

Rethinking the Vanguard

Rethinking the Vanguard:
Aesthetic and Political Positions
in the Modernist Debate, 1917-1962

By

John W. Maerhofer

**CAMBRIDGE
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P U B L I S H I N G

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Individual personality plays a role in mobilizing and leading the masses insofar as it embodies the highest virtues and aspirations of the people and does not wander from the path

It is the vanguard group which clears the way, the best among the good, the party.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

Every theoretical tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organizational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfillment in practice.

—Georg Lukács

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PREFACE AND ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

The following study offers a reinterpretation of avant-garde art and politics from early to mid-twentieth century. It grew out of my dissertation work completed at the Graduate Center of the City University of New York in 2007, yet also reflects my continuing interest in aesthetics and politics from the modernist era to the contemporary period. Historically speaking, this study encompasses two global wars, the rise of radical movements on the political left, Fascism in Italy and Germany, the anticolonial struggles from the early 1950's to the Algerian War for independence, as well as the failure of monopoly capitalism in the 1930's to its hegemonic reestablishment in the post-World War II era. As my students through the years have come to discover, often through struggles of their own with radical ideas and discussions in my courses, I refuse to utilize history as a backdrop for the study of literature and art, choosing instead, as Fredric Jameson puts it, to "historicize" texts not only in order to unveil the movement of aesthetics and politics within history, but also to create material reference points through which literary analysis can emerge dialectically, as something that is perpetually, questioningly awaiting an "absolute," yet without forcing conclusions to the immediacy of and historicity of cultural politics. Without reservations, the struggle against historical forgetfulness, which in our own era has contributed to the limitations on class struggle and the emergence of radical culture in general, is everywhere in the following study and something which, as its author, I hope to see create a materiality of awareness of radical movements that do not simply restructure the past, but that move beyond the "wishful thinking" of aesthetic and political revolt within the contemporary period.

Thus, the historical necessity of this study to which this preface refers has as much to do with the re-theorization of the past as it does with the historicity of the contemporary period. It is not surprising that there is a resurgent interest in the discourse of aesthetics and politics, avant-gardism, and the radical culture of the 1930's, for the parallels between *then* and *now* are quite apparent: inter-imperialist rivalry in the preparation for global war, deep-rooted racism and sexism, mass exploitation of labor that surpasses even the insufferable conditions of 19th century industrialization, asymmetrical development between the center and periphery topographies

which outshines the zenith of Western colonialism, and the conspicuous disparity between the voraciousness of corporate accumulation and the deprivation of basic necessities of entire populations. As I write these lines, we see both the intrinsic destructiveness of what Naomi Klein calls “disaster capitalism” as well as the aporias of late capitalist subsumption at work—cannibalism at the core of the system in its ability to overcome the crisis-of-a-crisis that continually builds upon itself at the expense of workers, students, soldiers, and the globalized *damnés de la terre*. Concomitant to the search for answers to the *crisis in representation* of modern socio-political history, thus, is the anticipation of finding solutions in writers, artists, and activists of the past century who had to contend with the catastrophes that shaped their work and whose influence is still felt in kindred spirits in the present moment. Without being overly superficial, Marxists have incessantly maintained that the global entrenchment of capital at the end of the cold war would bring about the most devastating effects on human society; the question, then, is what the intransience of the utopian principles of vanguardism can provide in the renewal of radical solutions for the present time, in building what Edward Said calls a *critical consciousness* for the futurity of revolutionary society out of the vestiges of capitalist annihilation. My hope is that the discussions offered in the following work will contribute to the materiality of that dialogue and the persistence of its historical necessity.

Parts of Chapter Four originally appeared as “Aimé Césaire and the Crisis of Aesthetic and Political Vanguardism,” in *Cultural Logic*, Tenth Anniversary Edition, 2007.

There are numerous people to thank for their assistance in the writing of this book. I especially want to thank my family for understanding, for always being there. Thanks to Mary Ann Caws, Jackie DiSalvo, and Peter Hitchcock of the City University of New York for their assistance in the early stages of this project. And I especially want to express gratitude to John Tytell, Barbara Foley, Anthony O’Brien, and Kathleen Kier for their advice and continuing support.

I dedicate this book to my life partner, Diane Lee Perez to whom I owe it all, and to my son, Tristan, for filling my heart with eternal joy.

CHAPTER ONE

THE THEORETICAL MARGINS OF THE HISTORICAL AVANT-GARDE

In his treatise on Marxist aesthetics, Herbert Marcuse argues that “The political potential of art lies only in its aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating.”¹ For Marcuse, the avant-garde artwork maintains its capability toward the “radical, transcendent goals of change” through the preservation of its autonomous status within the confines of capitalist hegemony, a point he shares with Marxist theorists of the avant-garde tradition who attempt to move beyond the rigidity of Socialist Realism and the orthodoxy of Marxist critics such as George Lukács who rejected the aesthetic avant-garde as being unable to express the needs of the revolutionary proletariat. What distinguishes Marcuse’s position is the acknowledgement that under capitalism in which we find “A universe administered by a corrupt and heavily armed monopolistic class,” it is no longer feasible for the artist of the revolutionary vanguard to claim identification with the proletariat, which Marcuse points out has been incorporated into the fold of capitalist social relations.² At the same time, the “estrangement” associated with avant-garde experimentalism inclines toward elitism in its failure to speak the language of the working class, despite political commitment on the part of the artist or movement that conveyed such objectives. As he writes, “If the subversion of experience proper to art and the rebellion against the established reality principle contained in this subversion cannot be translated into political praxis...how can this potential find valid representation in a work of art and how can it become a factor in the transformation of consciousness?”³ The predicament of revolutionary art for Marcuse lies precisely in the inconsistency between aesthetic and political representation, and yet the tension between form and content here

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), xii.

² *Ibid.*, 32.

³ *Ibid.*, 35.

outlines the “critical mimesis” necessary for the foundation of radical autonomy, or what for Marcuse is the philosophical requirement that moves revolutionary art toward a more thoroughly integrated and material praxis as it confronts capitalist social relations.

In keeping with Marcuse’s theory of the predicament of revolutionary art, this study proposes a Marxist re-theorization of avant-garde formations by focusing closely on the convergence of aesthetics and politics that materialized fully in the early part of the twentieth century, spanning the years 1917- 1962. The interconnection between revolutionary Marxism and the aesthetic response is intended to accentuate the extent to which “revolution” became a dominating signifier of avant-garde cultural production, as the standardized “manifestoes” of many of these movements illustrate, and thus established a paradigm beyond the parameters of avant-garde aestheticism. This book builds upon the seminal work of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, among others, in which the principles of avant-garde radicalism are analyzed with the intention of explaining more fully the intentionality of the avant-garde artist in his confrontation with social reality, which Bürger characterizes as an attack on bourgeois rationalism and the commodification of aesthetic autonomy. Beginning with the Aestheticism and Symbolism movements of the late 19th Century Bürger’s work is effective in interpreting the interior elements of avant-garde cultural production, which by radically dismantling the form and content of the conventional artwork, confronted the *everyday rationale* of bourgeois society, a conflict that has shaped the evolutionary discourses of modernist and postmodernist art overall.⁴ Bürger’s work, in this respect, is central in understanding the re-entrenchment of art in the “praxis of life,” and it is this “crystallization of a special sphere of experience” that also distinguishes the subsystem of avant-gardist cultural production from the overarching system of Modernism.⁵

While acknowledging that the inextricability between art and social life by the historical avant-garde is crucial to understanding the ideology of aesthetic revolt in the avant-gardist artwork, the present study also analyzes the convergence of aesthetic and political interests that not only negated the moral principles of bourgeois society but also challenged the hegemony of capitalism by utilizing the potential of the aesthetic dimension for the purposes of forging a political praxis which went

⁴ See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minneapolis Press, 1984). Bürger’s work will be analyzed further in the next section of this chapter.

⁵ Ibid., 24-25.

beyond the anarchistic isolationism of aesthetic resistance. Furthermore, this study also analyzes the tradition of Marxist criticism that has put forward a re-interpretation of modernist cultural politics, specifically as it relates to the ideological critique of revolutionary praxis by which the avant-garde sought to transfigure capitalist social relations, or what can be seen as the functionality of avant-gardism within its historical context.⁶ I would argue that the aversion to revolutionary politics in post modernist criticism has deterred the opportunity for theorizing a discourse of vanguardism which encompasses the historicity of revolutionary thought; rather, what transpires within the contemporary discourse of the historical avant-garde is a kind of complacency with what Donald Kuspit calls the “cult of the avant-garde artist,” which subsumes the political vanguard in favor of aesthetic subversion, a trend that is even more evident in much of the criticism of Socialist Realism of the 1930’s.⁷ The systematic reduction of politics to what Fredric Jameson calls the “ideological subtext” undermines the possibility of retextualizing the dialectic of revolutionary art and politics that resides at the core of avant-garde history and which, in the present context, is revealed in the structuralization of vanguardism beyond its reified presence in contemporary theoretical discourse.⁸

More precisely, as a re-historicization of the ideologies that informed revolutionary art, my intention is to rework some of the conceptual

⁶ Some of the key texts that deal with the relation between aesthetics and politics are Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon, 1988), John Willett, *Art and Politics of the Weimar Period* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport: Praeger Press, 2003), and Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifesto, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006), Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left: New Essays on Radical Culture and Politics* (London: Verso, 1994), Terry Eagleton, *Criticism & Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 2006).

⁷ The parameters of this debate will be addressed in chapter two.

⁸ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (New York: Cornell University Press, 1981), 81.

divisions that have been made between avant-garde cultural production and revolutionary politics so that a more inclusive representation of collective movements that sought radical alternatives to industrial capitalism can be analyzed theoretically, yet also with a view toward reclaiming the materiality of revolutionary praxis that has been denied a space in contemporary critical accounts of avant-gardist culture. Thus, some of the fundamental questions this study attempts to advance are: is it possible to restructure an interpretation of the aesthetic and political vanguard without rehashing the debate over whether or not it succeeds in “transcending” capitalist hegemony? What were some of the problematic elements of vanguardism and the process by which it brought revolutionary praxis from an external point in the hope of equalizing vanguard intellectualism and the mass response, rather than through the creation of a type of communist culture from within the spaces of capitalist hegemony? That is, how is it possible to rethink the dialectical relations of aesthetics and politics so that the fundamental complexities of those relations render a more unambiguous framework of the historical development of revolutionary art in the first half of the twentieth century? Finally, what are the interconnections among the ascendancy of late capitalism, anticolonial and decolonizing movements in the Third World, and the global restructuring of the communist left from the 1950’s onward and to what extent does the “recovery” of vanguardist cultural production in the neo-avant-garde expose the margins of its revolutionary potential as it began to struggle within the horizon of postmodernity?

Theoretically, the term *vanguardism* will be utilized throughout the present study in order to capture the manifestations of aesthetic and political mechanisms of revolutionary art in its historical context, particularly in the immediate after effects of the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution and into the 1920’s in which it had a formative impact on the radical imagination. Vanguardism is designed to be an inclusive concept and will be utilized to investigate the dialectic of revolutionary art and politics as it moved from the abstraction of individual “revolt” to the materiality of collective praxis. The 1917 Revolution was pivotal both in decentering the avant-gardist identification with bourgeois conceptualizations of self-sufficiency as well as in reconstructing the potentiality of revolutionary transformation from within the material spaces of capitalist social relations. The dialectic of vanguardism, in this sense, signifies the theoretical consequence of revolutionary art as it attempted to recreate models for actual liberation beyond the ideological limitations by which it had been determined in pre-1917 social space. If, ultimately, aesthetic works reveal a negotiation among what Raymond

Williams calls the *dominant, residual, and emergent* forces of cultural production, vanguardism allows for the restructuring of interior and exterior points by which revolutionary art came into being in its historical context; more than an inquiry into the meaning of avant-garde cultural production, this study emphasizes the extent to which vanguardism became the model of the emergent class of professional revolutionaries that reclaimed the effectiveness of radical culture which ruptured the very mechanisms by which art functioned within capitalist society, a potentiality that maneuvered itself external to social reality, yet attempted to immerse itself thoroughly in the residual spaces by which capitalism still maintained its hegemony. As Williams explains,

A new class is always the source of emergent cultural practice, but while it is still, as a class, relatively subordinate, this is always likely to be uneven and is certain to be incomplete. For practice is not, of course, an isolated process. To the degree that it emerges, and especially to the degree that it is oppositional rather than alternative, the process of attempted incorporation significantly begins.... The process of emergence, in such conditions, is then a constantly repeated, an always renewable, move beyond a phase of practical incorporation: usually made more difficult by the fact that much incorporation looks like recognition, acknowledgement, and thus a form or *acceptance*. In this complex process there is indeed regular confusion between the locally residual (as a form of resistance to incorporation) and the generally emergent.⁹

Vanguardism, in this sense, signifies the dialectic of an emergent phenomenon by which collective movements sought to reconstruct, as a repeated mechanism of political consciousness, revolutionary praxis in the aesthetic dimension, the struggle to sustain the elements of revolutionary social space in the face of capitalist counterrevolution, or what can be understood as the interior mechanism of subsumption always at work in capitalism, and the eventual weakening of left-vanguardism as it became splintered by the materialization of Fascism and the stringency of what has been termed “Stalinization” from the 1930’s to the end of World War II.

In attempting to restructure a Marxist theory of avant-garde cultural politics, the first two chapters are deliberately more conceptual than the last three. What the initial chapters hope to accomplish is a re-theorization of the avant-garde, which according to a Marxist critique of its historical development, intends to formulate a context for aesthetic and political vanguardism inasmuch as it challenges some of the acknowledged characteristics of revolutionary art, which have set varying limitations on

⁹ *Marxism and Literature*, 124-125.

the discourse of avant-garde cultural politics. It is my contention that the historical avant-garde has sustained a formative singularity in the discourse of Modernism as a result of its being saturated by the ideological of revolutionary politics, namely the organizational model of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 that brought about what Neil Larsen calls the “crisis in representation” of aesthetic autonomy upon which the pre-1917 avant-garde constructed its confrontation with bourgeois social reality. Rather than center on the elements of individual works or the interior mechanisms by which the avant-garde artwork functions, I intend to reconfigure the structure of the historical avant-garde as it moves from the *crisis in representation* after 1917 to the convergence of revolutionary aesthetic and political interests, or what can be seen as the emergence of vanguardism itself. The *representationality* of aesthetic and political praxis, to use Neil Larsen’s terminology, has been overlooked in critical histories of the historical avant-garde, for the assumption is that many writers and artists of the period between 1917 and 1962, particularly those that formed the wide-ranging movements that have codified the discourse of avant-garde studies, acquired the capability to act independently of the socio-political contexts in which they created. My critique does not mean to project a type of Althusserian deduction of avant-gardist culture, but rather to offer an analysis of the extent to which the exclusion of revolutionary politics from intellectual histories of avant-gardist cultural production has evolved as a result of the de-politicization of revolutionary art, which through the sanctification of experimentalism and artistic originality disregards the residual and emergent effects of communist politics in the development of the radical imagination.

In order to re-theorize the dialectic of vanguardism, I will begin by examining three major authors who have contributed to the discourse of avant-garde studies: Theodor Adorno, who in his *Ästhetische Theorie* offers a dialectical materialism on the parataxis of the artwork and aesthetics in the context of mass culture, yet who also concretizes the relation between aesthetic autonomy and the function of the artist, a concern that relates to the question of vanguardism in the present context as well; Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the seminal work which theorizes the historicity of avant-gardism and the dialectical relation between the avant-garde cultural politics and modernist hegemony, and finally, the work of Susan Robin Suleiman, who deconstructs the centrality of male avant-garde practice in order to revise the “subversive intent” of the *écriture féminine* that underlies avant-garde cultural politics from Surrealism to Postmodernism. While these works may not fully reflect the full range of theories that address the historical avant-garde, I argue that

these three constitute the predominant “code” of the historical avant-garde, or rather what I would call the dialectic of avant-garde cultural politics and the persistence of its ideology in the discourse of aesthetics and politics in the last forty years. My intention is to rethink the implications of avant-garde practice for the purposes of offering a theory of vanguardism that reflects the various relations of the historical avant-garde, yet with a view towards foregrounding the connotations of influence by which the dialectic of art and political praxis that encompasses vanguardism has structured a genealogy beyond the singularity of the aesthetic transcendence and what I argue (following Jameson, among others) is the reification of the aesthetic dimension, as revealed in some of the authors I analyze in what follows.

Part of the problematic of revitalizing a Marxist interpretation of avant-garde cultural politics, then, has to do with the enduring proclivity towards postmodernist theoretical models that perpetuate the mythical cult of creative autonomy and aesthetic purity while condemning the political dimension that is intrinsic to many of the movements that have shaped the tradition of what is called the historical avant-garde. The identification with radical politics by artists and writers associated with such movements as Dadaism, Surrealism, and particularly the collective movements by Soviet writers and artists who were truly inspired by the Bolshevik Revolution, as evidenced most notably by post-1917 Russian Constructivism and the rebellious *LEF* poets, is more often than not used as reason to construct tirades against “utopian” ignorance, which as a consequence of state-managed aesthetic platforms, led to the downfall of the *ethos* of avant-garde originality. The definition of revolutionary art, in other terms, has been institutionalized as a space thoroughly saturated by the aesthetic dimension, which by overcoming the socially regressive force of so-called anti-democratic systems has been handed down as avant-garde “truth” devoid of its radically political inheritance. As Samir Amin writes, “Postmodernist discourse is an ideological accessory that, in the end, legitimizes liberalism and invites us to submit to it,” and it is the submission to liberal interpretations of revolutionary art and politics that dismantles the anticipation of rebuilding the utopian project of radical culture in the contemporary period by falling victim to the evasion of dialectical materialism that is perpetuated in postmodernist criticism.”¹⁰ It would be safe to say that the inbuilt anti-Communism in many theories of avant-garde cultural phenomena, thus, is interconnected with the

¹⁰ Samir Amin, *The Liberal Virus: Permanent War and the Americanization of the World* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 2004), 19.

postmodernist critique of Marxism in the contemporary period, which by cleansing the framework of revolutionary art of the legacy of political praxis, renders an overall aestheticization of the political field. As Barbara Foley argues, the retreat from history is consistent with the retreat from utopian models by which the poststructuralists are complicit with late capitalist authority:

As a result of its rejection of scientism and its deemphasis on (or reformulation of) class, the poststructuralist critique of Marxism... suffers from a "poverty of strategy."... Refusing to subsume the particularity and autonomy of the imperatives of any social group to the grinding dialectic of class analysis, it regards the Leninist party— particularly in its pretension to "represent" the articulated interests of the working class by means of a disciplined theory and practice—as the epitome of logocentrism and master-discourses. Instead, the poststructuralist critique advocates an "interest-group politics" that, in the very ingenuousness of its promise to respect everyone's individuality, offers a meager threat to existing power hierarchies.¹¹

The stance against postmodernist discourse here is an attempt to read the avant-garde politically, to restructure a discourse through which the mediums of revolutionary culture can be situated historically without deemphasizing the necessities of class analysis, yet with the intention of rethinking the dialectical multiplicity of aesthetic and political interests that moves between the demands of avant-garde originality and revolutionary praxis.¹²

¹¹ Barbara Foley, "Marxism in the Poststructuralist Moment: Some notes on the Problem of Revising Marx." *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1990): 5-37, <http://victorian.fortunecity.com/holbein/439/bf/foleymarxismpost.html>.

¹² In other terms, it is the emphasis on text rather than context that I see as the problematic of postmodernist thinking, which David Harvey argues "avoids confronting the realities of political economy and the circumstances of global power." I would also stress that, in relation to the attempt here to restructure a Marxist theory of the historical avant-garde, postmodernist criticism often reiterates the anti-Communism and class opacity which, as Foley describes, automatically marginalizes such concerns without recognizing their significance in the historicity of vanguardist cultural praxis. At the same time, the deconstruction of Euro-American Vanguardism by Third World revolutionaries is a necessary step in emergence of a new form of the aesthetic and political vanguard, as well as of the construction of what I will call the neo-avant-garde. See David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), pp. 116-117. For an analysis of anti-communist critical discourse, see Grover Furr, "(Un) critical Reading and the Discourse of Anti-communism," *The Red Critique* (winter/spring 2006):

One important way of taking a critical stand against the postmodernist critique in the context of the present argument would be to look at what Donald Kuspit calls the *fetishization of innovation* that is at the core of many critical accounts of avant-garde history; for it is evident that such critics, while eschewing the politicization of aesthetics, extol the novelty of originality that the historical avant-garde bestowed to twentieth century aesthetics. As Kuspit rightly points out, the mystified novelty associated with the institutionalized critique of the historical avant-garde “becomes inseparable from the perception of the work of art as the supreme commodity,” a symptom which Kuspit argues is systemic to postmodernist narcissism as well as to the “failure” of the type of radical culture that the avant-gardist desired to inspire creatively.¹³ Without making a radical incommensurability between originality and political praxis, the Marxist re-theorization of avant-garde cultural production proposed here is meant to unveil not only the *political unconscious* of aesthetic practice and its ideological configurations, but also the materialization of conscious alignment that mediated the spaces between aesthetics and politics, or rather the concretization of revolutionary praxis which by fracturing the category of pure art and the abstraction of aesthetic sovereignty enabled the reconstruction of political engagement by reinscribing the materiality of emancipation in the interiors of collective movements of which the avant-garde was composed.

What needs to be distinguished here is what Fredric Jameson sees as the ideology of Modernism, the “operations whereby the notion of autonomy is constructed in the first place,” by locating the theoretical points that determine aesthetic and non-aesthetic categories: “The autonomy of art is surely secured by separating art from non-art; by purging it of its extrinsic elements, such as the sociological or the political; by reclaiming aesthetic purity from the morass of real life, of business and money, and bourgeois daily life, all around it.”¹⁴ For Jameson, the dissociation of art and “culture” that theorists of high Modernism have identified as crucial to an understanding of a *pure* aesthetic is precisely where the ideological configurations of modernist discourse crystallize: non-aesthetic cultural production, in this sense, is stigmatized either by the decadence of mass culture or by the totalitarianism of state-run aesthetics,

<http://www.redcritique.org/WinterSpring2006/index.html>.

¹³ Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 20. The question of postmodernism and the neo-avant-garde will be dealt with in the final chapter.

¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), 176.

the most germane being the program of Soviet Socialist Realism from the 1930's to the early 1950's.¹⁵ Although consistent with Jameson's critique that the ideology of *autonomization* that has determined high Modernism needs to be reconsidered within the historical context that also saw a noticeable restructuration of capitalist development, the present argument also analyzes the dislocation of aesthetic and political configurations of avant-garde cultural production in the hope of reclaiming the radical potentialities of its organization that have been glossed over or fully dismissed in the critical accounts of its history.

The concept of vanguardism, in this sense, corresponds to what Julia Kristeva calls the "semiotic," as it both nourishes the organization of the aesthetic act while simultaneously preconditioning the revolutionary potentiality as it enters the symbolic realm of capitalist rationality and control.¹⁶ Although not thoroughly within the scope of the current argument, the semiotic is adequate in traversing the distinction between the negativity of revolt of the avant-garde artist, which reproduces the reified process of aesthetic sovereignty that has become conditioned by bourgeois aesthetic philosophy, and the materiality of aesthetics-as-praxis as a result of the convergence of aesthetic and political consciousness in the aftermath of the 1917 Revolution. Perhaps it can be argued that the semiotic exposes the underlying *ideology of the aesthetic* by which vanguardism, as the conflation of aesthetic and political interests, destabilizes the category of the historical avant-garde. Accordingly, a brief inquiry into the Marxist critique of ideology is necessary to uncover the problematic relation between aesthetics and politics of the avant-garde inasmuch as it will materialize the character of vanguardism that has been utilized in the present context thus far.

For the purposes of extending some of the theoretical inquiries thus far, I believe it would be appropriate to examine briefly the role of ideology in Marxist criticism. For, in short, the critique of ideology signifies a point of departure for elucidating both the potentialities and limitations of Marxist aesthetics; that is, while the aim of ideological criticism is to reveal more fully how cultural production is obscured by capitalism, the instability of the dialectic between history and social organization is often

¹⁵ The differentiation between socialist realism and the avant-garde will be discussed in detail in chapter two below.

¹⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27. I am interested in the political implications of the "semiotic" as it relates to the production of revolutionary praxis and the negation of capitalist social relations. It is in this sense that I am delimiting the theoretical originality of Kristeva's terminology.

difficult to disentangle without falling into what Neil Larsen calls the “ideological fixation” of Marxist criticism. As Larsen argues, the predicament of Marxist interpretations of cultural phenomena is that it reproduces the symbolic “break” between political praxis and the requirements of aesthetic autonomy, particularly as it relates to the question of the historical avant-garde, by neglecting the building of a materialist critique “in accordance with an intuitive historical consciousness of representational crisis”:

What emerges here is a notion of a theoretical discourse of modern aesthetics as, in effect, a displaced politics. The crisis in representation that evinces the various and conflicting efforts to produce a historicized aesthetics—an aesthetics of the *real*—would itself, according to such an analysis, be read as the effect of a political crisis so radical as to resist its direct theoretical and critical appropriation. History must be made to compensate, on the level of the superstructure, that which it withholds from life in its politico-economic dimension.¹⁷

For Larsen, Marxist criticism is always compelled to begin with an analysis of the ideological configurations of the “work” in isolation from its aesthetic representation, as a dissociated process that materializes on the interiors of socio-political reality. This critical model is not out of the ordinary in itself; rather, in the attempt to produce a radical aesthetic program that displaces the crisis of representation to which it is subjected by external forces, Larsen is arguing for a materialist critique which is not confined to the process of displacement which as an effect of ideological positioning separates the mechanism of revolutionary transformation from the properties of historical affirmation, or in other terms, as a systematic regression by which the idealism of aesthetic representation is pit against the materiality of historical change.¹⁸ In fact, the history of Marxist aesthetics can be analyzed from the point of view of ideological miscellany, particularly as it relates to the opposing camps that emerged out of the Realism/Modernism debates of the 1930’s whose resonance can be seen in the subsequent critiques of Postmodernism in the latter half of the twentieth century.¹⁹ For the present context, Larsen exposes the very

¹⁷ Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony*, 8-9.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 11.

¹⁹ For a brief analysis of the 1930’s debates, see Frederic Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2002), 196-213, and Eugene Lun, *Marxism & Modernism*, especially 75-91; for an overview of Marxist literary criticism, see Moyra Haslett, *Marxist Literary and Critical Theories* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2000).

challenge of vanguardism: as a discourse that intends to explicate the mechanisms both in and beyond aesthetic resistance, the ideology of vanguardism pushes the limitations avant-gardist cultural formations toward the materiality of revolutionary praxis.

Similarly, as Pierre Bourdieu points out, it is the very “distance” between the aesthetic and political fields that fails to maintain itself as material praxis. The “rapprochement” of vanguardist aesthetics and politics sought to subvert the dominant social order by initiating the practice of antagonism as a model for revolutionary art, since the inherent changeability within the dimensions of such an oppositional process produced the most apposite features by which the criticality of bourgeois hegemony could occur with the most force. “The fact remains,” writes Bourdieu, “that the cultural producers are able to use the power conferred on them, especially in periods of crisis, by their capacity to put forward a critical definition of the social world, to mobilize the potential strength of the dominated classes and subvert the order prevailing in the field of power.”²⁰ Bourdieu is accurate in pointing out that, beginning in the modernist era with Symbolism and Aestheticism, intellectual labor created the ideology of confrontation and continually assumed a position against ruling class formations; this ideological construct was infused into the idea of the aesthetic avant-garde with the intention of reproducing its assumed critical autonomy as it struggled against the hegemonic configurations of bourgeois socio-political reality, culminating in wide-spread movements that would become associated with what in the present context is being labeled vanguardism, which attempted to sustain revolutionary praxis beyond the illusory, reified field of the aesthetic sovereignty. That is, despite his consolidation of the ideological justifications for the “sub-field” of dominant (bourgeois) cultural forces, Bourdieu limits the struggle against hegemony to subversion, or what can be described as the mechanism of displacement by which the continual reproduction of confrontational textuality is determined. The ideology of subversion, in this sense, would delimit the dialectical relations of vanguardism by constructing the demands of avant-garde originality without considering the historical framework by which radical culture comes into being: although both subversion and vanguardism are constructed on the margins of ruling-class formations, the latter illuminates both the exterior motives that fortify the potentiality of subversion as well as the challenge of sustaining the totality of revolutionary praxis from within the boundaries of capitalist hegemony, as evidenced by the inclusiveness of avant-gardist

²⁰ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 44.

cultural formations after the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Subversion, then, can be considered a reference point in the contextual framework of vanguardism, yet its legacy is one that is more attuned to the inherent anarchism by which the origins of the historical avant-garde came into being inasmuch as it unveils the process by which it became corrupted by capitalist subsumption as well as by the political right in the guise of the Italian Futurism in which Mussolini and other fascists played a major role.

As I stated above, the critique of ideology holds a significant place in what follows in this book, yet it becomes particularly central in chapter two, which begins with a dialectical analysis of the avant-garde manifesto and the distinctions between aesthetic and political propaganda. More specifically, what this chapter will draw attention to is the mechanism by which the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics in the structure of vanguardist aesthetic paradigms justifies an interrogation into the operation of non-aesthetic rhetorical devices that legitimate interpretative control, what can be described as political propaganda in its most visible formulation. It is this very tension between art and political praxis through which the radicalizing structure of the manifesto began to assume a more decisive role in aesthetic and political vanguardism, as evident in the Surrealists short-lived tenure as members of the Parti Communiste Française (PCF), and their dedication to the struggle against capitalist exploitation, the rise of Fascism in French and European intellectual circles, and their vicious attacks on French imperialism. Furthermore, the relevance of the Surrealist movement in the dialectical structure of the manifesto and the discussion of art and propaganda is significant, since the mechanism of revolt which configures the Surrealist vision becomes contingent on the production process itself, a point that is central to Walter Benjamin's interpretation that the function of the committed intellectual must emerge in relation to the material form with which the writer or artist is confronted, which in the form of art, will transform the margins of which capitalist social relations are determined.

Without reiterating the intrinsic "antagonisms" among the various platforms of revolutionary aesthetics, chapter two will trace the disjunctive relations between ideology and art, which in the form of the manifesto signifies a dialectical interrelation that attempts to erase the limitations imposed on the "either-or" marginalities to which aesthetics-as-politics is often ascribed. In distinguishing the "non-operational" process through which the manifesto reveals the *fantasy* of revolutionary praxis, I hope to offer an insight into the mechanisms by which the aesthetic dimension attempted to overcome the qualities of which the non-aesthetic could more easily attain revolutionary status, a mechanism that is readily obtainable in

propaganda form, yet also allows for the possibility of assigning the interior spaces by which the manifesto sought to reinscribe aesthetics-as-politics within a material framework. It is for this reason that Chapter Two will conclude with an analysis of Socialist Realism and the operations of politicized aesthetic programs which rigorously contrasted with the framework of individualist avant-gardist cultural production. The ideological conflict between Socialist Realism and the historical avant-garde, the “classic” debates among Marxist intellectuals in the 1930’s, will be analyzed with a view toward projecting a dialectical critique of the contextual framework of revolutionary art; that is, rather than condemn Socialist Realism for its totalizing de-aestheticization of the historical avant-garde, or simply rehash the constituents of the debate between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, for example, I argue that Socialist Realism signifies the culmination of the *crisis in representation* by which vanguardism is itself constructed and reveals the continual opening of the structure of vanguardism to its eventual transformation in the post-World War II era.²¹

In terms of the remaining chapters in this study, my attempt is to concretize the theoretical dimensions by examining specific authors who articulated and extended the conceptual apparatus of vanguardist cultural politics. These categorical examinations consider each author’s position and significance on the spectrum of political identification, the particular construction of the aesthetics-as-politics that informs each author’s work, and the overarching movements with which each author was affiliated both historically and geographically. The three authors chosen for this purpose in the third section of this study, Ezra Pound, Louis Aragon, and Louis Zukofsky, distinctly render the *crisis in representation* of vanguardism in their aesthetic and political commitments and are utilized to further some of the theoretical complexities analyzed in the first two chapters. For Ezra Pound, aesthetic innovation was crucial to the building of a new *Paideuma*, what he conceived as a cultural hierarchy that was nurtured and directed by artistic elites, yet who, in political terms, could only reside in the framework of Italian Fascism which for Pound provided the superlative model for forging a revolutionary artistic consciousness. My analysis of Pound’s work, especially after 1930, is emblematic of the turn to the political right by many writers and artists of the modernist era, yet my intention is to re-historicize the dialectic of vanguardism that is apparent in Pound’s aesthetics and politics without further accusing him of his Fascist tendencies. Rather, as I turn to an assessment of Louis Aragon

²¹ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, 75-91.

and his move from Surrealism to his *réalisme socialiste*, what becomes clear is that vanguardism experiences further ruptures in its formation as a result of its being unable to overcome the problematic of equalizing aesthetic radicalism and political praxis, which for Louis Aragon was remedied by the materiality of Socialist Realism and thus the turn away from experimentalism associated with what he saw as the *inutilité* of Surrealism and the overall fetishization of avant-gardist cultural politics.

It is for this reason that the fourth chapter should be understood in relation to the crisis in vanguardism that occurred after 1956 in which the Euro-American models of revolutionary art and politics were not only deconstructed but also reconfigured into the liberation projects of the Third World, as represented most notably in the work of Aimé Césaire, among others. The year 1956 is significant in this respect, for it marks the continual rift of the Communist International, symbolized by Khrushchev's speech against Stalin, and the establishment of de-"Stalinization," or the process of decentralization that would distinguish the emergent form of capitalist ascendancy in the post-World War II era, as well as the deconcentrated cultural formations that exemplify Postmodernism. The years 1956-1962, furthermore, also indicate the most remarkable anti-imperialist and decolonizing movements in the Third World, which as a effect of the overall process of decentralization that began to occur in the "center," opens the way for understanding the transformation of vanguardism as it was absorbed by the variety of revolutionary contexts, among the most notable are the Cuban Revolution of 1959 and the decolonizing struggle against French imperialism by the FLN (Front de Libération Nationale) in Algeria.²² Taking into consideration what I understand as the dialectic of "localization" that signifies the aesthetic and political debates within these and other Third World movements, the final chapter analyzes the residual and emergent elements of what can be termed "neo-vanguardism," a discourse which materializes concretely after 1956 in the milieu of postmodernity, as well as in the wake of the post-Stalin era of the Communist International.

In order to restructure part of the critical historicity of vanguardism, then, I begin with an investigation into some of the decisive critiques of its cultural tradition as well as some of re-theorizations that have been discussed in limited terms above.

²² For a history of Third World revolutions, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2006).

Spectrums: Adorno, Bürger, and Suleiman

Adorno's Aesthetic Theory

If the logic of the modernist artwork is an effect of its *disconnection* to material production, as Adorno argues, then it would seem contradictory to a theory which presupposes that the dialectical movement of avant-garde cultural politics, which is here being termed vanguardism, is reinforced by the constant attempt to root art in political and social praxis. And yet, the significance of Adorno's work in the context of my argument is directly related to what he calls the "historically imperative insufficiency" of the modernist artwork, an irreconcilability in the dialectic of art and society that is necessary for Adorno to reconstruct the paradox of modernist aesthetics, but more importantly to theorize the probability of its reconciliation, which Adorno conceives as the element that perpetuates the overall philosophical centrality of the art-object in its social context: "The artwork is related to the world by the principle that contrasts it with the world, and that is the same principle by which spirit organized the world.... Art's *promesse du bonheur* means not only that hitherto praxis has blocked happiness but that happiness is beyond praxis,"²³ According to Terry Eagleton, Adorno is effective in concretizing the dialectic of modernist aesthetics by affirming the inherent contradictions of its ideological formations, or rather as it manifests its internal contradictions at the point of its coming into being. As Eagleton writes, "Art for Adorno is thus less some idealized realm of being than contradiction incarnate.... It is at once being-for-itself and being-for-society, always simultaneously itself and something else, critically estranged from its history yet incapable of taking up a vantage point beyond it."²⁴ The radical character of the modernist work lies in its historic-philosophical contrast with existing material conditions, in the form of anti-art or in the aggressive positioning of the Surrealists, as it struggles against the mechanistic process of commodification:

Art's irrevocably rational element, which is concentrated as its technique, works against art. It is not that rationality kills the unconscious, the substance of art, or whatever; technique alone made art capable of admitting the unconscious into itself. But precisely by virtue of its

²³ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: Minnesota University Press, 1997), 7, 13.

²⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990), 352.

absolute autonomy the rational, purely elaborated artwork would annul its difference from empirical existence; without imitating it, the artwork would assimilate itself to its opposite, the commodity. It would be indistinguishable from completely functional works except that it would have no purpose, and this, admittedly, would speak against it. The totality of inner-aesthetic purposefulness develops into problem of art's purposefulness beyond its own sphere, a problem for which it has no answer.²⁵

Adorno reinforces the dialectic of art and society by exposing its inherent weakness: its relation to praxis, or rather, its historicity in the process of becoming art's *other*, what Adorno refers to as art's *purposefulness*. It is here that we are able to enter into the primary confrontation between the struggle for "self-preservation," the necessity of attaining an externalized, marginal space within the dominant social milieu by which Aestheticism constructed the essentiality of art's inutility, and the vanguardist sensibility, which emerged in the wake of what can be termed the politicization of the aesthetic dimension, especially after 1917.

In this sense, there is a utopian emphasis in Adorno's theory of the modernist aesthetic: the expectation of the revolutionary transcendence of art's capabilities, which according to Eugene Lunn would abstract (reify) the intended effects of the dialectical movement by which Adorno hopes to safeguard the possibilities of the modernist *ethos* from the process of commodification, something with which I agree, and which, from Adorno to Fredric Jameson to Antonio Negri, reveals the discontinuity by which Marxist criticism forms an antithetical position against consumer capitalism as well as against poststructuralist attack Marxist dialectical philosophy.²⁶ Adorno's place in the present context, therefore, stems from the process through which the modernist artwork retains the presence of its utopian dimension, something intrinsic to its design that acts to reinforce the mechanisms by which it continually maintains avant-gardist high culture. That is, in his attempt to restructure the ideology of Modernism, a project that Jameson takes up in his own work, Adorno liberates the visionary enthusiasm of the avant-gardist struggle for collectivity, which becomes detached both from the dominant mode of production as well as from the inducement toward the extremes of right or left of the political spectrum. As such, Adorno augments the horizon of the utopian moment

²⁵ Adorno, *Ibid.*, 217-218.

²⁶ Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, 240.

of the avant-garde neutrality (autonomy) by locating it furtively in the ontology of aesthetic sovereignty.²⁷

The level of confrontation that becomes embodied in the modernist artwork not only confronts the reification process intrinsic to bourgeois social reality, but also complicates its relation to the notion of commitment by which the avant-garde artist attempts to form a praxis for the aesthetic dimension. And it is here that Adorno's theorization contradicts the concept of vanguardism proposed here; that is, while the conceptualization of autonomy is necessary in revising the utopianism of the avant-garde movement toward collectivity, the concentrated focus on autonomy and the paradoxical position of the avant-garde artist which Adorno facilitates seems to negate the dialectic of emancipation it intends to construct, what can be seen as a de-limitation of the political praxis of the artwork. For Terry Eagleton, the tenets of the modernist aesthetic become locked into a kind of philosophical loop, which perhaps is the very thrust of Adorno's dialectic of autonomy which the avant-garde artist is forced to acknowledge in the face of the confrontation with a culture "deeply locked into the structure of commodity production." Eagleton goes on to say that, "The aporias of modernist culture lies in its plaintive, stricken attempt to turn autonomy... against autonomy. It would seem that art must now either abolish itself entirely... or hover indecisively between life and death, subsuming its own impossibility into itself."²⁸

What is significant about Eagleton's critique is his attempt to extend Adorno's dialectic into the discourse of Postmodernism and the conflicting position of the avant-garde project within the spaces of late capitalist subsumption, something which I will elaborate on in subsequent chapters. Its relevance here is that, while the synthetic structure of the modernist aesthetic that Adorno facilitates sets in motion the possibility of reclaiming the autonomy that has been repressed by the debilitating foundations of industrial capitalism, his category represses and negates the crisis in representation that underlies the historical avant-garde, what in broad terms may be conceived as the nexus of subversive individuation and collective liberation. In his defense of Modernism Adorno discounts the historicization of crisis to which the avant-garde responded in its separation from Aestheticism, as Peter Bürger also points out, yet what is also rendered opaque is the extent to which the rejectionism of modernist artwork enacts the fetishism of autonomy against which the avant-garde

²⁷ See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, 212. Lunn analyzes Adorno's theory of commitment in *Ibid.*, 154-157. I will elaborate on the question of commitment as well below.

²⁸ Eagleton, *Ibid.*, 348-349.

artist revolted and through which convergence of aesthetics and politics necessitated a newly conceived ideology, what I am terming vanguardism. Furthermore, if the struggle for autonomy was formulated in the intervention between social reality and the dissonance of the “functionless status” of the artwork, as Eagleton puts it, Adorno’s theorization distorts the criticality associated with aesthetic commitment, thus stimulating the very aporetic conditions by which Eagleton contains Adorno’s diagram:

What is social in art is its immanent movement against society, not its manifest opinions. Its historical gesture repels empirical reality, of which artworks are nevertheless part in that they are things. Insofar as a social function can be predicted for artworks, it is their functionlessness. Through their difference from a bewitched reality, they embody negatively a position in which what is would find its rightful place, its own. Their enchantment is disenchantment. Their social essence requires a double reflection on their being-for-themselves and on their relations to society.... To this extent, each artwork could be charged with false consciousness and chalked up to ideology. In formal terms, independent of what they say, they are ideology in that a priori they posit something spiritual as being independent from the conditions of its material production and are therefore as being intrinsically superior and beyond the primordial guilt of the separation of physical and spiritual labor.²⁹

The “historically imperative insufficiency” of the artwork is the demand for responsibility that is thrust upon the artwork as it enters social space, which as Eagleton points out, reveals the implicit aporia of Adorno’s dialectical formulation of social protest and autonomy. In a dialectical reversal of the separation between aesthetic autonomy and the implicit intentionality of the artwork, Adorno seems to reorganize such contradiction for the purposes of creating a mechanism for aesthetic resistance, or what he theorizes as a self-imposed reification form within the interior dimensions of artwork. As Adorno writes, “Art keeps itself alive through its social forcer of resistance; unless it reifies itself, it becomes a commodity. Its contribution to society is not communication with it but rather something extremely mediated: It is resistance in which, by virtue of inner-aesthetic development, social development is reproduced without being imitated.”³⁰ It is here that the organizational principle of Adorno’s aesthetic theory becomes manifest, both in relation to the interior mechanisms of the artwork as well as to the question of commitment, which will be dealt with later. What is evident is that the

²⁹ Adorno, *Ibid.*, 227.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 226.

reactionary position of the artwork stems from the refusal of its being mediated beyond the dimensions of the aesthetic dimension, beyond the parameters by which it is preserved in its radical autonomy, or what Adorno calls the *asociality* of the artwork. Without straying too much from the current context, it can be argued that the duality of Adorno's theorization, however aporetic and paradoxical it may seem, lends itself to the conceptual apparatus of what I am calling vanguardism in that it perpetuates the ideology of aesthetic transcendence from the principle of the artwork's confrontation with externality, or rather as an effect of the intra-textuality of aesthetic and political interests as they are manifested in social space.

Despite Adorno's fetishism of the modernist aesthetic, he initiates a discourse in which the ideological function of the artwork may lend itself to the process of revolutionary praxis by remaining antithetical to exchangeability and by sustaining its utopian potentiality. It is this movement that signifies for Adorno the dialectical movement of aesthetic and political praxis, which in the present argument conditions the philosophical breadth of vanguardism as it becomes exposed to the forces of history, or rather in the transformation from pure ideological content to historical consciousness. For Fredric Jameson, this progression toward the historicization of the aesthetic dimension is what constitutes the core of Marxist dialectical thought, what he calls the "momentary synthesis of the inside and the outside, of intrinsic and extrinsic, of existence and history." Jameson continues to say that "The tautological movement" in the artwork "is reproduced outside the work in the relationship between the content and its historical context," or the historicity of the aesthetic in the movement toward concrete political consciousness.³¹ Indeed, we can see that the inscription of the historical situation in the dialectical form of the artwork becomes apparent at the point at which the artwork is converted into political praxis, which according to Jameson occurs only at the level of the superstructure, and for Adorno must sustain the intrinsic character of its autonomy, however agonizingly it finds itself attached to the corruptive forces at its exteriors. This, for Adorno, is the essence of aesthetic preservation that defines Modernism and the historicization of its dialectical utopianism.

For now, what I want to draw attention to is the foundations by which vanguardism can be theorized in terms of the dialectical schema that Adorno utilizes to defend the ideology of the modernist aesthetic, which in

³¹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 348, 352.