Time-Images

Time-Images:
Alternative Temporalities
in Twentieth-Century Theory, Literature, and Art

By

Tyrus Miller

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION: REFIGURING TIME

The term "time-image," introduced by Gilles Deleuze in his Bergson-derived cinema theory,[1] has to date not received much consideration as a concept in historiographic theory. Yet as I wish to suggest with the essays in this book, the concept of time-image holds untapped potential for the historical interpretation of cultural and aesthetic works—and well beyond the primarily cinematic field in which Deleuze himself applied it. As a broad interpretative notion, I argue, it sets in resonance the theoretical frameworks of heterodox cultural thinkers such as Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno, Michel Foucault, Antonio Gramsci, and Gilles Deleuze, insofar as it comprehends a diverse, open-ended set of possibilities to configure historical materials in novel ways and to communicate historical knowledge figurally. Many of the artifacts and works that may be interpreted as time-images would not ordinarily be thought to have anything to do with history more narrowly conceived, yet in light of this interpretative concept they reveal their latent historicity. One might, however, turn this argument back upon conventional historiography and see it not as the primary, normative frame within which historicity may be disclosed symbolically, but rather as a secondary, limited case of a much vaster set of historical figures, "time-images." In a sense, what we think of in the narrower sense as "historical" may be no more than a form of imagining history in which the historical time-image has become invisible. To put it otherwise, the disciplinary concepts, authorized sources, and paradigmatic narratives of historical writing may simply be conventionally modalized, naturalized cases of a much more general repertoire of time-images by which we may experience states of historicity, both actual and possible. It is their privilege within a disciplinary framework of training and writing and not their inherent monopoly on historicity that defines historical texts and documents as properly "historical" materials, as opposed to fiction, myth, custom, rumor, entertainment, or other putatively "extra-historical" genres of discourse and culture.

As already noted, Deleuze formulates his notion of time-image through reflection on the art of the cinema, in which the unfolding image on the

screen depicts both movement in space and duration in time. These phenomenological dimensions of experience are not simply abstract, external metrics of the cinema image, however; they are also singularly qualified by the particular movements and metamorphoses within the frame and by the specific kinds of linkage between the segments of a sequence. Deleuze distinguishes between two modes of cinema image, according to the relationship between motion and time in the image. In the first case, "the movement-image," movement of bodies in space is the predominant feature, and the experience of time derives from that primary experience of spatial movement. We might imagine a fairly clichéd montage sequence in which a car passes various recognizable sights of the city of Los Angeles, and at last is seen in a long shot with highway stretching out in front of it and the desert in the distance. Even with elliptical jumps from place to place, nothing violates our sense of normal spatial continuity and movement: the highway, the automobile, and the driver form a single coordinated representation of passage through space in a proportionate, homogeneous span of time. We would understand this as a spatial journey out of the city and into the open country, and our sense of the temporality of the sequence would derive from our construction of the spatial itinerary from the montage. Yet it can also be possible that the filmmaker wishes to make the primary focus an experience of time, and s/he will shape the movements and the space in ways that violate our intuitive sense of sensory-motor continuity, so as figurally to capture an image of time. Corollary to my first example, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* represents our drive out of Los Angeles into the desert as the passage from the time of modernity, a hectic time of traffic and real estate speculation and political violence, into a qualitatively heterogeneous temporal order composed of chthonic nature, slow geological metamorphosis, and mythic consciousness. Consistently faithful to this primacy of time as the raw material of his image, Antonioni concludes his film with the famous slow-motion explosion of a model housing development in the desert, in a radical "un-housing" of modern space that Antonioni shows us twice, first in the imagined anticipation of the disaffected young woman, then again in the actuality of the present, which is nonetheless dilated to several minutes of screen duration. Space, movement, and causality are figurally warped to the shape of a direct representation of time, a "time-image" that retains an intimate relation with the invisible thoughts and affections of mental events—in this case, the alienation of the young woman from her older capitalist boss and her conversion, in an indiscernable instant, to the revolutionary nihilism of her

young dead lover, with whom she had experienced the inhuman geological time-space of the California desert.

How might we apply to questions of historiography this distinction between "movement-image," in which time derives indirectly from the spatial and causal relations in and between images, and "time-images," which aim to represent a mode of time directly and bend movement and relation to conform to the temporal figure? Without making reference to Deleuze, Peter Osborne, in his *Politics of Time*, in fact suggests an analogous framework. "If Aristotle," Osborne asks, "sought to understand time through change, since it is first encountered in entities that change, might we not reverse the procedure, and seek to comprehend change through time?"[2] He goes on to conclude:

> [T]here is a deeper conceptual logic to be found at work in such categories of cultural self-consciousness than is suggested by the way in which they are usually deployed, as markers for chronologically distinct and empirically identifiable periods, movements, forms or styles: a logic of historical totalization which raises questions about the nature of historical time itself. (Osborne viii)

We need to distinguish two sorts of period notions, however, in keeping with this primacy of historical change or of states of time. In the first case, analogous to the "movement image," we derive the qualities of time—i.e. crisis-ridden, stagnating, peaceful, chaotic, etc.—from the events and movements of change. The time of history is derived from the rhythms of what happens "in" time. In the figure formed of them in historical writing, the facts and documents are made to reveal a pattern of evolution and movement through the successive days and months and years. In the second case, however, analogous to Deleuze's "time image," particular qualities and types of time express themselves in singular occurrences and mixtures, through particular images, artifacts, spaces, and movements. The historian may not be searching for direct links of narrative and causality between the different elements, which might even derive from diverse chronological or cultural contexts. Rather s/he seeks in them a virtual conceptuality that will be methodologically disclosed through techniques of montage, multimedia assemblage, play between documentary and personal memory, interpenetration of fictional and factual frameworks, or other experimental modes of figural thought typically associated more with the arts than the discipline of history. It is especially these latter forms of conceptually rich "time-images" that this set of essays explores.

The essays are divided into three main sections. The first section, entitled "Time-Images as Theory and Historiography," considers alternative

temporalities underlying historicizing theories and specific practices of history. The examples treated here include the notion of "retro-avantgardism," which was used by Central and Eastern European avant-gardes of late and post-socialism to legitimate their appropriation of an avant-garde past that was, in a sense, being experienced for the first time, since its original manifestation and memory had been suppressed under socialism. Two chapters consider the work of the Frankfurt School thinkers Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno on the interrelations of images and history, and in a further chapter, I discuss an unusual British archival documentation project, Mass Observation's dream project, in which dreams were collected from ordinary citizens just prior to World War II through the first wave of aerial bombing.

In the second section, entitled "Time-Images in Modernist and Postmodernist Literature," I consider a range of modernist and postmodernist literary instances in which alternative notions of historical time are engaged. In the first essay, I focus on the idea of "cultural revolution," the acceleration of material history through cultural and ideological forces; I discuss the ambivalent relationship of the painter, novelist, and cultural critic Wyndham Lewis to this idea that emerged out of the Bolshevik victory in backward Russia in 1917. I go on in the next essay to consider how modernism and documentary were seen by artists as convergent, complementary representational modes for capturing the complex historical reality of the 1930s. Another essay considers Theodor Adorno's reading of Samuel Beckett's *Endgame*, and how Beckett offers him a concrete time-image of historicity after the end of large-scale dialectical History, which for Adorno, as for Beckett, coincided with the mass-death events of World War II. A similar engagement with a certain post-historicity is discussed in the essay that follows, on the poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, who utilized the work of Antonio Gramsci and the practice of philology to consider why the teleologies of Marxism and the assumptions of philology might no longer provide reliable knowledge of the historical present.

The third section, "Moving Images of Time," returns to the more properly Deleuzian homeland of the time-image, cinema. In the first essay of this section, I discuss the use of child experience and subjectivity as modes by which filmmakers have rendered tangible the intimate phenomenology of traumatic historical events, ranging from partisan warfare to political repression to nuclear annihilation. The following essay discusses the Quay Brothers' wordless animated adaptation of Bruno Schulz's masterpiece of literature, "Street of Crocodiles"; I suggest that the film displays a process of historical stratification in its translation from

word to animation, which replicates a similar process internal to Schulz's text. However, this "translation" is not meant so much to preserve experience as to ostentatiously reveal its decay, the sometimes gradual, sometimes catastrophic rhythms of loss that characterize a certain image of historical time. In a final essay, I confront two modernist artists, Sergei Eisenstein and Charles Olson, working in Mexico on projects that caused them to engage with questions of hieroglyphic or pictographic representation, etymology, speech / writing relationships, and archeological time. Eisenstein and Olson never met, though in my essay they are placed in a tripartite dialogue of poet, filmmaker, and Mayan glyphs. It is my hope that not only have I thus disclosed something about the time-images that these two artists sought to discover in Mexico in the middle of the twentieth century, but that in placing them in a speaking relationship, I have paid homage to their historiographic lesson as well.

Notes

[1] Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press 1986); *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis, University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

[2] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso Press, 1995) viii.

SECTION I:

TIME-IMAGES AS THEORY AND HISTORIOGRAPHY

CHAPTER TWO

RETROAVANTGARDE: CONFIGURATIONS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY TIME[1]

The paradoxical term "retroavantgarde" was first developed by artists working in the late socialist and post-socialist contexts of Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the territories of the ex-Yugoslavia.[2] In general, its semantic field has been defined by a range of post-modern and mostly post-socialist art practices that draw formal, philosophical, and social inspiration from the politicized, powerfully utopian avant-gardes of the early decades of the twentieth century, especially in the USSR and East-Central Europe. For example, the following manifesto by the Slovene art group IRWIN figured the post-communist legacy of the Cold War's east-west geo-political divide in terms of alternative temporal zones, in which the arts of the twentieth century exhibit significantly different rhythms and narratives of development. In the former "East," this temporality authorized—or even compelled—an artistic return to the avant-gardes of the past, which had never been allowed to play out their historical potential fully. The contemporary artist could help release those untapped utopian energies of the past, while utilizing them creatively in a historically and ideologically problematic present:

> As artists from the EAST, we claim that it is impossible to annul several decades of experience of the EAST and to neutralize its vital potential.
>
> The development of EASTERN MODERNISM from the past into the present will run through the FUTURE. The FUTURE is the time interval denoting the difference.
>
> Being aware that the history of art is not a history of different forms of appearance, but a history of signifiers, we demand that this DIFFERENCE be given a name.
>
> THE NAME OF EASTERN ART IS EASTERN MODERNISM.

THE NAME OF ITS METHOD IS RETROAVANTGARDISM.[3]

The tone of this appropriative look back by contemporary artists throughout the former "East Bloc" was not always as affirmative as it was for IRWIN, however. It ranged from extremes of nihilistic critical parody to rhetorical reference to avant-garde rigor against the banal hypocrisy of cultural policy in state socialism to authentically celebratory tribute, with many highly complex hybrid positions in between. At the negative extreme, reviewing in 1980 a number of the emigré review *Á-Ya*, the Russian artists Komar and Melamid, associated with Russian underground versions of pop art and conceptualism, wrote a bitter assessment of Kazimir Malevich and more generally denounced the whole avant-garde and socialist cultural legacy of the Soviet Union:

> [N]ot only was Malevich an illiterate philosopher and the inventor of the artistic movement Suprematism. . . but he was also an active Commissar, one of the first of the Soviet bureaucrats who concerned themselves with the separation of good from bad in the realm of the arts. His bureaucratic heirs, having exchanged Malevich's bad form for their own good uniforms, left his content untouched, and currently reign supreme in Russia. Recognizing this, Russian artists discovered that Lenin's avant-garde and Stalin's academicism are essentially only two different sides of the same socialist utopia. With the failure of this utopia its art too was discredited. [4]

In contrast, the statement by the Neue Slowenische Kunst artists Eda Cufer and IRWIN accompanying their Moscow "Embassy" action—which included unfurling a huge Malevich-inspired black square on the Kremlin's Red Square—established a much more measured, even redemptive relation to the radical avant-garde of the socialist past:

> Retro-avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. Modern art has not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states. The common perception of the avant-garde as a fundamental phenomenon of twentieth-century art is loaded with fears and prejudices. On the other hand this period is naively glorified and mythicized, while on the other hand its abuses, compromises, and failures are counted with bureaucratic pedantry to remind us that this magnificent delusion should not be repeated.[5]

Shuttling between the domain of artists' manifestos and contemporary art criticism, the term "retroavantgarde" received further elaboration by curators and theorist-practitioners such Peter Weibel, Boris Groys, Marina Grzinic, and Inke Arns, who over the last decade have attached it to a number of exhibitions, catalogues, video productions, and theoretical texts.

In all these operative uses of the term, evidently, the conceptual and ideological content has been extremely variable, linked to a wide range of artistic, theoretical, and programmatic intentions. But they have in common a specified version of the "revival of the aesthetic" of the classical avant-garde within the contemporary cultural-political horizon: an artistically mediated qualification of the postmodern present, drawing its energy retrospectively from a largely fictive relation to the past, a return that creatively revises the actual historical lack of continuity or the ugly actuality that eventuated from the avant-garde's utopian dreams. Retroavantgarde artists responded to a futurism past from the perspective of that now-actualized "future" which had once been addressed as the utopian horizon of earlier avant-garde artworks. This revival of the aesthetic under the paradoxical banner of the retroavantgarde can be understood, thus, as a self-conscious and reflexive way to phenomenalize and reshape the *time* of the twentieth century in contemporary works of art: a way of re-imagining and imaging this lost, or at least lapsed, time, rendering available for artistic manipulation and aesthetic experience its passing, its continuities and traumatic breaks, and its entwinement with the empirical contingencies of national and global histories.

It is not my intention, however, to discuss here specific interpretations of the "retroavantgarde" term and concept by artists or critics. This is partially because the extensive research of Inke Arns, published first in her 2004 dissertation at the Humboldt University, more recently in the book based on her thesis, documents these developments in detail and with considerable critical acumen.[6] Yet it is also because my intention in this paper is more properly philosophical, or metahistorical and metacritical, than historical and critical. Here I would echo Peter Osborne's claim, in *The Politics of Time*, that such basic terminology like modernism and postmodernism, avant-garde and—I will add—retroavantgarde, have generally not in themselves been taken as problems for philosophical reflection, although philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Gianni Vattimo (to name only a few luminaries) were actively involved in generating a critical and polemical discourse in which such notions were employed.[7] Accordingly, in what follows, I will not be greatly concerned with practical matters of how one might do things, artistic and critical, with this paradoxical, neologistic

word "retroavantgarde," and still less will I seek to enumerate and evaluate the various ways it has already been used. Rather I seek to illuminate the more fundamental problem of what this seemingly bizarre term would imply if we were to take it seriously as a historiographic concept. Furthermore, I wish to understand the philosophical conditions under which its conceptual content becomes thinkable and meaningful. Finally, I will also ask what these considerations might tell us about our conceptions of time, historical change, and the role of aesthetics in historical knowledge.

* * *

Peter Osborne suggests that basic periodizing categories can be understood as diverse ways of "temporalizing history." In other words, they describe ways in which we interpret and figure being in time as meaningful historical activity and experience:

> "Modernity" and "postmodernity," "modernism," "postmodernism" and "avant-garde" are categories of historical consciousness which are constructed at the level of the apprehension of history as a whole. More specifically, they are categories of historical totalization in the medium of cultural experience. As such, each involves a distinct form of historical temporalization. . . through which the three dimensions of phenomenological or lived time (past, present, future) are linked together within the dynamic and eccentric unity of a single historical view. (Osborne ix)

Two aspects of Osborne's formulation are notable for my purpose. First is that these periodizing conceptions are not simply monodimensional metrics of chronology and the quantitative differences between successive moments—i.e. on this day in 1921 we are in the "modern," whereas seventy years later, we have entered the "postmodern" epoch. Rather, they also designate shifts in the *configuration* of past, present, and future that gives "history" its content and character at a given moment. In a sense, we might say that the difference between modernity and postmodernity lies less in the sheer chronological difference between 1921 and 1991, than in the different ways in which modernity and postmodernity configure the possible relations between 1921 and 1991. In this regard, 1921-1991 is not necessarily commutable with 1991-1921, since these chronological coordinates exist within a different topology of past, present, and future in the two cases. Periodizing terms are needed precisely to mark these topological shifts within an apparently homogeneous chronology. Such

terms, thus, not only measure chronology, but also advance interpretations about qualitative differences in the way historicity is being represented and experienced, against the background of chronological continuity. In an essay that touches upon some of the same temporal paradoxes as retroavantgardism, Fredric Jameson has suggested that in our readings of cultural artifacts we must not only account for them historically, but also consider how they express epochal qualities in their very stance towards historical representation:

> Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the present as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective. It is appropriate, in other words, also to insist on the historicality of the operation itself, which is our way of conceiving of historicity in this particular society and mode of production; appropriate also to observe that what is at stake is essentially a process of reification whereby we draw back from our immersion in the here and now. . .and grasp it as a kind of thing.[8]

We might say accordingly: our periodizing concepts register under a single term both *historical* distinctions and differences in the mode of *historicity*, as the dynamic topology in which the dimensions of time are configured.

Second, Osborne connects this configurational aspect of time in period concepts with different modes of cultural experience, which are themselves figurally mediated by images, language, constructed spaces and artifacts, and bodily performances. We might go on to conclude—although Osborne does not develop this argument at length—that various sorts of figural acts and artifacts, such as art objects and performances, narratives and images, serve as the vehicles by which our temporalizing apprehension of historicity is experienced. Thus, historical experience and aesthetic experience of figural products of culture are intertwined, even mutually constitutive. Each provides the other with a hermeneutic framework by which the other can be interpreted and experienced as meaningful. When we read Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, we do not merely encounter a cultural artifact that communicates something about its represented context, Dublin on the 16th of June 1904, or of the context of its production in the years of World War I and the early 1920s. We also apprehend, through our aesthetic experience of the work, the very texture and meaning of time in modernity: that particular way in which the past and future are qualified and related to the present. Thus, the canonical opinion that *Ulysses* is a paradigm of the "modernist novel," seemingly so

natural given its style and the time of its publication, is actually a highly complex correlation of an artistic figuration with a temporal configuration, which thus implies a further interpretative hypothesis about the mutual translatability of these two types of figure, the temporal into the cultural and vice versa. Moreover, we should note, it is within this periodizing framework of modernity—in which cultural figuration and temporal configuration are conceived as transposable analogues of one another—that the historical sense of "avant-garde" is also developed.

One of the most sophisticated extensions of this idea of the figural nature of historicizing concepts is the deconstructive rhetorical criticism of Paul De Man, especially in his early writings collected in *Blindness and Insight.* There, in essays such as "Literary History and Literary Modernity" and "Lyric and Modernity," De Man subjected to scrutiny literary criticism's typical ascription of period successivity to figural and stylistic aspects of poetic texts. Especially the terms "modern" and "modernity" with respect to literature bring this problem to the fore:

> The term "modernity" is not used in a simple chronological sense as an approximate synonym for "recent" or "contemporary" with a positive or negative value-emphasis added. It designates more generally the problematical possibility of all literature's existing in the present, of being considered, or read, from a point of view that claims to share with it its own sense of a temporal present. In theory, the question of modernity could therefore be asked of any literature at any time, contemporaneous or not. In practice, however, the question has to be put somewhat more pragmatically from a point of view that postulates a roughly contemporaneous perspective and that favors recent over older literature. This necessity is inherent in the ambivalent status of the term "modernity," which is itself partly pragmatic and descriptive, partly conceptual and normative. In the common usage of the word the pragmatic implications usually overshadow theoretical possibilities that remain unexplored. My emphasis tries to restore this balance to some degree: hence the stress on literary categories and dimensions that exist independently of historical contingencies.[9]

De Man's focus is on certain basic rhetorical mechanisms in literature, especially the tendency to allegorize structural features of literary language in terms of historical—or pseudo-historical—indices, which in turn generate what is, for him, the largely illusory substance of literary historical and critical discourse. Indeed, in his later work, De Man advances a radical Nietzschean skepticism about any substantive linkages between literary meaning and history, which he views as an

unrepresentable play of material actions and blind forces, only retrospectively and willfully allegorized as meaningful.

I do not think this is a necessarily trajectory from De Man's point of departure. But in any case, however, his work does point to a far more rhetorically constructed—and hence, critically *de*-constructible—interaction between modes of temporality and frameworks of historical explanation than has generally been acknowledged by the disciplines of literary history, art history, or cultural history in their use of periodizing concepts. Moreover, when he suggests that critical ascriptions of modernity employ a rhetoric of temporality that need not entail strict *historical* contemporaneity, he opens the periodizing concept of modernity to the sort of figural mobility and transposibility that also self-consciously characterizes the concept of retroavantgardism. Unlike De Man, however, I do not believe that the figural nature of historicizing terms renders any use of them merely strategic, unstable, and ultimately spurious. Rather, I would suggest that their function is hermeneutically projective and culturally creative, insofar as they play an active role in constructing any possible historical experience and in any account of historical experience we inevitably rediscover their figural precipitate. Akin to the schemata and frameworks that preshape our perceptual encounters with the world, periodizing figures are images we actualize and concretize in our metabolic encounters with the cultural world, with its temporal dimensions of past, present, and future and its geo-cultural extension.

Indeed, I believe that already with the classical avant-gardes there was a high level of self-consciousness about their artistic activity being, above all, a labor of qualifying time in the form of a new historicity that would be proper to their age. It is in this light that we can the reconsider the comically hyperbolic paradox of anticipation and future realization of the final passages of Filippo Tomaso Marinetti's 1909 "Founding and Manifesto of Futurism." Marinetti imagines the last act of the aging futurists as that of provoking their own totemic murder at the hands of the younger generation, who by killing their ancestors, will unwittingly become the most orthodox "disciples" of those "old men" they kill:

> The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts—we want it to happen! They will come against us, our successors, will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs, flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odours of our decaying minds, which will already have been promised to the literary catacombs.

> But we won't be there. . . At last they'll find us—one winter's night—in open country, beneath a sad roof drummed by a monotonous rain. They'll see us crouched beside our trembling aeroplanes in the act of warming our hands at the poor little blaze that our books of today will give out when they take fire from the flight of our images.
>
> They'll storm around us, panting with scorn and anguish, and all of them, exasperated by our proud daring, will hurtle to kill us, driven by a hatred the more implacable the more their hearts will be drunk with love and admiration for us.
>
> Injustice, strong and sane, will break out radiantly in their eyes.
>
> Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice.[10]

The implications of this temporal self-consciousness are more far-reaching and enduring, ultimately, than the more dated characteristics of the classical avant-gardes, such as their critical negativity, their vaunted penchant for public scandal, or their demand for perpetual formal innovation. In fact, it is this lesson, first and foremost, that the retroavantgardists have learned from the historical avantgarde and which retroavantgardism has reflexively taken up as its characteristic note: treating time as a malleable resource for cultural creation, as an immaterial material that can be crafted into aesthetically communicable images.

* * *

"Modernism" and "avant-garde" are generic classes of *time-images*, which correlate particular cultural figures—an archive of spaces, acts, and artifacts—with specific ways of experiencing the qualitative articulation of time. In light of Deleuze's distinction of movement-image and time-image, which I discussed in my introduction, I would suggest a similar distinction might be applied to the periodizing concepts of *avant-garde*, in its classical sense of advanced "movements" and their succession, and *retroavantgarde*, which reflexively highlights the fundamentally *temporal* configuration and content of avantgardism. Typically, theories of the avant-garde, including Peter Bürger's influential institutional theory, have emphasized the avant-garde's provocative and critical negativity, its transgression of conventions and public norms of communication and behavior, and its rejection of the limits of art as a specialized realm of production, practice, and perception. In turn, these characteristics underwrite its peculiar temporal dynamics as a series of conflicting movements: the rapid succession of ever-more radical "isms," the demand for perpetual innovation in advance of the generalized adoption of the avant-garde's utopian projections, the swift rise and fall of avant-garde movements as public provocations, and their ambivalent fellow-travelling

and sometimes identification with broader revolutionary social movements of the right and left. Put more simply, however, the basic trope of classical avant-gardism is precisely "movement": the forward thrust of the small, militant, disciplined, organized group, which is temporarily provocative, incomprehensible, and utopian, because of the historical lag of the masses behind the historical condition to come, which the avant-garde adumbrates. Critical negativity in the domain of culture and aesthetics, thus, is figuratively projected onto the temporal axis of history as anticipation and prefiguration.

Retroavantgarde, in its paradoxical highlighting of the temporal dynamics of anticipation that it rhetorically inverts, brings this temporal element to the fore and derives its own nature as present tense occurrence from its more primary, direct figuration of temporal relation: its belated, retrospective, backwards-turned reference to the futural thrust of the avant-garde. The seeming loss of forward "movement," the apparent stasis in which past and present seem to pool together in retroavantgarde works, or the odd temporal void in which the revived utopian rhetoric of the past appears to be suspended, is in fact not a loss of time, but a more direct confrontation with it. The aberrant movement of backward-referring futurism leads us to ask why anticipation, and hence negativity as its aesthetic correlate, once seemed like the exclusive temporal resource the avant-garde had to transform culture and explore utopian alternatives to the existing social, sensory, and semiotic order.

If it is understood as the heir of avant-garde time-consciousness, accomplishing a break with the linear progressive thrust of the avant-garde and an elaboration of more complex temporal figures out of avant-garde artistic practice, retroavantgardism need not be seen as just one more in a long line of valedictory gestures towards a discredited avant-garde. It may help recover the avant-garde's authentically revolutionary position in culture, which was never, or never solely, based on its critical negativity, but rather more generally on *temporal heterogeneity to the present*, which results from its artistic treatment of time as a figurable material. If this is so, however, then there may still be much cultural work for a reconceived avant-garde to do, and despite regular, authoritative announcements of the "death of the avant-garde," we may yet bear witness to the revival of avant-garde aesthetics in many times and places. Insofar as there is not just one mode of temporal heterogeneity available to artists, but a plurality—critical, poetic, redemptive, and utopian—there may also be an indefinite multitude of ways in which the avant-garde's cultural work of shaping time can be artistically achieved.

Notes

[1] This essay originally appeared as "Retroavantgarde: Aesthetic Revival and the Con/Figurations of 20th-Century Time," *Filozofski Vestnik* 28/2 (Ljubljana, Slovenia) (2007): 253-265.

[2] The first use of the term dates back to 1983 with the exhibition of the political / conceptual rock group Laibach in the SKUC Gallery in Ljubljana, in which they presented art works, their first video, and a cassette tape recording of music. The exhibition's title was Ausstellung Laibach Kunst—Monumentalna Retroavantgarda. For documentation and further information, see *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, ed. New Collectivism, trans. Marjan Golobic (Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1991).

[3] Eda Cufer and IRWIN, "The Ear behind the Painting" (1991), in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, ed. Misko Suvakovic and Dubravka Djuric (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003) 581.

[4] Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, "The Barren Flowers of Evil" (1980), in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art since the 1950s* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002) 270.

[5] Cufer and IRWIN, "NSK State in Time" (1992/93), in *Primary Documents* 301.

[6] Inke Arns, *Objects in the Mirror May Be Closer Than They Appear! Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel, Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avantgarderezeption in (Ex-)Jugoslawien und Russland von der 1980s Jahren bis in die Gegenwart*, Dissertation: Humboldt University, Berlin 2004; Inke Arns, *Avangarda v Vzvratnem Ogledalu* [Avantgarde in the Rearview Mirror] (Ljubljana: Maska, 2006).

[7] Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995) vii.

[8] Fredric Jameson, "Nostalgia for the Present," in *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 1991) 284.

[9] Paul De Man, "Lyric and Modernity," in *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd Edition (Minneapolis, Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1983) 166-167.

[10] Filippo Tommaso Marinetti, "The Founding and Manifesto of Futurism" (1909), in *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, ed. Mary Ann Caws (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001) 189.

CHAPTER THREE

FROM CITY-DREAMS TO THE DREAMING COLLECTIVE: WALTER BENJAMIN'S POLITICAL DREAM INTERPRETATION[1]

Interpretation of / and Dreams

By the latter half of the 1920s, Walter Benjamin had begun to employ in his literary and cultural investigations a novel conceptual frame: "political dream-interpretation."[2] This term meant for Benjamin the work of an interpreter who attended to the particular "image-puns" (*Bilderwitz*) or superimposed pictures emerging not from the dream or the sensuous world—the former the domain of the psychoanalyst, the latter of the artist—but from social reality (*GS* III, 227). This interpreter of social reality should, it was true, study well the methods of these two adepts of word and image, the psychoanalyst and artist. For ultimately, the hermeneutic labors of the political dream interpreter should subsume, if not wholly supplant, those of his therapeutic and artistic *semblables*.

What began for Benjamin as a series of local probes into the sleep-walking and daydreaming of his own social milieu—child's play in the bourgeois household, toys and picture books, tourist travel, interior decoration and kitsch art, the writings of Kafka and Proust—eventually grew by the 1930s into a full-scale historiographic and political problematic in which the concept of "dream" played a central role.[3] In the study of nineteenth-century Paris that occupied Benjamin from 1927 until his suicide in 1940, his Arcades Project or *Passagenwerk*, the dreaming collective, dream-houses and the dream-city, and the historical dialectic of periods of mass dreaming and revolutionary awakening, were pivotal motifs, at times modified and reconfigured but never definitively relinquished.

Reflected perhaps in the very notion of dream and certainly in Benjamin's bold extension of it is its pregnancy of meaning and its correlative blurriness of reference. Benjamin himself speaks of the "untrue

duskiness" of dreams, and it is legitimate to ask whether there is not something of this shadowy luminosity lending the concept a false aura of depth. At the same time, however, the importance of dream as the passageway to new psychic and semiotic terrain, explored above all by Freud at the turn of this century, is undeniable. As Paul Ricoeur writes, regarding the dream as Freud's "royal road" to the unconscious:

> ... the word "dream" is not a word that closes, but is a word that opens. It does not close in upon a marginal phenomenon of our psychological life, upon the fantasies of our nights, the oneiric. It opens out onto all psychical productions, those of insanity and those of culture, insofar as they are the analogues of dreams, whatever may be the degree and principle of that relationship.[4]

The concept of dream has, one might venture to add, a propensity towards the semiotic logic that it seeks to describe: the condensation of multiple themes and motifs, the rebus-like overlaying and overdetermination of thoughts, an uncertain oscillation between literal and figural senses, a suggestion of occulted meanings visible through the manifest sign. Certainly in Benjamin's corpus several central themes converge upon and emanate from the concept of the dream. His rich but scattered employment of dream suggests the existence, somewhere beneath the surface of his writings, of a hidden node from which the individual uses take their *Ursprung*. And the present-day interpreter's search for this "origin" or "originary idea" of the dream-concept in Benjamin's work requires, like the narration of the dream itself, a narrative elaboration of the concept which may (re-)produce, for the first time, the story of its discontinuous emergence.

One of Benjamin's works from his student years, "Program of the Coming Philosophy," sets the later emergence of the dream-concept in a broad philosophical and historical context. In this programmatic essay, Benjamin criticizes Kant's conception of experience and in turn the enlightenment which Kant sought to foster (by implication, too, the neo-Kantian hegemony of Benjamin's own academic milieu). He argues that Kant's "experience," based on the perceptual empiricism of the physical sciences, was not universal but "unique and temporally limited"; it was thus an historically contingent rather than necessary element of transcendental philosophy. Benjamin means here that this conception of experience is typically "modern," which in turn stands under the general world-view of the Enlightenment. Such experience, he argues, has at best an historical privilege and one that should be challenged for what it is: a mythology of the modern.

> We know of primitive peoples of the so-called pre-animistic stage who identify themselves with sacred animals and plants and name themselves after them; we know of insane people who likewise identify themselves in part with objects of their perception . . . we know of sick people who do not relate the sensations of their bodies to themselves, but rather to other creatures, and of clairvoyants who at least claim to be able to feel the sensations of others as their own. The commonly shared notion of sensuous (and intellectual) knowledge . . . is very much a mythology like those mentioned . . . and indeed, only a modern and religiously particularly infertile one. [5]

In contradistinction to this impoverished mythology, Benjamin points to a "unity of experience" greater than the mere sum of separate experiences, a metaphysical continuity between apparently distinct spheres, a totality of which religion constitutes the "object and content" (*PCP*, 49, 51). This unity and continuity, however, can be sought by philosophy only through its reorientation towards *language*. "A concept of knowledge gained from reflection on the linguistic nature of knowledge," Benjamin writes, "will create a corresponding concept of experience which will also encompass realms that Kant failed to truly systematize" (*PCP*, 49).

Three things converge in Benjamin's essay. First, he criticizes the historical Enlightenment or "modernity" in general, its mythology of experience and the restricted knowledge based on that experience. Second, he argues for a systematic reorientation of philosophy towards language, towards problems of interpretation—its recasting as *hermeneutics*. Finally, he calls for a rethinking of "experience" in light of hermeneutics, for the recognition that human existence is inseparable from an engagement with *meaning* and that the dimensions within which experience takes place are those within which meaning emerges.

Formulated in this way, Benjamin's somewhat arcane and metaphysical language sounds more familiar. Benjamin, like many other German thinkers immediately preceding him, and those of the quarter century after his death, was arguing for a version of the "hermeneutic turn" in philosophy and the social sciences. Like Wilhelm Dilthey, Martin Heidegger and Hans-Georg Gadamer—all likewise shaped by the neo-Kantian and phenomenological movements in the German universities of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—Benjamin would make his own idiosyncratic turn towards language, textuality, and interpretation, which would leave neither his field of objects for study nor his methods by which to study them unchanged.

This emergence of hermeneutical philosophy out of neo-Kantianism and phenomenology is a complex history, the exposition of which lies beyond this paper. But of relevance to Benjamin's later adoption and—I

will argue—hermeneutic adaptation of the dream-concept is a twofold process common to modern hermeneutics: the extension of the field of hermeneutics and the operativization of interpretative procedure.[6] As is evident in his early criticisms of Kant as well as in his later critical and historiographic practice, Benjamin sought to extend the field of valid, significant "objects" beyond the "mythological" restrictions imposed by modern metaphysics and scholarly precepts. Indeed, the very consideration of theological entities and forces on the one hand, and the detritus and kitsch products of culture on the other, represents an initial "demythification" of knowledge and experience, a challenge to the restrictive mythology of the modern. It is as if these pariahed objects could bespeak in their very existence a critique of modernity and testify to a utopian, unmanifest "otherness" nested within—or beyond—modern space and time. Correlatively, the question of how one was to approach these curious objects took on a crucial importance for Benjamin. As Heidegger said of the "circle" of interpretation, the important thing is entering it in the right way. Benjamin's writing is replete with images of the proper approach to his objects of study, ranging from the "mosaic" of his *Trauerspiel* book, to the "thought-pictures" of his short prose of the late 1920s, to the ragpicker's piles of the *Passagenwerk*, to the "*plumpes Denken*" (crude thinking) of his Brechtian phases, to the "brushing of history against the grain" in his final meditations on the philosophy of history.

In his development of a political dream interpretation, Benjamin might be thought to synthesize Marx's critique of ideology with Freud's problematic of the unconscious. Benjamin's dream theory would stand in the line of attempts by thinkers like Wilhelm Reich, Erich Fromm, Theodor W. Adorno, Herbert Marcuse, Norman O. Brown, and Gilles Deleuze/Fé1ix Guattari to couple theoretically the respective economics of material production and desire—the legacy of so-called Freudo-Marxism. Yet such an assimilation of Benjamin's political dream-interpretation to this theoretical tendency would, in my view, misrepresent his intentions and the conceptual functioning of "dream" in his writings.[7] Benjamin's dream-concept is first and foremost an hermeneutic tool which cuts across both the Freudian and Marxist problematics eccentrically.

In *Freud and Philosophy*, Ricoeur identifies two basic postures of modern hermeneutics. Hermeneutics, he argues, serves either to restore meaning, to recollect and fulfill a "message" partly given in symbolic language; or to unmask ideologies, to destroy false appearances, to root out myths and illusions.[8] The former approach is generally linked to phenomenology, especially to the phenomenology of religion. The latter is

represented by what Ricoeur calls "the school of suspicion," most notably, by the founding figures of Marx, Freud and Nietzsche. The Freudo-Marxist synthesis, clearly, retains the latter posture of hermeneutic suspicion, amalgamating the frameworks of Marx and Freud in order to construct a more powerful arsenal of critical weapons against ideology and illusion. In his political dream interpretation, Benjamin likewise emphasizes the tactics of suspicion and unmasking against error, myth, and ideology. The dream has to be fully dismembered and discharged of its fascinating spell, to become "mortified" through analysis and interpretation.

Benjamin, however, links this unmasking to the telos of recollection and redemption of meaning—the restoration of an absolute meaning independent of either the cognizing subject or the constituted object, yet emerging only beyond the limits of an analytical destruction of false appearances. This absolute meaning properly pertains to theology, to the things of this world seen in the light of salvation. Benjamin conjoins these two conflicting hermeneutic stances in a unique way, brushing the hermeneutics of suspicion against the grain and replacing it in the service of a hermeneutics of restoration. Marcus Bullock aptly describes Benjamin's thinking as a projection of two paths: "It is most striking that he sets the axis between theology and secularization across rather than alongside that running from mythos to emancipation."[9] Benjamin accordingly places dream, as a critical concept and the pivot of his dual hermeneutic, at the crossroads where these paths meet.

The critical-destructive moment of Benjamin's dual hermeneutic, nevertheless, has significant points of contact with Freud's theory of dreams and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. In *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Slavoj Žižek suggests a comparison between Freud's and Marx's theory of commodity fetishism. Marx, Benjamin, and Žižek all address a common problem in their analyses of consciousness in advanced capitalist society. How is it, they ask, that the atomistic actions of individuals can have not just systemic effects, but precisely those systemic effects which allow the perpetuation of the system as a whole? Restated in more epistemological terms, their question becomes: How does one understand a system that realizes systemic ends precisely insofar as its actors do not see themselves as pursuing systemic, but individual goals? What is the nature of this collective "unknowing" or "unconsciousness" in the system?

Marx's answer lies in the form of the commodity. This form itself, Marx argues, has inscribed in it the peculiar deformation of consciousness he calls "fetishism," in which relations between producers of products (the