his paintings: he could not sell them, but preferred to give them away.

De Boeck had not read Kandinsky himself, but Über das Geistige in der Kunst was widely discussed at the meetings held every Saturday at his family farm in Drogenbos, just outside of Brussels. The artist was able to keep a degree of naïveté with regard to the formal and substantial problems of the art of his time, because he was an autodidact. There was no possibility for him to follow lessons in art schools, since these were closed during the Great War and because his father needed him to work on the farm. But in his spare time, he did read a lot of avant-garde treatises, such as Wilhelm Worringer’s Abstraktion und Einfühlung (1908) and Theo van Doesburg’s De nieuwe beweging in de schilderkunst (1917). There is no oral or written account of what De Boeck actually thought about these art theories. In what follows, a microhistorical method is used to show that the choices and interpretations he made during his life, cannot be understood without taking Kandinsky’s avant-garde model into account.

1 Kandinsky’s Model

In the avant-garde of the 1920s, a ‘German model’ can be designated, in which artists from various European countries simultaneously focused on constructivism as promoted by Kandinsky. The Bauhaus in Weimar was one of the
first institutions to give substance that model. In the Bauhaus, art and life came together in a new way: artists from various disciplines lived in small communities, in which they collaborated in an organized way on a *Gesamtkunstwerk*. The projects that the Bauhaus embarked on in the first years, from 1919 to 1922, had a utopian, quasi-religious character in particular.12

By the time the German avant-garde model was introduced in Belgium in 1919, Kandinsky had already left his position as a champion of innovation in art. During a trip to his Russian motherland in 1919, he had experienced the introduction of the Soviet program. That had made him lose all hope with regard to the spiritual values in art: artists were only allowed to make art that was in service of the worker. For that reason, during his lessons at the Bauhaus, which he started in 1922, he would teach his own art theory in a cut-down form. The fact that *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* was nevertheless so influential in Western Europe suggests that at least contradictions can be identified in its reception by various members of the avant-garde.13

In his art theory, Kandinsky searched for an underlying structure, which he called the ‘internal necessity’ of a work of art, that allowed it to move beyond time and space, beyond the personal and the national.14 In order to meet this principle of ‘internal necessity’ artists had to search for a striking style, which he described as one of ‘clashing dissonants’.15 He called on artists to combine seemingly incompatible qualities in their work, such as strong color contrasts and spatial disorder, that could provoke feelings of chaos in the art viewer. This way, artists could detach themselves from academic prescriptions to base their work on a narrative or anecdote, or from conventional notions of beauty and harmony. Kandinsky believed that modern music in particular best expressed the anarchist principle of clashing dissonants. It was explicitly made to shock the public.16

After reading Kandinsky, members of the ‘constructivist’ avant-garde of the 1920s chose to base their paintings no longer on perception. Instead they ascribed a spiritual quality to their work which served to give them autonomy from reality. The choice of the avant-garde for autonomous art and a non-Catholic spirituality stood in stark contrast to the artistic practices prescribed

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by the Catholic Church. Among themselves too artists had different views about how their abstract paintings should relate to the real world. Though this work is often labeled as ‘constructivist’, in fact a spectrum of artistic views hide behind this label, more or less recognizing the possibility of religious inspiration.

De Boeck borrowed from Über das Geistige in der Kunst a ‘constructivist’ art practice. This practice deviated to a certain extent from the way in which his contemporaries gave substance to constructivism. In the historiography of the avant-garde of the 1920s, there is a tendency to reduce constructivist art to its formal qualities. There is little to no mention of the various spiritual orientations that these artists derived from Kandinsky. This one-sided interpretation could be due to a radical form of Marxist cultural criticism, which gained popularity in Western Europe in the 1950s.

One of these Marxist critics was Peter Bürger, a philosopher who saw the avant-garde as a movement attacking the institution of art itself. In his book Theory of Avant-Garde he contended the division between art history and the history of philosophical reflections on art. The aesthetician should be aware of the bourgeois circumstances in which the avant-garde developed, paving the way for new categories to judge art. Bürger saw the avant-garde as a historical phenomenon, independent from other movements, such as modernism. He ascribed a form of institutional self-criticism to the way the avant-garde discussed the autonomy of the arts: the artistic practice of the avant-garde could not simply be integrated in other practices of daily life. What we are used to see as the ‘autonomy of the arts’, is in fact an ideological category of bourgeois society. On the one hand, the avant-garde showed that a certain artistic detachment was possible from other human activities, but on the other, the art historian cannot deny the fact that this detachment is the result of a socio-historic process. In bourgeois society, we learned to judge avant-garde art as an independent category. According to Bürger, the goals, production and recep-

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tion of the modernist artwork could be completely different compared to, for example, a religious artwork.\textsuperscript{20}

The life of De Boeck shows that an autonomist view of the artist in fact could be combined with other practices. De Boeck said he gained ‘spiritual freedom’ by working on his art solely on Sundays. He lived autonomously as a farmer in Drogenbos, and never took the initiative to organize exhibitions or to sell his paintings in galleries. He saw himself as an outsider, whose avant-garde perspective on modernist art was not influenced by others. Nonetheless his farm attracted people from around Belgium to discuss his art with him. Thus, he indeed attacked the very institution of art, since his income was enough to be independent of the museum or gallery world. Although he saw a kind of self-criticism in his involvement in the avant-garde, this was mostly influenced by his religious upbringing. He wanted to show that his abstract art could be combined with Roman-Catholic motives, such as the crucifix and the holy cross. In his constructivist art practice, De Boeck did not merely show an idealistic longing for redemption from the influence of social structures. He also embodied a cultural critique in a way that combined a certain optimism with an ascetic life style. In a letter to his friend, the artist Prosper de Troyer, he wrote that: ‘A worker is such a peculiar person, elevated above the masses [...] It is perhaps more correct to state that we are not superior, but happier people.’\textsuperscript{21} In De Boeck's view, the worker is elevated above the common people because according to him society should not be arranged according to a capitalist order, but to the degree in which people are happy. This non-capitalist interpretation of his artistic practice can be regarded as a clue to the divergent mentality of the rural avant-garde artist.

\section{Avant-Garde and Kitsch}

The radical aesthetic innovation that was proposed by the avant-garde of the 1920s, can be discerned in a distinct way from the broader field of modernism. Whereas modernism engaged with the approval or declination of modernity, avant-garde was as a more fundamental counterpart to conventional art or kitsch, made for the masses. This dichotomy formed the starting point of the American critic Clement Greenberg in his influential essay ‘Avant-Garde and

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\item \textsuperscript{20} Bürger, \textit{Theory of the Avant-Garde}, p. 48.
\item \textsuperscript{21} Letter by Felix de Boeck to Prosper de Troyer, ‘April 1920’, photocopy in private archive Felix de Boeck, Drogenbos, own translation.
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Kandinsky seen through the eyes of Felix de Boeck

According to Greenberg, the avant-garde could be seen as an artistic elite, which had its roots in nineteenth century bohemia: art should not be meddled by politics. The avant-garde was to be seen as an independent category in society, searching for ‘pure’, ‘abstract’, ‘non-objective’ or ‘non-representational’ art in order to free culture from ideological dispute. Since the introduction of the avant-garde, art had become its own object, whereas the social-realism as dictated by the Soviet states had only served the mediocre taste of the masses.

Although Greenberg wanted to believe otherwise, the avant-garde of the 1920s did meddle with politics. The self-referentiality that he saw as a distinct feature of the avant-garde art, was in fact for many artists a way to express an utopian ideal: they wanted to show an esoteric connection between art and life. Following Kandinsky’s theory, artists like Theo van Doesburg or Jozef Peeters wanted to start an international artist’s league, representing the concerns of the artist in other realms of society. Each in their own way, they propagated a non-political art that was neither serving the masses, nor could it be called ‘bourgeois’. Their art was able to show the way to a new society, as long as it was not subjected to party politics, nationalism or religious dogma. The avant-garde of the 1920s was not so much concerned with the formal qualities of art itself, as Greenberg’s autonomist perspective suggested. These formal qualities could better be described as the expression of a universal ‘spirit’ that the artist wanted to express, in order to invoke a mystic union between art and society.

Apart from a few exceptions, such as Sixten Ringbom’s study: The sounding cosmos. A study in the Spiritualism of Kandinsky and the Genesis of Abstract Painting (1970), from the 1950s onward it was considered not done to interpret abstract art based on allusions to esoteric modes of thinking. Such interpretations were seen as a defense of the ‘occult’ Nazi Germany, even though the Nazis themselves dismissed constructivism as ‘degenerate art.’ This one-sided interpretation can cause the modern day cultural historian to lose sight

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24 Hubert van den Berg, ‘Avant-garde art as art at the service of the revolution’, p. 59.

of the artist’s individual agency. Indeed, De Boeck derived his agency from the occult concepts in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* in a way that differs from that of his contemporaries. For members of this avant-garde, a self-representation as an autonomous artist was very important. The true artist was expected to be in the vanguard, to come up with new ideas on his own and in doing so, to not be influenced by predecessors.\(^{26}\) This view of the avant-garde required a great deal of dedication to the arts, which could not be combined with other activities. In addition to this ascetic desire for purity or control, the avant-garde also promised freedom. It presented itself as if it were able to open its eyes to a new society that could arise if all artificial structures in ‘old’ society were removed. This urge to get rid of artificial structures was often formulated using the discourse of a *rupture intégrante*: by using older traditions, such as Catholicism or mysticism, the new art was made comprehensible.\(^{27}\) The Belgian avant-gardists searched for a spirituality that was behind the visible reality. The way they thus distanced themselves from society, can be described in spatial terms: they needed a physical seclusion in order to get a higher state of mind. Their representation of the artist’s workshop can be compared to a convent, which could only be visited after undertaking a pilgrimage. Avant-gardists wanted their art to belong to a ‘community’, in which an exchange could take place of the ‘codes’ needed to get a deeper understanding of the structures that held society in captivity.\(^{28}\)

3 Center and Periphery

The Belgian constructivist avant-garde often portrayed itself as if the big city was its ‘natural’ habitat. It was in the cultural centers of Antwerp or Brussels where innovation in the arts happened, because this is where artists came into contact with one another, exchanged ideas, and presented their work. The avant-garde derived its identity from this urban orientation: the city offered opportunities to develop an ascetic way of life, which was utterly


\(^{27}\) Durand argues that, in order to convince people of its radical urge for renewal in the arts, the avant-garde made use of a ‘banal reduction’ [*une banalisation réductive*] of existing practices or ‘codes’. Pascal Durand, ‘D’une rupture intégrante. Avant-garde et transactions symboliques’, in: *Pratiques* 50 (1986), p. 41.

not hampered by the need to earn a living. This representational space also implied a new relationship between the artist and the people, who, with the help of ‘functional’ architecture and constructivist paintings, could be made aware of the purity of the spiritual world beyond observable reality.29

Due to a historiography of the avant-garde dominated by American critics such as Greenberg or Alfred Barr, the first director of the Museum of Modern Art, the avant-garde was very much associated with internationalism. This made later art historians turn a blind eye on nationalisms in the avant-garde.30 The so-called Flemish activism is a specific case in point. This nationalist movement was harshly repressed after the First World War by the Belgian government, since it brought about a transformation by the Dutch speaking younger generation, who joined forces against the French speaking ruling classes. The activists made use of a pacifist, communist or internationalist discourse. Radical members of the avant-garde wanted to connect with the most progressive wing of the Flemish Movement. They questioned the continued existence of the Belgian nation, mostly out of spiritual motives, such as their belief in universal peace.31 This opened their minds to international developments in the arts, like fauvism, futurism or constructivism – but most of the time they gave a national orientation to it: to show that Flemish culture could exist in its own right.

This nationalism was not unique to Belgium: different avant-garde centers in Europe (Paris, Berlin, Weimar) were in fact competing with each other.32 It is often argued that within the European avant-garde network, a non-hierarchical structure could be identified, of which artists could become a member, regardless the language they were speaking.33 But in Belgium, with its continuous struggle for emancipation of Dutch speaking culture against a francophone elite, the situation was different. In Belgium, a binary model

between the center (Brussels or Antwerp) and the surrounding periphery was adopted. Many Flemish constructivists, like Jozef Peeters, questioned the status of Paris as a cultural center, whereas their francophone contemporaries were much more oriented towards this city.\(^{34}\)

As a result of his bilingualism, De Boeck functioned as a gatekeeper between the two language communities in Belgium. It appeared that the division between center and periphery was not very clear: in fact, his farm was mostly visited by both Dutch- and French speaking inhabitants of Brussels, who liked to take a walk from the Brussels-South railway station to the countryside. De Boeck’s life was seen by his Dutch speaking friends as a symbol of old Flemish values, connected to the soil he was toiling, the family life and Christian faith. By his francophone friends, the fact was promoted that he spoke French fluently, had exhibited in Paris and came into contact with members of the international avant-garde there, like Piet Mondrian and Michel Seuphor. But this did not hamper this self-representation as an authentic Flemish farmer. De Boeck preferred to stay in Drogenbos, and let the people come to his place. Thus, he was active in different networks: some transnational, some not.

4 Conclusion

De Boeck had not read Kandinsky, but art historian Bart Cassiman makes a plausible case that a ‘diluted form’ of Kandinsky’s conception of art was definitely known to him.\(^{35}\) Cassiman points to the importance De Boeck attached to an ‘inner necessity’ for example in the fact he only worked on his paintings on Sundays. The artist was to surrender himself completely to his artistic craft, but in doing so also had to be able to make himself ‘spiritually free’, meaning: his mind should be free of the occupations of daily life.

De Boeck was convinced that with his abstract paintings he could bring about a special kind of communication with the art viewer. In this way he also explained his urge to work in a serial manner. Every time he painted an abstract painting, he contributed to the formation of a new thought within

\(^{34}\) Paenhuysen argues that one can find a defense of regionalism within the Flemish avant-garde next to the usual cosmopolitanism. An Paenhuysen, De Nieuwe Wereld. Wonderjaren van de Belgische avant-garde (1918–1939) (Amsterdam and Antwerp: Meulenhoff and Manteau, 2010), p. 11–24.

\(^{35}\) Bart Cassiman, *Felix de Boeck of de weg van de plastique pure sentimentale naar het ver-geestelijkt realisme*, p. 168.
the art viewer, because it was made in a new state of mind. De Boeck may have derived this desire to come into contact with the spirit of his audience indirectly from Kandinsky: in conversations with his comrades, he must have been convinced of Kandinsky’s view of the artist’s spiritual abilities. In *Über das Geistige in der Kunst*, the art theorist presented himself as a Messiah, whose purpose was the spiritual awakening of humanity.

Kandinsky’s universalism, which aimed to show within the painting an expression of the ‘pure and eternally artistic’, had with De Boeck made way for a Catholic perspective, to find the hand of God in each work. His self-representation had the characteristics of a calling: he wanted to sublimate his religious feelings in his abstract paintings, which would reveal themselves to the art viewer in a mystical way. His portraits too were provided with this aura: he often made a series of portraits of the same person in different color compositions, in which each portrait expressed different states of mind. De Boeck combined his Catholicism with a constructivist perspective on art. With Kandinsky, he saw the materialism of modern society as the reason why people were turned against each other, and why there was no longer a shared awareness of the humanitarian community.

In their descriptions of the Belgian constructivist avant-garde, art historians were often simply reproducing the contingencies of De Boeck’s life. The way he represents himself as belonging to the ‘periphery’ of the art scene is taken for granted. In fact, there was a continuous interface between Brussels and its periphery. The dominant status of Brussels in Belgium did not remain unquestioned in other centers, such as Antwerp or Paris, or even in rural artist’s communities as Sint-Martens-Latem. Artists who were not working in Brussels, were not automatically reduced to the dominated periphery. In their self-representation, avant-garde artists were all too convinced of their views upon the dichotomy between ‘center’ and ‘periphery’, or between ‘art’ and ‘community’. Their biography can show that they were in fact full of doubts about these divisions: they could easily jump from one view to the other. This oscillation was characteristic for the avant-garde of the 1920s, but also for later generations. In this research, Greenberg’s division between avant-garde and kitsch, based upon the self-referentiality of art, appeared not adequate to describe the ‘spiritual modernism’ of De Boeck. He was more concerned with how art could contribute to a new world. Whether this ideal was reached with help of ‘pure’ art or with help of political or religious ideas, was seen by him as two sides of the same coin.

Although he wanted his biographers to believe otherwise, De Boeck’s position as an artist was not as isolated from the rest of the constructivist group. Instead, it is better described as the result of a continuous exchange between
the group mentality of the avant-garde and the artist’s own normative values. In this article, the way De Boeck’s individual life deviates from or concords with these mentalities and values was problematized. Depending on his self-education, Catholic faith and income from non-artistic work, De Boeck was able to describe his agency as ‘autonomous’ to a certain degree.

The motivations the Belgian constructivist avant-garde had for the spiritual interpretations of their art showed something of their mentality. In the biographies of these artists, attention should be paid to their combinatorial abilities to bring together different views on art. I was able to show that the origin of many of these views could be found in Kandinsky’s Über das Geistige in der Kunst. The big city seemed to be environment in which the ‘different’ behavior and choices of the avant-garde artist were fully accepted. The constructivist mentality, with its unusual combination of freedom and control, of anarchy and mysticism, was more prevalent in the city than in the countryside. Still, the example of De Boeck showed that in the countryside too, in spite of the dominant Catholicism, there was a certain freedom to give his own substance to the spiritual value of abstract art.