

**Ahead of its Time:
Historicity, Chronopolitics, and the Idea of the
Avant-Garde after Modernism**

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The candidate confirms that the work submitted is her own and that appropriate credit has been given where reference has been made to the work of others.

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Abstract

In its etymology and in popular discourse, the term ‘avant-garde’ is commonly associated with a future temporality, while in art-historical discourse, it represents a tradition of modernist innovation, periodised as ‘historical avant-garde’ and ‘neo-avant-garde’. Since this historical periodisation was first established in the 1950s, the avant-garde’s futurity has been repeatedly disputed, bringing the very notion of an avant-garde into question. This thesis takes as its starting point the predicament of ‘an avant-garde after the avant-garde’ as a means to investigate the philosophico-political implications of a historical temporality marked by ‘afterness’. Writing in critical dialogue with scholarship that has articulated the avant-garde as a notion of historical time, the thesis modifies the parameters of this scholarship by foregrounding the category of historicism, and by reformulating the avant-garde as a notion that both resists and inhabits historical periodisation. As a study at the disciplinary intersection of comparative literature and critical theory, *Ahead of its Time* proceeds via close readings of selected theories of the avant-garde (German literary scholar Peter Bürger’s foundational *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the 1970s; British art theorist John Roberts’ formulation of a ‘suspensive avant-garde’ in the twenty-first century; and the intellectual debates of the Italian circle *Neoavanguardia* in the 1960s), while also mobilising the critical resources available in the thought of Walter Benjamin. Through a non-linear, comparativist critical analysis that discusses these theories in, and as, a Benjaminian constellation, the thesis proposes the avant-garde as a relational, indexical category that is constitutively split between historical continuity and historical rupture. In this manner, *Ahead of its Time* revisits the broader question of mediation between universality and particularity, and by recasting it in temporal terms, it advocates a chronopolitics of singularity, whereby the avant-garde’s split between continuity and rupture also reveals the ethically-necessary relationship between self-determination and contingency.

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Abbreviations & Bibliographical Note

Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the French, German, and Italian are my own. Where available, English translations have been consulted and, where felt necessary, modified. Substantial re-translations of available English editions have been made to Theodor W. Adorno's *Negative Dialektik*; Walter Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels*; and Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*.

Full details of the works below are provided in the Bibliography.

Adorno, Theodor W.

<i>Aesthetic Theory</i>	AT
'Essay as Form'	EF
<i>Gesammelte Schriften</i>	AGS
<i>Minima Moralia</i>	MM
<i>Negative Dialectics</i>	ND

Adorno, Theodor W. & Walter Benjamin

<i>Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940, The</i>	CC
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Adorno, Theodor W. & Max Horkheimer

<i>Dialectic of Enlightenment, The</i>	DE
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Benjamin, Walter

<i>Arcades Project, The</i>	AP
'Attested Auditor of Books', in <i>One-way Street</i>	AUB
<i>Correspondence 1910-1940</i>	CWB
<i>Gesammelte Schriften</i>	GS
<i>Origin of the German Mourning Play</i>	Origin
<i>Selected Writings</i>	SW
<i>Understanding Brecht</i>	UB

Bürger, Peter

<i>Aktualität und Geschichtlichkeit</i>	AuG
'Institution Kunst als literatursoziologische Kategorie'	IK
<i>Institutions of Art, The</i>	IoA
<i>Theorie der Avantgarde/Theory of the Avant-Garde</i>	ThdA/ThoA
<i>Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion</i>	V-R-F

Neoavanguardia

Balestrini, Nanni, et al, eds., <i>Gruppo 63: L'antologia/Critica e Teoria</i>	G63
Sanguineti, Edoardo, <i>Ideologia e linguaggio</i>	Ideologia

Roberts, John

'Art and its Negations'	AN
'[The]Labour of Subjectivity, The Subjectivity of Labour'	LS
'Productivism and its Contradictions'	PC
<i>Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde</i>	RTA
'Revolutionary Pathos, Negation and the Suspensive Avant-Garde'	SA

Introduction:

What's Historical about the Historical Avant-Garde?

...the rupture of history is transformed little by little into a history of rupture.

– Marcelin Pleynet, 'Problems of the Avant-Garde' (1966)¹

When French poet and essayist Marcelin Pleynet offered this negative diagnosis on the condition of the avant-garde in the pages of the influential literary journal *Tel Quel* in the mid-1960s, the avant-garde was beginning to show its first signs of exhaustion. The apparent paradox that 'the shock of the new' was no longer shocking, and that the experiments and innovations of 'the avant-garde of today' had rendered the very name 'avant-garde' an anachronism, was a view that had become prevalent amongst art critics and intellectuals writing from various European and North American outposts.² Triggered by what was perceived as an irreversible process of institutionalisation and co-optation, a widespread anxiety over the avant-garde's afterlife gave rise to a discourse that repeatedly proclaimed, if not the

¹ Marcelin Pleynet, 'Problemes de l'avant-garde', *Tel Quel*, 25. Printemps (1966), 77-86 (p. 81).

² As an indication, see Hans Magnus Enzensberger, 'The Aporias of the Avant-Garde' (1962), trans. by John Simon, in *The Consciousness Industry: On Literature, Politics and the Media*, ed. by Michael Roloff (New York: Seabury Press, 1974), pp. 16-41; Harold Rosenberg, *The Tradition of the New* (New York: Da Capo Press, [1960] 1994), pp. 4-10; Richard Chase, 'The Fate of the Avant-Garde', *Partisan Review*, 24.3 (1957), 363-75. The phrase 'shock of the new' is a nod to the popular book and BBC television series by Robert Hughes, which itself dates from the 1980s and does not form part of the intellectual discourses described here. See Robert Hughes, *The Shock of the New: Art and the Century of Change* (London: Thames & Hudson, [1980] 1991).

avant-garde's ultimate death, then certainly its perpetual crisis.³ Pleynet's articulation of this anxiety over the avant-garde's afterlife with reference to the categories of history and rupture stands out in its eloquence: not only does it foreground a relationship between the avant-garde and historical rupture ('the rupture of history' stands here for the avant-garde), it also poignantly refers to that relationship's gradual reversal. In this seemingly simple formulation – 'the rupture of history is transformed little by little into a history of rupture' – the avant-garde becomes the exact opposite of what it once was.

Pleynet's formulation exemplifies the compelling effects of chiasmatic reversal: at once simple and intricate, it discloses on closer inspection a relationship more complex than a straightforward reversal.⁴ The category of history, that is, the role played by 'history' in the formulation's constituent parts, is also transformed in this gradual process of transformation. Whereas, in the first instance, history seems to denote the flow of historical events, in the second iteration, its meaning has shifted to those events' representation, thus demoting history's significance to one of mere historiography. The avant-garde thus becomes entangled in this chiasmatic spider-web of history: it begins its journey as the thing that opposes and disrupts the continuity of historical flow, and ends up as nothing more than a story-telling of that flow's disruption. Yet, as this thesis seeks to propose, it is precisely in its entanglement in this complex web of relations concerning the different

³ On the prevalence of a 'death discourse' surrounding the avant-garde, see, for instance, Paul Mann, *The Theory-Death of the Avant-garde* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1993), especially p. 64; Jesper Olsson, 'From Beyond the Grave: The Life and Death of the Avant-Garde. Book review of Mikkel Bolt, *Avantgardens selvmord* (Copenhagen: 28/6, 2009)', *The Nordic Journal of Aesthetics*, 40-41 (2010-2011), 153-63.

⁴ On chiasmus and its continuing rhetorical significance since antiquity, see Anthony Paul and Boris Wiseman, eds., *Chiasmus and Culture* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2014).

meanings of history and ‘the historical’ that the aporetic character of the avant-garde is most forcefully articulated.

The intellectual questions underpinning Pleyne’s formulation speak directly to the central premise behind the propositions to be developed in this thesis: namely, that the status of the avant-garde’s relationship to historical time ought to be considered as an articulation of ‘afterness’: that is, as a constitutive split between historical continuity and historical rupture.⁵ Accepting that there was indeed a moment when the avant-garde’s alleged transformation from ‘a rupture of history’ into ‘a history of rupture’ took place (an idea that is further supported by scholarship that I discuss below), this thesis examines the philosophical implications of this changed relationship. If the very meaning of the avant-garde hinges on its identification with the historical break, what happens when the avant-garde has itself become historical? If the avant-garde’s radical politics centres on its ruptural relationship to history, what kind of politics or *chronopolitics* would a notion of the ‘historical avant-garde’ suggest? Far from being research questions in the strict sense of the term, these broad exploratory interrogations provide the necessary intellectual framework through which to begin a critical re-examination of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism. Therefore, this thesis aims to articulate a new conceptualisation of the notion of the avant-garde with reference to historical time, particularly as this conceptualisation is necessitated by the avant-garde’s changed status from a notion of futurity to one whose temporality is marked by a ‘future past’.⁶

One important preliminary step must be taken before we embark on this undertaking. Since it is the very notion of ‘the avant-garde’ that will come under scrutiny and reformulation, it is important that readers suspend any

⁵ My usage of the term ‘afterness’ is indebted to the Germanist scholar Gerhard Richter. My own proposition of ‘afterness’, as elaborated in Chapter 5, is conceptually distinct from Richter’s. Cf. Gerhard Richter, *Afterness: Figures of Following in Modern Thought and Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011).

⁶ My allusion here is to Reinhart Koselleck, whose work I consider briefly below.

prior assumptions that they may have regarding this term. Such prior assumptions may include certain conventions about who or what represents or exemplifies the avant-garde – be they specific artworks, texts and images; names of artists, writers and intellectuals; or lists of art movements. Assumptions may also pertain to specific geographical locations, historical periods, socio-economic conditions and political ideologies (including those that I have myself inescapably depended upon in my remarks in the preceding paragraphs). This strategy of suspension is not aimed at bypassing or erasing the issues that are raised through the consideration of specific artworks, geographical locations or historical periods. Quite the contrary: as will become apparent, this provisional ‘emptying out’ of signification is precisely what will enable the necessary interrogation of the status of *specificity* – in its deepest methodological and philosophical sense – when approaching the notion of the avant-garde critically.

What follows is an introduction to the intellectual and methodological parameters of this investigation, structured in three parts. Part I introduces ‘avant-garde’ as a term, clarifying the differences and convergences in the multiple discursive fields that the term occupies, before limiting its scope and proposing a preliminary, working notion of the avant-garde to be deployed in the thesis. Part II situates the present investigation within an existing body of scholarship that approaches the idea of the avant-garde as a philosophical problem, and suggests the ways in which this study builds on, and departs from, such scholarship. Part III introduces the corpus of texts through which this investigation will be undertaken, reviews key theories that were omitted from this study, and offers a brief summary overview while presenting the project’s broader methodological prism.

I. ‘Which Avant-Garde?’ Specificity and its Discontents

Conveying a sense of radicalism, novelty, and experimentation, ‘avant-garde’ is a word shrouded in mystique. An international term circulating in several fields of discourse, it retains today traces of its earlier military connotations

of a select group of soldiers marching ahead of the rest.⁷ For marketing and advertising executives ‘avant-garde’ usually means ‘cutting-edge’; for pop music journalists it may stand for ‘experimental’ or ‘difficult’; while for art lovers, it commonly represents a key moment in the development of nineteenth and twentieth century art. Despite its ubiquity, the term ‘avant-garde’ continues to bewilder. In its English usage it functions grammatically as both noun and adjective: someone or something may belong to ‘*the* avant-garde’ (*that* select group of innovators or pioneers), or something may have certain ‘avant-garde’ attributes. As art historian David Cottington has aptly remarked, this grammatical ambiguity has contributed to a broader conceptual ambiguity, and to a great deal of sloppy usage.⁸ Yet alongside the deceptively simple question of grammar, we must also note the term’s normative dimension: because of the implicit value-judgment entailed in saying who or what *may qualify as* ‘avant-garde’, the seemingly neutral question of definition quickly becomes embroiled in matters of legitimation and distinction. For, the question ‘what is (the) avant-garde?’ immediately poses the question: ‘who decides what is (the) avant-garde?’ If the avant-garde is no more than that which is said to be avant-garde – the noun merely exhibiting the characteristics of its own attribute – then we find ourselves caught in a definitional circularity.

⁷ See the etymological definition given by the *OED*, ‘Avant-garde, avant-guard’, *Oxford English Dictionary Online*, 2nd edn (1989), stable URL <<http://www.oed.com>> [accessed 18 February 2011]. The definitive scholarly histories of the term, tracing the link between the term ‘avant-garde’ and the utopian socialism of Saint-Simon, remain Donald Drew Egbert, ‘The Idea of “Avant-garde” in Art and Politics’, *The American Historical Review*, 73.2 (1967), 339-66; and Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Postmodernism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1977; 2nd edn 1987), pp. 97-111.

⁸ See David Cottington, *The Avant-Garde: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 3-6.

Confronted with this knotty problem, scholars and teachers of this thing called avant-garde have long wrestled with the term's contingent character, often resorting to identifying this contingency as the avant-garde's defining characteristic. Introducing the term in a student textbook, art historian Paul Wood has announced the avant-garde as 'a radically unstable concept'.⁹ Writing in a similar context, film historian Ian Christie has declared that: 'the idea of an avant-garde cannot, *by its nature*, be static or agreed. It is perhaps best understood as, in the philosophers' term, an essentially contested concept, always open to dispute or redefinition'.¹⁰ Literary scholar Susan Rubin Suleiman has acknowledged the same intricacies when referring to the avant-garde as an example of *deixis*; namely, as a semantic element whose reference is always relative to a specific location and standpoint, and which consequently has no meaning outside that standpoint.¹¹ Lastly, attempting to introduce a historical-materialist dimension to the issue, some scholars have turned to the thought of Raymond Williams and his category of the 'basic concept', suggesting that the avant-garde is best understood as a

⁹ Paul Wood, 'Modernism and the Idea of the Avant-Garde', in *A Companion to Art Theory*, ed. by Paul Smith and Carolyn Wilde (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 215-28 (p. 215).

¹⁰ Ian Christie, 'The Avant-Gardes and European Cinema before 1930', in *The Oxford Guide to Film Studies*, ed. by John Hill and Pamela Church Gibson (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), pp. 449-54 (p. 453, emphasis added). Christie is referring to W. B. Gallie's paradigmatic social-science model whose application for the humanities is, however, questionable. Cf. W. B. Gallie, 'Essentially Contested Concepts', *Proceedings of the Aristotelian Society*, 56 (1956), 167-98.

¹¹ Susan R. Suleiman, 'The Idea of the Avant-Garde', in *The Columbia History of Twentieth-Century French Thought*, ed. by Lawrence D. Kritzman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 162-65 (p. 163).

historically-constituted problem-category, alongside those of 'culture' and 'ideology'.¹²

This articulation of the avant-garde as a contingent and contested notion – whether considered 'essentially', semantically, or historically – has itself fed back into the term's etymological history. Thus, a large number of accounts that deal exclusively with the idea of the avant-garde have placed less emphasis on *defining* the avant-garde, and more on offering an intellectual historiography of its terminological contestation.¹³ These accounts have variously incorporated genealogies of artists and art movements that are considered to be part of an 'avant-garde tradition' with discussions of landmark publications such as Clement Greenberg's essay 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), Renato Poggioli's monograph *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* (1962, translated as *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1968), and the *locus classicus* for avant-garde studies, Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*

¹² See Jason M. Baskin, 'Romanticism, Culture, Collaboration: Raymond Williams beyond the Avant-Garde', *Cultural Critique*, 83. Winter (2013), 108–36 (pp. 108-9); Gail Day, 'Art, Love and Social Emancipation: The Concept "Avant-Garde" and the Interwar Avant-Gardes', in *Art of the Avant-Gardes*, ed. by Steve Edwards and Paul Wood (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2004), pp. 307-333 (p. 312).

¹³ In addition to Paul Wood's article cited above, see *inter alia* Edgar Lohner, 'Die Problematik des Begriffes der Avantgarde', in *Literarische Avantgarden*, ed. by Manfred Hardt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 113-27; Hannes Böhringer, 'Avantgarde – Geschichten einer Metapher', *Archiv für Begriffsgeschichte*, 22 (1978), 90–114; Jost Hermand, 'Das Konzept „Avantgarde“', in *Faschismus und Avantgarde*, hg. Reinhold Grimm and Jost Hermand (Königstein: Athenäum Verlag, 1980), pp. 1-17; Ann Gibson, 'Avant-Garde', in *Critical Terms for Art History*, ed. by Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996), pp. 202-16; Johanne Lamoureux, 'Avant-Garde: A Historiography of a Critical Concept', in *A Companion to Contemporary Art since 1945*, ed. by Amelia Jones (Oxford: Blackwell, 2006), pp. 191-211.

(1974, translated as *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1984).¹⁴ Others, seizing upon the opportunity opened up by such contestation, have sought to contribute to the field by revisiting the perennial question and by defining the avant-garde anew.¹⁵

Despite this broader acceptance of the avant-garde being a ‘problem-category’, it is my contention – and one of the departure points for my enquiry – that the avant-garde, *as notion*, remains firmly fixed upon a small number of coordinates. As I elaborate below, these coordinates relate to broader questions of history and representation, and have crystallised in the tension between the cognate concepts of ‘modernity’ and ‘modernism’. Following from this, I propose that the apparent problem of the contingency (or of the definitional circularity) of the avant-garde in fact concerns the more fundamental issue of mediation between universality and particularity. Thus, to articulate the issue in the form of questions: the question ‘what is (the) avant-garde?’, instead of being approached directly, is commonly displaced by answering the different question ‘which avant-garde?’. And this shift from generality to specificity (or from ontology to taxonomy, we might say) is also accompanied by a shift from idea to phenomenon: the avant-garde *as general*

¹⁴ See, respectively, Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-Garde and Kitsch’, in *Clement Greenberg: The Collected Essays and Criticism, Volume 1*, ed. by John O’Brian (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), pp. 5-22; Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, [1962] 1968); Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw; with a foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1974] 1984).

¹⁵ For an early affirmation of the avant-garde as a notion that must remain a question, see Helmut Krapp and Karl Markus Michel, ‘Noten zum Avantgardismus’, *Akzente*, 2 (1955), 399-407 (p. 399). More recently, see ‘What Is an Avant-Garde?’, Special Issue, ed. by Jonathan P. Eburne and Rita Felski, *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010) and Marc James Léger, ed., *The Idea of the Avant-Garde – And What It Means Today* (Manchester: Manchester University Press/Left Curve, 2014).

idea is made 'unproblematic' through resort to the avant-garde as *specific phenomenon*. Before I elaborate on the problems that emerge from such a shift, and how this thesis seeks to respond to these problems, let me first outline the most prevalent conception of the avant-garde as phenomenon and the coordinates upon which this conception is fixed.

Understood in its specificity, the avant-garde is generally articulated as a socio-cultural or artistic phenomenon of experimentation and innovation. As a socio-cultural phenomenon, the avant-garde comes to stand for a group of people (for instance, artists, intellectuals, or activists) who play a pioneering role within the wider social body.¹⁶ This group of people is often considered to be socially marginal and linked to 'bohemian' or 'counter-cultural' tendencies; in order for their activities to be considered 'avant-garde', they ought to be significant enough to take on the character of a 'formation' – to come to stand for what is often called a 'specific historical conjuncture'.¹⁷ In this conception, the avant-garde is best understood through sociological theories of art such as the paradigmatic analysis of Pierre Bourdieu, who insightfully articulates the avant-garde in relation to the 'bastard institution' of the salon, and identifies the unique character of the avant-garde in its paradoxical relation to, and legitimation by, the bourgeois

¹⁶ See, for instance, 'Avant-garde', in M.H. Abrams, *A Glossary of Literary Terms*, 3rd edition (New York: Holt, Rinehart & Winston, 1971), p. 227.

¹⁷ See Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, 'Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed', *Art History*, 4.3 (1981), 305-27; reprinted in Fred Orton and Griselda Pollock, *Avant-Gardes and Partisans Reviewed* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1996), pp. 141-164 (pp. 141-142). Cf. Cottington, *The Avant-Garde*, pp. 8-21; David Cottington, 'Like Mushrooms Overnight: A Conjunctural Analysis of the Emergence of the Avant-Garde', Unpublished Conference Paper, *Historizing the Avant-Garde*, Copenhagen 20-22 November 2009; with thanks to the author for providing access to the unpublished manuscript.

market.¹⁸ Understood as an artistic phenomenon, on the other hand, the avant-garde emerges as a more narrowly specified category. Though the avant-garde as an artistic phenomenon is still considered through its antagonistic relationship towards mainstream cultural production or the market, its determination is often little more than a process of classification and taxonomy, where genealogies of artists, artworks, and art movements are presented as part of the avant-garde tradition.¹⁹ This history of the avant-garde tradition is then further delineated according to two coordinates: most frequently, according to artistic medium (or discipline), and according to a national (or regional) origin. Whenever the decidedly undecided term 'avant-garde' is introduced in a discussion, therefore, one can easily fall back upon the certainties of specificity: the avant-garde becomes the architectural avant-garde, the musical avant-garde, the literary avant-garde, the digital avant-garde, etc.; or it becomes the Turkish avant-garde, the Latin American avant-garde, the Nordic avant-garde, the Australian avant-garde, and so on.²⁰ While

¹⁸ See Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field*, trans. by Susan Emanuel (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, [1992] 1996), especially pp. 47-68, 121-28.

¹⁹ See, for instance, the source books by Richard Kostelanetz, *A Dictionary of the Avant-Gardes* (New York: Schirmer Books, 2000); and Hubert van den Berg and Walter Fähnders, eds., *Metzler Lexikon Avantgarde* (Stuttgart: Metzler Verlag, 2008).

²⁰ Once again, this tendency is so prevalent in popular and scholarly discourse that space does not permit the inclusion of a comprehensive bibliography. Merely as an indication, see Aleksandar Flaker, 'The Croatian Avant-Garde', in *Literarische Avantgarden*, ed. by Manfred Hardt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1988), pp. 375-91; Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1995); Toshiko Ellis, 'The Japanese Avant-Garde of the 1920s: The Poetic Struggle with the Dilemma of the Modern', *Poetics Today*, 20. 4 (1999), 723-41; Hilde Heynen, 'Avant-garde', in *Encyclopedia of Twentieth Century Architecture*, ed. by R. Stephen Sennott (New York: Fitzroy Dearborn, 2004), pp. 97-99; Xiaobing Tang,

the latter specification of taxonomy through geography is welcome in that it often embraces inter-disciplinarity and goes beyond medium-specificity, it regrettably also reproduces a form of cultural essentialism, where each *specific* avant-garde phenomenon has to demonstrate its ‘avant-garde-ness’ – i.e. its legitimacy as avant-garde – to a *general*, arguably universalising, category of the avant-garde *as notion*. (I will be returning to this contentious claim below).

It is here that the centrality of the tension between ‘modernism’ and ‘modernity’ and its relationship to the avant-garde becomes crucial. Readers familiar with the problem of translating *le moderne* or *die Moderne* into English will be aware of the many misconceptions that arise as one tries to distinguish between ‘modernism’, ‘modernity’, and ‘the modern’.²¹ Yet the frequent lack of distinction between these terms is arguably also indicative of the more fundamental difficulty of systematically articulating an appropriate mediation between the socio-economic and cultural spheres. Modernism is still widely conceived in reflectionist terms – i.e. as the *aesthetic response* (whether as reflection of, or as reaction against) the socio-economic category of modernity.²² That said, this crude reflectionism has also been productively

Origins of the Chinese Avant-Garde: The Modern Woodcut Movement (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2007).

²¹ See the seminal discussions by Jürgen Habermas and Hans Robert Jauss amongst others. Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987), especially pp. 1-22; ‘Modernity versus Postmodernity’, trans. by Seyla Ben-Habib, *New German Critique*, 22. Special issue on Modernism (1981), 3-14; reprinted as ‘Modernity – an Incomplete Project’, in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. by Hal Foster (Port Townsend, WA: Bay Press, 1983), pp. 3-15. Hans Robert Jauss, ‘Modernity and Literary Tradition’, *Critical Inquiry*, 31.2 (2005), 329-64.

²² See, for instance, Philip Tew and Alex Murray, ‘Introduction: Beginning with Modernism’, in *The Modernism Handbook*, ed. by Philip Tew and Alex Murray (London: Continuum, 2009), pp. 1-15 (pp. 12-13).

countered by analyses that centre on mediating categories such as subjectivity or experience. Whether these draw on Reinhart Koselleck's conception of modernity (*Neuzeit*) as the historical period that is uniquely self-conscious of its own historical time as 'new', or depart from Charles Baudelaire's classic formulation that pronounces modernity as 'the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent, the half of art whose other half is the eternal and the immutable', such analyses allow for a more nuanced mediation between the cultural and the socio-economic dimensions of 'the modern'.²³

Despite these nuanced mediations of the cultural and the socio-economic spheres, the notion of the avant-garde – fluctuating between its socio-cultural meaning of bohemianism and its art-historical meaning of a tradition of formal experimentation – has inevitably been caught in the tension between (cultural) modernism and (socio-economic) modernity. Although the days of treating the avant-garde and modernism as synonymous are long gone, the avant-garde is still firmly attached to the notion of modernism.²⁴ This attachment can again be understood through the tension

²³ I have in mind analyses such as those by Marshall Berman, *All That is Solid Melts into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1982); and David Frisby, *Fragments of Modernity: Theories of Modernity in the Work of Simmel, Kracauer and Benjamin* (Cambridge: Polity, 1985). For Koselleck's paradigmatic conceptual history, see Reinhart Koselleck, *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*, trans. and with an introduction by Keith Tribe (New York: Columbia University Press, [1979] 2004), especially pp. 222-54. For Baudelaire's classic definition, see Charles Baudelaire, 'The Painter of Modern Life' [1859], in *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. and ed. by Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, [1964] 1995), pp. 1-41 (p. 12).

²⁴ For a now-outdated example of treating the avant-garde and modernism interchangeably, see John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde: Explorations in Modernism* (London: Alcove Press, 1973), *passim*. For more recent expressions of this fundamental link between modernism and the avant-garde, see *inter alia*, Raymond Williams, 'The Politics of the Avant-Garde', in *The Politics of Modernism: Against the New Conformists* (London: Verso, 1989), pp. 49-63 (p. 51); Robert Holub,

between a trans-historically conceived question of artistic form or representation, on the one hand, and a historically specific question of periodisation, on the other. With respect to representation, the avant-garde's links to modernism are legitimated through their joint opposition to realism (where both modernism and realism are understood in terms of *genre*). With respect to historical periodisation, the avant-garde is taken to occupy, or indeed to construct, the same historical period as modernism (with modernism being here construed in its double function as genre *and* period). Thus, modernism and by extension the avant-garde are historically situated in the years c. 1910-1930 or, in a more inclusive variation, in the years c. 1890-1940. Needless to say, these periodisations are much contested, and the chronological boundaries first laid out in Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane's canonical collection *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* have since been adjusted and modified.²⁵ Particularly since the rise of 'new modernist studies', these chronological – and indeed geographical – boundaries have given way to a plethora of studies that question the legitimacy of modernism as a homogeneous phenomenon, and place emphasis on transnational exchange and global networks.²⁶ In its most provocatively

'Modernism, Modernity, Modernisation', in *The Cambridge History of Literary Criticism: Volume 9, Twentieth-Century Historical, Philosophical and Psychological Perspectives*, ed. by Christa Knellwolf and Christopher Norris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 275-88 (p. 280).

²⁵ See Malcolm Bradbury and James MacFarlane, eds., *Modernism: A Guide to European Literature, 1890-1930* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1976).

²⁶ See the changes noted in the 'Preface to the Second Edition' in Peter Nicholls, *Modernisms: A Literary Guide* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 1995; 2nd edn 2009), p. viii; and the seminal survey article by Douglas Mao and Rebecca L. Walkowitz, 'The New Modernist Studies', *PMLA*, 123.3 (2008), 737-48. Of interest is also the regrettably mean-spirited exchange about the politics of new modernist studies between Max Brzezinski and Martin Puchner. See Max Brzezinski, 'The New Modernist Studies: What's Left of Political Formalism?', *Minnesota Review*, 76 (2011),

expansive articulation so far, Susan Stanford Friedman's *Planetary Modernisms*, traces of modernism are found as far as the Tang Dynasty and the Mongol Empire of Genghis Khan.²⁷

Such expansions and modifications notwithstanding, the avant-garde's historical location continues to be fixed to the periodising category of modernism. Its historical location has been additionally fixed by the fact that the avant-garde functions as a periodising category itself or, rather, as a periodising category 'cut in two'. Long before avant-garde studies had become a recognised sub-field of modernist studies, and as early as Pleynet's diagnosis of the avant-garde's historical crisis, the avant-garde had been split into two periods – 'historical avant-garde' and 'neo-avant-garde' – so as to mark the history of formal innovations in the first and second half of the twentieth century respectively and, in its initial formulation, to highlight precisely what was seen as the decline of the 'original' (i.e. 'historical') avant-garde.²⁸ Since

109-25; Martin Puchner, 'The New Modernist Studies: A Response', *Minnesota Review*, 79 (2012), 91-96.

²⁷ See Susan Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms: Provocations on Modernity across Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2015). For the turn towards plural, global modernisms, see *inter alia* Peter Brooker et al, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010); Mark Wollaeger and Matt Eatough, eds., *The Oxford Handbook of Global Modernisms* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

²⁸ The origin of the categories 'historical avant-garde' and 'neo-avant-garde' is often mistakenly attributed to Peter Bürger. See, for instance, David Hopkins, 'Introduction', in *Neo-Avant-Garde*, ed. by David Hopkins (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2006), pp. 1-15 (p. 2). Hopkins is correct to foreground Bürger's theory as popularising the neo-avant-garde as a 'lesser' avant-garde. However, the derogatory connotations of 'neo-avant-garde', and prior to that of 'neo-dada', had already been established in the writing of several critics and, indeed, of some 'ex-Dadaists' themselves. See Hubert van den Berg, 'On the Historiographic Distinction between Historical and Neo-Avant-Garde', in *Avant-garde/Neo-avant-garde*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005), pp. 63-74 (pp. 67-70).

these lamentations of the neo-avant-garde's lesser status as 'avant-garde' in the 1960s and 1970s, several attempts at rehabilitating the neo-avant-garde have taken place, most prominently those proposed by art critics Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Hal Foster.²⁹ Indeed, it is to Foster's influential essay 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?' (1994) that this introduction owes its title. Yet in asking 'What's Historical about the Historical Avant-Garde?' my aim is not to shift the focus back to the hegemonic periodising category that Foster's analysis successfully critiqued. Whereas Foster articulated an alternative temporality for the neo-avant-garde (i.e. as the Freudian structure of *Nachträglichkeit* that, in its repetition of the traumatic event, activates and makes sense of the original occurrence), my focus in this thesis rests neither with the temporality of the historical-avant-garde nor with the temporality of the neo-avant-garde. Rather, my concern lies in the paradoxical status of the avant-garde as a notion that both defies, and is bound by, the temporality of periodisation.

Thus, if we consider the avant-garde as a contested and contingent notion, and furthermore, as a notion that can articulate a problematic of historical time, we can identify the new theoretical horizons that are opened up by considering the avant-garde as both inhabiting and resisting the temporality of historical periodisation. In one of the few dictionary definitions that pays attention to the philosophical question of historicity in relation to the avant-garde, Ian Buchanan rightly problematises the avant-garde's relationship to modernism, and goes on to assert that the avant-garde is inextricably linked to the ontological question of 'the new': 'The notion of the

²⁹ See Benjamin H. D. Buchloh, 'Theorizing the Avant-Garde', *Art in America*, November (1984), 19-21; 'The Primary Colors for the Second Time: A Paradigm Repetition for the Neo-Avant-Garde', *October*, 37. Summer (1986), 41-52; *Neo-Avantgarde and Culture Industry: Essays on European and American Art from 1955 to 1975* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000). Hal Foster, 'What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?', *October*, 70. Autumn (1994), 5-32; *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996).

Avant-garde is therefore an ontological as well as artistic or historical problematic in that it contains the question of its own possibility: what does it take to be absolutely new?³⁰ The question that drives my enquiry makes the same demands of the avant-garde: it asks what it takes to be absolutely new and, moreover, it asks what it takes to be absolutely new while also being *historically new*. In order to formulate an answer to this question, the thesis proceeds by drawing on recent scholarship that has examined the notion of avant-garde through a philosophical prism. This body of scholarship, as I outline below, has raised key questions regarding the avant-garde's historicity, and it is within the parameters provided by this philosophical turn that my own approach is formulated.

II. Historicity, Time, and the Philosophical Turn in Avant-Garde Studies

The working definition of the avant-garde to be deployed in this thesis, therefore, does not consider the avant-garde as a socio-cultural phenomenon, genre, a series of art movements or a periodising category, but rather as a philosophical notion of historical time. This proposed notion has been formulated in response to a body of scholarship which, for want of a better term, might be referred to as a philosophical turn within (and, to some extent, against) avant-garde studies. Far from constituting a clearly delineated field of study, this philosophical turn can be seen to have emerged from the work of scholars with a shared interest in the philosophical implications of the avant-garde's temporal dimensions. Despite the absence of a pre-defined field of 'the philosophical avant-garde', however, the common ground established between these scholars, whether through direct contact and personal collaboration, or whether simply through common intellectual reference points, has resulted in an intellectual consistency and coherence that easily matches that of any long-established scholarly field.

³⁰ Ian Buchanan, 'Avant-garde', in *A Dictionary of Critical Theory*, 1st edn (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 34.

The reference points that have established an intellectual common ground for these works have been the legacies of the thought of Martin Heidegger, Theodor W. Adorno and Walter Benjamin. Accordingly, discussions of the avant-garde have tended to focus on the categories of historicity and experience within Heideggerian phenomenology and the Frankfurt School. While some scholars have been more partial to one intellectual tradition over the other, and have carefully navigated the commonalities and differences between the two, they have all been guided by a strong impetus to defend a conception of qualitative over quantitative time: or, otherwise put, a conception of time as lived experience over that of time as measurement.³¹ Krzysztof Ziarek, for instance, in works such as *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event* (2001), has approached the idea of the avant-garde through his research on poetics and technology, and an intellectual prism indebted to Heidegger and Adorno.³² In his proposition of the ‘avant-garde-work’, not as artwork but as what he calls an ‘event-work’, Ziarek has re-articulated the avant-garde as a ‘momentum’ or ‘force’ that can surpass the limitations posed by the periodising (and, by extension, quantifying) logic of modernism.³³ Situated at the intersection of post-Heideggerian hermeneutics and the Frankfurt School, Andrew Benjamin’s widely discussed collection of essays *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-*

³¹ These terms, and their epistemological foundations and implications, are clarified and discussed at length in Chapter 1.

³² See Krzysztof Ziarek, *The Historicity of Experience: Modernity, the Avant-Garde, and the Event* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2001), pp. 3-21, 33-115, 294-299; *The Force of Art* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), passim. See also Ziarek’s broader engagement with the ‘points of contact and conflict’ between Adorno and Heidegger in Iain Macdonald and Krzysztof Ziarek, eds., *Adorno and Heidegger: Philosophical Questions* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2008), passim (and in the quote here at p. 4).

³³ See Krzysztof Ziarek, ‘The Avant-Garde and the End of Art’, *Filozofski Vestnik*, 35.2 (2014), 67–81 (pp. 75-76); *The Force of Art*, pp. 1-17.

Garde (1991) has similarly articulated a conception of ‘avant-garde experience’.³⁴ Benjamin’s interest in the idea of the avant-garde can be seen as part of his broader intellectual project to re-formulate the philosophical category of ontology as ‘anoriginal difference’, and accordingly, his proposition of the avant-garde challenges the received notion of the avant-garde as a negation of tradition.³⁵ Instead, the avant-garde is proposed as a notion that affirms the very possibility of ‘inauguration’, of a most radical beginning that lies beyond the quantitatively new. Developed partly through direct dialogue with Andrew Benjamin, Peter Osborne’s contribution has indisputably been the most influential in this philosophical turn. Osborne’s monograph *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (1995; 2011) mobilises the thought of Heidegger, Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and Paul Ricoeur (among many others) in an attempt to re-think the temporality implicit in the concept of modernity.³⁶ Despite the book’s title, the avant-garde remains marginal to Osborne’s analysis, as the term is used either to

³⁴ See Andrew Benjamin, *Art, Mimesis and the Avant-garde: Aspects of a Philosophy of Difference* (London: Routledge, 1991), especially pp. 1-5, 36, 43-59, 64, 99-105, 131-141.

³⁵ Andrew Benjamin’s philosophical proposition of ontology as anoriginal difference has since been systematically developed in publications such as *The Plural Event: Descartes, Hegel, Heidegger* (London: Routledge, 1993) and *Towards a Relational Ontology: Philosophy’s Other Possibility* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2015).

³⁶ See Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 1995; 2nd ed. 2011), especially pp. ix-x, 1-5, 13-16, 23. For the broader project that marks their collaboration, see for instance, Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, eds., *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction & Experience* (London & New York: Routledge, 1994/2nd edn, Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000). While Andrew Benjamin’s position regarding historicity has remained consistent since the ‘90s, Osborne’s more recent book-length publication arguably reverts to the kind of historicist conception of the avant-garde that *The Politics of Time* had inspired future scholars to go beyond. See Peter Osborne, *Anywhere or Not At All: Philosophy of Contemporary Art* (London: Verso, 2013), pp. 18-22.

designate a temporal experience of rupture (which Osborne, in loose accord with Andrew Benjamin, calls 'avant-garde experience'), or to stand for an expanded treatment of Surrealism, the latter being somewhat cursorily enlisted to provide the connecting thread between Walter Benjamin, Henri Lefebvre, and the crucial category for Osborne: 'the everyday'.³⁷ That said, Osborne's main intellectual contribution – a phenomenological investigation into the concept of modernity, not as a neutral periodising category but as a form of historical consciousness – remains seminal for any consideration of historical temporality and the avant-garde.

The implications for a philosophical treatment of the avant-garde, especially with respect to the question of historicity, have since been taken up by scholars writing at the intersection of literary modernism, cultural studies, and critical theory. Building on Osborne's formulation of modernity, literary and cultural theorist David Cunningham has shifted the focus from modernity to the avant-garde itself, interrogating the implicit temporalities of art-historical and literary-historical discourses, and proposing the avant-garde as a concept of historical temporalisation.³⁸ Supplementing Adornian and Benjaminian tendencies with the post-Heideggerian thought of Maurice Blanchot and Jacques Derrida, Cunningham has attended to the grammatical distinction between *the* avant-garde, understood as a periodising category, and *an* avant-garde, understood as a concept that 'inscribes a particular mode of temporalizing history in its own right' and, in a move that can be seen as

³⁷ See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 165, 180-196.

³⁸ See *inter alia*, David Cunningham, 'Architecture, Utopia and the futures of the avant-garde', *The Journal of Architecture*, 6.2 (2001), 169-182 (pp. 169-170; 178, n. 5); 'A Time for Dissonance and Noise: On Adorno, Music, and The Concept of Modernism', *Angelaki*, 8.1 (2003), 61-74 (pp. 62-63); 'The Futures of Surrealism: Hegelianism, Romanticism, and the Avant-Garde', *SubStance*, 34.2 (2005), 47-65 (pp. 49, 60-61). The essays stem from the doctoral dissertation 'A Time of Affirmation: On the Concept of an Avant-Garde' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Westminster, 2001).

echoing Andrew Benjamin's notion of inauguration, the avant-garde is proposed as that which names the very possibility of rupture.³⁹ Also in dialogue with *The Politics of Time*, prominent Frankfurt School scholar and intellectual historian Susan Buck-Morss has adopted the conception of the avant-garde as experience of historical time, further delineating a distinction between 'vanguard' and 'avant-garde' time, and critiquing certain aspects of Osborne's formulation on empirical grounds.⁴⁰ Buck-Morss's reservations rest on her insistence that Russian avant-garde artists followed a Leninist (that is, linear and progressivist) conception of historical time, which, according to Buck-Morss, ought to be distinguished from the Benjaminian critique of progressivist historicism, theorised by Osborne as 'avant-garde'. As 'vanguard' and 'avant-garde' come to stand for two competing temporalities of modernity ('Soviet' and 'Western'), Buck-Morss's contribution reveals further complexities that are of geopolitical as well as chronopolitical significance.⁴¹ Lastly, through another contribution that is indebted to Osborne and that examines the relationship between modernities 'East' and 'West', comparatist Tyrus Miller has discussed the paradoxical temporality of the term 'retroavantgarde' with reference to the Slovene art

³⁹ Cunningham, 'The Futures of Surrealism', 49.

⁴⁰ See Susan Buck-Morss, 'Revolutionary Time: The Vanguard and the Avant-Garde', *Benjamin Studien/Studies*, 17: *Perception and Experience in Modernity*, ed. by Helga Geyer-Ryan (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2002), pp. 209–25; *Dreamworld and Catastrophe: The Passing of Mass Utopia in East and West* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2000), pp. 60–63; 298, n. 28; 304, n. 87.

⁴¹ Space does not permit me to discuss the contentious issues arising from such a distinction. For a valuable critical reading of Buck-Morss's problematic simplification of the temporality between 'East' and 'West', see Lisa Rofel, 'Hetero-Temporalities of Post-Socialism', in *Given World and Time: Temporalities in Context*, ed. by Tyrus Miller (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), pp. 243–60 (pp. 243–45).

group IRWIN, further problematising the implicit temporality of the avant-garde as a periodising category.⁴²

My own enquiry shares these scholars' principal intentions and intellectual prisms: it approaches the avant-garde philosophically, yet it does so outside the disciplinary boundaries of philosophy. In accord with the work of Cunningham and Miller, it seeks to interrogate the avant-garde as commonly understood within art-historical discourse, and to investigate the temporalities at stake in periodising categories such as 'historical avant-garde' and 'neo-avant-garde'. While in dialogue with these authors, my thesis departs from this body of scholarship in one key respect: its conception of historicity. The majority of the above scholars (Buck-Morss being the sole exception) either share or follow Osborne's phenomenological conception of historicity, a conception that is reliant, as we have seen, on the legacies of the thought of Heidegger, Benjamin and Adorno. A characteristic example of Osborne's fidelity to the thought of the latter is his espousal of the aphorism from *Minima Moralia*: 'Modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category'.⁴³ Viewed from such a perspective – a perspective which, as I discuss in Chapter 3, finds Adorno and Heidegger at certain points of convergence – historicity must stay clear of any form of time-measurement and, consequently, the avant-garde as a notion of historical temporalisation must be dissociated from historicism. What such a conception of historicity leads

⁴² See Tyrus Miller, *Late Modernism: Politics, Fiction, and the Arts between the World Wars* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), pp. 22-23; 'Retroavantgarde: Aesthetic Revival and the Con/Figurations of 20th-Century Time', *Filozofski Vestnik*, 28.2 (2007), 253-65; *Time-Images: Alternative Temporalities in Twentieth Century Theory, Literature, and Art* (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2009).

⁴³ See Peter Osborne, 'Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category', *New Left Review*, I/192 (1992), 65-84; *The Politics of Time*, p. 22. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, [1974] 2005), p. 221.

to, however, is a problematic conflation of historicism with positivism and, even more spuriously, of historiography with chronology.⁴⁴ It is precisely in this regard that my proposition of the avant-garde as a notion of historical time distances itself from Osborne's and the above scholars' contributions. Although I engage with the phenomenological conceptions of historicity as these are inflected in the thought of Benjamin and Adorno, I have sought to resist taking these thinkers' conception of historical time at their own word, proposing instead that, when considering avant-garde temporality, one ought to investigate the constitutive role of historicism. (Precisely how we are to understand 'historicism' here will become clear shortly.)

Consequently, the manner in which 'historicity' is deployed throughout the thesis marks a notable departure from the above scholarship. Although it is not my intention to offer a new theoretical formulation of historicity, I propose two working definitions that will enable the philosophical consideration of the idea of the avant-garde through a new lens. The first definition is intentionally broadly construed, leading to a second, much narrower, determination. Broadly construed, historicity is proposed as a category encompassing a variety of issues pertaining to the 'historical'. This conception aims to highlight the crucial issue that has already been intimated through Marcelin Pleynet's chiasmatic formulation: that is, the issue of mediation between the two meanings of 'history' (between history as event and history as representation). It thus seeks to attend to the multiple denotations of historicism (which Osborne's fidelity to a phenomenological attack on historicism problematically bypasses). Accordingly, it considers the constitutive role of historiography – not as naïve chronology, or a passive handing-down of facts and dates on a string (a caricature owing much to Walter Benjamin, as I discuss in Chapter 1), but as the active *writing* of history, and therefore as an indispensable form of *critical practice*. Stemming from these concerns, a second, narrower working definition of historicity is

⁴⁴ See, in particular, Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 33, 152.

proposed: historicity as the articulation of antagonisms between qualitative and quantitative time. Historicity is thus intended not simply as another name for qualitative time but as a category which mediates the tensions between experience and measurement. Therefore, one of the key intellectual premises upon which the ensuing arguments and propositions rest is that the avant-garde is *at once a qualitative and a chronological category*. It is through focussing upon the mediation and the unresolved tension between qualitative and quantitative time, I contend, that we are best able to consider the chronopolitical complexities of the meaning of the idea of the avant-garde 'after modernism'.

This intellectual departure necessitates one more conceptual clarification, since it reveals underlying differences between differing epistemologies of time. Andrew Benjamin, in his reading of Walter Benjamin's conception of history, foregrounds the equation of time with history: 'History cannot be thought other than as a philosophy of time'.⁴⁵ This equation is grounded in a Heideggerian conception of historicity [*Geschichtlichkeit*], a fundamental term in Heidegger's philosophy because, for Heidegger, historicity names the possibility of attaining historical consciousness and therefore an 'authentic' life.⁴⁶ It is beyond my scope to offer a summary of Heidegger's philosophical conception of time. Nevertheless, in a somewhat crude summary, and with reference to the contentious term of historicism that concerns us here, for Heidegger, *Geschichtlichkeit* offers the temporalisation of *Historie* (usually rendered in English as 'historiography' or 'historical science').⁴⁷ Thus, while *Historie* stands for the scientific study of past events

⁴⁵ Andrew Benjamin, *Style and Time: Essays on the Politics of Appearance* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2006), p. 13.

⁴⁶ See Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time*, trans. by Joan Stambaugh (Albany: SUNY Press, [1927] 1996), especially pp. 72-88. See also *The Concept of Time: The First Draft of Being and Time*, trans. by Ingo Farin (London: Continuum, 2011), *passim*.

⁴⁷ See Joan Stambaugh's invaluable index in the 1996 English translation of *Being and Time*, pp. xiii-xvi.

and is considered 'empty' of experience (a trope we will revisit in our discussion of Walter Benjamin in Chapter 1), *Geschichtlichkeit* stands for the authenticity of lived experience, and provides the ground for the ontology of time – and of time *as* ontology.⁴⁸ The primacy of an ontology of time in Heidegger and in the above scholarship results in what I regard as a problematic equivalence between time and history whereby history is experientially meaningful and 'authentic' only as historicity and thus as the temporalisation of itself. While I am in agreement with the above scholars' insistence on history's temporal dimension, my own epistemology seeks to retain a distinction between time and history. Hence also my deliberate adoption of the term 'chronopolitics' over 'politics of time'.⁴⁹ By replacing the noun-phrase 'politics of time' (which syntactically denotes politics as something that can be *attributed to* time) with the compound 'chronopolitics', I thus intend to problematise the ontological primacy of time over politics, and

⁴⁸ My understanding has been much aided by Charles Bambach's analysis, which elaborates on Heidegger's notion of historicity and its relationship to historicism while skilfully avoiding Heideggerian jargon. See Charles Bambach, *Heidegger, Dilthey, and the Crisis of Historicism* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1995), *passim*.

⁴⁹ The term 'politics of time' is common in strands of philosophical scholarship that draw on phenomenological conceptions of time. In addition to Peter Osborne's usage, see David C. Hoy, 'The Politics of Temporality: Heidegger, Bourdieu, Benjamin, Derrida', in *Given World and Time: Temporalities in Context*, ed. by Tyrus Miller (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008), pp. 261-76. In a sociological context, the term has a different currency and denotes the idea of political resistance to forms of temporal oppression: see Henry J. Rutz, 'Introduction: The Idea of a Politics of Time', in *The Politics of Time*, ed. by Henry J. Rutz (Washington, DC: American Anthropological Association, 1992), pp. 1-17 (p. 1). The seminal contribution in this latter strand remains Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, foreword by Matti Bunzl/with a new postscript by the author (New York: Columbia University Press [1983] 2014), whose ideas I draw upon in Chapter 4.

suggest instead a relationship of reciprocity: chronopolitics as ‘politics of time’ as well as ‘time of politics’.⁵⁰ The notion of the political that is adopted here has affinities with Andrew Benjamin’s foregrounding of the temporality of decision-making in relation to indeterminacy and contingency. Thus, in contrast to Peter Osborne, whose arguably under-determined category of the political in *The Politics of Time* often lapses into an impressionistic presentation of political ideologies (e.g. liberalism, fascism, or communism), in this study, I have consciously sought to resist the adoption of such political labels, as part of an attempt to unmoor the discussion of ‘politics and the avant-garde’ from fixed, often romanticised presuppositions about the avant-garde’s relationship to ‘the Left’.⁵¹ In this respect, therefore, the thesis

⁵⁰ The most widely-circulated usage of the term ‘chronopolitics’ occurs within political science and stems from Paul Virilio’s polemical theorisation of speed in the context of military communication technology. See Paul Virilio, *Speed and Politics: An Essay on Dromology*, trans. by Mark Polizzotti (New York: Semiotext(e), [1977] 1986), p. 69; Paul Virilio, *The Information Bomb*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, 1999), p. 109. In more recent years, the term has gained wider prominence. See Daniel Innerarity, *The Future and its Enemies: In Defense of Political Hope*, trans. by Sandra Kingery (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2012); in critical geopolitics, see Kimberly Hutchings, *Time and World Politics: Thinking the Present* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2008) and Ian Klinke, ‘Chronopolitics: A Conceptual Matrix’, *Progress in Human Geography* 37.5 (2013), 673-90; and, lastly, see the intellectually promising coinage of a ‘chronobiopolitics’ in Dana Luciano, *Arranging Grief: Sacred Time and the Body in Nineteenth-Century America* (New York: New York University Press, 2007).

⁵¹ See Osborne, *The Politics of Time*, pp. 116, 160-161, 200. See also Osborne’s interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s notion of the political as a ‘temporal mode of experience’, arguably collapsing politics into time in a manner comparable to his identification of historicity with an ontology of time. Cf. Peter Osborne, ‘Small-scale Victories, Large-scale Defeats: Walter Benjamin’s Politics of Time’, in *Walter Benjamin’s Philosophy: Destruction & Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne, 2nd edn (Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 55-107 (pp. 65-66).

performs another interrogation of a fixed coordinate that unproductively pins the idea of the avant-garde to a given, unexamined specificity.

This departure from a politics *of* time, and from time as ontology, is also reflected methodologically, since my analysis is informed by theories of time outside the philosophical discipline. A more nuanced approach to the relationship between historicity and historical writing is provided by turning to the field of historical theory (sometimes also referred to as ‘theoretical history’). As a sub-field within the historical discipline, its consideration of time in/and history builds upon a disciplinary tradition that reflects on the narratological aspects of history writing (after the legacy of Hayden White) and considers the intersection between temporality and etymological development (after the legacy of Reinhart Koselleck).⁵² This approach informs my overall epistemology but is most evident in the narratological analysis of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* developed in Chapter 2. In addition, in order to address the question of time’s exteriority to history, I have attempted to develop a methodology that, rather than collapsing time into history and vice versa, offers what might be described as a ‘parallax structure in/of time’.⁵³ In this structure, while a distinction is retained

⁵² As an indication, see Olivia Harris, ‘Braudel: Historical Time and the Horror of Discontinuity’, *History Workshop Journal*, 57.1 (2004), 161-74; Lynn Hunt, *Measuring Time, Making History* (Budapest: Central European University Press, 2008); Chris Lorenz and Berber Bevernage, eds., *Breaking Up Time: Negotiating the Borders between Present, Past and Future* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 2013); and the numerous lively discussions on time and historiography appearing in journals such as *History & Theory* and *Storia della Storiografia*. For the seminal studies of Hayden White and Reinhart Koselleck, see, respectively, Hayden White, *Metahistory: The Historical Imagination in Nineteenth-Century Europe*, 40th edn (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, [1973] 2014), and the aforementioned *Futures Past*.

⁵³ This phrase is indebted partly to Japanese thinker Kojin Karatani’s notion of ‘pronounced parallax’, and partly to British anthropologist Laura Bear, who is also concerned with the joint consideration of qualitative and quantitative time,

between the categories of time and history, the categories are still intricately connected in a relationship of ‘in/of’ – neither fully exterior to, nor fully constitutive of, one another. Such a structure can arguably be observed in Moishe Postone’s analysis of Marx’s *Capital*, whereby his twofold conception of labour-time as both social relation and the measure of social relations, offers a nuanced articulation of the relationship between time and history.⁵⁴ Or, as I hope to demonstrate through my analysis of a ‘Benjaminian comparativism’ in Chapter 1, such a parallax structure in/of time can be found in the work of Walter Benjamin itself. As I suggest in the next section, Benjamin’s thought can provide an intellectual framework through which to re-think the relationship between time and history and, ultimately, the chronopolitical status of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism. In this endeavour, the structure and historicity of the thesis itself is also inevitably implicated. Let us now turn to examining this precise structure and the ‘constituent parts’ that make up this thesis, while also reflecting on its exclusions.

III. The Idea of the Avant-Garde in/as a Benjaminian Constellation

Considering the intellectual intricacies that are involved in identifying the avant-garde’s meaning and location, attempting to theoretically survey the idea of the avant-garde after modernism might seem a gargantuan task. No

proposing in response a notion of ‘labour in/of time’. See, respectively, Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 44-53; and Laura Bear, ‘Doubt, Conflict, Mediation: The Anthropology of Modern Time’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute*, 20.S1 (2014), 3-30 (pp. 6-8, 20-21). Karatani’s notion of pronounced parallax, which differs from the dictionary definition of parallax as a shift of position caused by a shift in perspective, is discussed further in Chapter 5.

⁵⁴ See Moishe Postone, *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx’s Critical Theory* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), especially pp. 200-201.

doubt, it would seem to involve a multilingual, multidisciplinary, and historical and geographical scope so wide that it would be simply wiser to select one, *particular* avant-garde, rather than attempt to tackle the question of avant-garde *qua* avant-garde. Yet doing so would create yet another avant-garde variant that would still necessitate the deeper questioning of the avant-garde's relation to universality and particularity. By the same token, the texts that have been selected for analysis and discussion should not be seen as *representative of the* avant-garde, but rather as iterations of the broader problematic of a chronopolitics of 'the new after the new'. The guiding principle for articulating answers to this problematic has been given through an engagement with the thought of Walter Benjamin. Although Benjamin's thought is present in different ways throughout the thesis, the relationship between the selected theorists (writing chronologically 'after Benjamin') and Benjamin's work should not be seen as one of 'direct influence' (although there are clear elements of influence), but rather as another manifestation of the question of afterness. Before I elaborate on the reasons for bringing these diverse texts together, let me first say a few words about some of the texts that have been excluded from my discussion.

Due to the large volume of texts that have been written on (or, *in the name of*) the avant-garde, it was necessary to follow several principles of selection. The present selection was the culmination of surveying a wide range of texts that have concerned themselves with defining, defending, interrogating or critiquing the idea of the avant-garde: from artists' texts and manifestoes to polemical essays and scholarly treatises, a number of well-known and not-so-well-known writings on the avant-garde were considered.⁵⁵ As I have suggested, one of the starting points of my enquiry has

⁵⁵ These were necessarily also determined by my own linguistic abilities: I considered texts in English, German, French, Italian and Greek, or texts translated into English. Apart from the works mentioned so far, the following are worth noting: Thomas B. Hess & John Ashbery, eds., *Avant-garde Art* (London: Collier-Macmillan, 1968); Achille Bonito Oliva, ed., *The International Trans-avantgarde/La transavanguardia*

been an engagement with the work of Benjamin, and with the Benjaminian ‘application’ of historical time within the avant-garde’s philosophical turn. As such, in my selection I was guided less by the texts’ perceived canonicity or marginality (although readers familiar with genealogies of theorising the avant-garde will no doubt easily ‘spot’ the canonical). Rather, what was decisive in my selection was the theorists’ relationship to the Frankfurt School legacy, and their own articulation of indebtedness to that legacy through a theorisation of the avant-garde. Therefore, although important debates on the avant-garde have been played out in a French context, most prominently in the artistic and intellectual formations of *Tel Quel* and the Situationist International (these formations are themselves treated historiographically as *avant-garde*), their contributions were not included because of the divergent parameters of their intellectual projects. In other words, the temporality of ‘afterness’ at work in this project has also been guided by the internal affinities, points of convergence, and acknowledged instances of intellectual inheritance, albeit kept in tension with a more linear conception of ‘influence’.

Among the large number of writers and thinkers who have been omitted from this study, there are four in particular whose omission warrants a brief discussion: the Italian comparatist Renato Poggioli, the US art critic Clement Greenberg, and the French philosophers Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Rancière. All four thinkers have contributed to the intellectual history of theorising the avant-garde, yet each of them has been excluded for unique reasons. *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* by Renato Poggioli was the first monograph dedicated to the difficult task of theorising the avant-garde as concept and phenomenon. As has already been noted, Poggioli’s book (like the book that bears the near-identical English title, Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-garde*) is routinely mentioned in historiographical accounts of the

internazionale (Milano: Giancarlo Politi Editore, 1982). For recent polemical defences of the avant-garde, see Zanny Begg and Dmitry Vilensky, eds., Special Issue ‘Debates on the Avant-Garde’, *Chto Delat?/What is to be Done?*, Issue 17, August (2007); Gene Ray, ‘Avant-Gardes as Anti-Capitalist Vector’, *Third Text*, 21.3 (2007), 241-55.

avant-garde. Unlike Bürger's theory, however, which continues to be fervently debated and translated into new languages to this day, *Teoria dell'arte d'avanguardia* has aged rather ungracefully, and its theoretical contribution appears today more as a peculiarity typical of the intellectual climate of its time, and less as a blueprint with continuing critical purchase.⁵⁶ Compared to Bürger's theory, Poggioli's monograph has failed to offer a set of conceptual categories that are directly applicable to the analysis of diverse art movements and practices. Even when considered on its own account, Poggioli's socio-psychological methodology that maps a typology of avant-garde 'mentalities' (such as 'agonism' and 'nihilism') onto the artist's experience of social alienation is arguably marred by metaphysical strains that posit a de-historicised and de-materialised conception of an 'avant-garde spirit'.⁵⁷ Ultimately, Poggioli's theory was excluded because it was deemed neither intellectually tenable nor of continuing critical relevance.

In sharp contrast to Poggioli's theory, Clement Greenberg's contribution to the history of theorising the avant-garde has been foundational. The commonly-used term 'Greenbergian modernism' testifies to the critic's towering influence, not only over debates concerning the avant-garde, but also to his role in establishing the very vocabulary through which the development of modern art has been construed.⁵⁸ Renowned art critic

⁵⁶ See the intriguing analysis of the influence of Vilfredo Pareto on Poggioli's theory in Sascha Bru, 'A History of Aristocracies: Old and New Avant-Gardisms in Poggioli and Marinetti', *L'Esprit Créateur*, 53. 3 (2013), 64-78. This article aside, there is currently little interest in Poggioli's theorisation of the avant-garde.

⁵⁷ See Poggioli, *passim* (and especially, pp. 25-40, 61-77, 103-128, 224-226). It is worth noting that some of the limitations of Poggioli's theory were acknowledged by his contemporaries. See Peter Jones, 'The Theory of the Avant-Garde: Renato Poggioli (Book Review)', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 9.1 (1969), 84-89 (pp. 86-88).

⁵⁸ For a biographical study that attempts to situate Clement Greenberg's writing within a broader socio-cultural history of rationalisation and ocularcentrism in the mid-century United States, see Caroline Jones, *Eyesight Alone: Clement Greenberg's*

Rosalind Krauss's own account of how 'practically everything' in her book, as she exclaims, goes against Greenberg's position is telling, and the critical reception of Greenbergian modernism has itself been foundational for the establishment of French post-structuralist discourses in US art criticism.⁵⁹ There are, however, two interrelated reasons why this study does not deal with Greenberg's writings. First, a focus on Greenberg would necessitate discussions of visuality, medium-specificity, materiality, and the category of 'the painterly' and its relationship to photographic representation. Second, with respect to Greenberg's essay 'Avant-garde and Kitsch', it would necessitate a discussion on elitism and populism and a broader engagement with the question of a politics of artistic form. While I briefly discuss these concerns with respect to the frequent comparison between Greenbergian and Adornian modernism in Chapter 3, a discussion of the question of the avant-garde's politics of form would have overshadowed my more immediate concern with chronopolitics and historical time. (It is likely that analyses that offer a bridge between Greenbergian politics of form and a theory of chronopolitics could be put to work, but such an endeavour is not taken up here.)

With respect to the contributions of Jean-François Lyotard and Jacques Rancière, the reasons for their exclusion are again distinct. For his part, Lyotard began considering the avant-garde philosophically while formulating his answer to the hotly-debated question of the postmodern in the early 1980s.⁶⁰ Lyotard's liberal rendition of the Kantian sublime, enabled by

Modernism and the Bureaucratisation of the Senses (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005).

⁵⁹ See Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1986), pp. 1-2.

⁶⁰ See Jean-François Lyotard, 'Presenting the Unpresentable: The Sublime', trans. by Lisa Liebmann, *Artforum*, 20.8 (April 1982), 64-69; reprinted in modified form as 'The Sublime and the Avant-Garde', in *The Inhuman: Reflections on Time*, trans. by Geoffrey Bennington and Rachel Bowlby (Cambridge: Polity, 1991), pp. 89-107; and

interpretations of artworks by Barnett Newman and Kazimir Malevich, was quickly taken to task by Kant scholars, and his conception of the avant-garde as painterly abstraction (despite being overly reductive) meant that his propositions were discussed alongside Greenberg's canonical essays.⁶¹ Jacques Rancière's writings, by contrast, came into contact with the notion of the avant-garde through broader debates on the relationship between aesthetics and radical politics during the current century.⁶² Although Rancière has not been explicitly concerned with theorising the avant-garde, his engagement with the categories of autonomy and heteronomy, as well as his tripartite schema of art's movement through different historical stages, has prompted some commentators to compare his theory of the 'regimes of art' with that of Bürger.⁶³ Lyotard and Rancière have distinct theories of aesthetics and, accordingly, distinct conceptions of the avant-garde. Whereas Lyotard shares with Greenberg an inclination towards aesthetic form, Rancière's preferred term of 'sense' or 'the sensible' arguably problematises the distinction between aesthetic form and political praxis. And precisely through his notion of a 'distribution of the sensible', Rancière's theory of

'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', trans. by Régis Durand, in Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. by Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi, foreword by Fredric Jameson (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1979] 1984), pp. 71-82 (pp. 76-79).

⁶¹ See Paul Crowther, 'The Kantian Sublime, the Avant-Garde, and the Postmodern: A Critique of Lyotard', *New Formations*, 7.1 (1989), 67-75.

⁶² See Jacques Rancière, 'The Aesthetic Revolution and its Outcomes', *New Left Review*, 14. March-April (2002), 133-151, reprinted in *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics*, ed. and trans. by Steven Corcoran (London: Bloomsbury, 2010), pp. 115-133; 'Artistic Regimes and the Shortcomings of the Notion of Modernity', in *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. by Gabriel Rockhill (London: Continuum, 2004), pp. 20-30. Jacques Rancière, 'Rethinking Modernity', *Diacritics*, 42.3 (2014), 6-20 (pp. 18-19).

⁶³ See Gail Day, 'The Fear of Heteronomy', *Third Text*, 23.4 (2009), 393-406 (pp. 399-402).

aesthetic praxis has been recently been put to work for a new interpretation of avant-garde movements alongside Bürger's conception of heteronomy.⁶⁴ Yet Rancière's own analysis of the avant-garde is minimal, himself declaring that he finds the notion of little contemporary relevance.⁶⁵

We encounter no such problem in Lyotard's case, where the notion of the avant-garde is given due prominence in his discussion of the sublime and 'the unrepresentable'. We encounter a problem of a different order, however. Since Lyotard's avant-garde is one of painterly abstraction where the non-figurative character of avant-garde painting becomes a marker of the ineffable, the question of representation is handled almost literally: the avant-garde as abstract image points to the unrepresentable. From an ethico-political perspective, such a move suggests a quasi-theological proposition on the ban on images, responding to the singularity of Auschwitz as a historical event that ought to remain unspoken. It is here that Lyotard's treatment of the avant-garde is at odds with my own approach: firstly, my notion of the avant-garde is not restricted to one particular medium or artistic form; secondly, assigning to the avant-garde the kind of ethical task that Lyotard proposes cannot allow for an opening-up of the avant-garde's relationship to the political, since the unrepresentable cannot but preserve the fixed ethico-political location held by the name 'Auschwitz'. Rethinking the chronopolitics of the avant-garde after modernism can, of course, be legitimately considered through the question of an afterness of Auschwitz. (In addition to Adorno's famous statement on the possibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz, recent scholarship has approached this question of an avant-garde afterness through the question of fascism.)⁶⁶ Yet in my concern to re-establish the notion of the avant-garde through the question of universality and particularity, I seek to set a different

⁶⁴ See Aleš Erjavec, ed., *Aesthetic Revolutions and Twentieth Century Avant-garde Movements* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2015).

⁶⁵ See Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics*, pp. 21, 29-30.

⁶⁶ See Richard Langston, *Visions of Violence: German Avant-Gardes after Fascism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2008), especially Chapter 1, pp. 23-55.

ethico-political task. As I propose in the thesis' culminating chapter (Chapter 5: 'Afterness and Singularity'), this task requires *not* the fixed singularity of an unprecedented historical event, but *a relational singularity of a historicity guided by comparativism*. Far better suited to this task, I argue, are Walter Benjamin's theoretical formulations on historical time and representation, which allow for precisely such a comparative opening.

Benjamin's own life makes this choice perhaps predictable. His friendship with Bertolt Brecht and personal acquaintance with several Dadaists, Constructivists and Surrealists, coupled with the influence that automatic writing and photomontage had on the development of his thought in the turning-point years of 1923-1924, leave little doubt that Benjamin had something to say about the avant-garde.⁶⁷ Yet my choice is not guided by biographical concerns (which would after all re-affirm the locus of the avant-garde in a 'Parisian 1930s' geochronopolitical coordinate).⁶⁸ Rather, taking

⁶⁷ Let us recall here the oft-cited lines from a letter to Adorno, in which Benjamin, 10 years on, narrates his physical response to reading Louis Aragon's *Le paysan de Paris* for the first time: 'Evenings, lying in bed, I could never read more than two to three pages by him because my heart started to pound so hard that I had to put the book down. What a warning! What an indication of the years and years that had to be put between me and that kind of reading. And yet the first preliminary sketches for the *Arcades* originated at that time.' Letter 260, To Theodor Adorno, Paris, 31 May 1935, in *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin, 1910-1940*, ed. by Gershom Scholem and Theodor W. Adorno (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1994), pp. 488-91 (p. 488), hereafter *CWB*.

⁶⁸ Detailed accounts of Benjamin's links to the 'historical avant-gardes' can be found in a number of biographies. See, for instance, Berndt Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography*, trans. by James Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, [1985] 1991), p. 108; Esther Leslie, *Walter Benjamin* (London: Reaktion, 2007), pp. 42, 57-58, 66-67, 74, 82-85, 171-172, 193-194; Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2014), pp. 6, 105-106, 170-72, 236, 296, 310-12, 386, 394,

my cue from scholars such as Peter Osborne and Susan Buck-Morss, I develop their proposition that the temporality of the avant-garde can be articulated through Benjamin's notion of *Jetztzeit*. Moreover, through my analysis in the two chapters that open and close this thesis (Chapters 1 and 5), I seek to investigate whether Benjamin's work on mimesis – and particularly his categories of non-sensuous similarity and temporal indexicality – can be productively put to work so as to critique the aforementioned tendency towards avant-garde specificity.

In approaching Benjamin, my emphasis has been on what unites, rather than separates, the distinct phases of his thought. I have focussed on the categories that remain constant or, at least, whose core articulation remains unchanged by the transition towards the later explicitly Marxist concerns. The notion of constellation as it appears in the 'Epistemo-critical Prologue' of the *Trauerspiel* study, and the non-communicative aspects of language elaborated in the early essays on language are thus considered alongside their later reformulations through the autobiographical sketches of *Berlin Childhood circa 1900*, the fragments on the mimetic faculty, the essays on Marcel Proust and Surrealism, the materialist studies of Baudelaire and the *Arcades Project*, and the cryptic yet highly influential theses on the concept of history.⁶⁹ My enquiry in Part I (Chapter 1: 'The World in a State of Similarity') opens with a discussion of Benjamin's chronopolitics and revisits recent debates on the role of *kairós* (i.e. the decisive or opportune moment) in Benjamin's formulations on historical time. Examining 'On the Concept of History' alongside other later works that foreground quotidian, as opposed to exceptional, modes of historicity, I suggest that Benjamin's chronopolitics ought to be considered not through the prism of the moment of *kairós*, but rather as a delicate negotiation between decisionism and undecidability. In

490, 518-20. See also Margaret Cohen, *Profane Illumination: Walter Benjamin and the Paris of Surrealist Revolution* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1993).

⁶⁹ Full bibliographical details of the Benjamin editions and texts studied are given in the introduction of Chapter 1.

addition to modifying the parameters of discussing Benjaminian chronopolitics, Chapter 1 mobilises Benjamin's early and late essays on translation and the mimetic faculty so as to propose a new comparative method, which is then brought to bear upon the theorists that are discussed at length in the second part of the thesis (Chapters 2, 3 and 4): German literary scholar Peter Bürger, British art theorist John Roberts, and selected figures of the intellectual and poetic circle of the Italian *Neoavanguardia*.

Since the analytical approach pursued here is of a speculative and critical nature, the theorisations discussed in Part II should not be seen as empirical 'case studies', which are separated from the 'meta-theoretical' position of Benjamin. The thesis may begin and end with Benjamin, but the theorists that find themselves at the thesis' narrative core are best thought of as forming a constellation, structured by modalities of afterness. The avant-garde's many facets of afterness are thus explored through the figures of prolepsis, infidelity, and belatedness in the chapters on Bürger; Adorno and Roberts; and the *Neoavanguardia* respectively. In Chapter 2 ('Proleptic Avant-Garde'), Peter Bürger's canonical monograph is revisited in the broader context of his methodological formulations on the institution of art in the late 1970s, and read as a text whose narrative logic produces a temporality of prolepsis. Against common accusations of progressivism, my narratological re-reading of *Theory of the Avant-Garde* reveals new layers of historicity in Bürger's text that suggest an anticipatory temporality not unlike Benjamin's messianism. Chapter 3 ('Repeating Rupture') turns to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and analyses the notion of the new in relation to John Roberts' recent polemics in a number of essays and the monograph *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015). Exposing Roberts' appropriation of Adorno's thought, my analysis suggests that the historiographical anachronisms and textual infidelities characterising Roberts' theory exemplify, not a revolutionary time, but the avant-garde's aporetic condition of a rupture in repetition. Chapter 4 ('Strangers to our Times') examines the theoretical essays of members of the *Neoavanguardia* with reference to the contentious

issue of Italy's belated modernisation. Countering the prevalent discourses of modernisation theory with respect to the history of Italian avant-garde movements, my analysis draws on Johannes Fabian's concept of 'allochronism' and proposes that the avant-garde temporality articulated in *Neoavanguardia*, as well as in its Italian and Anglo-American literary historiographies, implicitly imposes an avant-garde centre to which *Neoavanguardia's* own temporality cannot but remain 'other'.

In light of these analyses, Part III (Chapter 5, 'Afterness and Singularity') returns to the thesis' main problematic regarding the mediation of universality and particularity, and broaches the question of articulating the avant-garde as a singularity. Chapter 5 begins by critically assessing the impact that ongoing debates on the status of 'multiple modernities' have had on the field of avant-garde studies and, siding with the critics of multiple modernities, it refuses the false choice of discussing the avant-garde 'in the plural'. This critique is then further articulated through a return to Benjamin, and a discussion of Benjaminian singularity as a parallax structure in/of time, gleaned from texts that foreground the figures of the vessel (with reference to language, representation and historical time); of the threshold (spatial as well as temporal); and of the fold (in ways reminiscent of, yet distinct from, Gilles Deleuze's own philosophy of singularity). As the thesis' culminating chapter, Chapter 5 concludes by articulating the chronopolitics of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism, and proposes the avant-garde as a relational notion in/of historical time. Such relationality rests not only on a rapprochement between qualitative and quantitative time, and an acknowledgment of the partly constitutive role of historicism, which my analyses of Peter Bürger, John Roberts, and *Neoavanguardia* make manifest but, just as importantly, on a Benjaminian conception of singularity that productively undermines the taxonomic, representational, and periodising impulses of avant-garde specificity.

It is often remarked that Benjamin's thought resists method. So why should we look to Benjamin for a method? Or as Max Pensky has probingly

asked: 'Why should we prefer a "constellation" to a solid work of critical historiography?'⁷⁰ A constellation might suggest an arbitrary selection of objects assembled without regard for historical specificity. If we are no longer bound to historicism, anything and anyone can be brought together to form a constellation. There is a grain of truth in these criticisms. However, Benjaminian constellation as I consider it here does not mean an assemblage of relations that exist outside historical time. While I aim to situate the selected texts and debates historically, such situating remains critical of a certain empirical reflectionism that would re-establish a conception of historical time as time's arrow. No linear movement *from* the '60s *to* the present is followed here; no expansive mechanism from the avant-garde's canonical geopolitical centre to the avant-garde's periphery, as is frequently proposed in new modernist studies, is espoused either. A critical historiography, no matter how 'solid', still posits the primacy of linear historical periodisation. A Benjaminian constellation, by contrast, interrogates the temporal logic of taxonomy, and disrupts the neat separation of historicity's exteriority and interiority. In other words – and to return to Pleyne's image of rupture of history/history of rupture – a Benjaminian constellation allows for the chiasmatic web of history's event and representation to unfold, while producing a historicity that remains in tension with historicism. It is through a Benjaminian constellation, therefore, that this thesis proposes the idea of the avant-garde as a parallax in/of time. Ahead of its time, the avant-garde emerges as a notion that is 'ahead' of its own historical temporality – in a mode of afterness which resists linear progressivism and which produces the very conditions of (its) historical difference. Neither 'living' nor 'dead', neither 'historical' nor 'neo', the avant-garde as a parallax in/of time re-opens the question of what it takes to be absolutely new, and in its temporal re-configuration as a Benjaminian

⁷⁰ Max Pensky, 'Method and Time: Benjamin's Dialectical Images', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 177-198 (p. 177).

constellation presents us with a chronopolitics that in turn asks us to radically re-configure our own fixed spatiotemporal and ideological conception of what constitutes modernity.

I. Towards a Benjaminian Comparativism

When our theatres perform plays of other periods they like to annihilate distance, fill in the gap, gloss over the differences. But what comes then of our delight in comparisons, in distance, in dissimilarity – which is at the same time a delight in what is close and proper to ourselves?

Bertolt Brecht, 'Appendices to the "Short Organum"'¹

She paused for a long moment and then began to speak; something about a home, but whether she meant a household or the literal structure, I couldn't tell; I heard the names of streets and months; a list of things I thought were books or songs; hard times or hard weather, epoch, uncle, change, an analogy involving summer, something about buying and/or crashing a red car. I formed several possible stories out of her speech, formed them at once, so it was less like I failed to understand than that I understood in chords, in a plurality of worlds.

Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station*²

¹ Bertolt Brecht, 'Appendices to the "Short Organum"', in *Brecht on Theatre: The Development of an Aesthetic*, ed. and trans. by John Willett (London: Methuen, 2001), p. 276.

² Ben Lerner, *Leaving the Atocha Station* (London: Granta Books, 2011), p. 14.

Chapter 1

'The World in a State of Similarity': Walter Benjamin, Chronopolitics, Historical Difference

Walter Benjamin never joined the German Communist Party. Although he seriously entertained the thought, he never took that decision. Often asked to justify himself for not doing so, Benjamin was highly aware of the temporal character of such a decision – an awareness most vividly captured in a letter to his close friend Gershom Scholem dating from 29 May 1926:

[T]he task is plainly not to decide once and for all, but rather at every moment. But what is essential is *to decide* [...]. If I were to join the Communist Party someday [...], my own conviction would be to proceed radically and never consistently in the most important matters. The possibility of my remaining a member is therefore to be determined experimentally; of interest and in question is not so much the yes and no, as the how-long? [*weniger das Ja und Nein als das Wielange?*]¹

Benjamin presents his reasons for not joining the Party as a justification for the reasons that he was hesitant to take *any* decision – or rather, as a justification for his reasons for *timing* the decision, for ensuring not only that the decision is made at the right moment but that the decision is itself temporalised. Benjamin's refusal can be read as a rejection of the a-temporal ultimatum of a question that requires a 'yes or no' answer. Shifting the parameters, Benjamin rejects the premise's punctual, irreversible character and introduces the problem of *duration*: the question 'should I become a member?' becomes '*for how long* should I be one'? While doing so, Benjamin also problematises the idea that there is a 'right' or 'opportune' moment for

¹ Benjamin, Letter to Gerhard Scholem, Paris 29 May 1926, *Gesammelte Briefe*, Bd. III, hg. Christoph GÖdde und Henri Lonitz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1997), pp. 158-159; Cf. 'Letter 156: To Gerhard Scholem', in *CWB*, p. 300 (translation modified; emphasis original).

taking a decision: deciding 'once and for all' is replaced by deciding 'at every moment': each and every moment in time becomes potentially decisive.

Taking Benjamin's attempt to re-define decision-making on his own terms as my starting point, in this opening chapter I set out to explore the political implications of the temporality of decision-making, while also focusing on the question of decision in Benjamin's writings. More specifically, I examine the political implications of this particular kind of temporalisation, an act that introduces the role of duration and distributes the moment of decision across time. These implications should thus be understood, not in the narrow party-political sense at stake in this particular exchange, but rather in a broader chronopolitical sense. Although the question of decision-making may at first sight appear as only pertaining to Benjamin's explicitly politico-theological writings, my analysis seeks to highlight Benjaminian chronopolitics as inextricable from his theory of mimesis and, to some extent, also from Benjamin's own philological practice. In this respect, therefore, I concur with Peter Osborne's call for 'a Benjaminian practice of constructing juxtapositional differences or encounters within the speculative unity of a singular history',² and suggest that such a practice can be thought as a new practice of comparativism.

Since the turn of the millennium, the question of 'comparativism' has re-emerged within a body of literature at the intersection of comparative literature, translation studies, and postcolonial theory.³ Benjamin's thought

² Peter Osborne, 'On Comparability: Kant and the Possibility of Comparative Studies', *boundary 2*, Special Issue: Problems of Comparability/Possibilities for Comparative Studies, 32.2 (2005), 3-22 (p. 21).

³ As an indication, see David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2003); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *Death of a Discipline* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2003); Haun Saussy, ed., *Comparative Literature in an Age of Globalisation* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2006); Emily Apter, *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (Princeton:

has been an indirect influence on this tendency, primarily through the reception of his foundational essay ‘The Task of the Translator’ (1923) in the field of translation studies.⁴ Similarly, and as I discuss below, there have been isolated attempts to bring Benjamin’s work into contact with postcolonial concerns. The approach of a ‘Benjaminian comparativism’ that I adopt here aims to bring together the problematic of what can be compared and under what conditions (and whether there can ever be an external unit of measurement that decides the very terms and conditions of comparison) with a problematic that addresses the relationship between the particular and the universal, and periphery and the centre, as well as attending to the conditions that legitimise the centre *as* universal.

For the purposes of this endeavour, my reading of Benjamin’s work is necessarily selective.⁵ I draw extensively from ‘On the Concept of History’

Princeton University Press, 2006); Thomas Docherty, ‘Without and Beyond Compare’, *Comparative Critical Studies*, 3.1-2 (2006), 25-35.

⁴ ‘The Task of the Translator’ is customarily anthologised in translation studies volumes. See *The Translation Studies Reader*, ed. by Lawrence Venuti (London: Routledge, 2004). See also Janet Sanders, ‘Divine Words, Cramped Actions: Walter Benjamin – an Unlikely Icon in Translation Studies’, *TTR: traduction, terminologie, rédaction*, 16.1 (2003), 161-83.

⁵ The following editions have been consulted: Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften Bd. I-VII*, hrsg. Rolf Tiedemann & Hermann Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972-1989), hereafter cited *GS* and by volume number; *Selected Writings: Volumes 1-4*, series ed. by Michael W. Jennings et. al. (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1996-2003), hereafter cited *SW* and by volume number; *The Arcades Project*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann; trans. by Howard Eiland and Kevin McLaughlin (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), hereafter cited *AP* and by convolute number; *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. by John Osborne (London: Verso, [1963] 1998), hereafter cited *Origin*; *Understanding Brecht*, trans. by Anna Bostock (London: New Left Books, [1966] 1973), hereafter cited *UB*; *Illuminations*, ed. by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968). As is customary in Benjamin scholarship, published essays and texts are dated according

(1940), complementing this reading with allusions from passages in texts conceived and written from the late 1920s onwards – especially, the *Arcades Project* (1927-1940), *One-Way Street* (1928), and ‘On the Image of Proust’ (1929). In doing so, I seek to foreground the *constitutive* relationship between the exceptional character of *Jetztzeit* and the quotidian temporality articulated elsewhere in Benjamin’s writings, especially as these take on a daily, autobiographical dimension. While my focus remains on the theses on history, I also consider the earlier essays ‘On the Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ (1916) and ‘The Task of Translator’ (1923), whose articulation of language returns in a materialist-messianic guise in the later fragments ‘Doctrine of the Similar’ (1933) and ‘On the Mimetic Faculty’ (1933) in an attempt to explicate Benjamin’s chronopolitics in relation to the figure of analogy. In analysing Benjamin’s theory of mimesis and the figures of thought that provide the material for this theory, I myself deploy analogical methods, not in order to self-consciously mirror the material I discuss, but rather because Benjamin’s work invites such a mode of reading. Comparativism thus also becomes a way of grappling with the difficulty that arises when one considers Benjamin’s work as a whole, while acknowledging the tensions and contradictions that lie within and across his writings.

The question of chronopolitics is treated in this study through the category of ‘historical time’. Whether ‘historical’ time can be neatly separated from ‘cosmological’, ‘geological’ or ‘biological’ kinds of time is, of course, a matter of continuing debate, whose reach extends across disciplinary fields.⁶

to their year of publication, while those texts unpublished in his lifetime are dated according to the years in which they were written and conceived. When translations have been modified, they are noted as such.

⁶ To mention one of the most recent and most significant contributions to such questions, the ‘Anthropocene’ thesis challenges long-held assumptions on the relationship between geological and human epochs. For an important discussion of this thesis’ impact on historical theory and practice, see Dipesh Chakrabarty, ‘The Climate of History: Four Theses’, *Critical Inquiry*, 35.2 (2009), 197-222.

With reference to Benjamin's work in particular, this debate is highly pertinent because of the centrality of theological motifs in his thought, which themselves throw doubt on the assumption that historical time equals humanity's 'development' over time.⁷ What is more, the question of historical time has often been treated in Benjamin scholarship as two separate questions: of 'history' and of 'time'. This separation has meant that those who study Benjamin's critique of historicism in the 'theses' or his attempts at a materialist historical practice in the *Passagenarbeit* only tangentially touch upon the underlying temporalities at work, while those focussing on the role of time side-line the question of historicity, sometimes even circumventing it altogether.⁸ Historical time's historicity is, too, a contentious issue in Benjamin's work, with one of the focal points of discussion being the question whether the time of *Jetztzeit* (now-time) is inside or outside history.⁹ My

⁷ For an analysis that attends to the 'beyond-human' elements in Benjamin's conception of history, see Beatrice Hanssen, *Benjamin's Other History: Of Stones, Animals, Human Beings, and Angels* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998).

⁸ On the former group, see the opposing views of Irving Wohlfahrt and H.D. Kittsteiner on whether Benjamin's historical practice is a form of historicism. Cf. Irving Wohlfahrt, 'Smashing the Kaleidoscope: Walter Benjamin's Critique of Cultural History', in *Walter Benjamin and the Demands of History*, ed. by Michael Steinberg (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press: 1996), pp. 190-205; H.D. Kittsteiner, 'Walter Benjamin's Historicism', Second Special Issue on Walter Benjamin, *New German Critique*, 39 (1986), 179-215. On the latter, see Peter Fenves, *The Messianic Reduction: Walter Benjamin and the Shape of Time* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2011), a well-crafted monograph which delineates its scope in the relationship between time and language in Benjamin's pre-materialist years, and thus tactfully avoids any mention of the role of history.

⁹ Peter Osborne, for instance, argues that now-time is 'neither wholly inside nor wholly outside of history, but faces both ways at once'. See Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. 144. For Giorgio Agamben, on the contrary, 'now-time', and even the messianic, is interior to historical time. See Giorgio Agamben, *The Time that Remains: A*

reading of Benjamin's conception of historical time considers this particular question while looking beyond the antagonistic relationship between historicism and *Jetztzeit* that is set up by Benjamin in 'On the Concept of History'. Considering other less 'evental' temporalities, as these are manifested in writing that concerns the realm of the quotidian, I suggest that the opposition between historicism and *Jetztzeit* (often reduced to an opposition between *chronos* [time as-measurement] and *kairós* [time-as-rapture]) has been problematically overemphasised. As I argue below, the reduction of Benjamin's conception of historical time to the figure of *kairós* has led not only to a false equation of *kairós* with decisionism, but also to a false sense of *Jetztzeit's* exteriority to *chronos*. In order to redress this temporal imbalance, I propose that Benjamin's chronopolitics be understood through the figure of *timing*, entailing both decisionism and undecidability, and acknowledging that measurement and measurability are *interior* to Benjamin's historical time. This interiority is articulated with reference to the monadological principle that guides Benjamin's thought, a principle Benjamin also calls the principle of 'montage' or 'interruption'. According to this principle, the montage 'fragment' is not *part* of a whole, but rather the part *contains* the whole, whereby *Jetztzeit* is neither reducible nor exterior to historical time, but rather contains historical time in miniature.

The monadological principle of *Jetztzeit* containing historical time in miniature is then taken up with respect to the question of comparativism. More specifically, the question of the change of scale that occurs when something is contained in miniature – or as an 'abridgment', as Benjamin writes – is discussed with reference to Benjamin's fragments on the mimetic faculty. Although they do not deal with the question of historical time per se, Benjamin's short pieces on mimesis shed light on the question of scale and the transposition from the miniscule to the enormous that marks Benjamin's

Commentary on the Letter to the Romans, trans. by Patricia Dailey (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2005), pp. 69-71; 138-145.

notion of *Ähnlichkeit*. Rendered as similarity or analogy, *Ähnlichkeit*, I argue, is a key category for Benjamin's non-representational relationship between universality and particularity, which can be productively deployed to articulate historical difference. The self-differentiating, self-determining conception of historical difference established in this chapter will therefore function as a compass for our enquiry into the chronopolitics of the avant-garde, and will be revisited and further developed in Chapter 5, when we return to Benjamin in light of the analyses of 'afterness' in the theorisations of the avant-garde after modernism.

1.1 Time Experienced/Time Measured: Historical Time in 'On the Concept of History'

Die Geschichte ist Gegenstand einer Konstruktion, deren Ort nicht die homogene und leere Zeit sondern die von Jetztzeit erfüllte bildet.

History is the subject of a construction whose site is not homogeneous and empty time, but time filled full by now-time.¹⁰

Like so many of Benjamin's writings, this famous extract from 'On the Concept of History' continues to puzzle newcomers and seasoned Benjaminians alike. In its mysterious concision, this brief sentence perfectly captures a confrontation between two different conceptions of historical time. On the one hand, we are presented with 'a homogeneous and empty time'; on the other, a 'time filled full by now-time'. How are we to understand this 'emptiness' or 'fullness' of time precisely? And what is the politics of such a confrontation? Although the notion of 'now-time' [*Jetztzeit*] is particular to the materialist-messianic constellation of Benjamin's late thought, the distinction between an empty and full time articulated here is founded on a set of

¹⁰ Thesis XIV, 'On the Concept of History', *SW4*, pp. 389-400 (p. 395); 'Über den Begriff der Geschichte', in *GS I.2*, pp. 693-704 (p. 701), hereafter cited by thesis number followed by page number of *SW* and *GS* editions.

presuppositions that is as old as philosophical enquiry into the nature of time itself.¹¹ It is beyond the scope of my present analysis to recount the genealogy of such presuppositions. Nevertheless, it is worth pausing briefly to sketch their outline, before I move on to examine their import for Benjamin's thought, particularly with reference to his critique of progress.

There are two presuppositions that require attention. The first concerns the question over whether time is a vessel. The archetypal image used to describe and cognise time – the river of time – hints at precisely this question: Does time flow (like the water in a riverbed)? Or is time the riverbed through which events flow? Otherwise put, this is a question over whether time is something that one can be 'inside' (and which *carries events* inside it) or whether time simply *is* these events. It is also a question concerning time's movement. If time itself flows then it is in movement; if time is a vessel, then it is the events inside it that move, not time.¹² The second presupposition concerns time's relationship to movement and, additionally, to measurement. The Aristotelian and Newtonian conceptions of time, which have been foundational for both physics and philosophy, posit a direct relationship between time and measurement. In Aristotle's proposition, time is indeed 'in movement', and it is this being-in-movement that allows it to function as a device of measurement: 'Not only do we measure the movement by the time, but also the time by the movement, because they define each

¹¹ For a concise introduction to the parameters of philosophical discussion on time and temporality across the ages, see Russell West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (London: Routledge, 2013), pp. 42-55.

¹² Debates over such questions have marked significant methodological differences between analytic and phenomenological approaches to the philosophy of time, although recently there has been more dialogue across the camps. See Roger McLure, *The Philosophy of Time: Time before Times* (London: Routledge, 2005); Yuval Dolev, *Time and Realism: Metaphysical and Antimetaphysical Perspectives* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007); Jack Reynolds, *Chronopathologies: Time and Politics in Derrida, Deleuze, Analytic Philosophy and Phenomenology* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2012).

other'.¹³ In other words, time is defined through the fact that it measures movement, yet it measures movement only on account of its own movement. According to the Aristotelian definition, being *in* time means being *measured by* time: 'if a thing is in time it will be measured by time'.¹⁴ Newtonian time or 'absolute time', by contrast, refers to time as self-constitutive: time is 'in and of itself, and of its own nature, without reference to anything external'.¹⁵ Thus, whereas Aristotelian time is constituted by its relationship to the objects whose movement it measures, absolute time exists prior to and irrespective of what it measures.

Returning to Benjamin with these ideas in mind, we can discern that the distinction between a 'homogeneous and empty time' and a 'time filled full by now-time' presupposes that time is a vessel, which can be empty or full of historical events. The distinction also presupposes that there can be a 'time within a time', or rather a *type of time* (i.e. 'now-time') which provides the content to time as an *a priori*, exterior vessel. With regard to the second question of time's measurement (and even though the idea of measurement may not appear as explicitly as that of the vessel in the selected passage), Benjamin puts forth a strong polemic against the conception of time-as-measurement. This polemic shows Benjamin to be firmly embedded in the intellectual context of his time, a context marked by the legacy of Henri Bergson's *Matter and Memory* (1896) and of a phenomenological analysis of time initiated by Edmund Husserl's *On the Phenomenology of the*

¹³ *The Complete Works of Aristotle: The Revised Oxford Translation, Volume 1*, ed. by Jonathan Barnes (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), pp. 354-390 (pp. 373).

¹⁴ *The Complete Works of Aristotle*, p. 375.

¹⁵ Isaac Newton, *The Principia: Mathematical Principles of Natural History*, trans. by I. Bernard Cohen and Anne Whitman, assisted by Julia Budenz (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999), p. 408.

Consciousness of Internal Time (1893-1917).¹⁶ Despite their differences, what these seminal philosophical contributions have in common is their critique of a positivist conception of time. In other words, they propose a conception of time whereby time is to be understood first and foremost as experience (be it called '*durée*' or 'consciousness'), and the reduction of time to measurement is considered a 'vulgarity' to be opposed at all costs.¹⁷ This crucial opposition between qualitative and quantitative time can serve to explicate Benjamin's concept of historical time. Although I wish to problematize such a clear-cut opposition between experience and measurement, this distinction is necessary so as to understand Benjamin's critique of quantitative time, which can be found in two particular manifestations: his critique of historicism and his attack on an undialectical notion of progress.

Let us first review Benjamin's critique of historicism. Benjamin's usage of the term 'historicism' is far from neutral, as historicism is itself a notion with a contested history. Indeed, German idealist philosophy and historiography is one of the *loci* where such a contestation has been played out, with variations in meaning so wide that the term can denote precisely opposite historiographical theories and practices.¹⁸ The kind of historicism

¹⁶ On the broader historical, cultural and scientific context of changing perceptions of time in the *fin-de-siècle* and early twentieth-century Europe, see Stephen Kern, *The Culture of Time and Space, 1880-1918* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, [1983] 2003).

¹⁷ See West-Pavlov, *Temporalities*, pp. 42-55; David Couzens Hoy, *The Time of Our Lives: A Critical History of Temporality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2009), pp. 45-68.

¹⁸ One key issue has been the question whether historicism should place emphasis on the particular context's uniqueness or whether it should emphasise the narrative of epochal continuity and/or change. For the context of this distinction in German historiography, see Georg G. Iggers, *The German Conception of History: The National Tradition of Historical Thought from Herder to the Present* (Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, 1983); Georg G. Iggers, 'Historicism: The History and Meaning of the Term', *Journal of the History of Ideas*, 56.1 (1995), 129-52 (pp. 131-132).

that Benjamin is referring to here is the German nineteenth-century school of historiography associated with the work of Leopold von Ranke and Gustav Droysen, also known as the German Historical School. It could be said that Benjamin's critique of this kind of historicism, also known as 'Rankean historicism', is exaggerated and caricatures these historians' actual tenets. Nevertheless, Ranke's dictum that history should portray events 'as they really were' [*wie es eigentlich gewesen*] is used by Benjamin to suggest a historical time devoid of time-as-experience. When Benjamin describes the first kind of time as 'homogeneous', therefore, what he has in mind is a historicist time which, through the practice of chronology, treats historical moments as if they were equidistant from one another, separated by equivalent intervals.¹⁹ For Benjamin, historicism follows an 'additive' logic, trying to fill historical time with data.²⁰ Thus, like the logic of measurement that operates under clock-time, the chronological time of historicism is for Benjamin objectionable because it posits a false objectivity on the historian's part and takes no account of the role of experience.²¹

Let us now turn to Benjamin's critique of progress. Benjamin's conception of the linearity and false objectivity of historicism becomes implicated in his critique of the orthodox Marxist belief that humanity is

¹⁹ As Andrew McGettigan has noted, Benjamin's '*homogene*' must be rendered and understood as 'homogeneous', that is, in the mathematical sense of having 'uniformity of degree' (and not 'homogenous', as being of the same *genos*, i.e. descent). See Andrew McGettigan, 'As flowers turn towards the sun: Walter Benjamin's Bergsonian image of the past', *Radical Philosophy* 158. November/December (2009), 25-35 (p. 34, n. 37).

²⁰ 'Its procedure is additive: it musters a mass of data [*die Masse der Fakten*] to fill the homogeneous, empty time'. Thesis XVII, *SW4*, p. 396; *GS I.2*, p. 702.

²¹ Benjamin does not oppose all forms of measured time: only those that disregard memory. In Thesis XV, Benjamin draws a distinction between clock-time and calendrical time, calling days of remembrance (such as holidays) 'monuments of historical consciousness'. Thesis XV, *SW4*, p. 395; *GS I.2*, p. 702.

marching towards a better world. In his letter to Adorno of 9 December 1938, Benjamin concurs with Adorno's reservation about the idea of progress, suggesting that he intends to critique the idea and 'get at its roots and origins'.²² Perhaps one of the ways in which Benjamin 'got' at these origins was through his association of the notion of progress with the empty and homogeneous time of historicism. As Thesis XVII declares: 'The conception of humankind's progress in history cannot be sundered from the conception of its progression [*durchlaufenden Fortgangs*] through a homogeneous and empty time. A critique of the conception of such a progression must be the basis of the critique of the conception of progress [*an der Vorstellung des Fortschritts*] itself.'²³ Benjamin outlines here a direct connection between the marching-forward [*durchlaufend*] movement in the movement of progress [*Fortgang*] and the movement that takes place in the empty-of-temporality time of historicism. What is asserted here is the conviction that a critique of the idea of humankind's historical progress requires a critique of its temporality. This critique is launched not only against Rankean historicism but also against the determinist notion of progress advocated by the orthodox Marxist ideology of the Social Democratic Party (SPD) which, according to Benjamin, gave the proletariat the false impression that they were part of a historical movement towards progress: 'Nothing has so corrupted the German working classes as the belief that it was *they* who were moving with the current'.²⁴

In opposition to the false objectivity of historicism and the determinism of orthodox Marxism, Benjamin articulates a form of historical time detached from the doxa of inevitable development: 'The historical [...]

²² See 'Letter 307: To Theodor W. Adorno', in *CWB*, pp. 585-92 (p. 591).

²³ Thesis XIII, translation mine; Cf. *SW4*, pp. 394-395; *GS I.2*, p. 701.

²⁴ Thesis XI, translation mine, emphasis original. Cf. *SW4*, p. 393; *GS I.2*, p. 698. See also Thesis XIII, *SW4* p. 394-395; *GS I.2*, pp. 700-701.

can no longer be sought in the riverbed of progress.²⁵ Benjamin's task is to move in a different historical direction: 'to swim in time against the direction of the swirling stream'.²⁶ This new form of historical time is proposed in the name of historical materialism, with the figure of the historical materialist deployed in stark contrast to that of the positivist historicist. Whereas the latter places events in chronological order, the historical materialist is called upon to 'blast a specific era out of the homogeneous course of history'.²⁷ Benjamin questions the explanation of causality in history through the notion of a 'chain of events', as he calls for an end to the practice of going through events with one's fingers as though they were rosary beads [*sich die Abfolge von Begebenheiten durch die Finger laufen zu lassen wie einen Rosenkranz*].²⁸ The past (or better put, the 'what-has-been', *das Gewesene*) is for Benjamin not something that one has at one's disposal, but rather something that is difficult to grasp because it 'flits past' [*huscht vorbei*] and threatens to disappear at every present moment.²⁹ This is Benjamin's famous 'dialectical image' which appears before the historical materialist, almost as if it were an apparition.³⁰ The historical materialist's task is, then, at that very precise and critical moment – an opportune moment which is also inescapably 'a moment of

²⁵ 'Das Historische [...] kann nicht mehr im Flußbett eines Verwicklungsverlaufes gesucht werden'. 'Tagebuch vom 7.8. 1931 bis zum Todestag', *GS VI*, p. 443.

²⁶ *AP* <G^o, 20 >, p. 843. On the connection posited by Benjamin between historical practice and temporal direction, see also *AP* <O^o, 56>, p. 862.

²⁷ Thesis XVII, *SW4*, p. 396; *GS I.2*, p. 703.

²⁸ Thesis A. Here I summarise with a modified translation, as the image of the historian's hands running through the rosary beads has been lost in the English translations; an image that perhaps can be itself likened to the movement of the abacus beads that measure while-being-moved by the human hand, albeit without the rosary beads' theological inflections. Cf. *SW4*, p. 397; *Illuminations*, p. 255; *GS I.2*, p. 704.

²⁹ See Thesis V, *SW4*, pp. 390-391; *GS I.2*, p. 695.

³⁰ See Thesis VI, *SW4*, p. 391; *GS I.2*, p. 695.

danger' – to seize hold of that fleeting image, through which knowledge of the historical past becomes accessible. *Jetztzeit* becomes therefore the key conceptual category that Benjamin proposes in opposition to quantitative time and the 'empty and homogeneous' time of historicism and progress. It is through *Jetztzeit* that Benjamin articulates a historiographical practice that goes by the name of historical materialism, critiquing the orthodox Marxist conceptions of historical time's forward march. But how does *Jetztzeit* relate to historical time precisely? To what extent can it be said to be *exterior to* historical time? Let us now examine these two questions in more detail.

1.2 Revisiting Benjaminian Chronopolitics: *kairós* and 'timing'

Benjamin's enigmatic proposition of a historical materialist practice is distinctive in its combination of anarchist, Marxist and theological tendencies: the voluntarist momentum that explodes 'the continuum of history' coexists with calls for a proletarian revolution, which themselves coexist with images of a Messiah that 'comes as the victor over the Antichrist'.³¹ A conceptual trope that can be deployed to bring these disparate tendencies together is the temporal figure of *kairós*, namely, the opportune or decisive moment for taking action – the moment when, as it were, one must 'seize the moment'. In contrast to the figure of *chronos* – a 'normal' or 'unexceptional' time – the time of *kairós* is 'exceptional'.³² The chronopolitics of *kairós* is captured in one passage that is commonly referred to by scholars and commentators, the appropriately-titled fragment 'Fire Alarm' in *One-Way Street*: 'And if the abolition of the bourgeoisie is not completed by an almost calculable moment in economic and technical development (a moment signaled by inflation and poison-gas warfare), all is lost. Before the spark reaches the dynamite, the

³¹ Thesis VI, *SW4*, p. 391; *GS I.2*, p. 695.

³² On the difference between *chronos* and *kairós*, see Hutchings, *Time and World Politics*, p. 5. For a more detailed analysis, see J.E. Smith, 'Time, Times and the "Right Time": *chronos* and *kairós*', *The Monist*, 53.1 (1969), 1-13.

lighted fuse must be cut.³³ This emphasis on seizing the moment and acting before it is too late – a chronopolitics of ‘the time is now’, we might say – has been taken up by a number of commentators who have seen Benjaminian *kairós* as a useful tool for political mobilisation.³⁴ The politics of *kairós* has also been foregrounded by current interpretations that trace an affinity between Benjamin’s conception of historical time and recent materialist-theological philosophy by figures such as Antonio Negri and Alain Badiou.³⁵ Lastly, and perhaps most controversially, Benjaminian *kairós* has been discussed with reference to the thought of the conservative Catholic and later Nazi jurist Carl Schmitt and his notion of the ‘state of exception’, which Benjamin references in the theses.³⁶

³³ ‘Fire alarm’, *One-Way Street, SW1*, p. 470; ‘Feuermelder’, *Einbahnstrasse, GS IV*, p. 122.

³⁴ The most influential analysis in this vein has been Michael Löwy, *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin’s ‘On the Concept of History’*, trans. by Chris Turner (London: Verso, [2001] 2005); see especially, p. 87. Cf. Daniel Bensaïd, *Marx for our Times: Adventures and Misadventures of a Critique*, trans. by Gregory Elliott (London: Verso, 2002), pp. 81-90. For an earlier, comparable position, see also Terry Eagleton, *Walter Benjamin: Or Towards a Revolutionary Criticism* (London: Verso, 1981), pp. 173-79.

³⁵ See Roland Boer, ‘The Immeasurably Creative Politics of Job: Antonio Negri and the Bible’, *SubStance*, 41.3 (2012), 93-108 (p. 95).

³⁶ Carl Schmitt famously declared that sovereignty is founded on the state of exception, namely, on the exceptional moment that grants the power to suspend legal order. See Carl Schmitt, *Political Theology: Four Chapters on the Concept of Sovereignty*, trans. by George Schwab (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1922] 1985), pp. 1-15. Giorgio Agamben has influentially read Benjamin’s reference to a ‘real state of exception’ as an appropriation, not confirmation, of Schmitt’s ideas. See Giorgio Agamben, *The State of Exception*, trans. by Kevin Attell (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), pp. 57-59. There is a wealth of scholarship discussing the difficult relationship between Benjamin and Schmitt, and Agamben’s reading. See Samuel Weber, ‘Taking Exception to Decision: Walter Benjamin and Carl Schmitt’ *Diacritics*, 22.3/4 (1992), 5-18; Horst Bredekamp, ‘From Walter Benjamin to Carl

Despite the undeniable presence of the decisive moment in Benjamin's chronopolitics, my wager is that the temporality of decisionism underlying *kairós* has been overstated, leading to a false identification of Benjamin's conception of historical time with *kairós*. By focussing on the temporality of *kairós*, whether in its messianic or its secular-decisionist guise, and by equating Benjamin's concept of historical time with *Jetztzeit*, one runs the risk of disregarding the import of less 'exceptional' temporalities that have an equally historical function within Benjamin's thought.³⁷ As I wish to show, this overemphasis on *kairós* has been to the detriment of another temporal figure, one which was intimated in Benjamin's letter at the beginning of this chapter, and which can be given the name 'timing'. Timing denotes 'telling the time': that is, knowing the time, and knowing through measuring. This measurement, however, is not based on exterior devices, such as clocks or calendars, but is a form of discernment based on a human experiential scale that, when considered alongside Benjamin's theory of mimesis, reveals timing as a form of embodied cognition. Thus, 'timing' and Benjamin's chronopolitics by extension, involves timeliness and untimeliness; it involves *kairós* as well as the moment of *indecision*.

Timing crops up in unexpected places in Benjamin's writing. Measuring time by following one's embodied cognition may encompass the newspaper reader's daily impatience for the news, the gambler's weighing-up of the exact moment when the bet must be placed, or the crowd's measured

Schmitt, via Thomas Hobbes', *Critical Inquiry*, 25.2 (1999), 247-66; Brian Britt, 'The Schmittian Messiah in Agamben's *The Time That Remains*', *Critical Inquiry*, 36.2 (2010), 262-87.

³⁷ I am here in agreement with the view that historical time in Benjamin is also present in the unexceptional, quotidian temporality of the *Passagenarbeit*. See Peter Buse, Ken Hirschkop, Scott McCracken and Bertrand Taithe, *Benjamin's Arcades: An Unguided Tour* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2005), p. 37.

movement in front of the arcades.³⁸ Moments of indecision may appear in fragments and thought-images involving the act of waiting, or the figure of awakening, a spatio-temporal threshold between action and idleness.³⁹ Such instances of waiting-time and undecidability have been read as moments of deferral by Anglo-American scholars who have taken deconstructive paths to interpreting Benjamin's texts.⁴⁰ However, although these in-between moments are no doubt present in Benjamin, focussing on the undecidability of Benjamin's chronopolitics *without* considering his decisionism, would be as misleading and as partial a move as the one made by those who can only hear the 'fire alarm'. The figure of timing, I suggest, opens a different path to understanding the relationship between undecidability and *kairós*. As we saw in Benjamin's letter in this chapter's introduction: 'the task is plainly not to decide once and for all, but rather *at every moment*.'⁴¹ This temporal

³⁸ See 'Author as Producer', *SW2.2*, pp. 771; *GS II.2*, p. 688. *AP* [O12a, 2], pp. 512-513. *AP* <O^o, 51>, p. 862.

³⁹ See, for instance, 'Breakfast Room', *One-Way Street, SW1*, pp. 444-445; 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, pp. 238-239; *Origin*, pp. 70-72. Further examples can be given in relation to the role that 'habit' plays in Benjamin's thought. See, for instance, *AP* [N2a, 1], p. 461. Cf. Tim Beasley-Murray, *Mikhail Bakhtin and Walter Benjamin: Experience and Form* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), pp. 22-24.

⁴⁰ Derrida's own interpretations of Benjamin aside, two prominent examples include Paul de Man, 'Conclusions: Walter Benjamin's "The Task of the Translator"', in *The Resistance to Theory* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1986), pp. 73-93; and Samuel Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2008), especially pp. 122-28. For Derrida's foundational essay, see Jacques Derrida, 'Des Tours de Babel', trans. by Joseph F. Graham, in *Difference in Translation*, edited with an introduction by Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 165-207. The original French is published as an appendix in the same collection. Cf. Jacques Derrida, 'Appendix: Des Tours de Babel', in *Difference in Translation*, pp. 209-48.

⁴¹ See n. 1 in this chapter; emphasis added. Moreover, see the closing sentence of the 'Surrealism' essay and the image of an alarm clock ringing ceaselessly, replacing the

relationship between the rupture of *Jetztzeit* and the continuity of 'deciding at every moment' can be elucidated through Benjamin's famous method of constellation. In order to explicate the broader chronopolitical import of timing, therefore, let us now turn our attention to Benjamin's method of constellation and his deployment of the Leibnizian monad.

Benjamin makes explicit reference to Leibniz's notion of the monad as early as the 'Epistemo-Critical Prologue' in his failed Habilitation on the *Trauerspiel* and returns to this notion in the theses.⁴² In Leibniz's own texts, the ontology of the monad is explained through a metaphor of plants and fish: 'Each portion of matter can be conceived as a garden full of plants, and as a pond full of fish. But each branch of a plant, each limb of an animal, each drop of its humors, is still another such garden or pond'.⁴³ The Leibnizian monad is an indivisible entity: it has no composite parts, and does not form part of a bigger entity. It is 'window-less': it does not refer to anything outside itself.⁴⁴ Following the theological idea of *analogia entis*, according to which God's creations are not 'part of' God but are 'analogous to' God, the monad is not part

function of ticking with that of a constant waking bell. *SW2.1*, p. 218; *GS II.1*, p. 310. See also the experience of constant tiny alarms by the reader of Proust: 'The true reader of Proust is shaken continuously [*immerwährend*] by little frights.' 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, p. 242; translation modified. Cf. *GS II.1*, p. 318.

⁴² 'Thinking involves not only the movement of thoughts but, equally, their arrest [*Stillstellung*]. Where thinking suddenly stops in a configuration pregnant with tensions, it gives that configuration a shock, through which it is crystallised as monad.' Thesis XVII; translation modified. Cf. *SW4*, p. 396; *GS I.2*, pp. 702-703.

⁴³ G. W. Leibniz, *Philosophical Texts*, trans. by Richard Francks and R. S. Woolhouse, introduction by R. S. Woolhouse (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 277.

⁴⁴ On the indivisibility of the monad in Leibniz, see Daniel Garber, *Leibniz: Body, Substance, Monad* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 353. For a detailed analysis of Leibniz's influence on Benjamin, see Paula L. Schwebel, 'Intensive Infinity: Walter Benjamin's Reception of Leibniz and its Sources', *MLN*, 127.3 (2012), 589-610.

of the universe but is, in its internal structure, analogous to the universe.⁴⁵ Benjamin's metaphor also involves a planetary, and arguably also theological, analogy: 'ideas are related [*verhalten sich*] to things as constellations [*Sternbilder*] are to stars'.⁴⁶ Literally 'star-images', constellations are not *a priori* to the stars, nor do they function as first principles. Like the mosaic, the other image that Benjamin characteristically deploys, the constellation is formed of multiple singularities: 'Every idea is a sun and is related to other ideas just as suns are related to each other.'⁴⁷ Rather than being a particle of the world, the monad is a world within a world. Or, as Eli Friedlander reminds us: 'the dialectical image is not an image *of* anything'.⁴⁸ Thus, Benjamin's much-discussed figure of the fragment is monadological in this precise sense: it does not refer to anything outside itself but is complete in itself.⁴⁹

Benjamin's monadological principle does not restrict itself to texts where the monad is mentioned explicitly. In the *Arcades Project*, the collector and collecting as a way of relating to objects become another expression of singularity: 'For the collector, the world is present, and indeed ordered, in each of his objects'.⁵⁰ As a monad, each object is not part of the collection but

⁴⁵ See Lucian Hölscher, 'Time Gardens: Historical Concepts in Modern Historiography', *History and Theory*, Forum: Multiple Temporalities, 53 (2014), 577-91 (p. 583).

⁴⁶ *Origin*, p. 34; translation modified. Cf. *GS I.1*, p. 214.

⁴⁷ See *Origin*, pp. 28, 37.

⁴⁸ Eli Friedlander, 'The Measure of the Contingent: Walter Benjamin's Dialectical Image', *boundary 2*, 35.3 (2008), 1-26 (p. 4; emphasis original).

⁴⁹ See, for instance, 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian': 'The researcher [...] must abandon the calm, contemplative attitude towards his object in order to become conscious of the critical constellation in which precisely this fragment of the past finds itself with precisely this present.' *SW3*, p. 262; *GS II.2*, pp. 467-68.

⁵⁰ *AP* [H2, 7; H2a, 1], p. 207. Cf. 'And for the true collector, every single thing in this system becomes an encyclopaedia of all knowledge of the epoch [...]'. *AP* [H1a, 2], p. 205.

contains the entire collection within it. Benjamin's theories of allegory, gesture and indexicality also follow the same principle. 'Each gesture is an event [...] in itself', writes Benjamin with reference to the gestural aspects that he recognises in Kafka.⁵¹ In his analysis of epic theatre, too, Benjamin salutes the non-empathetic, non-representational quality of Brecht's plays, recognising a method that he advocated and practised: literary montage and the principle of interruption.⁵² Brecht himself described epic theatre in terms that were in accord with Benjamin's appropriation of the Leibnizian monad: 'One can as it were take a pair of scissors and cut [the epic play] into individual pieces, which remain fully capable of life'.⁵³ These individual pieces are fully capable of life because they do not need to form part of a larger whole in order to retain their import. As Benjamin famously summarised his principle of montage: 'I needn't say anything. Merely show. I shall [...] appropriate no ingenious formulations. But the rags, the refuse – these I will not inventory but allow, in the only way possible, to come into their own: by making use of them'.⁵⁴

The montage principle was also intended by Benjamin as a method of historical practice. Historical materialism would provide the space 'to carry over the principle of montage into history [...], to assemble large-scale constructions out of the smallest and most precisely cut components [...] to discover in the analysis of the small individual moment the crystal of the total event'.⁵⁵ Thus, each historical moment can be fully 'capable of life', and not reduced to a rosary bead in the string of the narrative of progress. In Benjamin's own declarative terms: 'If the object of history is to be blasted out

⁵¹ 'Franz Kafka, On the Tenth Anniversary of his Death', *SW2.2*, p. 802; *GS II.2*, p. 419. See also Benjamin's remarks on Chaplin's movement in 'The Formula in Which the Dialectical Structure of Film Finds Expression', *SW3*, p. 94.

⁵² See *UB*, pp. 4, 12, 81, 99.

⁵³ *Brecht on Theatre*, p. 70.

⁵⁴ *AP* [N1a, 8], p. 460; emphasis original.

⁵⁵ *AP* [N2, 6], p. 461.

of the continuum of historical succession, that is because its monadological structure demands it.⁵⁶ It is important to underline here that the principle of interruption does not lead to a rupture where time ‘escapes’ measurement, as some commentators have suggested.⁵⁷ Rather, the montage principle produces a new relationship between the moment of *kairós* and the unexceptional moment, with the idea of singularity being here crucial. In *Convolute N* and the theses, Benjamin presents now-time as a crystallisation or condensation of the whole course of history into one particular moment, and this condensation appears in the aporetic temporal movement of *Jetztzeit* as ‘dialectics at a standstill’.⁵⁸ *Jetztzeit* is certainly in opposition to the time of historicism, as we have already seen. However, in its monadological relationship to history (namely, containing the whole course of history in miniature), *Jetztzeit* is not exterior to *chronos*.⁵⁹ Although *Jetztzeit* cannot be equated with *chronos* – it is, after all, a rupture in the historical time of

⁵⁶ *AP* [N10, 3], p. 475.

⁵⁷ As an indication see the phenomenological analysis proposed by Kia Lindroos, which, in my view, emphasises the centrality of qualitative time to such an extent where the dialectical relationship to a time-measured is effaced. See Kia Lindroos, *Now-Time/Image-Space: Temporalization of Politics in Walter Benjamin's Philosophy of History and Art* (Jyväskylä: SoPhi/Jyväskylä University Press, 1998), p. 20.

⁵⁸ ‘It’s not that what is past casts its light on what is present, or what is present its light on what is past; rather, image is that wherein what has been comes together in a flash with the now to form a constellation. In other words: image is dialectics at standstill’. *AP* [N2a, 3], p. 462. Cf. Thesis XVII, *SW4*, p. 396; *GS I.2*, p. 703. See also *AP* [N11, 4], p. 476.

⁵⁹ Giorgio Agamben arrives at the same conclusion, even though via a different hermeneutic route. See Agamben, *The Time that Remains*, pp. 68-72. Following Agamben, Sami Khatib makes the comparable point that *Jetztzeit* is not exterior to ‘capital-time’. See Sami Khatib, ‘The Time of Capital and the Messianicity of Time. Marx with Benjamin’, *Studies in Social & Political Thought*, 20 (2012), 46-59 (pp. 59-62).

historicism – equally, it cannot be reduced to, or subsumed by, the messianic. In all its exceptionality, *Jetztzeit* finds itself *related to* time-as-measurement.

This relationship can be understood as a condensation, as I have mentioned above. Or, rather more appropriately, considering the central status of philology in Benjamin's thought, it can be understood as an abridgement or abbreviation. Benjamin uses the term abridgement [*Abbreviatur*] to describe both the 'idea' in *Origin*, and *Jetztzeit* in the theses.⁶⁰ The idea's relationship to the world of ideas is one of abbreviation, and so is *Jetztzeit's*:

Die Jetztzeit, die als Modell der messianischen in einer ungeheueren Abbreviatur die Geschichte der ganzen Menschheit zusammenfaßt, fällt haarscharf mit *der* Figur zusammen, die die Geschichte der Menschheit im Universum macht.⁶¹

Now-time, which, as a model of the messianic, comprises the history of all humankind in a tremendous abbreviation, coincides precisely with *the* figure that the history of humankind draws in the universe.⁶²

The temporality of abridgement is here key, as abridgement is both a spatio-temporal condensation and a textual act of cutting short. Abridgement is the antidote to the additive, accumulative temporality of historicism: instead of the accumulation of new historical data to a line of events, Benjamin proposes the abbreviation of humankind's entire history, an abbreviation that is itself 'enormous' [*ungeheuer*]. The question of time's direction becomes thus three-dimensional, as the abbreviation suggests a change in scale and proportion.⁶³ What is more, *Jetztzeit* is a 'model', that is, it is in a proportional relationship to the messianic. Therefore, through the philological device of abridgement,

⁶⁰ See *Origin*, p. 48.

⁶¹ Thesis XVIII, *GS I.2*, p. 703; emphasis original.

⁶² Thesis XVIII, *SW4*, p. 396; emphasis original and translation modified.

⁶³ See for instance: '[...] the historical object [...] into which all the forces and interests of history enter on a reduced scale'. *AP* [N10, 3], p. 475.

Benjamin proposes a mediation between the miniscule and the enormous, and between the historical instant and the entire course of human history.

Let us recap our argument so far. Although Benjamin's concept of historical time cannot be explicated without the decisive moment of *kairós*, the monadological structure of *Jetztzeit* problematises any clear-cut opposition between *kairós* and *chronos* and, consequently, questions the notion that the moment of rupture can escape measurement. We have seen that *Jetztzeit* does not have a 'metonymic' relationship to history (that is, a relationship of 'part' to 'whole').⁶⁴ Instead, as a singularity, *Jetztzeit* comprises the whole course of history in an abridgement. Whereas *kairós* disregards the importance of 'in-between' tropes such as awakening and waiting, the proposed temporal figure of 'timing' better captures the ambivalence between decisiveness and undecidability that characterises Benjamin's writing, and highlights a form of measuring time that is inextricable to human experience. With these conclusions in mind, we are now in a position to probe further into the monadological constitution of the relationship between the particular and the universal, while suggesting an epistemological continuity between Benjamin's concept of historical time, his reflections on mimesis, and his own propensity 'for seeing similarity'.

⁶⁴ Osborne rightly points out that *Jetztzeit*, being an abridgement of historical time, is temporally 'both durational extension and point-like source'. (See Osborne, *Politics of Time*, p. 145). He also suggests, however, that the dialectical image has a 'metonymic' relationship to history as a whole, a suggestion which seems to contradict its monadological character, underlined by Osborne himself. Cf. *Politics of Time*, pp. 147, 151. 'Metonymic' is used by Osborne rather loosely and does not refer to Jakobson's classic distinction between metonymy and metaphor: see Roman Jakobson, 'Two Aspects of Language and Two Types of Aphasic Disturbances', in *On Language*, ed. by Linda R. Waugh and Monique Monville-Burston (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1990), pp. 115-33.

1.3 Seeing Similarity: Benjaminian Analogy as Historical Difference

Considering that Benjamin's concept of historical time is founded on the critique of progress, it is unsurprising that 'On the Concept of History' has found allies among critics of modernisation theory from the field of postcolonial studies. In his foundational monograph *Provincializing Europe*, historian and historical theorist Dipesh Chakrabarty alludes to Benjamin's notion of the 'empty and homogeneous' time of historicism before launching into a critique of the temporal logic that structures the relationship between 'the West' and 'non-West'.⁶⁵ Historicism's logic of the 'not-yet', argues Chakrabarty, places the 'non-West' in 'the waiting room of history', where the 'not-yet-modern' has to wait for its turn, so that it can too 'modernise'.⁶⁶ The movement of transition between different stages in history – most importantly, the transition 'towards modernity' – becomes also a movement where the relationship between centre and periphery is temporally figured. In keeping with Chakrabarty's overall project of 'temporalising' discourses on geopolitical centre/periphery relations, in this chapter's final part I wish to bring my analysis of Benjamin's chronopolitics of timing to bear on the question of representation. As has been recently suggested by Zahid R. Chaudhary, historical difference manifests itself in Benjamin's writings on mimesis and can be instructive for postcolonial studies.⁶⁷ Although my own methodological emphasis is not on Benjamin's potential contribution to

⁶⁵ See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2000), pp. 6-11.

⁶⁶ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 8. It must be noted here that Chakrabarty understands historicism with reference to development: 'the idea of development and the assumption that a certain amount of time elapses in the very process of development are critical to this understanding'. Chakrabarty, p. 23.

⁶⁷ See Zahid R. Chaudhary, 'Subjects in Difference: Walter Benjamin, Frantz Fanon, and Postcolonial Theory', *differences: A Journal of Feminist Cultural Studies*, 23.1 (2012), 151-83 (pp. 160-66).

postcolonial thought, Chaudhary's call to relate Benjamin to the postcolonial *via* mimesis is nonetheless timely, because it offers a productive avenue for investigating the relationship between universality and particularity.⁶⁸ In my analysis, therefore, I turn to Benjamin's theory of mimesis in an attempt to take the first steps towards a Benjaminian comparativism. Such comparativism does not rely on tracing axes of influence from the centre to the periphery and back again, but rather, in the model of *Jetztzeit*, it functions as a lens whose shifting focus from the miniscule to the enormous conditions the world 'in a state of similarity'. Before spending too long anticipating my conclusions, however, let me begin by examining Benjamin's fragments on mimesis.

There are two short fragments where Benjamin's theory of mimesis is explicitly articulated: 'Doctrine of the Similar' and 'On the Mimetic Faculty', both dating from 1933, the latter being a shortened version of the former.⁶⁹ At the core of these texts is the notion of 'nonsensuous similarity' [*unsinnliche Ähnlichkeit*]. 'Nonsensuous' needs to be understood here as transcending the five senses of sight, hearing, smell, taste and touch. Accordingly, what

⁶⁸ It is beyond my present enquiry to discuss the possibilities, as well as limitations, in proposing a 'postcolonial Benjamin'. Scholarship on this issue remains, by Benjamin studies standards, limited. As an indication, see Willi Bolle, 'Paris on the Amazon? Postcolonial Interrogations of Benjamin's European Modernism', in *A Companion to the Works of Walter Benjamin*, ed. by Rolf J. Goebel (Columbia, SC: Camden House, 2009), pp. 216-45; 'Walter Benjamin in Latin America' Special Issue, *Discourse*, 32.1 (2010); John Kraniauskas, 'Beware Mexican Ruins! *One-way Street* and the Colonial Unconscious', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction and Experience*, ed. by Peter Osborne & Andrew Benjamin (London: Routledge, 1995), pp. 139-54.

⁶⁹ 'Doctrine of the Similar' [1933], *SW2.2*, pp. 694-98; 'Lehre vom Ähnlichen', *GS II.1*, pp. 204-10. Cf. 'Doctrine of the Similar', trans. by Knut Tarnowski, *New German Critique*, 17. Walter Benjamin Special Issue (1979), 65-69. 'On the Mimetic Faculty' [1933], *SW2.2*, pp. 720-22; 'Über das Mimetische Vermögen', *GS II.1*, pp. 210-13.

Benjamin calls 'the mimetic faculty' – namely, the faculty that enables the perception of similarities – transcends all other faculties. Benjamin defines the 'gift for seeing similarity', a gift exclusive to humans, as the remainder of an earlier mimetic faculty which compelled humans 'to become and to behave alike' [*ähnlich zu werden und sich zu verhalten*].⁷⁰ This earlier, 'truer' form of mimesis has disappeared in modern times, writes Benjamin, but residues are still discernible in astrology, children's play and – above all – language.⁷¹ There are inescapable mystical overtones in this presentation of a faculty of a higher order, whose origin is traced in a questionable narrative of historical movement from the 'primitives' to the 'moderns'.⁷² Yet, for all its dubious mysticism and reductive historicism, Benjamin's articulation of the importance of 'seeing similarity' is instructive for its comparativist potential. This perception of similarity must not be confused with a movement towards assimilation or homogeneity. Seeing similarity does not mean looking for what is 'the same' but rather for what is 'alike' [*das Ähnliche*], and thus entails difference as much as it entails sameness. Perceiving the alike is, for Benjamin, akin to discerning a physiognomic resemblance.⁷³ It also informs the practices of philology and translation, both of which rely on the ability to compare, or a

⁷⁰ 'Doctrine of the Similar', *SW2.2*, p. 698; translation modified. Cf. *GS II.1*, p. 210.

⁷¹ See 'On the Mimetic Faculty', *SW2.2*, p. 721; *GS II.1*, pp. 211-12.

⁷² See 'Doctrine of the Similar', *SW2.2*, pp. 695-696; *GS II.1*, pp. 205-6. See also the unpublished fragment dated around 1936 'The Knowledge that the First Material on which the Mimetic Faculty Tested itself [...]', *SW3*, p. 253; *GS VI*, p. 127.

⁷³ Benjamin also describes historiography with reference to physiognomy: 'To write history means giving dates their physiognomy'. *AP* [N11, 2], p. 476. See also 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, pp. 237, 246. On the relationship between physiognomy and non-sensuous similarity, see Frederic Schwartz, *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2005), pp. 194-201.

‘comparability’ as we might say adding a new term to the list of Benjamin’s ‘–abilities’.⁷⁴

A philological expression of the mimetic faculty was suggested by Benjamin a few years prior, in the 1929 essay ‘On the Image of Proust’. Proust’s life and writing become for Benjamin exemplary of the perception of the alike, particularly with respect to the singularity of an in-between state of experience that interrupts the distinction between night and day, sleeping and wakefulness. What Benjamin describes as Proust’s ‘impassioned cult of similarity’ lies precisely in this threshold between an awake and sleeping state:

The similarity of the One to the Other [*des Einen mit dem Andern*], which we reckon with, which preoccupies us when awake, merely laps around in the deeper dream world, where what occurs is never identical, but alike: to itself emerging unfathomably alike [*was vorgeht, nie identisch, sondern ähnlich: sich selber undurchschaubar ähnlich, auftaucht*].⁷⁵

This passage is particularly cryptic and so its translation necessitates a form of textual interpretation to take place prior to the linguistic translation itself. At stake in this ambivalence is the question over whether the relationship of analogy is simply between the One and the Other, or whether the One is itself divisible (and thus in that case non-monadological) and in an analogical relationship to itself. In my own present task as philologist and translator, I

⁷⁴ I am here indebted to Samuel Weber’s definition of ‘–ability’ in Benjamin’s work (see Weber, *Benjamin’s –abilities*) and to Harry Harootunian’s articulation of a broader intellectual project of ‘comparability’. See Harry Harootunian, ‘Modernity and the claims of untimeliness’, *Postcolonial Studies*, 13.4 (2010), 367-82 (p. 369). See also ‘Problems of Comparability/Possibilities for Comparative Studies’, Special Issue, *boundary 2*, 32.2 (2005).

⁷⁵ ‘On the Image of Proust’, *SW2.1*, p. 239; translation modified. Cf. ‘Zum Bilde Prousts’, *GS II.1*, pp. 313-14.

have decided *not to decide* and leave the translation ambivalent.⁷⁶ Yet, even if we were to take one position and read the One as non-monadological, the figural tropes that Benjamin deploys to describe the temporality of analogy both in the essay on Proust and in the fragments on mimesis bring us back to his reflections on the concept of historical time, and the monadology of the dialectical image.

In the 'Proust' essay, Benjamin offers a visual metaphor to explain the perception of the alike in Proust's writing: 'Proust's most accurate, most conclusive insights fasten on their objects the way insects fasten on leaves [...].'⁷⁷ At first, writes Benjamin, the insect is not discernible from the leaf, until suddenly there is a miniscule 'leap' which makes the perception of similarity, and thus the difference between the two entities come to light. The relationship between insect and leaf, insight and object, continues Benjamin, is the same relationship that a child recognises when playing with a sock: the sock becomes both content and container (both an object and a vessel for other objects), *and* the interplay in-between.⁷⁸ We can discern here an ambivalence that brings us back to Benjamin's concept of historical time,

⁷⁶ The translation in *Selected Writings* suggests that '*identisch*' and '*ähnlich*' are adjectives that describe 'what occurs', thus adding the verb 'to be'. However, another interpretation is possible, whereby *identisch* and *ähnlich* function as adverbs describing the manner in which the One relates to the Other, and to itself (as Other). This is what the translation in *Illuminations* seems to suggest (even though it does not render the immanent analogy of the One to itself). See *Illuminations*, p. 200. My usage of 'emerging' (not designating but potentially implying a subject) and 'alike' (potentially either an adjective or an adverb) hopefully retains the ambivalence characterising the German.

⁷⁷ 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, p. 242; *GS II. 1*, pp. 317-18.

⁷⁸ See 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, p. 240. See also 'The Sock', *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, *SW3*, p. 374; 'Berliner Kindheit um Neunzehnhundert', *GS IV*, p. 284. On animal mimicry in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, see Joyce Cheng, 'Mask, Mimicry, Metamorphosis: Roger Caillois, Walter Benjamin and Surrealism in the 1930s', *Modernism/Modernity*, 16.1 (2009), 61-86 (pp. 77-80).

which can itself be described as an interplay between time's potential to be both vessel and content.

Equally reminiscent of his formulations on historical time is the temporality that Benjamin describes explicitly in the 'Proust' essay. Benjamin considers time in Proust as 'entangled, not boundless time' [*verschränkte, nicht grenzenlose Zeit*].⁷⁹ This 'entangled', non-linear time can only be revealed when it is crystallised in quotidian, daily time: 'Proust has brought off the monstrous feat letting the whole world age by a lifetime in an instant. [...] *À la Recherche du temps perdu* is the constant attempt to charge an entire lifetime with the utmost mental awareness. Proust's method is actualization [*Vergegenwärtigung*], not reflection'.⁸⁰ Similarly, the temporality described in the fragments in mimesis brings to mind the instantaneous and condensed time of *Jetztzeit*. Both rely on a particular velocity and the moment of *kairós*:

The perception of similarity is in every case bound to an instantaneous flash [*Aufblitzen*]. It slips past [...] but really cannot be held fast [...]. It offers itself to the eye as fleetingly and as transitorily as a constellation of stars. The perception of similarities thus seems to be bound to a time-moment [*Zeitmoment*].⁸¹

This deciphering, whether it is secular or sacred, whether it is the pupil reading an ABC book or the fortune-teller reading the stars, 'is subject to a *necessary tempo*, or rather a critical moment, which the reader must not forget at any cost lest he go away empty-handed'.⁸² The perception of the alike is thus characterised by a chronopolitics of *kairós* but, like in the dialectical image, this temporality is condensed and abbreviated.

⁷⁹ 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, p. 244; translation modified. Cf. *GS II.1*, p. 320.

⁸⁰ 'On the Image of Proust', *SW2.1*, p. 244. Cf. *GS II.1*, p. 320.

⁸¹ 'Doctrine of the Similar', *New German Critique*, 66. Cf. *SW2.2*, pp. 695-96. *GS II. 1*, pp. 206-7.

⁸² 'Doctrine of the Similar', *SW2.2*, p. 698; emphasis added. *GS II. 1*, pp. 209-10.

We have so far discussed Benjamin's remarks on analogy in his fragments on the mimetic faculty and 'On the Image of Proust'. Yet analogy is more than a fleeting subject matter to be detected in a narrow selection of Benjamin's texts. An analogic imperative is at the heart of Benjamin's work, operating conspicuously in his own mode of thinking and writing. As Sigrid Weigel has acutely observed, Benjamin's mode of working is 'a way of thinking and writing that favours simultaneity and constellation over continuity, similitude over representation or sign, and the detail or fractionary (*Bruchstück*) over the whole'.⁸³ Benjamin's way of 'thinking-in-images' as Weigel calls it, or his unparalleled 'gift for seeing similarity', as we might say here appropriating Benjamin's own words, is crucial for articulating a comparativist practice of historical difference. Such an analogic mode of thinking is expressed in Benjamin's parallel syntactical structures, which, as Peter Demetz has noted, demonstrate a particular form of reasoning: 'Benjamin speaks about correspondences where many other Marxists would refer to economic basis and cultural superstructure; and he often suggests these correspondences by parallel sentence structures, neatly arranging the semantic elements in the required relationships ('as...as'; 'as little...as').'⁸⁴ Although it is not the relationship between economic basis and cultural superstructure that is at stake in my present enquiry (and there are arguably instances where Benjamin *does* rest on a Marxist basis/superstructure model for his understanding of culture), Demetz's point is nonetheless illuminating, because it captures the philological centrality of analogy in Benjamin's work

⁸³ Sigrid Weigel, 'The Flash of Knowledge and the Temporality of Images: Walter Benjamin's Image-based Epistemology and its Preconditions in Visual Arts and Media History', *Critical Inquiry*, 41.2 (2015), 344-66 (p. 345).

⁸⁴ Peter Demetz, 'Introduction', in Walter Benjamin, *Reflections: Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, ed. by Peter Demetz (New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich: 1978), p. xxxix. On the centrality of similarity in Benjamin's writing, see Sigrid Weigel, *Entstellte Ähnlichkeit: Walter Benjamins theoretische Schreibweise* (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1997).

while also suggesting its broader intellectual import. As a result, therefore, conceptual relationships of determination, reflection and representation are replaced by those of analogy, abridgement, and actualisation but in a manner that implicates the author's own praxis.

This intimate relationship between subject matter and method is most vivid when Benjamin deploys analogic methods while theorising analogy. Thus, different levels of analogy become implicated in Benjamin's thinking and writing, pointing to a theory of mimesis that also constitutes a form of analogic praxis. In a much-cited passage, Benjamin formulates an analogy first between 'the child' and 'humanity', then between 'a ball' and 'the moon', and finally, between two kinds of goals: '*Just as a child who has learned to grasp stretches out its hand for the moon as it would for a ball, so humanity [...] sets its sights as much on currently utopian goals as on goals within reach*'.⁸⁵ We see here an intricate web of analogies between syntactical subjects (child/humanity), and objects (moon/ball), as well as the *degree* with which humanity as a universal historical subject stretches towards the reachable *and* the unreachable. In her insightful analysis of this passage, the late Germanist Miriam Hansen has analysed the centrality of play as creative mimicry, suggesting that Benjamin's mimicry is a 'miscognition' which is then transformed into radical art and politics.⁸⁶ Even if Benjamin himself valorises miscognition, however, I would suggest that what is taking place in the passage itself is a self-aware analogy rather than miscognition. The child does not take the moon *for* a ball. The child acts *as if it were* a ball. And through this self-aware play-acting, the child – together with Benjamin who is himself playfully seeing and creating similarity – produces a utopian model for humanity.

⁸⁵ 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility (Second Version)', *SW3*, p. 124, n. 10; *GS VII*, p. 360; emphases added. See also the related fragment 'A Different Utopian Will', *SW3*, pp. 134-35.

⁸⁶ See Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *October*, 109 (2004), 3-45 (pp. 19-20).

We saw in the previous section that Benjamin refers to *Jetztzeit* as a ‘model of the messianic’. This change of magnitude between the model and its object, the model being a microcosm of the larger and future entity, is what is articulated in the relationship between the child and humanity. Change of magnitude is required for the monadological principle to function: ‘[r]eal time enters the dialectical image not in natural magnitude [...] but in its smallest *gestalt*’, writes Benjamin.⁸⁷ In the *Arcades*, we see yet another analogy connecting two different magnitudes: ‘Just as Proust begins the story of his life with an awakening, so must every presentation of history begin with awakening [...]’.⁸⁸ The narrative time of a single human life is here likened to the narrative time of history, with the daily awakening of an individual corresponding to the awakening of the entire humankind: Proust’s life and work become a model for ‘the world in a state of similarity’.⁸⁹ Benjamin’s attention to the miniscule is thus mediated by the possibility of its expansion into the cosmos, a possibility that makes itself most apparent in texts such as ‘To the Planetarium’, where Benjamin alludes to a colossal shift from an immediate, seemingly-trivial experience of intoxication to the planetary organisation of a technological utopian commons.⁹⁰

The theses found in ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’ also offer an insight into the role of universality in Benjamin’s thought. Although the theses were explicitly aimed at critiquing the idea of universal history, there persists a pull towards the universal that is expressed in a parallel formulation regarding universal history and universal language:

⁸⁷ *AP* <Q^o, 21>, p. 867.

⁸⁸ *AP* [N4, 3], p. 464.

⁸⁹ ‘On the Image of Proust’, *SW2.1*, p. 244. *GS II.1*, p. 320.

⁹⁰ See ‘To the Planetarium’, *One-Way Street*, *SW1*, pp. 486-487; ‘Zum Planetarium’, *Einbahnstrasse*, *GS IV*, pp. 83-148 (pp. 146-48). Emily Apter has discussed the possibility of a planetary comparativism that would draw on Benjamin amongst others, but she surprisingly omits discussing this text. See Apter, *The Translation Zone*, pp. 92-93.

The multiplicity [*Vielheit*] of “histories” is closely related, if not identical, to the multiplicity of languages. Universal history in the present-day sense is never more than a kind of Esperanto. (It expresses the hope of the human race no more effectively than the name of that universal language.)⁹¹

Benjamin is not opposed to universality as such, but simply to the current forms of universality found in universal history and universal language. The kind of higher, truly universal language that Benjamin has in mind needs to transcend the particularism of Esperanto which, like historicism, has an additive quality, being constituted by many already-existing particular languages. For Benjamin, universal history has revolutionary potential so long as it follows a monadological principle because this principle ‘allows [universal history] to be represented in partial histories’.⁹²

Esperanto may be an indication of false universality for Benjamin, yet the possibility of true universality via language is not altogether abandoned. In the early essays ‘On Language as Such and on the Language of Man’ and ‘The Task of Translator’, Benjamin formulates a theory of language founded on the ontological primacy of a ‘pure language’ [*reine Sprache*], a language *exterior to* and prior to ‘languages’ in their particularity.⁹³ When he writes that ‘a translation [...] must lovingly and in detail incorporate the original’s way of meaning, thus making both the original and the translation recognizable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel’, Benjamin retains this idea of language as an incomplete entity awaiting to be made whole.⁹⁴ Thus, in an idealism of almost Platonist dimensions, Benjamin

⁹¹ New Theses K, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’, *SW4*, p. 404; *GS I.3*, p. 1235.

⁹² New Theses H, ‘Paralipomena to “On the Concept of History”’, *SW4*, p. 404; *GS I.3*, p. 1234.

⁹³ See ‘On the Language as Such and on the Language of Man’, *SW1*, pp. 62-65; *GS II.1*, pp. 140-44.

⁹⁴ ‘The Task of the Translator’, *SW1*, p. 260; *GS IV*, p. 18.

advocates the impurity of the particular, and the purity of the universal. In the later fragments on mimesis that we have already discussed, traces of this earlier idea of universality problematically persist, whereby Holy Scripture and astrology provide the possibility of humans' connecting to that 'purity'. However, there are indications of an important shift towards a different kind of universality, or indeed of *a shift towards a singularity*, and it is this shift towards singularity that I will now, by way of conclusion, turn to.

Benjamin was fascinated by hieroglyphics and the interpretation of handwriting, and his articulation of a singularity of language, as well as history, can be found in his formulation of language *as script*.⁹⁵ As we have seen, language is one of the central *loci* for perceiving the alike, and for Benjamin it is within language as written word that the mimetic faculty finds expression: 'Graphology has taught us to recognize in handwriting images that the unconscious of the writer conceals in it. [...] Script has thus become, alongside language, an archive of nonsensuous similarities, of nonsensuous correspondences.'⁹⁶ In the entry 'Attested Auditor of Books' from *One-way Street*, Benjamin offers a utopian commons that brings to mind the planetary comparativism of the entry 'To the Planetarium'. Whereas 'To the Planetarium' projects a technological utopia centred on the human body, this entry suggests a mode of universality founded on language as script. Benjamin opens the passage by sketching the development of script from the invention of printing to the moment where script is liberated from the confines of the book, finding itself in the modern cityscape amongst posters,

⁹⁵ On Benjamin's interest in the scientific interpretation of handwriting, see 'Graphology Old and New' (1930), *SW2.1*, pp. 398-399. On the important links between graphology and fortune-telling in Benjamin's thought, see Eric Downing, 'Divining Benjamin: Reading Fate, Graphology, Gambling', *MLN*, 126.3 (2011), 561-80.

⁹⁶ 'On the Mimetic Faculty', *SW2.2*, p. 722; translation modified. *GS II.1*, pp. 212-13.

advertising and ‘the brutal heteronomies of economic chaos’.⁹⁷ Benjamin relates the script’s newfound ‘three-dimensional quality’ to the archival logic of a library card-file system [*Kartothek*] before changing his tone from the diagnostic to the prognostic.⁹⁸ It is in the final prognostic part that a new conception of language is articulated: a language both visual and textual, proclaimed to emerge in the not-so-distant future: ‘[...] the moment is coming when quantity suddenly changes into quality, and script, advancing its new eccentric image-ness [*Bildlichkeit*] ever more deeply into the graphic sector, takes on all at once its suited subject matter.’⁹⁹ Poets, technicians and scribes of all kinds partake in the production of an international hieroglyphics that Benjamin describes with a word of his own coinage – *Wandelschrift*.¹⁰⁰

Benjamin’s vision of poets and writers taking on tasks of technical and statistical nature is reminiscent of the ideas presented in ‘The Author as Producer’.¹⁰¹ Yet what is unique in this passage is the fact that Benjamin’s vision of doing away with the intellectual and technical division of labour operates on a global scale: ‘With the establishment of an international exchange-script [*Wandelschrift*] they will renew their authority in the life of peoples and find a role for themselves, in comparison to which, all aspirations to a renewal of rhetoric will turn out to be outdated daydreams.’¹⁰² Benjamin’s ‘exchange-script’ is not an international language like Esperanto, which falsely combines together the plurality of particularities. *Wandelschrift* is a script whose universality stems from its convertibility, with language

⁹⁷ ‘Attested Auditor of Books’, *One-Way Street*, *SW1*, p. 456; ‘Vereidigter Bücherrevisor’, *Einbahnstrasse*, *GS IV*, pp. 102-103; hereafter cited ‘AUB’.

⁹⁸ AUB, *SW1*, p. 456; *GS IV*, p. 103.

⁹⁹ AUB, *SW1*, pp. 456-57; translation modified. *GS IV*, p. 104.

¹⁰⁰ AUB, *SW1*, p. 457; *GS IV*, p. 104.

¹⁰¹ See ‘Author as Producer’, *SW 2.2*, pp. 770-77; *GS II.2*, pp. 686-96.

¹⁰² AUB, *SW1*, p. 457; translation modified. *GS IV*, p. 104.

being exchanged and converted, almost like a form of currency.¹⁰³ This notion of language as ‘exchange-script’ marks a departure from Benjamin’s earlier conception of language. Whereas in the notion of *reine Sprache*, each language is the particular of a fragmented vessel waiting to be stuck together, in the notion of *Wandelschrift* each language is a singularity in a relation of constellations. Benjamin’s notion of language as an international exchange-script thus complements the monadological principle of *Jetztzeit* and nonsensuous similarity, offering a notion of universality that rests on convertibility and exchange. This notion of universality, as I further elaborate in Part III (Chapter 5), is in fact a form of individuation and *singularity* that disrupts the neat separation of universality from particularity. In its epistemological dimensions, therefore, and in thinking of the possibility of a Benjaminian comparativism, a singularity gleaned from Benjamin’s writings on historical time and mimesis would point to a system of exchange whereby the terms and units of comparison are decided *not* with a ‘yes or no’ but with a ‘how-long’; and the temporality of this ‘how-long’ would itself be determined, not externally from its objects, but in the monadological abbreviation of historical time itself.

It is with these ideas in mind – a form of decision-making through the chronopolitics of *timing*, and a relational category mediating between ‘one’ and ‘other’ in an analogy, shifting in magnitude and circulating as exchange-script – that we can now shift our focus back to the notion of the avant-garde and the ways it has been theorised by selected thinkers. Although in the following chapters Benjamin’s work will recede into the background as complementary analytical tools are mobilised to address the specificities of

¹⁰³ Translating the term as ‘moving script’ (see *SW1*, p. 457) does not quite render the element of exchange in that movement. J. A. Underwood’s translation as ‘internationally convertible kind of script’, although it detaches the idea of convertibility from ‘script’, is still closer to the meaning of a ‘exchange-script’ as I interpret the term. See Walter Benjamin, *One-way Street and Other Writings* (London: Penguin, 2008), p. 67.

each theory, it is this organising principle of a Benjaminian singularity which underlies the temporalities within and across these theories, and which will become explicitly manifest as we return to Benjamin in the thesis' culminating chapter. In the close textual readings in Part II, Benjamin's thought will be also present in direct and indirect modes of influence, whether such discussions centre on the avant-garde, the principle of montage, the historicity of *Jetztzeit*, or through Adorno's own usage of Benjaminian ideas. The category of historicism will also become central in my analyses of these theories, partly against Benjamin's own antipathy towards progressivist chronology, but most importantly as I have already highlighted, as a means through which to articulate a rapprochement between qualitative and quantitative time, and a mediation of different levels of historicity, both in terms of scale and in terms of textual interiority. Therefore, the avant-garde's chronopolitics will gradually yet decisively emerge at those very points where the seemingly hermetic world of textual criticism becomes a threshold that allows the historical temporality of its extra-textual 'other' to enter.

II. Theorising the Avant-Garde after Modernism

Chapter 2

Proleptic Avant-Garde: Historicism and Narrative Time in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*

If there is one text that is synonymous with theorising the avant-garde after modernism, then it is unquestionably Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.¹ Originally published in the Federal Republic of Germany in 1974, it remains the most-cited text on the avant-garde and continues to be translated into new languages to this day.² Bürger's theory is infamous as much as it is famous, having attracted a host of criticisms that range from accusations of political pessimism to attacks on its overall plausibility and empirical rigour.³

¹ Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 2nd edn (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, [1974] 1980); *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw; foreword by Jochen Schulte-Sasse (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, [1974] 1984), hereafter cited *ThdA/ThoA*. Unless otherwise stated, all translations from the German are my own. Anglophone readers must note that there are often substantial differences between Michael Shaw's translation and mine, and references to the English edition are given primarily for the purposes of comparison.

² At the time of writing, Bürger's theory has been translated into over 15 languages. A surprisingly late addition has been the French translation. See Peter Bürger, *Théorie de l'Avant-garde*, trad. Jean-Pierre Cometti (Paris: Questions théoriques, 2013).

³ Critical responses are too numerous to mention, especially since it has now become obligatory for any scholar using the term 'avant-garde', or examining an avant-garde movement, to begin by referencing Bürger's definition, and then continue by critiquing and modifying it. The most influential critical responses, and the ones that Bürger has addressed himself, are: W. Martin Lüdke, ed., *Theorie der Avantgarde. Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung in Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976), hereafter cited *Antworten*; Benjamin Buchloh, 'Theorizing the Avant-Garde', *Art in America*, November (1984), 19-21; Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real: The Avant-Garde at the End of the Century* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1996), hereafter cited *Return*. Bürger's responses to the German collection are

Yet despite these not-entirely-unjustified criticisms, forty years after its original publication *Theory of the Avant-Garde* remains the inevitable starting point for any theoretical exploration of the avant-garde and, for the purposes of my own investigation, it merits detailed and generous analysis. While critical reception has primarily focussed on Bürger's privileging of certain art movements over others – the recurring issue of an 'avant-garde part' *standing in* for an 'avant-garde whole' – or on Bürger's ambivalence with regard to aesthetic autonomy and his inadequate explanation of the mysterious workings of the 'sublation of art into life',⁴ my enquiry focusses on the implicit temporalities at work in Bürger's text, especially through his treatment and own critical practice of historicism. Historicism is approached here not in the Benjaminian or phenomenological sense of an empty vessel of 'atemporal time' but in the sense that was elaborated in my introduction: as a form of critical practice that weaves in and out of the chiasmus of history (as event) and history (as representation).

Although *Theory of the Avant-Garde* offers Bürger's most elaborated position 'on' the avant-garde, there are a number of other, less-frequently-discussed texts which shed light on his implicit conception of an *idea of the avant-garde* as it underpins his theory. The monograph *Der französische Surrealismus: Studien zum Problem der avantgardistischen Literatur* [French Surrealism: Studies on the Problem of Avant-Garde Literature, 1971] contains detailed close readings of literary texts by André Breton and Louis Aragon and can serve to illuminate the rather brief analyses of these texts found in *Theory*

included in the postscript of the second edition, while the responses to the critics Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Hal Foster can be found in 'Avant-Garde and Neo-Avant-Garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*', *New Literary History* 41.4 (2010), 695-715.

⁴ See, for instance, Foster, *Return*, p. 15; Richard Wolin, 'Communism and the Avant-Garde', *Thesis Eleven*, 12 (1985), 81-93; Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 26-33.

of the Avant-Garde.⁵ *Nach der Avantgarde* [After the Avant-Garde, 2014], a collection of short essays written for newspapers and exhibition catalogues, though separated by the original publication by forty years and in many ways departing from the monograph's main objectives, offers useful clarifications on the relationship between the historical avant-garde movements and the avant-garde as idea.⁶ Lastly, and most importantly, *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion* [Mediation-Reception-Function, 1979], and the numerous publications that Bürger edited and authored following the publication of the theory's first edition in the late 1970s and early 1980s, proposed a new sociological approach for the study of literature.⁷ Through these analyses, developed as part of a research project at the University of Bremen entitled 'Literature as Institution: On the Historical Transformation of the Social Function of Literature' and resulting in collaborations with German literary scholars Christa Bürger, Jochen Schulte-Sasse and Peter Uwe Hohendahl amongst others, Bürger formulated a theory of the institution of art and literature which was in close and, as I show in my analysis, incongruous dialogue with the theses formulated in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*.

This chapter seeks to discuss Bürger's influential theory alongside these lesser-known texts in order to revisit the historical temporalities at

⁵ Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus: Studien zum Problem der avantgardistischen Literatur* (Frankfurt: Athenäum Verlag, 1971). See also the edited collection of essays, *Surrealismus*, hg. Peter Bürger (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1982).

⁶ Peter Bürger, *Nach der Avantgarde* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2014).

⁷ Peter Bürger, *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion. Ästhetische Theorie und Methodologie der Literaturwissenschaft* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), hereafter 'V-R-F'; Peter Bürger, *Aktualität und Geschichtlichkeit. Studien zum gesellschaftlichen Funktionswandel der Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1977), p. 17; hereafter 'AuG'; hg. Peter Bürger, *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1983); hg. Peter Bürger, Christa Bürger, Jochen Schulte-Sasse, *Aufklärung und literarische Öffentlichkeit* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980).

work in Bürger's broader conceptualisation of the idea of the avant-garde. Deploying narratological methods of analysis, I argue that Bürger's theory is characterised less by a cause-and-effect logic, as the theory's historicism has been read by some critics, than by a narrative logic which reveals an anticipatory, proleptic temporality. The narratological distinction between 'narrated time' and 'narrative time' – of the time *in* narrative and the time *of* narrative – enables us to distinguish the different levels of historicism at work in Bürger's theory. As I argue below, while narrated time in *Theory of the Avant-garde* is stagist and developmental, narrative time is proleptic, following a logic of 'it is only after x that y is made possible'. This proleptic logic manifests itself at two different levels of historical time, which I call 'first' and 'second historicism', and at both levels we see a disruption of sequentiality and linear causality. This disruption of causality is exemplified at the first historical level through the relationship between the avant-garde and the category of the institution of art, and at the second meta-narrative, or 'extra-diegetic', level through the relationship between the *theorising* of the avant-garde itself and its author's self-situating of his theory 'in history'. In examining narrative time as it weaves in and out of Bürger's diegesis, involving historical 'problem horizons', as Bürger calls them, such as May '68 and Adorno's death, the chronopolitics of the idea of the avant-garde is also viewed through a new prism: Bürger's *notion* of the avant-garde, as distinct from the periodising category of the historical avant-garde and his tentative list of 'isms', emerges as an idea that *does not fully belong* to the specificity of the historical moment of the 'historical avant-gardes', but is instead singularised into a relational notion in/of historical time.

2.1 First as Effect then as Cause: The Proleptic Logic of Bürger's Historicism

Thanks to the influential critiques of Benjamin H.D. Buchloh and Hal Foster, Bürger's theory has become synonymous with praise for the radicalism of the historical avant-gardes and dismissal of the experiments of their post-war

counterparts. As I briefly discussed in the thesis' introduction, Buchloh and Foster famously took aim at the elevated historical position that Bürger attributed to the historical avant-gardes, setting out to correct what they saw as Bürger's unfair assessment of the neo-avant-gardes. Foster's critique, in particular, hinted at the narrative logic that characterised *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and sharply criticised its historicism, which he described 'as the conflation of *before* and *after* with *cause* and *effect*, as the presumption that the prior event produces the later one'.⁸ Such a criticism is not without merit but, as this chapter argues, it is problematised by other historical temporalities at work in Bürger's text. The conflation of sequence with causality highlighted by Foster is indeed evident in the monograph's pages. Yet Foster's description of '[t]he Bürger narrative of direct cause and effect, of lapsarian before and after, of heroic origin and farcical repetition [...]' is only partly accurate.⁹ For as I show in this chapter, the historical typology, which to Foster's eyes is a deterministic cause-and-effect historicity, forms part of a broader narrative logic encompassing different narrative levels of conflicting temporalities.

If we are to analyse the 'Bürger narrative' *as narrative*, as I set out to do in this chapter, then we need to pay close attention to the different narrative levels that unfold within and through *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. One productive way of doing so is by turning to narratological theory and its treatment of temporal difference. In narratology, the question of temporal difference is explored through the distinction between 'narrated time' [*erzählte Zeit*] and 'narrative time' or 'story time' [*Erzählzeit*].¹⁰ Narrated time

⁸ Foster, *Return*, p. 10 (emphasis original).

⁹ Foster, *Return*, p. 13.

¹⁰ See Michael Scheffel, Antonius Weixler, Lukas Werner, 'Time', in *The Living Handbook of Narratology* < <http://www.lhn.uni-hamburg.de> > [accessed 23 January 2015]. 'Prolepsis' is one of the many aspects of 'metalepsis': a boundary crossing between 'story-time' and 'discourse-time'. See also John Pier, 'Metalepsis', in *Handbook of Narratology*, ed. by Peter Hühn et al. (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2014), pp. 190-

designates the time of the thing being told, while narrative time designates the time of telling (or, to put it in the structuralist terms used by 'classical' narratologists, narrated time is the time of the signified, and narrative time is the time of the signifier).¹¹ According to Gérard Genette's foundational analysis, temporal difference between these two narrative levels can be analysed with reference to order, duration or frequency.¹² Of relevance here is the first category – temporal order – because it bears on the questions of sequence and historical causality. Genette defines the study of temporal difference with regard to order as follows: 'To study the temporal order of a narrative is to compare the order in which events or temporal sections are arranged in the narrative discourse with the order of succession these same events or temporal segments have in the story [...]'.¹³ As Tyrus Miller explains, in narratological theory, narrative 'takes shape from a *differential* between the time of action and events within the narrated world and the temporal organisation of the narrative representation by which this narrated world is evoked'.¹⁴ In other words, to study the temporal difference between narrated and narrative time means to *compare the order* in which events occur through the narration (i.e. their arrangement in the narrative discourse), and the order in which events occur within the narrative (i.e. their depiction or description within the story).

203; Monika Fludernik, 'Scene Shift, Metalepsis, and the Metaleptic Mode', *Style*, 37.4 (2003), 382-400; Dorrit Cohn, 'Metalepsis and Mise en Abyme', *Narrative*, 20.1 (2012), 105-14.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² See Gérard Genette, *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. by Jane E. Lewin; foreword by Jonathan Culler (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, [1972] 1980), pp. 25-160.

¹³ Genette, *Narrative Discourse*, p. 35.

¹⁴ Tyrus Miller, 'Time', in *Literature Now: Key Terms and Methods for Literary History*, ed. by Sascha Bru et al. (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2016), pp. 137-151 (p. 144; emphasis added).

Adopting this narratological distinction to examine temporal difference as it manifests itself in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, we can discern that there is indeed a marked difference between the order of the time of the thing being told, and that of the time of telling. Bürger's theorisation can be understood as a form of historical narrative, as it sketches a historical typology of art's development in bourgeois society and reflects on the role of historicism in formulating a critical literary theory.¹⁵ The temporal difference at stake in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* can thus be understood as a difference between two levels of narrative temporality, which from now on I will refer to as 'first historicism' and 'second historicism'. First historicism is the telling of the story of art's development from the middle-ages to the present (that is to say, the text's present: the early 1970s), with the pivotal point in this story being the historical avant-garde movements. Second historicism is the telling of the story of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde's* own historicity. It includes aspects of 'first historicism' but it also encompasses methodological reflections which are meta-historical and which fall outside the narrative time of first historicism. I use here the terms 'first' and 'second' to denote a movement from a simpler to a more complex form of historicism, and, as I show below, the temporal difference between the order of narrated and narrative time is at work in both these forms.¹⁶

Let us begin by examining temporal order in first historicism. Of the two historicisms, it is first historicism that most gives the illusion of sequence, since it can be easily summarised in a linear, chronological fashion. Since Bürger's theory is most often accessed and discussed in a 'summary form', it is

¹⁵ See especially the methodological reflections on the historicity of aesthetic categories, *ThdA*, pp. 20-26/*ThoA*, pp. 15-20; and the famous diagram *ThdA*, p. 65/*ThoA*, p. 48.

¹⁶ Genette uses the terms 'first narrative' and 'second narrative', with the second narrative acting as deviation from the main 'first' narrative. Here second historicism should not be seen as a deviation from a first historicism, but as a self-reflexive, meta-historical form of historicism. Cf. Genette, *op. cit.*, pp. 48-49.

perhaps understandable that this linear *narrative* is often mistaken as the theory's *argument*. Told in a linear order, the infamous 'Bürger narrative' of first historicism goes like this: Considering art in relation to its conditions of production and reception across the ages, we see a movement towards aesthetic autonomy, namely, art's separation from its social function. In the middle-ages, art is inextricably linked to its cultic or religious function, whereas in court society, it gains its social function through serving the political establishment. With the emergence of bourgeois society in the nineteenth century, art begins to separate itself from everyday life practices (whether of the people, in the first case, or of the ruling order, in the second), and becomes an end in itself. This movement reaches its apogee in the late nineteenth-century with aestheticism, when art becomes its own subject matter and comes to represent nothing but itself.¹⁷ At that moment, art enters the stage of crisis. In the first decades of the twentieth century, the historical avant-garde movements (Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and – with qualifications – Cubism, Futurism and Expressionism) protest against aestheticism and pronounce the re-integration of art into everyday life practices. This protest is epitomised by Marcel Duchamp's act of signing and exhibiting found objects such as a bottle-rack or a urinal. Duchamp's act exemplifies the avant-gardist project of protesting against aesthetic autonomy and attacking art as a bourgeois institution. However, the bourgeois institution welcomes the protest with open arms, the anti-art protest is turned into art, and the avant-gardist project fails. In the post-war period, there is an emergence of neo-avant-garde art movements that follow in the footsteps of the historical avant-gardes yet their acts of anti-art protest are ineffectual. Today, although a genuine avant-garde protest is no longer possible, the avant-

¹⁷ By 'aestheticism' we ought to understand here both a particular art movement (and thus an 'Aestheticism with a capital A') as well as a periodising category with trans-historical, epistemological implications. I will elaborate on the importance of this interplay between historical specificity and epistemological generality below.

garde project remains crucial in art's historical development by having exposed art as a bourgeois institution.

The familiar narrative I have just sketched is unmistakably marked by a developmental historicism. Not only are the changes in the history of art sketched in stagist terms, but these stages are also posited as historically necessary. Bürger writes of the 'law of development [*Entwicklungsgesetz*] to which the sphere of art is also subject' and recommends using the avant-garde as a historical starting point through which to understand what has come before.¹⁸ We cannot fail to miss the Hegelian undertones of a forward march of reason towards emancipation when Bürger describes art's movement towards autonomy,¹⁹ or when it is proposed that: 'in the development of art in bourgeois society, the avant-garde movements represent the logical point from which art's development can be grasped'.²⁰ When art reaches the point of aestheticism – a point where the separation between art and social function cannot be stretched any further – art enters the stage of crisis.²¹ Thus, aestheticism serves as the peak in that development and as 'the *logically-necessary precondition* [*entwicklungslogische Voraussetzung*] of the historical avant-garde movements'.²² In this narrative, both aestheticism and the historical avant-gardes have their rightful place in a linear art-historical development, each stage being necessitated and justified by the course of history.

It may seem, therefore, that Foster's criticism of a stagist, cause-and-effect historicism is not entirely unjustified. It is precisely on this point, however, that the difference in the temporal order between narrated time and

¹⁸ See, respectively, *ThdA*, p. 43/*ThoA*, p. 33 and *ThdA*, p. 24/*ThoA*, p. 19.

¹⁹ *ThdA*, p. 64/*ThoA*, p. 47.

²⁰ *V-R-F*, p. 11 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, p. li.

²¹ 'Mit dem Ästhetizismus erreicht die Entwicklung der Kunst in der bürgerlichen Gesellschaft in gewissem Sinne ihren Höhepunkt, zugleich tritt sie damit ins Stadium der Krise ein.' *AuG*, p. 17. See also *ThdA*, p. 65/*ThoA*, p. 48.

²² *ThdA*, p. 134/*ThoA*, p. 96 (emphasis added).

narrative time can be productively deployed to reveal a different historicism at work.²³ The narrative I summarised above was recounted in a linear, chronological order. In *Theory*, however, it is told in such a way so as to anticipate what will occur later. This anticipatory mode of narrating, I suggest, can be understood as a prolepsis (or a 'flash-forward').²⁴ According to Genette's theorisation, prolepsis is one of the three 'anachronies', disrupting the linear temporality of the narrative and functioning as a deviation from the main narrative line.²⁵ I will too deploy the term prolepsis to describe the 'deviant' temporal order at work in Bürger's narrative time. Yet I will do so with some qualifications because, as I seek to show, in *Theory* there is no main narrative from which to deviate: rather, the developmental historicism told in a proleptic manner *is* that main narrative.

Proleptic logic manifests itself in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* both at a 'micro' and a 'macro' level: in other words, it is discernible both in the rhetorical structure of individual sentences, and in the way in which the argument unfolds within the text. At the level of the individual sentence, we find an anticipatory structure which takes the form of: 'it is not until x that y is made possible'. This structure can be found in several sentences that function as a repetition and variation of one of Bürger's central theses: 'Art reaches its full unfolding in bourgeois society only with [*erst mit*] aestheticism, to which the historical avant-garde movements respond'.²⁶ Instead of deploying an

²³ It is worth noting that, for all the stagist logic of the theory's narrated time, Bürger himself has expressed his opposition towards modernisation theory, favouring the notion of non-synchronicity. See Peter Bürger, 'Literary Institution and Modernization', in *The Decline of Modernism*, trans. by Nicholas Walker (Cambridge: Polity, 1992), pp. 3-18 (pp. 6, 13); originally published as 'Institution Literatur und Modernisierungsprozeß', in *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur*, pp. 9-32 (p. 13). See also *ThdA*, p. 31/*ThoA*, p. 24.

²⁴ See 'Time' in *The Living Handbook of Narratology*.

²⁵ *Ibid*; see also Genette, pp. 48-49.

²⁶ *ThdA*, p. 22 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, p. 17.

accumulative structure of 'x happened, followed by y', or of 'then, and then, and then' – narrating the events as instants in a sequence as I do above – Bürger deploys instead a retroactive rhetorical structure. Thus, the end point is announced first, and then the earlier moment is revisited (or rather *visited for the first time*) in light of that end point: 'only when [*erst nachdem*] art enters the stage of self-criticism [...];'²⁷ 'only after [*erst nachdem*] art, in nineteenth century aestheticism has altogether detached itself from life-praxis [...];'²⁸ 'only at the moment when [*erst in dem Augenblick, wo*] contents [*Gehalte*], too, lose their political character, and art wants to be nothing but art, does the self-critique of art as social subsystem become possible. This stage is reached at the end of the nineteenth century with aestheticism.'²⁹ Thus, the structure of '*erst nachdem*' or '*erst seit*' reveals a temporal logic, whereby an event is marked by what will have already been. It is 'only after' or 'not until' a pivotal point in history that the earlier event can be recognised: 'only with [*erst seit*] the avant-garde certain general categories of the artwork are made recognisable [*erkennbar*] in their generality.'³⁰ And that pivotal historical point is a moment of recognition after which art history is no longer the same.

These instances of prolepsis at the level of individual sentence form part of a broader temporal logic that unfolds in the text's argument. This logic of 'it is not until x that y is made possible' characterises one of Bürger's key theoretical propositions which concerns the relationship between the avant-garde and the category of the institution of art. In order to examine this relationship in narratological terms, however, we need to briefly revisit Bürger's own definitions, as well as implicit conceptions, of the avant-garde and the institution of art and literature (*Institution Kunst/Literatur*).³¹

²⁷ *ThdA*, p. 29/*ThoA*, p. 22.

²⁸ *ThdA*, p.29/*ThoA*, p. 22.

²⁹ *ThdA*, p. 34 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, pp. 26-27.

³⁰ *ThdA*, p. 23 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, p. 19.

³¹ The term *Institution Kunst/Literatur* has been variously translated into English as 'institution of art', 'institution 'art'', and 'art as institution'. I have chosen to leave the

As any newcomer to Bürger's theory will notice, nowhere in the text does Bürger offer a *definition* of the avant-garde. The avant-garde is taken to be synonymous with the historical avant-gardes [*historische Avantgardebewegungen*], which themselves are defined with much qualification and hesitation. Not all art movements of the first half of the twentieth century deserve the name 'historical avant-garde', and those that do, might not always live up to the name: only early (and not late) Surrealism is a historical avant-garde; Italian Futurism and German Expressionism may sometimes be eligible; Cubism is according to one criterion but not according to another, and so on.³² Bürger does set out clearly his criteria for the avant-garde's *intentions*, however. These criteria, which we have already seen placed within a linear historical narrative, are the attack on the institution of art (and the notion of aesthetic autonomy), and the re-integration of art into life-praxis. This attack on the institution of art and aesthetic autonomy is conceptualised by Bürger in Hegelian terms: not as a destruction or elimination of art but as a dialectically-constituted historical movement of negation (and thus also preservation through sublation). As Bürger himself puts it: 'the Surrealists do not intend the destruction of literature and art, but rather its sublation [*Aufhebung*] in a practice [*Praxis*] in which art and life are no longer opposites'.³³ Given that these criteria are the starting point for identifying the historical avant-gardes and that we cannot simply assume that any 'ism' is

term untranslated in order to avoid any misunderstandings which, as I explain below, would lead to the false association of the notion of 'institution' with an institutional body. I have also chosen to omit the second part of the term 'Literatur', though it must be borne in mind that Bürger intends this term to be applicable to both art and literature, and that he makes little distinction – problematically according to many critics – between the specificities of visual and literary arts.

³² See *ThdA*, p. 44, n. 4/*ThoA*, p. 109, n. 4. See also *Nach der Avantgarde*, pp. 7-8.

³³ Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus*, p. 67 (trans. mine). Cf. G.W.F Hegel, *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. by A.V. Miller (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1977), pp. 114-115.

necessarily 'avant-garde', then we need to infer a definition of the avant-garde from these two criteria, so that the avant-garde does not simply become another name for Dada, Surrealism, or Constructivism. Once we do so, we can identify Bürger's avant-garde as a notion that is negatively constituted: defined through what it attacks (the institution of art) and through what it intends (re-integration of art into life): in other words, through what it is not and what it is *not yet*.³⁴

Unlike the notion of the avant-garde, the category of *Institution Kunst* is defined by Bürger in clear and precise terms.³⁵ *Institution Kunst* refers to 'the productive and distributive apparatus as well as to the prevailing ideas about art that determine the reception of artworks in any given epoch'.³⁶ As Russell A. Berman has rightly remarked, Bürger's notion 'represents somewhat of a

³⁴ In a recent radio interview, Bürger defined the avant-garde with respect to the historical past: the avant-garde as that which is no longer historically possible. See *Theorie der Avantgarde: Peter Bürger im Gespräch* (17.10.10), Serie 446: Kunst, Spektakel und Revolution <<https://www.freie-radios.net/36663>> [accessed 23 January 2015].

³⁵ Apart from the definition articulated in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, I also draw upon various definitions from the following publications: Peter Bürger, 'Institution Kunst als literatursoziologische Kategorie' – Skizzen einer Theorie des historischen Wandels der gesellschaftlichen Funktion der Literatur', *Romanistische Zeitschrift für Literaturgeschichte*, 1 (1977), 50-71 (p. 51), hereafter cited 'IK'; 'The Institution of Art as a Category of the Sociology of Literature: Toward a Theory of the Historical Transformation of the Social Function of Literature', in Peter Bürger and Christa Bürger, *The Institutions of Art*, trans. by Loren Kruger (Lincoln & London: University of Nebraska Press, 1992), pp. 3-29 (pp. 4-5), hereafter cited *IoA*. This essay has also appeared in translation by Michael Shaw in *Cultural Critique*, 2. Winter (1985-1986), 5-33; references will be made here to Kruger's more established (and more authoritative) translation. See also *AuG*, pp. 12-13; and Gerhard Goebel, '»Literatur« und Aufklärung', in *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur*, pp. 79-97 (p. 84).

³⁶ *ThdA*, p. 29 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, p. 22

corollary to Habermas's concept of public sphere'.³⁷ More recent discourses on the institution of art, especially pertaining to the practices of 'institutional critique' or 'IC' have been partly responsible for popularising a conception of Bürger's category in less Habermasian terms than the author had originally intended.³⁸ Thus, whereas institutional critique, now often regarded as a sub-genre of the avant-garde that continues the history of its radical tradition, seeks to expose and explicitly address the structural inequalities of the *institutions of art*, in Bürger's Habermasian sense by contrast, it is art as such that functions as an institution: namely, as a social subsystem within a given socio-historical epoch, alongside the institutions of law and religion. In this sense, therefore, it should not be confused with *organisational bodies* that produce and distribute art and literature (academies, museums, publishing houses, etc.).³⁹ As Ulrich Meier's instructive example on the distinction between organisation and institution puts it: 'a county court is an organisation of the institution of law'.⁴⁰ Similarly, we can say that a museum is an organisation of the institution of art, bearing in mind, however, that the institution is more than a sum of its parts: it includes but cannot be reduced to these individual organising bodies.⁴¹ Rather, a 'Bürgerian' art-as-institution is

³⁷ Russell A. Berman, 'Introduction', in *IoA*, p. xviii. For an application of the notion of *Institution Kunst* by one of Bürger's own students, see Hans Sanders, *Institution Literatur und Roman. Rekonstruktion der Literatursoziologie* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1981).

³⁸ For an instructive essay that situates the label 'institutional critique' in the context of the *October*-inflected reception of Bürger's theory, see Andrea Fraser, 'From the Critique of Institutions to an Institution of Critique', in *Institutional Critique and After*, ed. by John C. Welchman (Zurich: JRP Ringier, 2006), pp. 123-135.

³⁹ See *IoA*, pp. 4-5.

⁴⁰ Ulrich Meier, 'Soziologische Bemerkungen zur Institution Kunst', in *Zum Funktionswandel der Literatur*, pp. 33-58 (p. 58, n. 29).

⁴¹ Bürger associates the study of individual institutions with positivist sociology, from which he wishes to distance himself (see *IoA*, p. 5). It would thus be unfair to assess

a system of social relations that recognises and legitimises art *as art*; it is a legitimising system that confers on art/literature its status, both economically and discursively, in a particular socio-historical context.

According to this definition, *Institution Kunst* is clearly delineated as a 'historicist' category: it is historically *specific* and historically *variable*. As we have seen within Bürger's proleptic first historicism, it is the avant-gardes that make the historical recognition of *Institution Kunst* possible: '[the category *Institution Kunst*] becomes recognisable only after [*erst nach*] the avant-garde movements' critique of the autonomy society'.⁴² Although its peak comes with aestheticism, the institution of art can also be discerned in earlier periods, such as the early Enlightenment.⁴³ At the same time, however, *Institution Kunst* is proposed as a hermeneutic category whose purpose is to enable the practice of a new sociology of art and literature: 'the proposed category – [*Autonomiestatus*] of art in developed bourgeois institution of art – should be understood as a hermeneutic rather than historical category. The point of introducing this category *is to make possible* a critique of the evolution of art in bourgeois society'.⁴⁴ Here *Institution Kunst* is intended as a methodological tool that can be used in empirical studies that trace the changing function of art and literature from epoch to epoch.⁴⁵ Therefore, *Institution Kunst* in the latter sense is a category upon which this new 'institutional-sociological' approach rests: it is what makes institutional-sociological analysis *conceptually possible*. Having defined and elaborated on the notions of the avant-garde and *Institution Kunst*, we can now return to our narratological concerns as they relate to difference in temporal order. As we have seen,

Bürger's theory as inadequately 'sociological' on positivist grounds as such an assessment is expressed for instance in Ian Heywood, *Social Theories of Art: A Critique* (Basingstoke: Macmillan Press, 1997), pp. 9, 46-63.

⁴² *V-R-F*, p. 12 (trans. mine); *ThoA*, p. lii.

⁴³ See *IoA*, pp. 78, 137-138.

⁴⁴ *IoA*, p. 83 (emphasis added).

⁴⁵ See *IoA*, p. 13.

Institution Kunst is both a historical and a hermeneutical/sociological category. Because of its double function, it relates to the avant-garde in two different ways which, when considered together, I contend, produce a temporality of prolepsis. As a historical category, *Institution Kunst* is inextricably linked to aestheticism – it is recognised as institution once aesthetic autonomy has fully unfolded and art's subject matter has become its very autonomy. Without the institution of art, the avant-garde would conceptually vanish, since it is defined negatively as its opposition. In this sense, therefore, *Institution Kunst* is historically and conceptually prior to the avant-garde. As a hermeneutical/sociological category, however, the institution of art provides the foundation for a new sociological analysis of art and literature, which aims to offer an alternative to dialectical and positivist social theories.⁴⁶ In this latter sense, it is a trans-historical category whose core unchanging characteristics are applied to different epochs. However – and it is at this very point that prolepsis occurs – the institutional-sociological approach, which itself theoretically relies upon the category *Institution Kunst*, requires the avant-garde to have happened historically. To quote from a particularly illuminating passage:

If the thesis presented there [CP – in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*] is right, that is, if the historical avant-garde movements attacked and thus made the autonomous status of art recognisable, then *the end of the historical avant-garde movements enables [erlaubt] the formulation of a sociology of art that takes art's autonomous status as the determining institutional condition [institutionelle Rahmenbedingung] of the production and reception of art in bourgeois society.*⁴⁷

In other words, *it is only after* the historical avant-gardes and their attack on the institution of art that an institutional-sociological theory is made possible. (And note how we return once more to the temporal logic of 'erst nachdem'.) Bürger notes how the historical avant-gardes mark a historical break that

⁴⁶ See *IoA*, pp. 3-5.

⁴⁷ *IK*, p. 51/*IoA*, p. 4 (trans. modified; emphasis added).

impacts upon scholarship, as the avant-gardist attack of *Institution Kunst* has practical consequences for scholarship that need to be addressed at the methodological level.⁴⁸ Christa Bürger also adopts such a perspective in her analyses: ‘Institutional-sociological literary scholarship departs from traditional scholarship in that it does not treat the conception of artistic autonomy as the essence of art but rather as a historically given framework. *This departure is possible because* historical avant-garde movements challenged the framework of autonomy.’⁴⁹ In this other sense, therefore, *it is the avant-garde that is historically prior* to the institution of art. This double function has led some commentators to identify a tautological relationship between the avant-garde and *Institution Kunst*.⁵⁰ Martin Lüdke, in particular, has insightfully remarked that in Bürger’s theory the avant-garde is both ‘determining and determined [*bestimmend und bestimmt*]. That is to say, the definition at the level of mediation [*Vermittlungsebene*] which takes the form of *Institution Kunst* is itself dependent on the avant-garde’s attack on this *Institution Kunst*, because it is only the attack on the institution that makes the institution recognisable as such’.⁵¹ This reciprocity of determination leads us then to question what exactly is being theorised and to what end. Is *Theory of the Avant-Garde* really a theory of the avant-garde or is it rather a theory of *Institution Kunst*? According to the US publisher’s online description, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is a book that ‘sets before English-language readers for the first time a fully elaborated theory of the “institution of art”’.⁵² When translated into the realm of historical time, this relationship of logical

⁴⁸ See *AuG*, p. 11.

⁴⁹ *IoA*, p. 138 (emphasis added).

⁵⁰ See Hans Burkhard Schlichting, ‘Historische Avantgarde und Gegenwartsliteratur. Zu Peter Bürgers Theorie der nachavantgardistischen Moderne’, in *Antworten*, pp. 209-251 (pp. 239-241).

⁵¹ See W. Martin Lüdke, ‘Einleitung’, in *Antworten*, pp. 8-26 (p. 13).

⁵² See University of Minnesota Press website <<http://www.upress.umn.edu/book-division/books/theory-of-the-avant-garde>> [accessed 15 January 2015].

dependency becomes a relationship of reciprocal recognition, which involves a reciprocal 'making possible' and a reciprocal indebtedness. On the one hand, *Institution Kunst* and the avant-garde enable one another's theorisation; on the other, *Institution Kunst* and the avant-garde both require one another historically.

Having examined the logic of prolepsis at the level of first historicism, we can now open up this investigation into the more elusive terrain of second historicism. Here we find a prolepsis that implicitly involves the author's own biographical time as it is narrativised in relation to the 'external' markers of Adorno's death and May '68, which become two additional points around which the notion of the avant-garde revolves. Thus, being indebted to Adorno's aesthetics or to the 'failed' moment of May '68 becomes, as we will see below, a 'meta-narrative' form of prolepsis.

2.2 Leaving Adorno Behind: Afterness as Prolepsis

In a little-known book review of *Theory of the Avant-garde*, Bürger's book is aptly described by the reviewer as 'self-reflexive, [as] an explanation and justification of its own methodology'⁵³ and as a theory that 'transforms *its own understanding* of the historical avant-garde into a general theory of art [...]'.⁵⁴ As is evident from the self-reflexive, self-historicising statements that typify the book, and which are prominent in its opening sections, Bürger is committed to the project of a *kritische Literaturwissenschaft* [critical literary studies] understood as continuing the intellectual tradition of critical theory as articulated by the Frankfurt School. As Bürger clearly states: 'criticism can produce new knowledge only when it involves itself with what is critiqued'⁵⁵ and when it acknowledges the institutional restrictions of that criticism:

⁵³ Leah Ulansey, 'Review: Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*', *MLN*, 99.5 (1984), 1192-1195 (p. 1193).

⁵⁴ Ulansey, 1192 (emphasis added).

⁵⁵ *V-R-F*, p. 9; Cf. *ThoA*, p. xlix.

‘insofar as the literary scholar himself works within the institution he examines, criticism describes a process of self-reflection.’⁵⁶ According to this intellectual standpoint, since this self-criticism is itself historically conditioned, a project of critical literary studies cannot but self-historicise.⁵⁷ Bürger is aware of the difficulty of developing a theory while also attempting to historicise it, and defines the kind of historicism that he wishes to pursue as an ‘insight into the connection between the unfolding of the object [*Entfaltung des Gegenstandes*] and the categories of a discipline’.⁵⁸ It is this attempt to capture the historicity of one’s own theory, and – to refer to the reviewer’s formulation above – to transform *its own understanding of the avant-garde* into a general theory of art to which my analysis will now turn.

In second historicism, the temporal difference shifts from the level of mediation between the avant-garde and *Institution Kunst* to the level of mediation between the theorisation of the avant-garde and the development of an institutional-sociological theory ‘after Adorno’. In this respect, the prolepsis occurring at the level of second historicism can also be thought of as a meta-narrative prolepsis. As I suggest, the avant-garde operates at both these levels in Bürger’s text, at once as a historical category (and then synonymous with the historical avant-garde movements) and a conceptual category (and then synonymous with Bürger’s transformation of his conception of the avant-garde into a general theory of art).

Second historicism, too, is guided by a proleptic logic. Bürger’s self-reflexive, self-historicising statements are interspersed with flash-forwards, which little by little give away the story line. One of these anticipations hints at the plot-to-come as well as making reference to an already-formulated theory:

⁵⁶ *AuG*, p. 14.

⁵⁷ See *ThoA*, p. 15.

⁵⁸ *ThdA*, p. 21; Cf. *ThoA*, p. 16.

*It was only because my point of departure was that the avant-garde movements should be today seen as historical [historische] that I could leave aside the value judgements that are central to the theories of Lukács and Adorno, and could hope to pass beyond the theoretical level they attained.*⁵⁹

Whereas in the prolepsis discussed earlier the temporal dislocation occurs at the level of the historical typology that moves from the Middle Ages through Aestheticism and through the avant-garde to the present, here prolepsis occurs at a meta-historical level, involving Bürger's own argumentation into its narrative: it was only because the avant-garde movements were theorised as historical that the theories of Lukács and Adorno could be overcome, asserts Bürger. Another form of prolepsis, which admittedly was not intended by its author, has an editorial, textual dimension. Readers who approach the Anglophone edition of *Theory of the Avant-garde* linearly – reading the book in its entirety from beginning to end – will be faced with another temporal dislocation. The statement I have cited above is made in the book's introduction: narratively speaking, the avant-garde movements have not yet been introduced, and the central theses on the avant-garde's intention have not yet been declared. Furthermore, readers who look closely at the text's bibliographic details will note that the 1980 English edition contains two additional parts (the introduction and the first chapter), which have been extracted from a different publication, *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion*, published in 1979, a few years after Bürger had formulated his theses on the avant-garde.⁶⁰ It is perhaps understandable that such a bibliographic detail has received no scholarly attention. Yet the narratological analysis to which we have subjected the text demands that this editorial dislocation is addressed – particularly as it expresses a dislocation of historical time. The introductory statements taken from *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion* were written and

⁵⁹ *V-R-F*, p. 12/*ThoA*, p. lii (trans. modified; emphasis added).

⁶⁰ See 'Einleitung: Theorie der Avantgarde und Theorie der Literatur' and 'Hermeneutik – Ideologiekritik – Funktionsanalyse', in *V-R-F*, pp. 9-17, 147-159.

published after the first German edition of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. In other words, Bürger's initial formulations had already occurred historically, and when writing the above sentences, Bürger has already historicised his own theory and incorporated his findings into his historical narrative.

In addition to this prolepsis-in-translation, there is a more profound epistemological prolepsis. In *Theory of the Avant-garde* and elsewhere, Bürger insists that the avant-garde must be distinguished from modernism, and that Adorno and Lukács were mistaken for not acknowledging a distinction between the two.⁶¹ Or rather, suggests Bürger, the fact that they could not see that difference means that their aesthetic theories are today as 'historical' as the avant-gardes themselves. For Bürger, fighting for or against the avant-garde is the sign of a bygone age: 'To the extent that Adorno does that [CP – positions himself against realism], he himself as theoretician belongs to the era of the historical avant-garde movements. This is also clear from the fact that Adorno saw the avant-garde movements not as historical, but as still alive in the present'.⁶² What is more, adds Bürger, Adorno's theory does not recognise the co-existence of multiple artistic material in one epoch; that is another reason why it begins to be seen as historical.⁶³ As foundational as Adorno's aesthetic theory may be, states Bürger, it is no longer contemporary: 'Aesthetic theory today finds its model in the aesthetic theory of Adorno,

⁶¹ 'For Lukács, there is no difference between modernism and [the] avant-garde, a difference that is crucial in my view. Modernism accepts the institution of art, [the] avant-garde fights it.' 'Interview with Peter Bürger: 27 December 1991, Bremen', in *Lukács after Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals*, ed. by Eva L. Corredor (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), pp. 46-60 (p. 51); see also *ThoA*, pp. 60-63.

⁶² *ThdA*, p. 86 (trans. mine); Cf. *ThoA*, p. 63.

⁶³ See Peter Bürger, 'Der Anti-Avantgardismus in der Ästhetik Adornos' (1985), in *Das Altern der Moderne. Schriften zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2001), pp. 31-47 (p. 33).

whose historicity has become recognisable'.⁶⁴ In this respect, Bürger proposes that in order to recognise the avant-garde *as avant-garde* (i.e. distinct from modernism) one has no choice but to leave Adorno's theory behind.

Critical theorist and literary scholar Peter Uwe Hohendahl has helpfully distinguished between three kinds of Adorno readers. At the opposite extremes we find the orthodox reader, who remains faithful to Adorno's philosophical and political position, and the dismissive reader, who considers Adorno's thought to be historically outdated. In the middle stands the reader whose position 'foregrounds the historical relevance of Adorno, but also the task of going beyond Adorno's theory'.⁶⁵ Peter Bürger, both in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and in later essays that critically engage with Adorno's aesthetics, belongs to this latter group. However, the ways in which Bürger's theorisation of the avant-garde interrelates with Adorno's thought renders such a task proleptic since, as I show below, Bürger's leaving-behind of Adorno's thought also constitutes a form of return.

While Bürger leaves Adorno's aesthetic theory behind because it does not recognise the avant-garde as distinct from modernism, he paradoxically raises the avant-garde to the status of a historical necessity in order to justify that very theoretical move. In the essay that expands Bürger's critique of Adorno's 'anti-avant-gardism', it is proposed that abandoning Adorno's thesis 'facilitates the insight that the later development of artistic material can run into internal limits. This can be observed in Cubism.'⁶⁶ In other words, Bürger suggests that only when we leave Adorno's aesthetics behind can we recognise the avant-garde as avant-garde. Yet, as we have seen above, the exact opposite

⁶⁴ *ThdA*, p. 130; Cf. *ThoA*, p. 94.

⁶⁵ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, 'The Ephemeral and the Absolute: Provisional Notes to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', in *Language without Soil: Adorno and Late Philosophical Modernity*, ed. by Gerhard Richter (New York: Fordham University Press, 2009), pp. 206-226 (p. 206).

⁶⁶ Bürger, 'The Decline of Modernism', in *The Decline of Modernism*, pp. 32-47 (p. 36); Cf. *Das Altern der Moderne*, p. 16.

logical and temporal movement has occurred: it is the 'fact' of the historical avant-gardes' having overcome the parameters of that debate (i.e. by having broken out of the aestheticist formalism of modernism) that justifies the claim that Adorno's thought is no longer contemporary.

In what we might describe, following Genette, as a 'mark of narrative impatience', Bürger's working hypotheses take on the character of logical and historical preconditions to support a *theory to-come*.⁶⁷ In *Theory of the Avant-Garde's* final chapter, 'Avant-Garde and Commitment [*Engagement*]', we see the theses introduced in earlier chapters becoming foundational statements upon which a third, additional hypothesis can be tested out: if the theory of the avant-garde is correct then it should also make the modernism/realism debate obsolete.⁶⁸ Similarly, in the abstract that accompanied the original publication of the essay 'Institution Kunst als literatursoziologische Kategorie' (*Institution Kunst as Literary-Sociological Category*), Bürger makes reference to the theses formulated in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Yet these theses are presented not as hypotheses but as research findings, which are then posited as historical preconditions. Bürger thus suggests that the methodological question of overcoming the dichotomy between dialectical and positivist approaches to the study of literature is answered by the avant-garde:

I believe to have found this theoretical field [CP – beyond the dichotomy] in the avant-garde movements (Futurism, Dadaism, Surrealism). In revolting against a certain conception of art, a conception dominant in bourgeois society where the artwork is 'autonomous', and in attempting to reintegrate the artwork in the context of other social practices, the avant-garde movements have proceeded to a rupture in the development of art and, as a result, have allowed us to see art as an institution.⁶⁹

Historical precondition is expressed this time at the meta-narrative level. As

⁶⁷ Genette, op. cit., p. 72.

⁶⁸ See *ThdA*, p. 117; *ThoA*, p. 83.

⁶⁹ *IK*, p. 75.

Bürger mobilises his earlier theses in order to substantiate his sociological-institutional theory, the logic of 'it is not until x that y is made possible' continues in second historicism. Whereas at the level of first historicism it was aestheticism that was historically necessary for the avant-garde, at the level of second historicism, it is the avant-garde that becomes historically necessary for a post-Adornian theory of art and literature.⁷⁰ It thus seems unavoidable to raise the following question, which parallels the one asked at the level of first historicism: Does Bürger critique Adorno in order to better theorise the avant-garde, or does he theorise the avant-garde in order to better critique Adorno? If it is the avant-garde that is at the service of a sociological-institutional theory, then the historical specificity of the avant-garde becomes important for Bürger because it is the avant-garde as distinct from modernism that makes his critique of Adorno possible. If it is the critique of Adorno that is at the service of a theory of the avant-garde, then it is the abandonment of Adorno and the formulation of a post-Adornian sociological theory of literature that makes the avant-garde possible.

From my analysis so far, it might seem that Bürger's narrative time is hermetically sealed from history (as *res gestae*). Yet the epistemological prolepsis of second historicism is possible only because Bürger assigns two historical events prime significance: namely, May '68 and Adorno's death. Although the historical marker of '68 does not seem to play a role in the narrative time of the first historicism – being simply designated by the 'today', the moment after May '68 where avant-garde protest is no longer possible – it does play an important role in second historicism. At the meta-narrative level, the avant-garde becomes recognisable *as avant-garde* only after the historical imaginary of '68 (as 'event') because, according to Bürger, it is that event's failure that also makes the failure of the historical avant-gardes to re-integrate

⁷⁰ For another instance of the avant-garde providing the 'answer' to a methodological problem, see Peter Bürger, 'The Decline of Modernism', in *The Decline of Modernism*, p. 45.

art into life-praxis recognisable.⁷¹ When defending *Theory of the Avant-Garde* against the early criticisms collected in the Suhrkamp edition, Bürger holds on to his original thesis because 'it corresponds to a *historical problem-horizon* [*Problemhorizont*], as it emerged after the end of the May-events of 1968 and the failure of the student movement in the early seventies'⁷² In a more recent article, Bürger once again stresses the significance of the May events and, by way of reference to Benjamin's theses on history, describes '68 as 'the moment of recognisability' [*der Augenblick der Erkennbarkeit*]: as the moment where the historical avant-gardes became alive again following the period of silence in the early post-war years.⁷³

The second historical marker that provides the link between narrative time and the time of *res gestae* brings us back to the figure of Adorno. In an essay from the early 1990s, Bürger traces the point of transition from the modern to the postmodern in relation to Adorno: 'A garden gnome is no longer a garden gnome. [...] Up until a certain moment (*let us take 1969, the year of Adorno's death, as a marker*) a garden gnome was still a garden gnome.'⁷⁴ The implications of this statement are that seeing the garden gnome, not as a symbol of petit-bourgeois cultural capital, but rather with postmodern irony, is something that can occur only 'after Adorno'. Leaving the validity of this witticism aside, it is, nevertheless, telling that a broader shift in cultural history, which has of course little to do with Adorno's actual biological death, has been marked by the figure of Adorno. The temporal distance – the *Abschied*, the leaving behind – of Bürger's narrative time is coupled here with the temporal distance of biological time – Adorno's death. We have seen that leaving Adorno's thought behind required the avant-garde's failure *to have happened in history*. Yet this historical necessity is coupled with a historical

⁷¹ See Bürger, 'Ende der Avantgarde?', in *Das Altern der Moderne*, pp. 186-187.

⁷² *ThdA*, p. 134 (translation mine, emphasis added); Cf. *ThoA*, p. 95.

⁷³ Bürger, *Nach der Avantgarde*, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Peter Bürger, 'Aporias of Modern Aesthetics', trans. by Ben Morgan, *New Left Review*, 184. November-December (1990), 47-56 (p. 47; emphasis added).

impossibility: Adorno did not live to see the aftermath of May '68, which according to Bürger, enables the recognition of the avant-garde's failure. Taking Bürger's narrative logic at its own word, therefore, for both Lukács and Adorno it would have been not simply intellectually impossible to recognise the avant-garde as distinct from modernism, but *historically impossible*. Thus, in the 'Bürger narrative', understood now in the broader sense extending far beyond the confines of the linear historicism of the text's narrated time, Adorno's death becomes another 'historical problem-horizon'.

As with May '68 so with Adorno's death, the question of afterness looks back to the moment of prolepsis. For the question of temporal order that has been guiding our enquiry is not merely a matter of sequence and causality, but also a matter of historical indebtedness. Bürger is conscious of this historical debt as he exclaims: 'And where do we stand, we who are both the heirs of aestheticist formalism and of the avant-garde protest against it?'⁷⁵ The response he seems to give through *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, and through the prolepsis we have identified in terms both rhetorical ('it was not until') and epistemological (logical precondition as historical consequence), is that this is a debt that flashes forward into the future. Put in less narratological and more Benjaminian terms, the question of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism, or of an *avant-garde inheritance* – whether this is approached through the problem-horizon of May 68 or of a post-Adornian aesthetics – requires a temporality of a present futurity. Yet that present futurity is not the space between the present and future in the sequence of beads in a rosary (as Benjamin's image of historicism has it), but rather it has more in common with the gaze of the 'backward-looking prophet' described in Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, where fortune-telling requires the past in order to find itself back in the critical moment of the present.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Bürger, 'The Decline of Modernism', in *The Decline of Modernism*, p. 46.

⁷⁶ See Benjamin, Thesis IX, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW4*, p. 392; *GS I.2*, pp. 697-98.

Revisiting Peter Bürger's canonical *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, in this chapter I have argued for an alternative interpretation of the historical temporality underpinning Bürger's conception of the avant-garde, beyond the narrow textual and narrative confines of his theory. Drawing on narratological theory and analysing the two levels of historicism that weave in and out of Bürger's text, I have suggested that the notion of the avant-garde implicitly posited by Bürger is distinct from the periodising category of the historical avant-gardes, and that its relationship to the key hermeneutic category of *Institution Kunst* is marked by a double temporality. At once historically specific and trans-historical, bound to the moment of aestheticism but also going beyond it in its heuristic function as the epistemological foundation of a new sociology of art, *Institution Kunst* was shown to both determine, and to be determined by, the idea of the avant-garde. This double temporality was then discussed with reference to the proleptic epistemology at work in Bürger's historicisation of his own theory, where the theory's indebtedness to Adorno's aesthetics was articulated as both historical consequence and precondition. Although reading *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in autobiographical terms would stretch the existing text beyond recognition, my analysis has hinted at the self-narrativising dimensions of Bürger's text, so as to expose the multiple levels of historical time that have so far been obfuscated by scholars' over-emphasis on the text's surface-narrative of the 'failed' dream to re-integrate art into life. Through this unorthodox narratological reading, therefore, I have sought to offer one iteration of 'unmooring' the avant-garde from modernist periodisation, and to propose that in this split between hermeneutical and historical causality the avant-garde at once belongs to, and remains at a critical distance from, its time.

Chapter 3

Repeating Rupture: John Roberts' post-Adornian Avant-Garde with and against the New

“Fine”, said K., “I’ll buy it”. K.’s curtness had been unthinking and so he was glad when the painter, instead of being offended, lifted another canvas from the floor. “Here’s the companion picture”, he said. It might be intended as a companion picture, but there was not the slightest difference that one could see between it and the other; here were the two trees, here the grass, and there the sunset. But K. did not bother about that. “They’re fine prospects”, he said. “I’ll buy both of them and hang them up in my office”. “You seem to like the subject”, said the painter, fishing out a third canvas. “By a lucky chance I have another of these studies here”. But it was not merely a similar study, it was simply the same wild heathscape again.¹

– Franz Kafka, *The Trial*

Kafka’s nameless protagonist is in an artist’s atelier and is being presented with paintings, one after another. The narrator describes the first painting, and then notes coolly that the ‘companion picture’ is not discernibly different. Then, a third painting is shown. Once again, it is not a variation – it is *exactly the same* painting. This remarkable passage, cited and remarked upon by Benjamin in the *Arcades Project*, lends itself to familiar readings that destabilise the relationship between ‘original’ and ‘copy’ in the age of the artwork’s technical reproducibility. Yet it also calls for analysis with regard to its nightmarish temporality: the identical nature of the heathscapes foregrounds a paradoxical repetition. As each painting is shown in sequence yet each painting appears the same as the one that has just been encountered, it is as if time had not lapsed. It is this repetition – a movement in stasis, an absence of variation – that is foregrounded by Benjamin: ‘Definition of the “modern” as the new in the context of what has always already been there [*des immer schon Dagewesnen*]. The always new, always identical [*immer neue*,

¹ Franz Kafka, *The Trial*, trans. by Willa and Edwin Muir (London: Secker & Warburg, 1996), p. 154.

immer gleiche] “heathscape” in Kafka (*Der Prozeß*) is not a bad expression of this state of affairs.² Rather than defining the modern as a radical rupture with the past that leaves the past behind, Benjamin proposes the modern as that which is ever new yet ever same. This repetition of the same, which arguably disrupts the novel’s linear narrative temporality for a brief moment, is therefore taken by Benjamin to the realm of historical time: it is modernity’s very historicity that now has to grapple with this nightmare.

Having examined historical time with reference to progressivism and sequentiality in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in the previous chapter, in this chapter I examine a different iteration of the question of ‘the new after the new’ by turning to the issues of novelty and historical repetition. As has been noted in the thesis’ introduction, even though the term ‘avant-garde’ continues to attract interest from within art-historical discourses, there have been few attempts to theorise the avant-garde since Bürger’s seminal publication and the ensuing critical responses articulated by Benjamin Buchloh and Hal Foster. An exception to this tendency is provided by the polemical work of British art theorist John Roberts, whose essays on the avant-garde have been in circulation since the turn of the new century and most recently reformulated in the book-length publication *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (2015).³ Focussing on Roberts’ intellectual indebtedness

² AP [S1, 4], p. 544. See also AP [S1, 5], p. 544; [S2a, 3], p. 548; [S5, 2], p. 552.

³ John Roberts, *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* (London: Verso, 2015), hereafter cited *RTA*. My analysis also draws upon the following: John Roberts, ‘On autonomy and the avant-garde’, *Radical Philosophy*, 103. September/October (2000), 25-28; ‘After Adorno: Art, Autonomy, and Critique’, *Historical Materialism*, 7.1 (2000), 221-39; ‘The Labour of Subjectivity, The Subjectivity of Labour: Reflections on Contemporary Political Theory and Culture’, *Third Text*, 16.4 (2002), 367-85, hereafter ‘LS’; ‘The Logics of Deflation: Autonomy, Negation and the Avant-Garde’ (PhD Dissertation by Publication, University of Bath, 2005); ‘Avant-Gardes after Avant-Gardism’, *Chto Delat?/What is to be Done?, Debates on the Avant-Garde*, 17 (2007) <<http://www.chtodelat.org>> [accessed 29 March 2012]; ‘Productivism and

to Adorno's aesthetics and his formulation of a 'third' or 'suspensive' avant-garde, this chapter seeks to enquire into the chronopolitics of such a formulation, asking whether, and the extent to which, it might, *malgré soi*, submit the avant-garde to the hellish vision of the 'always new, always identical'. If both the 'historical avant-garde' and the 'neo-avant-garde' are now 'historical', is the 'third' avant-garde but one in a series of ruptures that will simply become historical in thirty years' time? Is the 'suspensive' avant-garde an avant-garde 'again' ('for the third time'), and therefore a second repetition in the footsteps of the neo-avant-garde's alleged repetition, or does it constitute an avant-garde 'anew' – a truly new, radical rupture untainted by capital-time?

Enlisting Adorno as my primary aide in this endeavour, I investigate John Roberts' re-deployment and critical appropriation of Adorno's thought, paying particular attention to the notion of 'the new' [*das Neue*].⁴ As is

Its Contradictions', *Third Text*, 23.5 (2009), 527–36, hereafter 'PC'; 'Art and Its Negations', *Third Text*, 24.3 (2010), 289–303, hereafter 'AN'; 'Revolutionary Pathos, Negation, and the Suspensive Avant-Garde', *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010), 717–30, hereafter 'SA'.

⁴ My analysis is drawn primarily from: Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann; trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (London: Continuum, 1997), hereafter cited *AT*. The following have also been consulted: Theodor W. Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 20 vols. ed. by Rolf Tiedemann with Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1970-1986), hereafter cited *AGS* and by volume number; *The Adorno Reader*, ed. by Brian O'Connor (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000); Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. by John Cumming (London: Verso, [1979] 1997), hereafter *DE*; *Kierkegaard: The Construction of the Aesthetic*, trans. by and ed. by Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989); *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. by E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, [1974] 2005), hereafter *MM* (*AGS* Bd. 4); *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E.B. Ashton (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1973), hereafter *ND* (*AGS* Bd. 5); *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel Weber and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1967); *Quasi una fantasia*:

discussed below, a link between Adorno's notion of the new and the idea of the avant-garde has been established since the publication of Bürger's theory. However, although the new has received some attention within Adorno scholarship, its import for theorising the avant-garde has not been extensively explored.⁵ It is my intention in this chapter to re-examine the relationship between the idea of the avant-garde and the chronopolitics of the new and, by doing so, also suggest new avenues for re-assessing more established discussions pertaining to the relationship between Adorno's aesthetics and the idea of the avant-garde.

This focus on the notion of the new in Adorno's aesthetics entails viewing Adorno's broader intellectual project through a very particular intellectual prism. As is widely acknowledged, and as Susan Buck-Morss's pioneering study was one of the first to show, Adorno's philosophical project is deeply indebted to Benjamin's *Trauerspiel* dissertation, and the theory of mimesis presented in *Aesthetic Theory* owes much to Benjamin's own reflections on the mimetic faculty.⁶ Without underestimating the crucial differences between

Essays on Modern Music, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, [1963] 1998). Page references are given in the English editions followed by the *Gesammelte Schriften* edition, with any modifications to the English translations noted as such. References to *Aesthetic Theory* (AGS Bd. 7) are accompanied by section headings to help guide the reader through the text's unedited corpus.

⁵ The most detailed treatment of the notion of the new in Adorno's aesthetics appears in the dissertation-based monograph: Sylvia Zirden, *Theorie des Neuen. Konstruktion einer ungeschriebenen Theorie Adornos* (Würzburg: Königshausen & Neumann, 2005). Fredric Jameson's better-known yet less reliable reading in *Late Marxism: Adorno, Or, The Persistence of the Dialectic* (London: Verso, 1990) is discussed below. See also Tilo Wesche, 'Adornos Einführung von Kunst und Moderne – Zum Begriff des Neuen in der Ästhetischen Theorie', in *Das Neue – Eine Denkfigur der Moderne*, hg. Maria Moog-Grünwald (Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag C. Winter, 2002), pp. 73-89; Stewart Martin, 'Renewing Aesthetic Theory', *Radical Philosophy*, 89 (1998), 46-47.

⁶ See Susan Buck-Morss, *The Origin of Negative Dialectics: Theodor W. Adorno, Walter Benjamin, and the Frankfurt Institute* (Hassocks: Harvester Press, 1977), passim. On

the two thinkers, or overemphasising the affinities between Benjamin's and Adorno's thought (as is done by some scholars who discount Adorno's Hegelianism, for instance),⁷ my adopted position nonetheless insists on examining the notion of the new by locating it within a common Adorno-Benjaminian project. Thus, my analysis resists the treatment of Adorno's thought as 'pure' and 'uncontaminated' by external influences and, in this respect, is in agreement with musicologist Max Paddison's assessment that: 'to fall under the hypnotic spell of [Adorno's] prose style and abandon any attempt at a systematic understanding' would be 'a form of fetishisation that would contradict the spirit of critical theory itself'.⁸ It is in the spirit of critical theory, therefore, that I propose the adoption of a certain distance towards Adorno's writing, one that does not, however, altogether dismiss it, as does Thierry de Duve when he exclaims: 'negative dialectics is a way of thinking that you either embrace or reject but with which you cannot enter into discussion.'⁹ Rather, my move of adopting a certain distance has more in common with Lambert Zuidervaart's mode of 'going after' Adorno in social philosophy: of being indebted to yet also chasing after Adorno and his

Adorno's academic seminars on Benjamin, and Benjamin's reservations about Adorno's unacknowledged deployment of his thought, see Stefan Müller-Doohm, *Adorno: A Biography*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: Polity, [2003] 2005), pp. 145-50.

⁷ See Shierry Weber Nicholsen, 'Aesthetic Theory's Mimesis of Walter Benjamin', in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 55-91.

⁸ Max Paddison, 'Review Article: Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *Music Analysis*, 6.3 (1987), 355-77 (p. 356).

⁹ Thierry de Duve, 'Resisting Adorno, Revamping Kant', in J. M. Bernstein et al., eds., *Art and Aesthetics after Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2010), pp. 249-99 (p. 258).

'followers'.¹⁰ I thus intend to re-visit Adorno's aesthetics and address the way in which, and the extent to which, John Roberts as one of his followers, and the theory of the suspensive avant-garde as a self-proclaimed 'post-Adornian' theory, re-articulates the category of the new for the early twenty-first century. As I argue below, Roberts' appropriation of Adorno's texts reveals a new chronopolitics for the idea of the avant-garde after modernism that establishes a deeply aporetic relationship between historical periodisation and historical rupture.

The analysis that follows is structured in three parts. Part 1 offers a brief overview of *Aesthetic Theory's* reception with reference to some common misconceptions surrounding the applicability of Adorno's aesthetics to the avant-garde. Revisiting the Anglophone scholarly reception of *Aesthetic Theory* since its publication in the 1980s, and historically situating this reception in the context of debates over modernism's relationship to realism and postmodernism, it is suggested that the commonly-portrayed image of Adorno as a theorist of the avant-garde needs to be interrogated and critically re-sketched beyond its underlying Cold War assumptions about 'autonomous art' and 'mass culture'. Part 2 examines Adorno's notion of the new through the double prism of the essay-form and the commodity-form, stressing Adorno's phenomenological conception of time while also foregrounding the centrality of the category of the ever-same for his dialectical conception of aesthetic autonomy. With these clarifications on the avant-garde's role in *Aesthetic Theory* and the character of the new in mind, Part 3 turns to an assessment of Roberts' post-Adornian theory of the avant-garde, suggesting that the suspensive avant-garde, despite its revolutionary aspirations, is marked by a 'non-evental' chronopolitics that ultimately remains wedded to a progressivist conception of historical time.

¹⁰ See Lambert Zuidervaart, *Social Philosophy after Adorno* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), p. 7.

3.1 Adorno and the Avant-Garde: Re-sketching the Physiognomy

Upon hearing the words ‘Adorno’ and ‘avant-garde’, one may be forgiven for conjuring up the following mental image: Adorno, the avant-gardist – ardent admirer of literary and musical modernism, friend of Thomas Mann and loyal pupil of Viennese composer Alban Berg, staunch critic of mass culture and ‘the culture industry’, bourgeois intellectual mistrustful of the ‘committed’ stance of Georg Lukács, Jean-Paul Sartre and Bertolt Brecht. Though hardly inaccurate, this image is nonetheless deceptively simple, especially because it relies on a clichéd correlation between Adorno’s own personal taste – a taste notoriously Eurocentric and high-brow – and the philosophical role that the avant-garde (as name and notion) plays in Adorno’s body of work. Re-visiting the Anglophone reception of Adorno’s aesthetics, and the posthumously published *Aesthetic Theory* in particular, in this section I aim to briefly re-draw this physiognomy, identifying key turning points in the reception of Adorno’s aesthetics, while situating this reception within a broader intellectual history of the late twentieth century. Such a re-drawing thus serves as the starting point for articulating an idea of the avant-garde after modernism that mobilises Adorno’s thought while going beyond his own assertions and polemics.

Aesthetic Theory has received substantive critical attention, especially since the publication of Robert Hullot-Kentor’s authoritative 1997 English translation.¹¹ A wealth of scholarship has been published on issues ranging from mimesis to natural beauty to artistic labour, and *Aesthetic Theory*’s status

¹¹ Robert Hullot-Kentor’s more recent translation has now superseded Christian Lenhardt’s earlier attempt. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. by Christian Lenhardt (London: Routledge & Keagan Paul, 1984). See also the exchange between the two translators, Robert Hullot-Kentor, ‘Aesthetic Theory: The Translation’, *Telos*, 65. Fall (1985), 143-47; Christian Lenhardt, ‘Response to Hullot-Kentor’, *Telos*, 65. Fall (1985), 147-52.

within Adorno's body of work as a whole has been fervently debated.¹² Whatever the emphasis, the discursive parameters have been demarcated along philosophical lines. This has meant that some of the art-historical concerns regarding the avant-garde have been bypassed, with the work's afterlife coming to seem like a sardonic response to Friedrich Schlegel's quotation that Adorno intended as the book's epigram: 'What is called the philosophy of art usually lacks one of two things: either the philosophy or the art'.¹³ That is not to say, of course, that *Aesthetic Theory* is lacking in art. What I contend, rather, is that the critical emphasis on debating the Kantian, Hegelian, or Benjaminian dimensions of Adorno's aesthetics has shifted attention away from the question of how Adorno's anti-systematic philosophy precisely mediates the two spheres – philosophy and art – in practice.¹⁴ Therefore, the obstacles in distinguishing the avant-garde from modernism that have been outlined in the thesis' introduction resurface in the context of Adorno's aesthetics, as otherwise dependable commentators continue to

¹² Mentioning for now only the publications that will be referred to extensively below, see Gerard Delanty, ed., *Theodor W. Adorno, Vol. II, Aesthetic Theory* (London: SAGE Publications, 2004), hereafter cited 'Delanty'; Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart, eds., *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), hereafter cited '*Semblance*'.

¹³ See *AT*, 'Editors' Afterword', p. 366/544.

¹⁴ One must also note the critical purchase of analyses that focus on Adorno's writing *as writing*, proposing his aphoristic, paratactical style as exemplary of literary modernism (and/or 'the avant-garde'). See *inter alia* Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth Century Dialectical Theories of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), p. 58; Edward Said, 'Adorno as Lateness Itself', in *Adorno: A Critical Reader*, ed. by Nigel Gibson and Andrew Rubin (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), pp. 193-208; Richard Wolin, 'Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism', in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, ed. by Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), pp. 93-122 (p. 114); Ulrich Plass, *Language and History in Theodor W. Adorno's Notes to Literature* (London & New York: Routledge, 2007), p. xl.

circumvent the implications of this relationship, describing *Aesthetic Theory* by turns as: ‘a historico-philosophical justification of modernism’,¹⁵ a ‘monument to the critical metaphysics of the modernist aesthetic’,¹⁶ or a theory that ‘not only defends and legitimizes modernism and the avant-garde, [but that] may well be called a theory of the avant-garde’.¹⁷ The anti-systematic, deeply personal manner in which Adorno engages with specific artworks, however, is, as Simon Jarvis has noted, closer to the approach of a critic than to a theorist.¹⁸ And, therefore, as Rüdiger Bubner has also correctly remarked, Adorno’s evocation of particular artworks on a ‘case-by-case’ basis – that basis often expressing simply cultural preferences – is deeply at odds with the prescriptive generality of his category of ‘modern art’.¹⁹ What this means for our present enquiry is that when little or no distinction is drawn between the idea of the avant-garde and avant-garde art, or between modernism and the modern (*die Moderne*), Adorno can easily masquerade as

¹⁵ Richard Wolin, ‘The De-aestheticization of Art: On Adorno’s *Aesthetische Theorie*’, *Telos*, 41 (1979), 105-27, reprinted in Delanty, pp. 5-30 (p. 13).

¹⁶ Peter Osborne, ‘Adorno and the Metaphysics of Modernism: The Problem of a ‘Postmodern’ Art’, in *The Problems of Modernity: Adorno and Benjamin*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin (London & New York: Routledge, 1989), pp. 23-48.

¹⁷ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, ‘Autonomy of Art: Looking Back at Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie*’, *The German Quarterly*, 54.2 (1981), 133-48, reprinted in Delanty, pp. 49-65 (p. 54). For other such accounts see Stewart Martin, ‘Autonomy and Anti-Art: Adorno’s Concept of Avant-Garde Art’, *Constellations*, 7.2 (2000), 197-207; reprinted in Delanty, pp. 179-91; David S. Ferris, ‘Politics and the Enigma of Art: The Meaning of Modernism for Adorno’, *Modernist Cultures*, 1.2 (2005), 192-208; Thomas Huhn, ‘Adorno’s Aesthetics of Illusion’, *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 44. Winter (1985), 181-89 (p. 181). See also how Adorno’s thought is problematically refashioned after Bürger to ‘explain’ the avant-garde in Ann Gibson, ‘Avant-Garde’, in *Critical Terms for Art History*, pp. 205-6.

¹⁸ See Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), p. 138.

¹⁹ See Rüdiger Bubner, ‘Concerning the Central Idea of Adorno’s Philosophy’, in *Semblance*, pp. 147-175 (pp. 162-167).

a champion of Surrealism and Expressionism.²⁰ And the less attention is paid to how the ‘modernist’ or ‘avant-garde’ artworks that Adorno mentions favourably operate within the theory and mediate his philosophical categories – ‘the ugly’, ‘enigmaticalness’, or ‘dissonance’ – the more the erroneous impression of Adorno as a theorist of the avant-garde persists.²¹

That said, such reception should not be entirely dismissed, especially because it can function as a historical compass for broader debates concerning the avant-garde’s relationship to realism and postmodernism, the implications of which I will also discuss with reference to the Italian *Neoavanguardia* in the following chapter. Thus, attempting here a brief intellectual history of *Aesthetic Theory*’s reception, my proposition is that there are three main areas where such sedimentation – one is almost tempted to say ‘reification’ – of Adorno’s avant-gardism has taken place. Two of the three areas can be identified, firstly, with respect to the so-called ‘Expressionism debate’ and, secondly, with respect to the frequent comparisons between Adorno’s notion of aesthetic autonomy and the aesthetic formalism of US art critic Clement Greenberg.²² While the former context has repercussions both within and beyond West Germany, the latter has been more influential in an Anglophone art-historical context.

²⁰ As an exception, see Hauke Brunkhorst’s apt distinction between modernism and the modern in Hauke Brunkhorst, *Theodor W. Adorno. Dialektik der Moderne* (München: Piper, 1990), pp. 113-16. I discuss the extent to which Adorno was sympathetic towards the various ‘isms’ below.

²¹ To pre-empt any misunderstanding, I do not mean to suggest that these categories have not been discussed with reference to avant-garde artworks; my point is rather that these categories have not been deployed to sufficiently challenge assumptions about these artworks’ ‘being avant-garde’.

²² For a comparable reception in the field of English literature, undertaken with reference to the New Criticism of F.R. Leavis, see David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp, ‘Introduction’, in *Adorno and Literature*, ed. by David Cunningham and Nigel Mapp (London: Continuum, 2006), pp. 1-7 (pp. 2-3).

Nevertheless, and despite the marked differences between the historical and political contexts in the West German and Anglo-American receptions, in both cases the question of Adorno's modernism has not been too far from the question of Adorno's Marxism, and thus within an ever-present and underlying Cold War 'political unconscious'.²³ Therefore, with respect to the 'Expressionism debate' and especially the debate's later reception, which pits the avant-garde against realism, Adorno has been painted as defender of the avant-garde because he is on the side that opposes 'committed realism'.²⁴ In the comparisons with Greenberg, on the other hand, Adorno has found himself in a united front against kitsch, with the category of kitsch functioning as the avant-garde's *Gegenbegriff* (counter-concept) and showing both intellectuals' allegiance to both high art *and* the anti-traditional tradition of the modern.²⁵

²³ Although an analysis of the German reception is beyond my present scope, the following publications give an indication of the text's reception in the context of the German New Left. Wilfried F. Schoeller, hg., *Die Neue Linke nach Adorno* (München: Kindler Verlag, 1969); Theodor W. Adorno Special Issue, *Text + Kritik*, ed. by Heinz Ludwig Arnold (1977); *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie. Theodor W. Adornos Konstruktion der Moderne*, ed. by Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdke (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979).

²⁴ See Hans-Jürgen Schmitt, hg. *Die Expressionismusdebatte. Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973); Special Issue: 'Brecht/Lukács/Benjamin. Fragen der marxistischen Theorie (I)', *Das Argument*, 46 (1968); Theodor W. Adorno, et. al., *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. by Rodney Livingstone et al. (London: New Left Books, 1977), especially pp. 100-109. For a useful historical overview, see Eugene Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1982).

²⁵ See Ian McLean, 'Modernism and Marxism, Greenberg and Adorno', *Australian Journal of Art*, 7.1 (1988), 97-111; Peter Osborne, 'Aesthetic Autonomy and the Crisis of Theory: Greenberg, Adorno and the Problem of Postmodernism in Visual Arts', *New Formations*, 9. Autumn (1989), 31-50; J. M. Bernstein, 'The Death of Sensuous Particulars: Adorno and Abstract Expressionism', *Radical Philosophy*, 76.

The third element that I wish to bring to this brief intellectual history is the role that Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has played in the reception of Adorno's aesthetics. Such a role may seem paradoxical considering Bürger's indisputable indebtedness to Adorno's work, and as we have seen in Chapter 2, his theory coming decidedly 'after Adorno'. Yet, with their English translation historically coinciding (and within the context of renewed debates on the legacy of the modern in light of the postmodern), *Aesthetic Theory* and *Theory of the Avant-Garde* were often discussed side-by-side.²⁶ These discussions drew on Bürger's own critical engagement with Adorno (most notably, *Theory of the Avant-Garde's* section entitled 'The New').²⁷ They also mobilised Adorno and Bürger in an effort to re-read the history of late twentieth-century art and culture, and thus re-habilitate art's 'critical' dimension, at the time considered to have been erased by postmodern tendencies.²⁸ Significantly, such reception was part of a broader

March/April (1996), 7-18; Nancy Jachec, 'Modernism, Enlightenment Values, and Clement Greenberg', *Oxford Art Journal*, 21.2 (1998), 123-32 (pp. 123-24).

²⁶ See Lambert Zuidervaart, 'The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger', *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48 (1990), 61-77; reprinted in Delanty, pp. 67-92; Lambert Zuidervaart, *Adorno's Aesthetic Theory: The Redemption of Illusion* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1991), pp. 217-247; Richard Wolin, 'Utopia, Mimesis, and Reconciliation: A Redemptive Critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*', *Representations*, 32 (1990), 33-49; reprinted in Delanty, 31-48 (46-47). Christian Lenhardt would even go as far as to suggest that, after Bürger's publication, the English translation of *Aesthetic Theory* 'comes on the scene too late'. See Lenhardt, 'Response to Hullot-Kentor', 151.

²⁷ See *ThoA/ThdA*, pp. 59-63/81-86.

²⁸ A prominent role in this re-articulation of the avant-garde against the postmodern, with the legacy of the Frankfurt School as a primary point of reference, was played by the journal *New German Critique* and the affiliated Center for Twentieth Century Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee, which was at the time the institutional home for scholars such as Andreas Huyssen. See Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana

re-assessment of Adorno and Benjamin as thinkers of the postmodern, a reading supported by emphasising their critique of totality, systematicity and progress, and bypassing any Hegelian or Marxist traces that might have supported the case to the contrary.²⁹ The distinctions between culture 'high and low', and realism and modernism sustaining Adorno's clichéd physiognomy were by then beginning to wane. The cliché was arguably still sustained, however, through the persistence of debates surrounding Adorno's status in relation to Derridian deconstruction. The camps were once more delineated as 'for' and 'against' deconstruction and the postmodern, with this very 'for/against' logic perpetuating the image of Adorno as a modernist, and by extension, of Adorno aesthetics as an aesthetics 'of the avant-garde'.

Since the turn of the millennium and the diminishing influence of deconstruction within cultural theory, the reception of Adorno's aesthetics has arguably become less polarised, and the more familiar philologico-philosophical approaches now co-exist alongside debates in fields as diverse

University Press, 1986), passim; Jochen Schulte-Sasse, 'Introduction: Modernity and Modernism, Postmodernity and Postmodernism: Framing the Issue', *Cultural Critique*, 5. Winter (1986-1987), 5-22 (p. 7); Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, *Modernity & the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), passim; *New German Critique*, Theodor W. Adorno Special Issue, 56. Spring/Summer (1992); Andreas Huyssen, *Twilight Memories: Marking Time in a Culture of Amnesia* (London & New York: Routledge, 1995), pp. 17-23, 92-101.

²⁹ Regarding the Benjamin reception, see the scholarship discussed with reference to 'undecidability' in Chapter 1. Regarding the Adorno reception, see, for instance, Sabine Wilke, 'Adorno and Derrida as Readers of Husserl: Some Reflections on the Historical Context of Modernism and Postmodernism', *boundary 2*, 16 (1989), 77-89; J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (Cambridge: Polity, 1992); Christoph Menke, *The Sovereignty of Art: Aesthetic Negativity in Adorno and Derrida*, trans. by Neil Solomon (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1988] 1998).

as postcolonial studies and environmental aesthetics.³⁰ The Marxist approach taken by John Roberts can be seen in this regard as a response to older debates on autonomy and the status of Kantian thought in Adorno's project.³¹ With regard to the question of the avant-garde more specifically, Roberts' discussion of the role of the avant-garde in *Aesthetic Theory* offers a new, if misguided, perspective. His critical appropriation of Adorno's aesthetics for a theorisation of the avant-garde, not only after modernism and the historical avant-garde, but also *after the neo-avant-garde* – the historical avant-garde's so-called 'repetition' – thus raises important questions with respect to the legacy of Adorno's aesthetics for the avant-garde, and vice versa. Before examining Roberts' post-Adornian avant-garde, let us first turn to Adorno's aesthetics and consider its chronopolitical implications in more detail.

³⁰ With respect to literary criticism, see Robert Kaufman, 'Negatively Capable Dialectics: Keats, Vendler, Adorno, and the Theory of the Avant-Garde', *Critical Inquiry*, 27.2 (2001), 354-84; Robert Kaufman, 'Aura, Still', *October*, 99. Winter (2002), 45-80. For postcolonial attempts, see Robert Spencer, 'Thoughts from Abroad: Theodor Adorno as Postcolonial Theorist', *Culture, Theory & Critique*, 51.3 (2010), 207-21. In the field on environmental aesthetics, see Donald Burke, 'Adorno's Aesthetic Rationality: On the Dialectic of Natural and Artistic Beauty', in *Critical Ecologies: The Frankfurt School and Contemporary Environmental Crises*, ed. by Andrew Biro (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2011), pp. 165-86.

³¹ See, for instance, the polemic launched against Kantian approaches in Dave Beech and John Roberts, eds., *The Philistine Controversy* (London: Verso, 2002).

3.2 Reading without a Dictionary: the Essay, the Commodity, the New

*The essay lends itself to concepts in a manner most likely comparable to the behaviour of someone abroad, who, rather than bungling the elements of the foreign language together from a school-book, is instead forced to speak that language. They will read without a dictionary.*³²

– T.W. Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’

Adorno’s sudden death brought the manuscript preparation for *Aesthetic Theory* to an abrupt end. Had he been able to complete the manuscript, however, the text would still remain unfinished. For as has often been noted, despite being a lengthy monograph, *Aesthetic Theory* is guided by the principle of the ‘essay-form’.³³ Such ‘finished unfinishedness’, frequently taken for a form of proto-postmodernism as we have seen, is encapsulated in Adorno’s famous chiasmatic inversion of Hegel’s aphorism found in *Minima Moralia* – ‘*Das Wahre ist das Ganze*’ [The true is the whole] becomes, in Adorno’s hands, ‘*Das Ganze ist das Unwahre*’ [The whole is the untrue].³⁴ It is also aptly

³² Theodor W. Adorno, ‘The Essay as Form’, trans. by Bob Hullot-Kentor and Frederic Will, in *The Adorno Reader*, pp. 91-111 (101, trans. modified); ‘Der Essay als Form’, *AGS XI*, pp. 9-33 (21). All subsequent references are to these editions, hereafter ‘EF’.

³³ See Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2013), p. 160; James Gordon Finlayson, ‘The Artwork and the *Promesse du Bonheur* in Adorno’, *European Journal of Philosophy*, 23.3 (2012), 392-419 (p. 393).

³⁴ See *MM*, p. 50/55 (trans. modified). It must be noted that Adorno insisted on a distinction between an ‘accidental fragment’ (viewed unfavourably and associated with aleatory practices) and the fragment ‘as form’ (viewed favourably and guiding the essay principle). On the former, see *AT*, ‘Universal and Particular’, pp. 221-222/328-330; on the latter, see *AT*, ‘Situation’, p. 45/74; ‘Coherence and Meaning’, pp. 136-147/205-221. Cf. the audio recording of a radio interview with Adorno, ‘Das Fragment als Form und Zufall’, Gespräch zwischen Adorno und Peter von Haselberg.

captured by Adorno's aphoristic image of a person reading without a dictionary. Combining a theory of experience with a theory of cognition, this passage from the celebrated 1958 essay 'Essay as Form' finds Adorno at his most Benjaminian. Just as Baroque language is 'constantly convulsed by rebellion on the part of the elements which make it up' for Benjamin, so too for Adorno must the relationship between word and meaning be emancipated from the logic of equivalence.³⁵ Thus, to read without a dictionary means to read in a manner that the word's meaning is variable, each new encounter between word and reader producing its meaning in constellation.

The variable correspondences produced by the essay-form have chronopolitical as well as epistemological implications. In a comparable image from the foundational formulation of constellation in *Negative Dialectics*, the safe-deposit box is unlocked and reveals its meaning only through a number combination, not a single key.³⁶ Or in yet another image from *Aesthetic Theory*, a child playing the piano stumbles upon a never-heard-before chord that in its accidental and discordant character provides the model for the experience of 'the new'.³⁷ Bringing these images of 'non-identity thinking' together, in this section I examine the implicit epistemology of time that can be found in Adorno's philosophical project. As I suggest below, the critique launched by the essay-form finds its temporal counterpart in the notion of the new, both figures of thought enacting a critique of time-as-measurement. Yet, as I demonstrate, such critique can only be articulated through foregrounding the dialectical relationship between the new and the ever-same, thus exposing the limitations of interpretations that read *Aesthetic Theory* as a theory of modernism.

Aufnahme beim HR, 2 Februar 1967; Sendung: NDR, 18 April 1967. Berlin, Akademie der Künste, Theodor W. Adorno/Walter Benjamin Archiv, Audio File TA_003.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Origin*, p. 207.

³⁶ See *ND*, pp. 163/163-164.

³⁷ See *AT*, 'Situation', p. 32/55.

Adorno may not have explicitly set out to develop a philosophy of time, yet the question of historical time permeates his major philosophical antagonism with Heideggerian phenomenology, on the one hand, and positivist social science, on the other. Viewed by Adorno as two sides of the same coin, phenomenology and social science were both considered to be lacking in historicity: whereas phenomenology's focus on 'mere temporality' is found guilty of subjectivism, the erasure of the subject's experience in social science leads to 'identity-thinking' [*Identität Denken*].³⁸ Considered chronopolitically, therefore, the principle of the essay-form, and Adorno's broader critique of the logic of equivalence found in a philosophy of 'first principles' (or *prima philosophia*) also constitutes a critique of time-as-measurement. Thus, despite Adorno's hostility towards the thought and figure of Martin Heidegger, there is a common origin between Heideggerian phenomenology and Adorno's conception of time, especially considering the intellectual affinities between Edmund Husserl and Adorno's mentor and academic supervisor Hans Cornelius.³⁹ As we have also discussed in the context of Benjamin's critique of historicism in Chapter 1, the phenomenological 'now' is distinct from a present that can be measured as an instant, its 'now-ness' or 'present-ness' involving not only what 'has-been' but also what is 'to-come'. Adorno's intellectual project is indisputably also guided by this underlying conception

³⁸ See especially 'The Actuality of Philosophy', trans. by Benjamin Snow, in *The Adorno Reader*, pp. 23-39; 'Die Aktualität der Philosophie', *AGS X*, pp. 325-344; and Theodor W. Adorno, *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique. Studies in Husserl and the Phenomenal Antinomies*, trans. by Willis Domingo (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1982), pp. 38-40; *AGS 5*, pp. 46-47.

³⁹ On the role of Husserl in Adorno's early philosophical development, see Ernst Wolff, 'From Phenomenology to critical theory: The genesis of Adorno's critical theory from his reading of Husserl', *Philosophy & Social Criticism*, 32.5 (2006), 555-72. See also Roger Foster, *Adorno: The Recovery of Experience* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2007), pp. 89-111.

of time, his critique manifesting itself more polemically in the writings on chronometrisation in music and the critique of leisure time.⁴⁰

This fundamental affinity notwithstanding, the Adorno-Benjaminian conception of time-as-experience departs from the above phenomenological framework as soon as it comes into contact with the humanist Marxism of Georg Lukács. As is well established, Lukács's landmark analysis of the fetish character of the commodity that re-reads the opening chapter of Marx's *Capital* and formulates the notion of reification as a process of de-temporalisation, and relatedly de-humanisation, has had a profound influence on both Adorno and Benjamin.⁴¹ Understood in Lukács's Marxist terms, the critique of quantitative time is none other but the critique of the principle of capitalist commodity exchange that reduces human labour to an abstract concept of median labour-time.⁴² Thus, in Adorno and Horkheimer's classic account in *The Dialectic of Enlightenment*, the culture industry is defined with respect to its lack of historicity: 'Nothing remains as of old; everything has to run incessantly, to keep moving.'⁴³ And we are categorically reminded that,

⁴⁰ See 'Free Time', in *Critical Models: Interventions and Catchwords*, trans. by Henry W. Pickford, introduction by Lydia Goehr (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 167-75; 'Freizeit', *AGS 10. 2*, pp. 654-55. Cf. *MM*, 'Morality and Temporal Sequence', pp. 78-81; 'Timetable', pp. 130-31. It is telling in this regard that Adorno's conception of time is broadly equated with variance and duration, so that temporal variance is often evoked to denote historicity. See, for instance, *EF*, p. 99; *AT*, 'Art Beauty', pp. 79-80/81-85, pp. 85-86/132-34; 'Subject-Object', p. 175/262; 'Toward a Theory of the Artwork', pp. 175-78/262-66, pp. 191-93/272-74.

⁴¹ See Georg Lukács, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', in *History and Class Consciousness*, trans. by Rodney Livingstone (London: Merlin Press, [1923] 1971), pp. 83-222. Cf. Karl Marx, *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy. Volume I*, trans. by Ben Fowkes (Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1976), pp. 125-77 (especially, pp. 129-31).

⁴² See *ND*, p. 146/147. See also 'Progress', in *Critical Models*, pp. 143-160; 'Fortschritt', *AGS 10.2*, pp. 617-38.

⁴³ *DE*, p. 134; *AGS 3*, p. 156.

despite its frenetic movement, the culture industry 'is constituted by repetition' [*besteht in Wiederholung*], the constant pull towards a superficial 'up-to-date-ness' masking a deeper historical stasis.⁴⁴

In Adorno's aesthetics, too, the loss of historicity associated with reification defines the artwork's paradoxical relationship to the commodity. Whereas the authentic artwork grows old, the commodity, like the doomed-to-youth Dorian Gray, never ages. For Adorno, the authentic artwork is necessarily historical.⁴⁵ Yet such historicity does not denote a distinction between an (aesthetic) interiority opposed to a (historical) exteriority.⁴⁶ Rather, the artwork's immanent historicity is to be understood alongside the artwork's 'social asociality', famously captured by such aphoristic statements as: 'what is social in art is its immanent movement against society'; 'art is the social antithesis of society, not directly deducible from it'; 'even in the most extreme refusal of society, art is essentially social'.⁴⁷ Therefore, the artwork's social and historical import is to be found not in a supplementary engagement with an external socio-historical reality but in its dialectical negation of a socio-historical exteriority, articulated through its autonomy.

⁴⁴ *DE*, p. 136/*AGS* 3, p. 158 (trans. modified). This chronopolitical motif recurs in selected aphorisms in *Minima Moralia* as well as Adorno's notorious critique of jazz. See *MM*, 'Gala Dinner', pp. 118-119; 'Consecutio temporum', pp. 217-219; 'Late extra', p. 235; 'Perennial Fashion-Jazz', *P*, pp. 123-127. Cf. *AP* [J56a, 10], p. 331; [S1, 3], p. 544; [S1, 5], p. 544.

⁴⁵ See *inter alia*, *AT*, 'Art Beauty', pp. 85-86/132-133; 'Semblance and Expression', p. 112/170; 'Toward a Theory of the Artwork', p. 191/285; 'Paralipomena', p. 286/426; 'Draft Introduction', pp. 357-359/530-533.

⁴⁶ On the idea of immanent critique being at the same time a critique 'from outside' [*von außen*], see *ND*, p. 145/147. Cf. Adorno's Benjaminian analysis of the bourgeois *intérieur* in *Kierkegaard*, pp. 40-46; *AGS* 2, pp. 65-69. See also the famous Letter 39, 'Adorno and Gretel Karplus to Benjamin, Hornberg, 2-4 and 5 August 1935', in *CC*, pp. 104-116.

⁴⁷ See, respectively, *AT*, 'Society', p. 227/336; 'Art, Society, Aesthetics', p. 8/19; 'Paralipomena', p. 320/475; 'Draft Introduction', p. 349/519.

If considered in isolation from the critique of the culture industry, Adorno's definition of aesthetic autonomy might elicit the conclusion that the temporality of the commodity-form exists in a world *apart* from that of the artwork. Such conclusions have been sometimes drawn by scholars of modernism who, as we have touched upon in the previous section, regard *Aesthetic Theory* as a theory of aesthetic modernism. Fredric Jameson has been one such reader, problematically de-dialecticising Adorno's thought by dissociating 'culture' from 'industry' and assigning the notion of the new a privileged, autonomous position so that its utopian chronopolitics remains untainted by the compromised temporality of the culture industry.⁴⁸ Yet, if one does not conflate Adorno's philosophico-historical conception of the modern (which cannot operate but *within* modernity's compromised social relations and unrepresentable atrocities), and an aestheticist, genre-bound conception of modernism, then it is evident that Adorno's aesthetics considers art's participation in the dialectic of Enlightenment.⁴⁹ Not only is progress another name for barbarism, but the artwork is never fully exterior to the commodity. Rather, the artwork requires the commodity because it is negatively constituted by it. 'If it is essential to artworks that they be things, it is no less essential that they negate their own status as things [...]', to cite one of many such explicit formulations found in *Aesthetic Theory*.⁵⁰

⁴⁸ See Fredric Jameson, *Late Marxism*, pp. 144, 151, 171, 185. I am not alone in having made this observation. See Espen Hammer, *Adorno and the Political* (London & New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 78-79. See also the summary of critical accounts by Eva Geulen, Robert Hullot-Kentor and Peter Osborne in John Pizer, 'Jameson's Adorno, or, the Persistence of the Utopian', *New German Critique*, 58. Winter (1993), 127-51 (p. 127).

⁴⁹ See, for instance, *AT*, 'On the Categories of the Ugly, the Beautiful and Technique', p. 47/76; p. 61/97.

⁵⁰ *AT*, 'Subject-Object', p. 175/262.

In a short essay that attends to the artwork's relationship to the commodity, Marxist art theorist Stewart Martin has convincingly argued that such relationship is a 'contradictory relation of recognition'.⁵¹ Re-translating Hullot-Kentor's rendition of the clause 'the absolute artwork converges with the absolute commodity' as 'the absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity', Martin has foregrounded a relationship of mutual recognition between the artwork and commodity that manifests itself in a moment of encounter.⁵² This encounter – this very spatio-temporal point at which the artwork meets with or, to modify Martin's translation further, *is encountered by* the commodity – is marked with the threat that the artwork will be overwhelmed by the commodity. As Hohendahl has also noted, Adorno's problematisation of art's autonomy is taken to such an extreme that it is at risk of disappearing.⁵³ Considering this relationship of encounter in chronopolitical terms, therefore, the encounter between the new and the ever-same can also be said to be such a 'contradictory relation of recognition': it is the threat of *kairós* being overpowered by the repetitive up-to-date-ness of capital-time. Indeed, Adorno himself posits this relationship between the two temporalities in such terms: 'The category of the new, as the abstract negation of the category of the permanent, converges with it: its invariance is its weakness'.⁵⁴ The new is always at risk of becoming the ever-same, and

⁵¹ See Stewart Martin, 'The absolute artwork meets the absolute commodity', *Radical Philosophy*, 146. November/December (2007), 15-25 (pp. 18, 24-25, n.18).

⁵² Martin, 24 n.18.

⁵³ See Hohendahl, *Fleeting*, p. 61. On the artwork being 'under threat', see also *AT*, 'Paralipomena', p. 308/456.

⁵⁴ *AT*, 'Paralipomena', p. 271/404 (trans. modified). This conception of the qualitatively new (as 'a movement that does not play itself out in mere identity, mere reproduction of what has always been') appears as early as the foundational 1932 lecture 'The Idea of Natural History'. See Theodor W. Adorno, 'The Idea of Natural-History', trans. by Robert Hullot-Kentor, in Robert Hullot-Kentor, *Things beyond*

must remain in suspension between identity and non-identity so as not to lapse into mere novelty.⁵⁵ While the new cannot be thought without the temporality of industrial commodity production, the latter's repetition 'contain[s] a principle antithetical to the new. This exerts itself as a force in the antinomy of the aesthetically new'.⁵⁶ The new 'dreams' of being liberated from such temporality, writes Adorno in *Minima Moralia*, yet 'its concept remains attached to that sickness'.⁵⁷ Yet the risk of catastrophe at the same time signals a utopian promise. This is why it is crucial for Adorno that the new remain unfulfilled and temporally incomplete: 'The new is the longing for the new, not itself; it is from this that everything new suffers'.⁵⁸ Therefore, it is within this spatio-temporal point of encounter between the new and ever-same that Adorno's dialectical relationship of utopia and catastrophe unfolds.

To retrace our steps so far, in this section I have examined how Adorno's crucial epistemological category of the essay-form rests on a particular notion of historical time indebted to a phenomenological conception of time-as-experience and a humanist Marxist critique of quantitative time. Following Stewart Martin's analysis of the relationship between artwork and commodity, and correcting common assertions that view the new as identical with aesthetic modernism and circumvent its dialectical relationship with the culture industry, I have sought to demonstrate that the new is best understood in its dialectical encounter with the ever-same – an encounter that signals the possibility of both utopia and catastrophe. If the principle of the essay-form lies neither within *chronos* nor *kairós* but in the encounter between the two, as has been argued here, then what happens when such principle is deployed

Resemblance: Collected Essays on Theodor W. Adorno (New York: Columbia University Press, 2006), pp. 252-269 (p. 253). Cf. 'Idee der Naturgeschichte', *AGS 1*, pp. 345-365.

⁵⁵ *AT*, 'Situation', p. 21/36; p. 23/41. Cf. *MM*, 'Late extra', p. 237.

⁵⁶ *AT*, 'Paralipomena', pp. 272/405.

⁵⁷ *MM*, 'Late extra', p. 235. See also *AT*, 'Paralipomena', pp. 270-272/402-405.

⁵⁸ *AT*, 'Situation', p. 32/55 (trans. modified).

in the context of Roberts' post-Adornian theory of a suspensive avant-garde? We can now turn our attention to answering this very question.

3.3 Exceptionally New? The Suspensive Avant-Garde's Adornian (In)fidelities

John Roberts' theorisation of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism – or of 'an avant-garde after avant-gardism', as he himself calls it – is highly germane to our present investigation of repetition in historical time.⁵⁹ Roberts has described his broader intellectual project as a 'negative dialectical and anti-poststructuralist research programme'⁶⁰ and a 'dialectical art theory informed by a Hegelian-Marxist model',⁶¹ and his theorisation of the avant-garde can certainly be situated along these axes. Despite his critique of the alleged pessimism articulated in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Roberts' theoretical standpoint is in fact broadly aligned with Bürger's overall intellectual aims. Both are guided by a Hegelian-Marxist conception of history, and both are at pains to rescue Adorno's autonomy from a perceived apolitical formalism.⁶² With reference to their conception of the avant-garde's historicity, too, there are notable convergences (even if the differences in the deployed terminology can somewhat mask such affinity). Both Roberts and Bürger distinguish between an 'authentic' and a 'false' sublation of art into life, with the latter being represented (largely, though not consistently in the case of Roberts) by the neo-avant-garde, and both concede that, even though the historical avant-garde failed in its aims, traces of these aims manifest

⁵⁹ AN, 293 (italics original).

⁶⁰ LS, 382.

⁶¹ AN, 303.

⁶² As we have seen in Chapter 2, Bürger attempts to modify Adorno through turning to a more empirical, sociological model of art and literature, whilst Roberts, as is discussed below, combines Adorno's aesthetic theory with elements from Soviet Productivism.

themselves in later art.⁶³

Where Roberts and Bürger differ is in their prior assumptions about the avant-garde's continuing radical function. As we have seen in Chapter 2, Bürger's theorisation of the avant-garde is posited in such a manner so as to affirm the category of *Institution Kunst*, and any claims related to the avant-garde's contemporary historical relevance are inflected by this priority. In the case of Roberts, the primary intellectual and political starting point is precisely the affirmation of the avant-garde's contemporary relevance.⁶⁴ It is upon this categorical belief in the avant-garde's continuing radical function that Roberts' further claims and propositions rest. Responding to Bürger's claim that the historical avant-garde failed in its aim to re-integrate art into life praxis, Roberts constructs a new theory of the avant-garde, basing his theory on this very failure. He introduces a distinction between a historicist and a trans-historical conception of the avant-garde, vehemently maintaining that 'the political and social defeat of the originary avant-garde is not the same as the defeat of the *category* of the avant-garde'.⁶⁵ This distinction between the avant-garde as the periodising category of the 'historical avant-gardes' and a trans-historical category of the avant-garde *as notion* also guides the main premise in my own enquiry. However, as I argue below, the historicity at work in Roberts' theorisation renders this distinction untenable. In what follows, I assess Roberts' indebtedness to *Aesthetic Theory* while also identifying his textual, and by extension chronopolitical, infidelities to Adorno's epistemology of time.

Roberts' dialectical art theory resonates with Adorno's thought on several levels. Remaining in close and faithful proximity to Adorno's classic

⁶³ Cf. *ThoA/ThdA*, p. 59/80 and AN, 292-293, 299-300.

⁶⁴ Apart from Bürger, Roberts also positions himself against popular narratives of the avant-garde's co-optation such as those of Suzi Gablik. See Suzi Gablik, *Has Modernism Failed?* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1984), pp. 65-82.

⁶⁵ Roberts, LS, 378 (emphasis original); see also *RTA*, pp. ix-x, 14-15, 103-104; RP, 718; AN, 300; PC, 532-533.

conception of aesthetic autonomy, Roberts is careful to emphasise that such autonomy remains bound to its heteronomous other: it is variously described as a 'socialised autonomy', an 'autonomy-as-negation', and an 'autonomy-as-the-critique-of-autonomy'.⁶⁶ It is on such clearly discernible Adornian grounds that Roberts' attack on relational aesthetics, for instance, is played out. Whereas for Roberts relational aesthetics subsumes artistic practices under social concerns and thus instrumentalises them, the category of the avant-garde that he instead advocates remains delicately 'suspended' in the space between aesthetic autonomy and social praxis.⁶⁷ *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde* devotes a long discussion to Adorno's relevance for a theory of contemporary art and explicitly calls for an Adornian method that can 'be brought to bear on Adorno's categories'.⁶⁸ Correspondingly, his conception of avant-garde historicity has distinct Adornian echoes. According to Roberts' proposition, the avant-garde's original aims failed to be realised and it is precisely because of this past failure that the relevance of the avant-garde (as 'category') persists.⁶⁹ Although the allusion is not made by Roberts himself, one need only think of the famous opening sentence of *Negative Dialectics* – 'philosophy, which once seemed outmoded, lives on because the moment of its realisation was missed' – to discern the Adornian logic underpinning the suspensive avant-garde.⁷⁰

Equally formative for the development of a theory of the suspensive avant-garde has been Roberts' deep-seated fidelity to the political imaginary of the October Revolution. It is therefore telling that when referring to a 'historical avant-garde' Roberts has in mind only a small fraction of what art historians usually associate with the term, his implicit typology of what constitutes 'avant-garde' being in this respect even narrower than Bürger's.

⁶⁶ See *RTA*, chapter 2, pp. 92-122; and pp. 33-37, 54-57, 71.

⁶⁷ See *RTA*, pp. 35, 47-50, 73, 80-83, 91.

⁶⁸ *RTA*, p. 99.

⁶⁹ See *RTA*, pp. 14-21, 55-57, 90-91, 197.

⁷⁰ *ND*, p. 3/13 (trans. modified).

(Whereas Bürger's avant-garde typology includes, as we have seen, Dada, early Surrealism, Constructivism, and with further qualifications, Expressionism, Futurism and Cubism,⁷¹ Roberts posits a canon that is concerned only with post-revolutionary Russian movements and any Soviet affiliations these may have had in Weimar Germany.⁷²) It is from this highly selective canon that Roberts draws his distinction between the avant-garde understood as a failed historical phenomenon and the avant-garde as a radical category that remains alive in the present. Thus, looking to a Soviet Productivist model of art practice where there is no distinction between artist and technician or between artist and engineer, Roberts proclaims that the avant-garde today ought to be conceived as an 'open-ended research programme'.⁷³ Here, however, Roberts' intellectual project becomes distinctly 'post-Adornian', disrupting the notion of autonomy that was elsewhere so fiercely endorsed, and suggesting a theoretical category that can only be seen as deeply incompatible with Adorno's foundational programmatic statement that introduced the idea of philosophy as founded *not* on research, but on interpretation.⁷⁴

Roberts' Productivist adaptation of Adornian aesthetics is further complicated by the presence of another kind of infidelity. This form of infidelity is best understood in the context of language and translation theory: in other words, in a sense that does not denote allegiance or loyalty, but

⁷¹ See *ThdA/ThoA*, pp. 44-45/109, n. 4.

⁷² See, for instance, PC, 528, 538; SA, 718, 727-729.

⁷³ *RTA*, p. 105.

⁷⁴ Roberts insists that such a research programme is 'open-ended' and untainted by the technocratic demands of the creative industries, yet the very fact that the category of art falls under the more important category of the research programme constitutes a significant departure from Adorno's idealist, in this regard, aesthetics, which is founded upon maintaining art's philosophical import. See 'Actuality of Philosophy', p. 31.

textual (or translational) deviation from the original.⁷⁵ While Roberts' intellectual debt to Adorno is incontestable, his presentation of Adorno's own ideas, especially with regard to the avant-garde, is far from dependable. Such textual infidelities perhaps owe something to the confusion surrounding Adorno's relationship to the avant-garde, as has been discussed above; and Adorno's elusive references and ambiguous statements have certainly not helped. In the section of *Aesthetic Theory* entitled *Die Ismen*, for instance, the 'isms' are understood in the art-historiographical sense of 'avant-garde movements' but Adorno also reserves the then-still-current journalistic sense of 'avant-garde' denoting 'advanced' or 'vanguard' to describe any kind of art that may have been, rightly or wrongly, considered pioneering.⁷⁶ Often the two senses converge, especially when describing 'contemporary avant-garde art', which like 'new, new music' is regarded by Adorno with suspicion.⁷⁷ Bürger's theory has perhaps also contributed to this confusion, since Bürger adopts key Adornian categories such as the new and the non-organic artwork (which Adorno would have deployed with reference to Samuel Beckett or Arnold Schoenberg) and then applies them to Dada and Surrealist works (which would not have been selected to exemplify these categories by Adorno himself).⁷⁸ Moreover, as Richard Wolin has aptly noted, Adorno's own view

⁷⁵ See Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), p. 213. See also Barbara Johnson, 'Taking Fidelity Philosophically', in *Difference in Translation*, edited with an introduction by Joseph F. Graham (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1985), pp. 142-48.

⁷⁶ Cf. *AT*, 'Situation', pp. 24-25/43-44. For examples of the latter instance see *AT*, 'Toward a Theory of the Artwork', p. 183/273; 'Paralipomena', p. 287/426.

⁷⁷ See *AT*, 'Situation', p. 22/40; 'Music and New Music', in *Quasi una fantasia*, pp. 249-268.

⁷⁸ See *ThoA*, pp. 73-82; *ThdA*, pp. 98-111. Cf. *AT*, 'Situation', pp. 29-30/51-52; 'Art Beauty', p. 90/139.

on Surrealism remained deeply ambivalent.⁷⁹ When compared to Benjamin's favourable assessment and sometimes direct influence, Adorno's position finds him closer to Georg Lukács's assessment that deemed Surrealist works to be overly subjectivist.⁸⁰ Yet in *Aesthetic Theory*, although avant-garde movements generally receive similar treatment, at the same time and often in the very same passage, Adorno will write in favour of the 'isms', specifically defending their ideology in light of these artists' victimisation and persecution

⁷⁹ See Richard Wolin, 'Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism', in *Semblance*, pp. 106-119. Cf. Theodor W. Adorno, 'Looking Back on Surrealism' (1956), in *Notes to Literature. Volume 1*, ed. by Rolf Tiedemann; trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), pp. 86-90. See also the passing, rather cryptic comment in an early essay, where Kurt Weill's musical collaborations with Brecht are described as 'surrealistic' and as part of a 'hybrid' type of music that remains clearly distinct from the 'modern' music of Schoenberg. 'On the Social Situation of Music' (1932), *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, ed. by Richard Leppert; trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2002), pp. 391-436 (pp. 396-97).

⁸⁰ Adorno's relationship to Surrealism is most often discussed with reference to his relationship to Benjamin. Yet a different dimension to Adorno's relationship with Surrealism could be opened up through an examination of his relationship with the graduate student Elizabeth Lenk, whose dissertation on the lyric poetry of André Breton also provided a frame of reference for Bürger's analysis. See *ThoA/ThdA*, pp. 53, 113-114/72, 75; Elizabeth Lenk, *Der Springende Narziss. André Bretons poetischer Materialismus* (München: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971). Cf. Elizabeth Lenk, hg. *Theodor W. Adorno und Elisabeth Lenk: Briefwechsel 1962-1969* (München: edition text + Kritik, 2001), for instance, letters 4 and 5, pp. 27-29; recently translated as *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. and trans. by Susan H. Gillespie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015).

by the Soviet and Nazi regimes.⁸¹ These complications notwithstanding, Roberts' presentation of the avant-garde in *Aesthetic Theory* can be seen as a typical case of textual infidelity. Having sustained a long and extensive intellectual engagement with the work of Adorno, Roberts habitually projects his own claims and propositions onto Adorno's voice and intentions, thus lapsing into a form of ventriloquism.⁸² There are many instances of such ventriloquism, concerning discussions of autonomy and the institution of art, and Bürger's critique of Adorno's aesthetics.⁸³ For the purposes of our enquiry, however, we can focus on one example that has direct bearing on the temporality of the new. Since this act of ventriloquism has in part to do with Roberts' tendency to over-generalise and paraphrase without offering any references or citations, it is necessary to cite it here at length:

In *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), Adorno recognises the historical defeat of the Soviet and Weimar avant-gardes and the present impossibility of art's critical sublation into life. But, rather than sacrificing the negativity of the avant-garde to some untroubled notion of 'political art' or conservative restitution of an older modernism, he rearticulates the question of the avant-garde on the terrain of art's autonomy. [...] Autonomy and the avant-garde, then, are the codeterminate names given to the production of the 'new' as the condition of art's necessary emergence from heteronomy. On this basis, I would argue, Adorno introduces into the debate on the avant-garde a distinction between the avant-garde as Event and the avant-garde as the temporal, global experience of modernity. Rather than treating the avant-garde as the failed repetition of an original lost moment, he sees the postwar avant-garde as aesthetically and critically equivalent to the early avant-gardes.⁸⁴

⁸¹ *AT*, 'On the Categories of the Ugly, the Beautiful, and Technique', pp. 55-56/90-92; 'Art Beauty', pp. 93-94/145-146; 'Society', pp. 229, 256-257/343, 380-382; 'Paralipomena', p. 270/402.

⁸² Roberts' tendency to ventriloquise has also been noted by some reviewers of his earlier work. See Steve Edwards, 'A Duchamp for the Left?', *Radical Philosophy*, 149. May/June (2008), 56-58 (p. 58).

⁸³ See, respectively, *RTA*, pp. 98; 94-95.

⁸⁴ *LS*, 378-79 (emphasis original).

Even though Roberts makes no specific references to any parts of *Aesthetic Theory*, it is evident from the above passage that he uses Adorno's theory so as to speak through it. As one can fairly easily establish, nowhere in *Aesthetic Theory* does Adorno use the terms 'historical avant-garde' and 'neo-avant-garde', let alone write in defence of the latter. One may infer Adorno's awareness that there were now two waves of avant-gardism (the essay 'The Ageing of New Music' confirms this), but when he makes a passing remark on 'Neo-Dadaism', for instance, this is an ironic dismissal and certainly not its defence against the avant-garde's failure.⁸⁵ Similarly, the two kinds of temporality that Roberts suggests can be found in Adorno's text are an expression of his own theorisation of the suspensive avant-garde. Thus, as we will see below, this particular case of textual infidelity reveals an underlying manifestation of historical infidelity.

This ventriloquised distinction between two kinds of historical time can be neatly captured through the distinction between measured and experienced time. Loosely basing his conception of historicism on the familiar Benjaminian critique of progress that seeks to replace the seriality of empty, homogeneous time with a time of radical rupture, Roberts intends to 'lift the avant-garde out from its conventional art historical categories'.⁸⁶ Instead of seeing the avant-garde as a series of art movements – or as events on a string of rosary beads, to revisit Benjamin's memorable image – Roberts proposes the avant-garde as a 'spatial concept'⁸⁷ and rejects those 'vulgarly historicist' positions that view the avant-garde as politically irrelevant.⁸⁸ Here, Roberts' account problematically reduces historicism to a form of defeatism, where, crudely put, those who consider the avant-garde dead are 'historicists', and those who

⁸⁵ See *AT*, 'Coherence and Meaning', p. 153/230. Cf. 'The Ageing of New Music' (1955), in *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, pp. 181-202.

⁸⁶ *RTA*, p. 16.

⁸⁷ *AN*, 293; cf. *RTA*, pp. 14-15.

⁸⁸ See *SA*, 717.

do not are ‘anti-historicists’.⁸⁹ Assuming the position of an ‘anti-historicist’ (against Bürger’s alleged historicism), therefore, Roberts proposes the avant-garde as ‘the place where the co-temporality of historical and revolutionary time is restored’.⁹⁰ This place is categorically situated against the avant-garde understood as an ‘empirical historical sequence’, its historicity being reclaimed in the service of revolutionary time.⁹¹ The suspensive avant-garde is thus proposed as a moment of radical rupture that breaks away from the ever-same linearity of capital-time, and thus as a moment of *kairós*.⁹²

Roberts’ foregrounding of the ruptural dimensions of avant-garde temporality is intensified by his adoption of Alain Badiou’s notion of ‘the Event’.⁹³ In *Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde*, Badiou is extensively critiqued for aestheticising modernism and equating the avant-garde with a non-dialectical (read, non-Adornian) notion of autonomy.⁹⁴ Yet in an earlier

⁸⁹ See *RTA*, pp. 17-21.

⁹⁰ *RTA*, p. 49.

⁹¹ *RTA*, p. 176.

⁹² See, *RTA*, pp. 48-49, 132; *AN*, 291, 303; *LS*, 379, 381, 383-384.

⁹³ The summary of Badiou’s thought that follows relies on my reading of: Alain Badiou, *Being and Event*, trans. by Oliver Feltham (London: Continuum, [1988] 2005), pp. 232-61; *Ethics: An Essay on the Understanding of Evil*, trans. by Peter Hallward (London: Verso, [1993] 2001). My understanding has been greatly aided by the following introductions and interpretations: Marian Eide, ‘Otherness and Singularity: Ethical Modernism’, in *A Handbook of Modernism Studies*, ed. by Jean-Michel Rabaté (Chichester: Wiley-Blackwell, 2013), pp. 313-26 (pp. 321-24); Andrew Gibson, *Intermittency: The Concept of Historical Reason in Recent French Philosophy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2011), chapter 2, pp. 24-67; Gary Gutting, *Thinking the Impossible: French Philosophy since 1960* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), chapter 9, pp. 165-83; Peter Hallward, *Badiou: A Subject to Truth* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2003), chapter 5, pp. 107-51.

⁹⁴ See *RTA*, pp. 71, 73-91; *AN*, 302; John Roberts, ‘On the limits of negation in Badiou’s theory of art’, *Journal of Visual Arts Practice*, 7.3 (2008), 271–82. An examination of Badiou’s turn to theorising the avant-garde is beyond the scope of my analysis; for a

essay whose main ideas also reappear in a slightly modified form in Roberts' monograph, one can identify allusions to the Badiouian Event, specifically with reference to the idea of fidelity.⁹⁵ We have seen in Chapter 1 that Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* is often likened to the Badiouian Event, both notions generally thought to be expressions of a radical rupture of historical time. Whereas Benjaminian *Jetztzeit* arguably negotiates a liminal position between quotidian and exceptional time, in the case of the Badiouian Event, however, one is resolutely located in the realm of exception. Such exception is marked retroactively through the notion of fidelity: after the Event's occurrence, one is propelled to show fidelity to what has occurred, for it is no longer possible to act, and to continue acting, as if nothing had happened.⁹⁶ In Roberts' deployment of the notion of fidelity, the Event emerges in the form of the 'historical avant-garde', which revolves around the political imaginary of the October Revolution. Roberts urges his readers 'to hold onto the truth of the failure of the original avant-garde' in an act of fidelity towards the 'original' avant-garde's failure and, by extension, the failure of the October Revolution to bring about communism.⁹⁷ Thus, for Roberts, the suspensive avant-garde is constituted by its fidelity to the 'failed Event' of the historical avant-garde, and it is this fidelity that produces its revolutionary temporality.

Through mobilising the Badiouian Event and a *kairotic* conception of *Jetztzeit*, Roberts' new may appear to be even more ruptural than its Adornian counterpart. Yet the suspensive avant-garde's newness occupies a less exceptional space than his author might have intended. We have seen that

brief discussion, see Jan Voelker, 'Reversing and Affirming the Avant-gardes: A New Paradigm for Politics', in *Badiou and the Political Condition*, ed. by Marios Constantinou (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), pp. 147-163. Cf. Alain Badiou, 'Avant-gardes', in *The Century*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2007), pp. 131-47.

⁹⁵ See LS, 379, 381, 383-84; *RTA*, pp. 90-91, 132, 176, 185.

⁹⁶ See Badiou, *Ethics*, pp. 40-44.

⁹⁷ LS, 384.

Roberts opposes historicist accounts of the avant-garde, preferring instead to view the avant-garde as a space of temporal possibility. Nonetheless, his overall intellectual framework follows a loose chronological conception of art movements moving through the decades of the twentieth century – the ‘30s, the ‘60s, the ‘90s – that relies heavily upon the historicist accounts he rejects.⁹⁸ Such chronology is romantically attached to lists of calendrical years that denote key turning points in history – ‘1848, 1871, 1917, 1956, 1968, 1974, 1989’ – in a manner that might well be closer to the socialist-democratic mechanistic belief in progress attacked by Benjamin, than to the moment of *Jetztzeit*.⁹⁹ The series of dates that are listed here are, of course, in themselves ruptural and could be read as temporal indexes of revolutionary rupture. Yet the extent to which Roberts’ own historicism is guided by a chronological imperative means also that the suspensive avant-garde is inserted into a linear, chronological narrative that tells the story of the ‘historical avant-garde’, the ‘neo-avant-garde’ – and now ‘third’ avant-garde – in a chain of periodising categories.

Roberts’ textual infidelity to Adorno is crucially implicated in this periodisation of rupture. Whereas Roberts is careful to consider the artwork’s dialectical relation to the commodity-form, the centrality of the ever-same in negatively constituting the new is problematically elided. As we have discussed in Part II, while the Adorno-Benjaminian new denotes a historicity of rupture, it is never external to the threat of the ever-same. Thus, when such temporal relationship is taken to the discussion of continuity and rupture in history, the chronopolitics guiding Roberts’ suspensive avant-garde is revealed as non-evental, indeed operating ‘as if nothing had happened’. Unlike Hal Foster’s reworking of Freudian belatedness that Roberts partly espouses because of its ‘anti-historicism’, in the suspensive avant-garde, there is no traumatic event to be re-enacted and re-told. Unlike Adorno’s or Benjamin’s

⁹⁸ As an indication see *RTA*, pp. 20-28, 37-39, 167.

⁹⁹ See *LS*, 371.

moment of decision which expresses a liminal, hazardous position, in the suspensive avant-garde, defeat does not carry with it the possibility and threat of absolute catastrophe. The historical avant-garde's failure is seen merely as a relative blow – there is no encounter with the threat of fascism, with the singularity of Auschwitz, with the finitude of death. We are then left only to speculate that, should the suspensive avant-garde itself now fail, things will simply continue 'as usual'.

In light of this analysis, we can now return to the opening questions prompted by Benjamin's reading of Kafka. Does the suspensive avant-garde constitute an avant-garde 'anew' or is it nothing but a re-enactment of the hellish repetition of the 'ever-new, ever-same'? The suspensive avant-garde is certainly not a 'faithful copy' of the historical avant-garde, nor is Roberts' post-Adornian theory faithful to Adorno's writing. As we have seen, the suspensive avant-garde is constituted by a relationship of fidelity towards the failed aims of the historical avant-garde. In opposition to Bürger's claim that the historical avant-garde has been defeated and therefore that the avant-garde is irrelevant as a whole, Roberts introduces a distinction between the avant-garde as a sequence of art movements and the avant-garde as the space of an open-ended research programme, so as to affirm the avant-garde's relevance for the present. Yet, as my analysis suggests, since Roberts' periodising logic remains wedded to a historicist chronology, the suspensive avant-garde becomes quickly incorporated into the very seriality that it sought to disrupt. This periodisation of the avant-garde as rupture is striking when the suspensive avant-garde is examined in relation to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory*. As I demonstrate, Roberts crucially misreads the role that the avant-garde plays in *Aesthetic Theory*, and deploys Adorno's text as a vessel through which to express his own intentions. Roberts carefully attends to the function of aesthetic autonomy as a relational category. Yet the underlying temporality that structures the dialectical relationship between artwork and commodity-form escapes his attention. Whereas Adorno's notion of the new is dialectically constituted by its heteronomous other, the ever-same, Roberts'

new instead foregrounds its *kairotic* aspects, thus bringing the notion closer to the readings of *Jetztzeit* as *kairós* and to the exceptional chronopolitics of the Badiouian Event. Paradoxically, therefore – or, rather, consistent with the paradoxical logic that guides Adorno’s dialectics – the further the notion of the new is pulled towards *kairós* by Roberts, the more distant its potential for historical rupture becomes. To those who, like Roberts, are invested in the category of the avant-garde as a locus of revolutionary politics, this conclusion may itself seem like an expression of defeat. Yet, if the idea of the avant-garde after modernism is still bound by the temporal contradictions of the modern, then it is imperative that the unwelcome chronopolitics revealed through Roberts’ theory is galvanised so as to prompt a deeper questioning of the avant-garde’s participation in the hellish newness-in-repetition of modernity.

Chapter 4

Strangers to Our Times: Belatedness, Modernisation and the Auto-Allochronism of the *Neoavanguardia*

*Strangely, the stranger inhabits us.*¹
– Julia Kristeva

Having examined afterness through the theorisations of Peter Bürger and John Roberts, the last iteration of ‘the new after the new’ takes us to a point in time before Roberts’ proposition of a third, suspensive avant-garde and before Bürger’s much-disputed affirmation of the historical avant-gardes. The time of the neo-avant-garde – a time when the terms ‘neo-avant-garde’ and ‘contemporary avant-garde’ meant one and the same thing, and the ‘neo’ had yet to become a ‘second historical’ – is examined in this chapter, not through the now-canonised essays of Hal Foster and Benjamin Buchloh, but instead from ‘the periphery’ of the *Neoavanguardia*.

The literary, artistic and critical output of the *Neoavanguardia* is itself far from unknown. Within a national Italian context, it represents a pivotal moment in the historiography of twentieth-century Italian culture. Nevertheless, *Neoavanguardia* remains marginal in avant-garde studies and its theoretical contributions tend to fall outside the remit of currently-circulating genealogies of ‘avant-garde theory’. Exceptions to this rule are offered by Matei Calinescu’s *Five Faces of Modernity* and the encyclopaedic volume *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe siècle* (both of which date from the 1980s and focus on summarising the debates), while more recent Anglophone scholarly reception, though vibrant, is still firmly situated in the disciplinary field of Italian studies.² My own aim is to place the critical discourses of the

¹ Julia Kristeva, *Étrangers à nous-mêmes* (Paris: Fayard, 1988), p. 9.

² This is primarily because many of the texts are yet to be translated into English. Cf. Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, pp. 122-123, 128-129, 144; and Alessandra Briganti, ‘Italien’, trans. by Françoise Carpinelli, in *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe*

Neoavanguardia in a new historical constellation but also, just as importantly, to investigate the ways in which this avant-garde movement has itself been historicised *as avant-garde*. Although this study greatly relies on the wealth of Italian secondary sources on the *Neoavanguardia* (as well as on the small number of Anglophone sources available), my aim has been to expose the historical temporalities underpinning such historiographies. To this end, I partly adopt an empirico-historical approach, so as to situate the discourses within a broader intellectual-historical context, and partly adapt Johannes Fabian's notion of 'allochronism', so as to articulate a critique of modernisation theory discourses (especially in their Italian 'variant'). My analysis also draws on recent Italian studies scholarship that has sought to problematise the often-crude distinction between 'political realism' and 'apolitical postmodernism', or between '*impegno*' [commitment] and '*riflusso*' [retreat].³ Although the focus of this scholarship has been on literary and cultural production during the period of the so-called 'political retreat' of the 1980s, and therefore does not examine the *Neoavanguardia*, its problematisation of the realism/ postmodernism dichotomy with reference to the question of commitment is, as I show below, also highly pertinent to the period of the early 1960s.

Siècle: Vol. I: Histoire, ed. by Jean Weisberger (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984), pp. 24-32 (pp. 28-30). I will be engaging with the latter body of scholarship at length below.

³ See the essays collected in Pierpaolo Antonello and Florian Mussgnug, eds., *Postmodern Impegno: Ethics and Commitment in Contemporary Italian Culture* (Oxford: Peter Lang, 2009); and Jennifer Burns, *Fragments of Impegno: Interpretations of Commitment in Contemporary Italian Literature, 1980-2000* (Leeds: Northern University Press, 2001), especially p. 13.

The issue of *impegno* was at the centre of *Neoavanguardia* debates.⁴ It was often raised as a direct, immediate question: should today's avant-garde be *impegnato*, and, if so, how exactly? Is it an oxymoron to speak of a 'committed neo-avant-garde', particularly when commitment has hitherto been associated with realism? While I elaborate on how selected figures in the group responded to such questions, I also attempt to raise the issue to another, meta-historical, level. This means investigating not just the relationship between the avant-garde as 'form' and commitment (or lack thereof) as 'political intent', but also the relationship between political intent and historical periodisation. Here, I argue, *Neoavanguardia*, and the name 'avant-garde' more generally, become placeholders for a historical narrative of 'deprovincialising' Italian culture, where such 'deprovincialising' crucially entails a movement *from* a 'provincial', 'backward' realism *to* an 'international' 'up-to-date' postmodernism. While the avant-garde is historically posited as a moment of transition between realist commitment and postmodern diversity, these historiographical accounts also exhibit what I describe as an 'auto-allochronism', namely, a temporal 'self-othering'. It is this auto-allochronism, I suggest, that produces a temporal distance, and self-differentiation, between the pronounced *specificity* of the calls of the *Neoavanguardia* for an avant-garde of the 'here and now' and the sense of 'backwardness' or 'belatedness' expressed with reference to an international, cosmopolitan 'modernism'.

This chapter is organised in two parts. In the first part I introduce the various intellectual positions adopted within the *Neoavanguardia*, situating these in the context of the Italian New Left, and the recurring debates on *impegno* both inside and outside the group. While focussing on a few examples of selected figures' differing positions on the question of historicism, and of 'history with a capital H', I also sketch their relationship to figures such as Adorno and Benjamin. In the second part, I turn to the historiography of

⁴ See, for instance, the special issue 'Avanguardia e impegno', *Il Verri*, 10. October (1963), 42-84. See also Renato Barilli, 'Quale impegno?', *Il Verri*, 8. June (1963), 17-36.

the *Neoavanguardia*, paying particular attention to the ways in which the neo-avant-garde has been related to the periodising categories of modernism and postmodernism. Here I read the repeated calls for a ‘de-provincialisation’ of Italian culture in a broader context of modernisation theory discourses (shared across the pro-communist/anti-communist political spectrum in the *Neoavanguardia* and reflected in the continuing purchase of a so-called ‘myth of backward Italy’). As I elaborate, these calls for deprovincialization, expressed in an undialectical polarisation between *sviluppo* [development] and *arretratezza* [backwardness], are not unique to the debates of the *neoavanguardisti*. Nevertheless, my proposition is that when this discursive tendency is formulated in relation to the term and periodising category ‘avant-garde’, a distinct dimension of the chronopolitics of ‘the new after the new’ is revealed, especially when considered alongside other theorisations of the avant-garde where the geopolitical questions of modernisation do not seem as prevalent, as was the case with Bürger and Roberts. In the seemingly-neutral looking-ahead-towards, and looking-forward-to an innovative, open culture offered by the modernising promise of the postmodern, therefore, we find traces of a temporal self-othering, where the particularity of the *Neoavanguardia* is at once advocated and denied.

4.1 ‘No Manifesto and No Intention to Write One’: *Neoavanguardia, impegno* and the Italian New Left

The name *Neoavanguardia* refers to a loose circle of writers, poets and intellectuals who played a key role in restoring the status of avant-gardism in post-war Italian literary culture.⁵ Active in several northern Italian cities from

⁵ For this general introduction to the *Neoavanguardia*, I have drawn from a number of sources, including: Fabio Gambaro, *Invito a conoscere la neoavanguardia* (Milano: Mursia, 1993); Giorgio Luti and Caterina Verbaro, *Dal neorealismo alla neoavanguardia: Il dibattito letterario in Italia negli anni della modernizzazione, 1945-1969* (Firenze: Casa Editrice Le Lettere, 1995); Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia*

the mid-1950s to the late 1960s, the group that would later become synonymous with *Neoavanguardia* initially comprised five poets: Nanni Balestrini, Alfredo Giuliani, Elio Pagliarani, Antonio Porta and Edoardo Sanguineti. During the late 1950s, the five poets had regular outlets for their work through the Milanese literary quarterly *Il Verri*, whose editor Luciano Anceschi also acted as the poets' mentor and publicist.⁶ Within the space of a few years, and especially after the publication of the poetic anthology *I Novissimi* in 1961, their poetry began to receive attention beyond narrow intellectual circles, and the names *novissimi*, *Il Verri* and *Neoavanguardia* started to become interchangeable.⁷

italiana: dalla nascita del 'Verri' alla fine del Quindici (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995); John Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy: Theoretical Debate and Poetic Practices* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2004); Francesco Muzzioli, *Il Gruppo 63: istruzioni per la lettura* (Roma: Odradek, 2013). I have also consulted the following shorter entries: Christopher Wagstaff, 'The Neo-avantgarde', in *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1984), pp. 35–61; Christopher Wagstaff, 'Neoavanguardia', *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Hainsworth and David Robey (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), pp. 405-6; and Andrea Ciccarelli, 'Neoavanguardia', in *Cassell Dictionary of Italian Literature*, ed. by Peter Bondanella and Julia Conaway Bondanella (London: Cassell, 1996), pp. 396-97.

⁶ *Il Verri* (Milan; ed. by Luciano Anceschi) was one of many self-published literary periodicals that sprang up in Italian urban centres during that period. Other influential ventures run by left-wing writer-intellectuals included *Officina* (Bologna; ed. by Pier Paolo Pasolini and others), *Il Menabò* (Bologna; ed. by Elio Vittorini and Italo Calvino), and *Angelus Novus* (Venice; ed. by Massimo Cacciari and Cesare De Michelis), named after the influential Italian edition of Walter Benjamin's writings, to which I return below.

⁷ It is telling that, although the first edition had been possible through a family-owned publishing initiative, only four years later, the anthology had its second edition with the prestigious publishing house Einaudi. See Alfredo Giuliani, ed., *I Novissimi – Poesie per gli anni '60* (Milano: Rusconi, 1961/ 2nd edn; Torino: Einaudi, 1965). For

The *novissimi* – the name itself pronouncing the poets’ ‘newness’ or ‘lateness’ – attracted attention as much for their poetics as for their polemics, often drafted in response to other writer-intellectuals who were involved in rival literary ventures.⁸ Translator, poet and essayist Franco Fortini found it ‘ridiculous’ that these poets thought ‘dynamiting syntax’ was somehow revolutionary.⁹ Equally unconvinced, poet and filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini found the errors in their experimentations all too perfect: ‘Even though the pages of Sanguineti, Balestrini, and the others are tormented by parentheses, grammatical cuts, typographical chasms, interruptions, inversions and iterations of every kind [...], the page never collapses, never wrinkles, never opens into internal surfaces [...] and therefore never has an ambiguity (unless

the English translation, see *I Novissimi – Poetry for the Sixties*, ed. and with a new preface to the American edition by Alfredo Giuliani; prose and notes translated by David Jacobson; poetry translated by Luigi Ballerini et al. (Los Angeles: Sun and Moon Press, 1995).

⁸ On the polemics between the *neoavanguardisti* and other writer-intellectuals such as Italo Calvino, Pier Paolo Pasolini and Franco Fortini, see Éanna Ó Ceallacháin, ‘Polemical Performances: Pasolini, Fortini, Sanguineti, and the Literary-Ideological Debates of the 1950s’, *Modern Language Review*, 108.2 (2013), 475–503; Guido Bonsaver, ‘Il Menabò, Calvino and the ‘Avanguardia’: Some Observations on the Literary Debate of the Sixties’, *Italian Studies*, 50 (1995), 86-96. See also the colourful interview with the writer Giorgio Bassani in Nello Ajello, ‘Rome: La Dolce Avanguardia’, trans. by Gavin Ewart, *The London Magazine*, August (1964), 65-70.

⁹ Franco Fortini, *Summer is Not All: Selected Poems*, trans. by Paul Lawton (London: Carcanet, 1992), p. 11. See also Franco Fortini, ‘Due Avanguardie’ and ‘Avanguardia e mediazione’, in *Verifica dei poteri. Scritti di critica e di istituzioni letterarie* (Milano: Il Saggiatore, 1965), pp. 95-108, 109-19; recently translated as *A Test of Powers: Writings on Criticism and Literary Institutions*, trans. by Alberto Toscano (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016); with thanks to the translator for offering access to the manuscript prior to publication.

it is enunciated), an uncertainty, an excess, a pause, a mistake'.¹⁰ The *novissimi* themselves were not held back by such belittling statements, immersed as they were in writing and debating the role of the avant-garde in contemporary Italian culture, often in little-disguised acts of self-promotion.¹¹

Nevertheless, their activity did pay off, as the core group entered into discussions and collaborations with other writers, artists and musicians, and in a large gathering in Hotel Zagarella near Palermo in October 1963, the much broader church of *Gruppo 63* was founded.¹² From then on, and until terminating its activities in 1967, the group would meet annually and, as several of its members were eager to stress, *Gruppo 63* was a diverse, open

¹⁰ Pier Paolo Pasolini, 'Fine dell' avanguardia' (1966), in *Empirismo Eretico* (Milano: Garzanti, 1972); translated as 'The End of the Avant-Garde', *Heretical Empiricism*, ed. by Louise K. Barnett; trans. by Ben Lawton and Louise K. Barnett (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1988), pp. 121-41 (pp. 128-29).

¹¹ It is worth noting that the 'self-promoting' elements of their writing were couched in an intellectual discourse that attempted to situate neo-avant-garde poetics historically. See, for instance, Edoardo Sanguineti's essay analysing the poetry of his fellow travellers Nanni Balestrini and Antonio Porta as early as 1964. Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Il trattamento del materiale verbale nei testi della nuova avanguardia', in *Ideologia e linguaggio* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1965), pp. 91-131 (pp. 113-31), hereafter cited '*Ideologia*'. Cf. Fausto Curi, 'Proposta per una storia delle avanguardie', *Il Verri*, 8. June (1963), 6-15.

¹² Detailed proceedings of their meetings can be found in: Nanni Balestrini and Alfredo Giuliani, eds., *Gruppo 63: la nuova letteratura, 34 scrittori, Palermo ottobre 1963* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1964); Nanni Balestrini, ed., *Gruppo 63. Il romanzo sperimentale* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1966); Renato Barilli and Angelo Guglielmi, eds., *Gruppo 63, critica e teoria* (Milano: Feltrinelli, 1976); newly edited as, *Gruppo 63: L'antologia* (Torino: Testo e immagine, 2002). The most recent edition combines the two volumes from 1964 and 1974. Cf. *Gruppo 63. L'antologia*, a cura di Nanni Balestrini, Alfredo Giuliani; *Critica e teoria*, a cura di Renato Barilli, Angelo Guglielmi (Milano: I Grandi Tascabili Bompiani, 2013). All references are to the 2013 edition, hereafter cited '*G63*'.

formation without an official membership. Remembering the movement 50 years later, Angelo Guglielmi would insist that: 'we were diverse but we had the same impatience'.¹³ Semiotician and novelist Umberto Eco, indisputably the group's most renowned participant, maintained that *Gruppo* was not a 'masonry' but a 'village fest', confiding that he saw the other participants as 'people with whom it was not a waste of time to argue'.¹⁴ Echoing Eco's sentiment, Edoardo Sanguineti would also refer to the group as an 'open laboratory': 'there had been no manifesto and no intention to write one'.¹⁵

Both the criticism that the *Neoavanguardia* received from Marxist intellectuals, such as Fortini and Pasolini, and the insistence with which the *Neoavanguardia* proclaimed the group's diversity ought to be seen in the broader cultural politics of the Italian New Left. Since the years of the Resistance and Italy's liberation, and during the immediate post-'45 period, discussions of the role of the avant-garde among progressive intellectuals had been almost entirely absent.¹⁶ Neo-realism, on the other hand, had obtained the status of cultural orthodoxy and was also officially supported by the Italian Communist Party (PCI), whose core policies were still under the direct control of Moscow, and which condemned modernist experimentation as 'bourgeois' and 'decadent'.¹⁷ After the events of 1956 which saw, as in many other

¹³ Angelo Guglielmi, 'Chi eravamo', *Alfa 63 cinquanta'anni dopo*, IV.33 (2013), p. 5.

¹⁴ Umberto Eco, 'Il Gruppo 63, lo sperimentalismo e l'avanguardia', in *Sugli specchi e altri saggi* (Milano: Bompiani, 1995), pp. 93-104 (p. 94).

¹⁵ See Fabio Gambaro, *Colloquio con Edoardo Sanguineti* (Milano: Anabasi, 1993), p. 69. See also Florian Mussgnug, 'Between *Novissimi* and Nuovo Romanzo: Literary Genre Categories in the Works of the *Gruppo 63*', in *From Eugenio Montale to Amelia Rosselli: Italian Poetry in the Sixties and Seventies*, ed. by John Butcher and Mario Moroni (Leicester: Troubador, 2004), pp. 21-40 (pp. 23-24).

¹⁶ On the absence of literary debates on the avant-garde in the '40s and '50s, see Briganti, 'Italien', in *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe Siècle*, p. 27.

¹⁷ On the relationship between neo-realism, the PCI and left-leaning intellectuals (whether party members or not), see David Ward, 'Intellectuals, Culture and Power

Western countries, a mass exodus from Communist Parties, Marxist intellectuals who distanced themselves from the PCI began to re-articulate the meaning and parameters of *impegno* beyond party dogmatism and beyond the genre of neo-realism.¹⁸ Moreover, the years during which the *Neoavanguardia* emerged were marked by unprecedented socio-economic changes. The 'new social reality' constantly referred to in the *Neoavanguardia* debates – a reality to which they sought to provide an adequate representation through avant-garde means – was nothing like the reality of their forefathers. It would not be an exaggeration to observe that the years of the so-called 'economic miracle' (characterised by unprecedented economic growth, mass migration from the agricultural south to the industrial north, and overall improvement in health, literacy, and living standards) were experienced as a new historical epoch – and for the Marxists amongst the group, as a new phase of capitalism that required a new form of poetic and cultural expression.¹⁹

in Modern Italy', in *The Cambridge Companion to Modern Italian Culture*, ed. by Zygmunt Baranski and Rebecca West (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), pp. 81-96; Stephen Gundle, *Between Hollywood and Moscow: The Italian Communists and the Challenge of Mass Culture, 1943-1991* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2000), pp. 114-18; David Forgacs, *Italian Culture in the Industrial Era, 1880-1980: Cultural Industries, Politics and the Public* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1990), pp. 5-6. See also Nello Ajello, *Intellettuali e PCI, 1944-1958* (Bari: Laterza, 1979), pp. 201-233.

¹⁸ This emphasis on openness and diversity is, of course, also related to discourses of political liberalisation which, in the context of the Italian New Left's relationship to the PCI, mean also a process of de-Stalinisation. See Attilio Mangano, *Origini della nuova sinistra. Le riviste degli anni sessanta* (Massina-Firenze: Casa Editrice G. D'Anna, 1979), p. 17.

¹⁹ On the *miracolo*, see Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics, 1943-1980* (London: Penguin Books, 1990), pp. 212-17; Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth, 'The Transformation of Post-war Italy', in *Writers and Society in Contemporary Italy*, ed. by Michael Caesar and Peter Hainsworth (Leamington Spa: Berg, 1984), pp. 1-34 (pp. 4-5).

The relationship between the PCI and the *Neoavanguardia*, as well as the question of Marxism's relationship to the avant-garde more broadly, was discussed both within and outside the group. On the occasion of the very first issue of the periodical *Angelus Novus*, a panel discussion on the topic of 'The Avant-Garde and Marxism' in January 1965 introduced the journal's aims with reference to this very topic and suggested that a historical examination of the avant-garde phenomenon (that is, of 'the classical avant-garde') would be most timely.²⁰ These contributions, which were published in *Angelus Novus* soon after, concerned themselves with the Sartrian and Adornian versions of commitment, with debating the relevance of Lukács's anti-avant-garde position, and with the more recent, closer-to-home critiques articulated by figures such as Pasolini. Underpinning these debates was the question of humanism and of political agency through the writing of literature. Pasolini's attack on the poetics of *Neoavanguardia* as a form of experimentation that was too-controlled was, as we have seen, revealed through these debates as a fundamental questioning of the relationship between semiotic and literary language, whereby the distinction between historical and neo-avant-gardes (and the latter's inadequacy) rested precisely on *Neoavanguardia's* prioritisation of language as semiotic communication (and not as literary expression).²¹

This explicitly antagonistic relationship between semiotic and literary language is also discernible in the different positions adopted within *Neoavanguardia* itself. For the semiotically-oriented amongst the *neoavanguardisti*, it was imperative that any form of writing that deserved the name 'avant-garde' would be against *impegno* and against any form of historicism. Angelo Guglielmi's position, voiced in the 1963 Palermo meeting as well as through the key essay 'Una sfida senza avversari' [A challenge

²⁰ Paolo Chiarini, Armando Plebe, Tommaso Chiaretti e Vittorio Saltini, 'Avanguardia e marxismo', *Angelus Novus*, 3. Primavera (1965), 1-21.

²¹ See Paolo Chiarini, 'Le due avanguardie', in 'Avanguardia e marxismo', *Angelus Novus*, 3. Primavera (1965), 1-9 (pp. 2-3).

without adversaries] published originally in the journal *Il Menabò* as a retort against Italo Calvino, crystallises this tendency. For Guglielmi, the avant-garde must take a non-committed stance and oppose the meta-narrative of historical development:

La linea 'viscerale' della cultura contemporanea in cui è da riconoscere l'unica avanguardia oggi possibile è a-ideologica, disimpegnata, astorica, in una parola 'atemporale'; non contiene messaggi, né produce significati di carattere generale. Non conosce regole (o leggi) né come condizione di partenza, né come risultati di arrivo.

The 'visceral' line of contemporary culture, in which one must recognise the only avant-garde possible today, is non-ideological, non-committed, ahistorical, in one word, 'atemporal'; it doesn't contain messages, nor does it produce any general meanings. It knows no rules (or laws) neither as a condition to depart from nor as results to be arrived at.²²

The rejection of commitment pronounced here is characteristically coupled with a rejection of historicism, which is instantly translated into a rejection of history *qua* history, and ultimately, of time. The avant-garde of today, asserts Guglielmi, must be 'atemporal'. It is beyond my present aim to analyse whether Guglielmi's own poetic practice was in fact able to embody such an 'atemporal' state. Yet it is important to note how this structuralist, semiotically-oriented position, which looked to new information and communications theories and which was not afraid to embrace 'mass media', was adopted by members of the group such as Guglielmi as a means through which to reject the particular temporality of a certain 'PCI-approved' historicism.

If Guglielmi's position stands at the most anti-historicist end of the *Neoavanguardia*, in the figure of Edoardo Sanguineti we find a position that is

²² Angelo Guglielmi, 'Il dibattito in occasione del primo incontro del Gruppo a Palermo nel 1963', *G63*, pp. 779-91 (pp. 785-86). Cf. Angelo Guglielmi, 'Avanguardia e sperimentalismo', in *G63*, pp. 15-24; originally published in *Il Verri*, 8. June (1963), 38-46.

both firmly modernist and firmly historicist. Not only did Sanguineti consider himself a historical materialist, remain in the Communist Party until his death, and enter Italian parliamentary politics as an independent PCI member, he was also a staunch opponent of realism.²³ Sanguineti's collaborations with artist Enrico Baj or composer Luciano Berio could easily fit Greenbergian models of 'formalism' and, considering Sanguineti occupied that very particular position of a 'pro-modernist Marxist', comparisons with Adorno have been at the centre of the reception of his thought.²⁴ It is certainly plausible to see the Sanguinetian position on the avant-garde as Adornian, especially since Sanguineti advocated that the avant-garde's social critique should be carried out not at the level of 'message' or 'content' (pejoratively described as *contenutismo*), but at the level of language. And Sanguineti's declaration that literature 'is not at the service of revolution but *is* revolution at the level of words' [*non è al servizio della rivoluzione, ma è la rivoluzione sopra il terreno delle parole*] is certainly in accord with Adorno's own position on cultural-political praxis.²⁵

Nevertheless, it is precisely in their theories of language that Adorno's and Sanguineti's positions diverge. Whereas ideology critique is at the centre of an Adornian conception of autonomy, Sanguineti's position embraces the ideological character of all language and in fact calls for the avant-garde's 'ideologisation'.²⁶ Since the avant-garde is the intellectual's present condition, and the most accurate expression of the writer-intellectual's relationship to

²³ See Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Come si diventa materialisti storici', in *Cultura e realtà*, ed. by Erminio Risso (Milano: Feltrinelli, 2010), pp. 17-33.

²⁴ See, for instance, the collected essays in Paolo Chirumbolo and John Picchione, eds., *Edoardo Sanguineti: Literature, Ideology and the Avant-Garde* (London: Legenda, 2013).

²⁵ Sanguineti, 'Per una letteratura della crudeltà', in *Ideologia*, pp. 133-35 (pp. 134-35; emphasis original).

²⁶ See Edoardo Sanguineti, 'Pour une avant-garde révolutionnaire', *Tel Quel*, 29. Printemps (1967), 76-95 (pp. 84-87).

bourgeois society, proclaims Sanguineti, it is the avant-garde's task to foreground this ideology by exposing the contradictions of late capitalism through linguistic experimentation.²⁷ Therefore, although in the context of a crude realism/modernism dichotomy Adorno and Sanguineti appear to be in the same camp, their notions of aesthetic autonomy, especially when it comes to the question of language, diverge rather significantly.

More important for Sanguineti's elaboration of a theory of the avant-garde is the intellectual influence of Benjamin. Like many other Italian writers of his generation, Sanguineti had been introduced to Benjamin's writings through the translation and editorial work of Renato Solmi, an Adorno scholar who presented Benjamin primarily as a thinker of the avant-garde.²⁸ In the later years of his life, Sanguineti would refer to the famous aphorism from the entry [N1a, 8] of the *Arcades Project* – 'I needn't say anything; merely show' – and suggest that his own work was guided by the principle of montage.²⁹ Sanguineti was drawn to the idea of a citational literary practice as a way of coming to terms with the experience of modernity, and montage was seen as providing the means through which to continue the 'avant-garde

²⁷ See, for instance, Sanguineti's response to Angelo Guglielmi's in the Palermo meeting in 1963. Sanguineti, 'Il dibattito in occasione del primo incontro del Gruppo a Palermo nel 1963', *G63*, pp. 779-91 (pp. 787-91).

²⁸ Solmi's editorial introduction to the volume follows the Adornian tendencies that marked the first phase of Benjamin's posthumous reception, and presents Benjamin primarily as a philosophical critic of neo-Kantianism. See Walter Benjamin, *Angelus Novus: saggi e frammenti*, traduzione e introduzione di Renato Solmi (Torino: Einaudi, 1962). On Benjamin's early Italian reception, see Momme Brodersen, *Benjamin auf italienisch: Aspekte einer Rezeption* (Frankfurt: Verlag Neue Kritik, 1982); Riccardo Gavagna, *Benjamin in Italia. Bibliografia italiana 1956/80* (Milano: Sansoni, 1982). See also Esther Leslie, 'Revolutionary Potential and Walter Benjamin: A Postwar Reception History', in *Critical Companion to Contemporary Marxism*, ed. by Jacques Bidet and Stathis Kouvelakis (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 549-66.

²⁹ Sanguineti, 'Come si diventa materialisti storici', p. 17.

inheritance'.³⁰ Such an inheritance was mapped in relation to a Benjaminian reading of Baudelaire alongside selected references to James Joyce (a key influence for Sanguineti), or to Dada and Surrealism, the latter being proclaimed by Sanguineti as 'the ghost that rightfully persecutes any possible future avant-garde and denies it peaceful sleep'.³¹ A Sanguinetian avant-garde was thus proposed via Benjamin's Baudelaire, where artwork and commodity go hand-in-hand, and where the experience of the modern is felt precisely through this 'double movement' away from and towards the heteronomy of the market.³²

Although the principle of montage is followed when it comes to identifying the avant-garde in terms of form, Sanguineti's own historicisation of the historical and neo-avant-gardes does not follow the same Benjaminian temporality. When it comes to analysing the relationship between the two historical periods of the avant-garde, Sanguineti's historicity arguably remains closer to the SPD progressivism attacked by Benjamin than to a *kairotic*, now-time that was espoused by others on the 'heretic' Italian left.³³

³⁰ See, for instance, Sanguineti, 'Il percorso dalla filosofia alla letteratura', *Cultura e realtà*, p. 175. Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', *Ideologia*, pp. 67-83 (p. 72); John Butcher, 'Da *Laborintus* a *Postkarten*: Intervista ad Edoardo Sanguineti', in *From Eugenio Montale to Amelia Rosselli: Italian Poetry in the Sixties and Seventies*, ed. by John Butcher and Mario Moroni (Leicester: Troubador, 2004), pp. 221-33 (p. 221). On the influence of Benjamin's thought on Sanguineti, see also Roberto Esposito, *Le ideologie della neoavanguardia* (Napoli: Liguori, 1976), p. 196.

³¹ Sanguineti, 'Per una letteratura della crudeltà', in *Ideologia*, pp. 133-35 (p. 134).

³² See, for instance, Sanguineti, 'Sopra l'avanguardia', in *Ideologia*, pp. 62-66 (pp. 62-64). Cf. Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', in *Ideologia*, pp. 67-83 (p. 80). An English translation of these two essays has been published in the poetry journal *Lara Turner* and is also available online. See <<http://www.lanaturnerjournal.com/archives/edoardo-sanguineti-essays-avant-garde-poety-commodity-society-commitment>> [accessed 02 December 2016].

³³ On the reception of Benjamin alongside other 'non-PCI-approved' thinkers by the radical Italian left, see Lisa Gerusa, 'A (Conceptual) History of Violence: The Case of

Here we find Sanguineti positing a relationship of structural equivalence between the historical avant-gardes' response to capitalism and the neo-avant-gardes' response to neo-capitalism:

L'argomento dice soltanto, in effetti, che le neo-avanguardie costituiscono, nella loro configurazione generale, un appello contro l'ordine neo-capitalistico, *in modo al tutto equivalente* a quello in cui le avanguardie storiche già costituirono, nella loro configurazione generale sempre, un appello contro l'ordine del capitalismo storico.

The argument simply says, in effect, that the neo-avant-gardes constitute, in their general configuration, a call against the neo-capitalist order, *in a way quite equivalent* to the way in which the historical avant-gardes, in their general configuration again, constituted earlier a call against the order of historical capitalism.³⁴

The neo-avant-garde is presented here as a reaction against neo-capitalism, and this relationship between base and superstructure (i.e. capitalist economy and avant-garde culture) is justified through the mirror-image of the avant-garde's earlier phase: just as the historical avant-garde was against a 'historical capitalism' [*capitalismo storico*], so too the neo-avant-garde is against this new, latest stage of capitalism through which the tangible experiences of the *miracolo* can be analysed.³⁵ This double relationship of base and superstructure in two stages is, of course, not framed in explicitly causal terms. Nowhere is it proposed that *because* history has entered the stage of neo-capitalism that the avant-garde, too, must also enter its neo-avant-garde

the Italian Extreme Left in the 1970s', in *Imagining Terrorism: The Rhetoric and Representation of Political Violence in Italy, 1969-2009*, ed. by Pierpaolo Antonello and Alan O'Leary (London: Legenda, 2009), pp. 128-38 (p. 131).

³⁴ Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', *Ideologia*, p. 73, emphasis added.

³⁵ Although the term 'neo-capitalism' is not explicitly defined in these debates, it can be broadly understood as synonymous to 'late capitalism', a term which would become more widespread and commonly-used in the following decades. See for instance Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (London: New Left Books, 1975).

phase. Nevertheless, it is worth stressing this reflectionist, stagist relationship between the avant-garde and capitalism, which was prevalent regardless of whether one considered the avant-garde to be dead or alive. For Fausto Curi, for instance, who recounts the common narrative of co-optation, there are two avant-gardes, and these are historically separated by their relationship to capitalist society: 'The opposition that existed a while ago between the avant-garde and bourgeois society can no longer be seen in terms of a clear-cut separation. Neo-capitalist society has "accepted" avant-garde art and avant-garde art has "accepted" neo-capitalist society.'³⁶ In this parallel construction of historical avant-garde/bourgeois or 'high' capitalism, and neo-avant-garde/neo- or 'late' capitalism, therefore, we see a direct correspondence (Sanguineti himself calls it a structural 'homology') between each avant-garde and each stage of historical development.³⁷ It is true that the notion of the avant-garde was not considered in these debates explicitly with reference to the question of temporality (Guglielmi's negation of the avant-garde's temporal character that we saw above is an exception). Yet the double character of the category of the avant-garde within the texts of the *Neoavanguardia* – as equivalent to modernism and the principle of montage, on the one hand, and as a periodising category that reflects the stages of capitalist development, on the other – exposes a particular chronopolitical problematic where the avant-garde, as we will see in the following section, is at once 'located' and 'dis-located'.

Having examined the *Neoavanguardia* in the context of the Italian New Left and the debates on *impegno*, as well as outlining the issues of literary representation and historical periodisation with reference to Adorno and Benjamin, let us now shift our attention to the historiographical discourses surrounding the *Neoavanguardia*. I have so far suggested that Sanguineti's indebtedness to Benjamin was restricted to the citational practice of montage

³⁶ Fausto Curi, 'Tesi per una storia delle avanguardie', in *G63*, pp. 851-61 (p. 858).

³⁷ See Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', in *Ideologia*, p. 72.

and did not translate to a Benjaminian conception of history. Bearing in mind the linear, reflectionist historicism that underlies Sanguineti's texts as well as the *Neoavanguardia's* complex relationship to Marxism and the PCI, we can now further investigate the chronopolitics of this *particular* 'neo', as the notion of the avant-garde is articulated with reference to persisting discourses of socio-economic modernisation in the context of writing a 'late modern', 'post-impegnato' national cultural history.

4.2 Looking Forward (on)to Postmodernism: Historicising the *Neoavanguardia*

Shifting our focus to a meta-historical analysis, the different intellectual positions of the *Neoavanguardia* that were sketched in the previous section can now be viewed through a modified prism. The antagonism between Angelo Guglielmi, representing a post-political cynicism associated with a postmodern attitude, and Edoardo Sanguineti, representing the committed Marxist intellectual invested in analysing the condition of alienation during late capitalism through modernist tropes, is itself marked by a particular historical temporality that is evident in *Neoavanguardia's* historiographic reception.³⁸ Personal accounts and memoirs such as the ones that we have

³⁸ The below assessment draws on a number of Italian and Anglophone studies that either view *Neoavanguardia* as an anticipation of postmodernism or simply re-write it within a modern/postmodern dichotomy that 'expels' its avant-garde-ness from the narrative. See Renato Barilli, *La neoavanguardia italiana: dalla nascita del 'Verri' alla fine del Quindici* (Bologna: Il Mulino, 1995; 2nd edn: San Cesario di Lecce: Manni, 2007), pp. 206-19; Romano Luperini, *Controtempo. Critica e letteratura fra moderno e postmoderno: proposte, polemiche e bilanci di fine secolo* (Napoli: Liguori, 1999), p. 170; Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy*, pp. 46-48; Matteo Di Gesù, *La tradizione del postmoderno. Studi di letterature italiana* (Milano: FrancoAngeli, 2003), pp. 25-38; Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, 'Modernism in Italy: An Introduction', in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, ed. by Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2004), pp. 3-31. See

discussed above, and which stress the diversity of opinion within *Neoavanguardia*, have been taken up by Italian studies scholars who are introducing the intellectual parameters of the group to a new (non-Italian) readership.³⁹ While these calls to diversity are respected in this reception, there has nonetheless been an inescapable tendency to present this diversity through a taxonomy where the ‘two camps’ of the *Neoavanguardia* are narrated as pointing towards two different historical periods: ‘one is tied to the project of modernity, the other to postmodern aesthetic postures’.⁴⁰ There are those who narrate *Neoavanguardia* as a precursor to postmodernism (and who explicitly write that the movement ‘anticipates’ the postmodern); foregrounding Guglielmi’s position and presenting it as the most representative in the group serves such a repurposing.⁴¹ There are others still who have claimed the position of Sanguineti as proto-postmodern, proposing that the *Neoavanguardia* is not really an avant-garde at all, and that holding onto the very name ‘avant-garde’ is simply a form of nostalgia.⁴²

Scholars such as Florian Mussgnug who have taken issue with the all-too-easy demarcation of an ‘*impegnato* realism’ versus a ‘post-political postmodernism’ have noted this problematic genealogy which recasts the Italian neo-avant-garde as postmodern.⁴³ True, the comparisons with

also Romano Luperini and Massimiliano Tortora, eds. *Sul modernismo italiano* (Napoli: Liguori, 2012).

³⁹ See, for instance, Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy*, pp. 46-48; Luca Somigli and Mario Moroni, ‘Modernism in Italy: An Introduction’, in *Italian Modernism: Italian Culture between Decadentism and Avant-Garde*, pp. 3-31.

⁴⁰ Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy*, p. viii.

⁴¹ See Christopher Wagstaff, ‘Neoavanguardia’, in *The Oxford Companion to Italian Literature*, pp. 405-406.

⁴² See Giulio Ferroni, *Dopo la fine. Sulla condizione postuma della letteratura* (Torino: Einaudi, 1997), pp. 36-37, 128.

⁴³ See Florian Mussgnug, ‘Review: The New Avant-garde in Italy’, *Italian Studies*, 63.2 (2008), 335-36 (p. 336); Florian Mussgnug, ‘Review Article: Giorgio Manganelli’s

postmodern Anglophone writers or with the French *Tel Quelists* have served as a way of introducing the work of the *Gruppo* to those who had only been familiar with Anglo-American and French debates.⁴⁴ The trope of ‘anticipation’ in art and literary historiography is, too, a legitimate means through which to map and situate particular movements historically. Nevertheless, the historical and cultural ‘translation’ of the *Neoavanguardia* from a form of avant-gardism to a variety of postmodernism ought to be considered, I suggest, precisely as a geochronopolitical movement, whereby the relationship between genre and political ideology is also a relationship between the avant-garde’s *place* in national, cultural historiographies and its implicit *placeless-ness* in the seemingly borderless, cosmopolitan historiography of ‘the isms’.

This historical temporality of ‘looking forward’ to a postmodern Italian culture is often marked in this historiographic reception by explicit mentions of ‘backwardness’ and ‘provincialism’. Therefore, as the movement that anticipates postmodernism, the *Neoavanguardia* is also tasked with ‘de-provincialising’ Italian culture. John Picchione has asserted, for instance, that ‘[t]here is no doubt that the debate provoked by Gruppo 63 was vital in

Early Clarity’, *Italian Studies*, 63.1 (2008), 153-58 (p. 157). See also Viktor Berberi, ‘Review: The New Avant-garde in Italy’, *Italian Culture*, 23 (2005), 194-97 (p. 195); Lucia Re, ‘Language, Gender and Sexuality in the Italian Neo-Avant-Garde’, *MLN*, 119.1 (2004), 135-73 (p. 134, n. 4).

⁴⁴ See Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy*, p. viii. On the links between members of the *Neoavanguardia* and *Tel Quel*, see Beate Sprenger, *Neoavantgardistische Theorienbildung in Italien und Frankreich: das emanzipatorische Literaturkonzept von Edoardo Sanguineti und Philippe Sollers* (Frankfurt: Lang, 1992); Patrick ffrench, *The Time of Theory: A History of Tel Quel, 1960-1983* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1995), pp. 74-75; Danielle Marx-Scouras, *The Cultural Politics of Tel Quel: Literature and the Left in the Wake of Engagement* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1996), pp. 64-65, 76-77.

initiating a process of deprovincialization within post-war Italian culture'.⁴⁵ According to similar accounts, the fact that the neo-avant-garde has been canonised shows the success of the idea of the avant-garde. This success itself indicates 'the overcoming of the backwardness [*il superamento dell'arretratezza*] of Italian culture, trapped between idealism, old Marxism, and ideologies of realism'.⁴⁶ This 'backwardness' might be explicitly expressed here in rather formal terms – Italian literature had lost its 'edge'; it had become too conservative; was not innovative enough; and so on – yet, from a chronopolitical perspective, one cannot ignore the historical temporality that underpins such assessment, no matter how 'formalist' in its intent. Not only is the avant-garde posited here as a vanguard whose anti-realist progressivism leads to the postmodern, *Neoavanguardia* is also presented as a modernism (lest *avanguardia* be mistaken here for an 'old-fashioned' kind of polemicism).

This situating of the avant-garde within a modern/postmodern axis is thus explicitly presented as a process of 'neutralisation' from the partisan connotations of the term avant-garde and from its Italian 'particularity'. As Paolo Chirumbolo and Mario Moroni characteristically put it in their introduction, the term 'modernism' was preferred because of 'its relative neutrality – its 'foreignness' to the Italian tradition, if you will'.⁴⁷ Once again,

⁴⁵ Picchione, *The New Avant-Garde in Italy*, p. 202, n. 17.

⁴⁶ Paolo Bertetto, 'Il cinema sperimentale e il Gruppo 63', *Alfa 63 cinquanta'anni dopo*, IV.33 (2013), p. 18.

⁴⁷ Paolo Chirumbolo and Mario Moroni, 'Literature and the Arts in the 1960s: An Introduction', in *Neoavanguardia: Italian Experimental Literature and Arts in the 1960s*, ed. by Paolo Chirumbolo, Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 3–18 (p. 4). See also Monica Jansen, 'Neoavanguardia and Postmodernism: Oscillations between Innovation and Tradition from 1963 to 2003', in *Neoavanguardia: Italian Experimental Literature and Arts in the 1960s*, ed. by Paolo Chirumbolo, Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli (Toronto: Toronto University Press, 2010), pp. 38-73 (p. 38).

the choice of the term modernism over that of the avant-garde can perhaps be justified in the institutional context in which such scholarly and historiographic reception takes place. As the editors highlight, the marginal, peripheral status of Italian studies in Anglo-American academia (when compared to French studies especially) means that a certain amount of cultural translation is necessary when the material is aimed at ‘non-Italians’ or, as importantly, when in the context of a Cold War reception of Marxist thought, the *Neoavanguardia* is seen as too ‘red’ to be neatly incorporated into a Greenbergian or New Critical model of formalism.⁴⁸

While these efforts to take the literary and intellectual output of the *Neoavanguardia* out of its national borders and into the sphere of a globally-circulating, ‘neutral’ culture are made in the names of modernism and postmodernism, it is the particularity (or even *exceptionality* in some cases) of ‘Italian-ness’ that becomes paradoxically foregrounded. In a little-discussed article by Hungarian scholar Miklós Szabolsci, entitled ‘Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions’ and published in the journal *New Literary History* in 1971, we encounter one of the first comparative interpretations of the *Neoavanguardia*, and one such instance of particularisation. Assessing the movement’s originality as well as mapping its characteristics in relation to better-known groups (e.g. to *Tel Quel*, as was and continues to be the most common point of comparison), Szabolsci’s verdict is that *Neoavanguardia* is not *unique* in its avant-gardism: ‘The history of the Italian neo-avant-garde between 1960 and 1963 is just another version of the French or other West-European movements, only in a more

⁴⁸ On this issue of language accessibility and anti-communist politics in the Anglo-American (especially US) reception of the *Neoavanguardia*, see Paolo Chirumbolo and Mario Moroni, ‘Literature and the Arts in the 1960s: An Introduction’, in *Neoavanguardia: Italian Experimental Literature and Arts in the 1960s*, ed. by Paolo Chirumbolo, Mario Moroni and Luca Somigli (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), pp. 3–18 (p. 5).

“ideological”, sometimes more “Marxist”, form’.⁴⁹ This dismissive assessment of the *Neoavanguardia* as ‘just another version’ is, needless to say, disputable. As for its ‘ideological’ position or its ‘Marxism’, we have already seen that many members of the group had little interest in writing ideological poetry, whether of Marxist orientation or otherwise. And although Sanguineti’s intellectual position was categorically Marxist, it is worth stressing that the poetic practices of *Neoavanguardia* could never be sufficiently orthodox to gain Moscow’s approval.⁵⁰ Within the *Tel Quel* journal itself, on the other hand, we see another instance of particularisation, although this time the assessment is favourable. Jean Thibaudeau, who frequently translated Sanguineti’s writing and promoted the activities of the *Neoavanguardia* in France, reviews Sanguineti’s *Ideologia e linguaggio* in the journal and champions the group precisely because of its uniqueness, and for the ways in which it shows the ‘Italian way’ to the avant-garde.⁵¹

This particularisation of the *Neoavanguardia* as first and foremost ‘Italian’ is not without its chronopolitical consequences. The very temporality of the avant-garde is here under question, especially as the notion is, once more, cut in two. As we have already discussed in the cases of Bürger and Roberts, the avant-garde as notion sometimes coincides with and sometimes diverges from the avant-garde as periodising category. Considering the issue of *place* is recurring in these debates, a further ‘cutting-up’ is at work, where the ‘neo’ needs to be established not only with reference to the ‘historical’ and to the ever-present ‘trans-historical’ avant-garde underpinning these periodising

⁴⁹ Miklós Szabolsci, ‘Avant-Garde, Neo-Avant-Garde, Modernism: Questions and Suggestions’, *New Literary History*, 3.1 (1971), 49-70 (p. 69).

⁵⁰ *Neoavanguardia* was in fact mentioned unfavourably in the 3rd edition of the Great Soviet Encyclopedia, published in 1969. See ‘Avangardizm’, *The Great Soviet Encyclopedia*; available online <<http://bse.sci-lib.com/article057560.html>> [accessed 11 April 2016]; with thanks to Simon Huxtable for his help in translating from the Russian.

⁵¹ See Jean Thibaudeau, ‘Idéologie et langage’, *Tel Quel*, 22. Été (1964), 89-90.

categories, but also to an imagined avant-gardism that is *not* 'backward'.

It is instructive here to turn to the thought of anthropologist Johannes Fabian as a means through which to critically analyse this discursive tendency. In his ground-breaking study *Time and the Other*, Fabian coins the term 'allochronism'.⁵² Introducing the role of time in the discipline of anthropology, Fabian uses the term to describe the anthropologist's encounter with the cognised and represented anthropological subject as Other, and especially as a *temporal Other*. According to Fabian's compelling analysis, allochronism is perpetuated in and by anthropological discourse and practice, where the time of the anthropologist is posited as always different from (and implicitly historically *ahead of*) the time of her/his subjects. In his trenchant critique of modernisation discourses as they manifest themselves in normative terms such as 'primitive society' (or even the more politically-correct 'traditional culture', we might add), Fabian exposes the antagonistic relationship that marks the discipline of anthropology. In the case of the *Neoavanguardia*, there is of course a very different epistemological relation. More importantly, allochronism is often articulated by the othered/othering subjects themselves. Nonetheless, the temporalisation of the relationship of othering one's self that is enabled by adopting Fabian's notion is here decisive because it allows us to expose the underlying historicity of what might have otherwise appeared only as a problem of 'place'.

I have so far stressed the prevalence of discourses on de-provincialisation and backwardness with reference to the *Neoavanguardia*. In order to fully articulate the chronopolitical implications of this undialectical historicity, however, it is important to return to an empirico-historical analysis and situate these discourses in a broader intellectual-historical framework. These discourses, especially as they were expressed in intellectual debates in the early 1960s, can be seen as an expression of what geographer John Agnew has

⁵² See Fabian, *Time and the Other*, especially pp. 143-44, 151-65.

called the 'myth of backward Italy'.⁵³ On the one hand, we find iterations of this self-perpetuating myth of backwardness within orthodox Marxist discourses, where the Italian nation is presented as either having failed to *complete* the modernisation process (and thus not having reached the stage of 'mature' capitalism), or as arriving in the modernising game too late.⁵⁴ On the other hand (and these two tendencies are dialectically related), modernisation discourse appears in Italy via the widespread influence of the modernisation theory model that emerged in the United States in the 1950s.⁵⁵ According to this latter model of progressivism, economic and socio-political development is a process of emulation and synchronisation with the national specificity of the USA.⁵⁶ However, as has been well-established by scholars of modernisation theory, this process of synchronisation is with a US *model* – that is to say, not with the United States' socio-economic reality at a particular historical moment, but with its ideal type (itself empty of historical time). Therefore, the distinction between traditional and modern societies, and this temporal movement of transition *from* the traditional *to* the modern crucially

⁵³ See John Agnew, 'Time into Space: The Myth of "Backward" Italy in Modern Europe', *Time & Society*, 5.1 (1996), 27-45.

⁵⁴ See Valdo Spini, 'The New Left in Italy', *Journal of Contemporary History*, 7. 1/2 (1972), 51-57 (p. 52). For an example of this logic, with reference to the question of a 'mature' capitalism, see Sanguineti, 'Avanguardia, società, impegno', in *Ideologia*, pp. 67-83 (pp. 68-69).

⁵⁵ Historian Tim Mason has stressed the specific character of Italian modernisation discourses, combining French *Annales* historiography, German philosophy and Italian Marxism, and not being directly modelled on US modernisation theory, as was the case in Japan. See Tim Mason, 'Italy and Modernization: A Montage', *History Workshop Journal*, 25 (1988), 127-47 (p. 130).

⁵⁶ For a critical introduction to modernisation theory in its global Cold War context, see David H. Harrison, *The Sociology of Modernization and Development* (London & New York: Routledge, 1988); and David C. Engerman, Nils Gilman, Mark H. Haefele, Michael E. Latham, eds., *Staging Growth: Modernization, Development and the Global Cold War* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2003).

rests on a geochronopolitical imaginary beyond the empirical specificity of the alleged national units of comparison. As David C. Pitts has argued in an early critique of modernisation theory, these discourses are not only ethnocentric; they are also 'tempocentric'.⁵⁷ In other words, the privileging and valorisation of particular social structures as 'modern' or 'modernising' posits a relationship of centre and periphery not only in terms of nation but also in terms of historical time.

In the case of Italy, once again, modernisation discourses are also intimately linked to the infamous 'Southern Question' [*la questione meridionale*]: that is, the problem of a supposed gap in development between the Italian North and the Italian South, whereby the former stands for a rational, secular, urbanised (in short, 'modern') geographical imaginary, and the latter represents 'traditional' religious, agricultural and informal forms of social organisation.⁵⁸ Since the *Neoavanguardia* debates did not concern themselves with the problem of *meridionalismo* (these writer-intellectuals were all based in the urban centres of the North, and their gaze was directed even further 'North' and 'West'), this aspect of Italian modernisation discourse may appear irrelevant. Yet *meridionalismo*, in its persisting concern with a gap in development *within one nation* crucially reveals how 'Italian-ness' itself has been constructed. This is so especially when the specificity of 'modern' Italian culture emerges in its relation to a Western Other, habitually projected as historically more 'advanced'. As one commentator has astutely observed, Italian modernisation discourses are founded upon 'an imaginary geography of modernity, which either excludes Italy from modern Europe or separates

⁵⁷ See David C. Tipps, 'Modernization Theory and the Comparative Study of Societies: A Critical Perspective', *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 15.2 (1973), 199-226 (p. 216).

⁵⁸ I am here indebted to analyses that consider *meridionalismo* as a form of orientalism. See Nelson Moe, "'Altro che Italia!' Il Sud dei piemontesi (1860-61)", *Meridiana*, 15 (1992), 53-89. See also the essays in the volume *Italy's "Southern Question": Orientalism in One Country*, ed. by Jane Schneider (Oxford: Berg, 1998).

the modern North from the backward South'.⁵⁹

The absence of any explicit discussions of the 'backward South' in the case of *Neoavanguardia*, therefore, does not necessarily imply that the discourses of de-provincialisation that are at the heart of *specifying* an 'Italian neo-avant-garde' are not formed by the auto-allochronism operating in broader discursive tendencies about Italian modernity. In fact, my wager is that the temporal self-othering that we encounter in these debates, precisely in the way in which the question of a national modernity is articulated (in this instance, Italian, but many other national cases are also applicable), points to the foundational question of the avant-garde's mediation between universality and particularity. Thus, as we have seen, while the notion of the avant-garde is denounced in some instances because of its associations with an inheritance of *impegno*, in other cases, it is mobilised precisely as a means of 'modernising' Italian culture within its national borders. This process of modernising – where 'making modern' means also 'making modernist' – is, as I have sought to demonstrate, a process of ideological neutralisation which itself entails a process of de-particularisation. In other words, making *Neoavanguardia* a 'modernism', namely, taking the 'avant-garde-ness' (i.e. *impegno*) out of the avant-garde, is at the same time articulated as a movement of cultural translation that geochronopolitically takes the 'Italian' avant-garde out of 'Italy'.

Returning to Fabian's notion of allochronism and proposing the self-reflective inflection of 'auto-allochronism' in the case of *Neoavanguardia*, therefore, we might suggest that such temporal othering between a projected 'backward here-and-now' (itself a geochronopolitical contradiction), and its counter-image of a 'developed elsewhere' indicates another iteration of the avant-garde as afterness. As is the case with the historical temporality of any neo-avant-garde, the 'new' of the *Neoavanguardia* is caught between the

⁵⁹ See Michel Huysseune, *Modernity and Secession: The Social Sciences and the Political Discourse of the Lega Nord in Italy* (New York: Berghahn Books, 2006), pp. 14-16 (p. 2).

temporalities of repetition and rupture. In its *particularisation* as an ‘Italian’ neo-avant-garde, however, the ‘neo’ is here tasked with yet another mode of return. As a stage between realism and postmodernism, and as an avant-garde that must itself ‘modernise’ and masquerade as a modernism in order not to seem too partisan, or too particular in its Italian-ness, the *Neoavanguardia*’s inheritance is doubly ‘in another time’.

As has been hinted at above, this ‘Italian case’ of the *Neoavanguardia* as a neo-avant-garde is not discussed here with *specifying* intentions. I do not seek to propose that the *Neoavanguardia* is uniquely or exceptionally ‘Italian’, nor do I wish to suggest that its inclusion for discussion alongside the theorisations of Peter Bürger and John Roberts constitutes a preferable way of *introducing* its legacy within a linear genealogy of theories of the avant-garde. Nevertheless, having myself taken the *Neoavanguardia* out of the national and disciplinary borders of Italian studies and into the trans-national comparativism of avant-garde studies, let me address the geochronopolitical implications of this including gesture by way of conclusion. Unlike the allochronic movement that seeks to detach partisan commitment from ideological neutrality by safeguarding the separateness of an ‘Italian avant-garde’ from an ‘international modernism’, my inclusion of *Neoavanguardia* is not done in the name of modernisation. Rather, what the ‘case’ of *Neoavanguardia* in this present constellation of theorisations of the avant-garde reveals is the chronopolitical dimension of the relationship between comparativism and area studies, whether Italian or not. In the alleged movement towards modernisation, the transition from a ‘regional backwardness’ to a ‘national modernity’ is necessarily uneven, for the ‘regional’ is always-already ‘pre-modern’ and the ‘national’ (at least when perceived from within its own national borders) appears always as historically more ‘advanced’ in comparison.⁶⁰

⁶⁰ On this fundamental problem of uneven comparability in modernisation theory, both with respect to scale and object of comparison (as exemplified by the categories of ‘nation’ and ‘tribe’ for instance), see Tipps, 217-19.

When we are guided by a different kind of comparativism the very separateness and *interiority* of a national modernity, and by extension of area studies, comes under scrutiny. Benjaminian comparativism, I have suggested in my analysis in Chapter 1, does away with a part/whole relationship where the whole is exterior to the part, since *Jetztzeit*'s relationship to historical time is at once expanded and condensed. Thinking about an indexical, non-metonymic relationship between the 'regional pre-modern' and the 'national modern', therefore, means critically reconfiguring the manner in which particularity and universality function as chronopolitical markers. It also means a further reconfiguration of the part/whole relationship on a bigger scale: between the 'national modern' and the 'global modern', and the ways in which the latter regionalises the particularity of a 'national modern'. Thus, the iteration of the new after the new that the *Neoavanguardia* and its role in national and trans-national historiographies articulates exposes the avant-garde's relationship to the double temporality of the modern. In this instance, this double character is not expressed in the hellish repetition of the new that we encountered in the suspensive avant-garde in Chapter 3, nor is it the doubling of the anticipatory movement of prolepsis that we examined in Chapter 2. This doubling takes us further back to the beginning to Chapter 1 and the discussion of time as vessel. Here, the false neutrality of the modern is exposed and its temporality is revealed for what it is: both vessel and content, a time that measures movement (as development) and a time (and place) that has been measured (as that which is developed). Not simply the static, ahistorical antithesis to tradition, the modern is revealed as both the unit of comparison and that comparison's *condition*. As we return to the thought of Walter Benjamin and the insights that have been gleaned from these iterations of the avant-garde after modernism in the next and final chapter ('Afterness and Singularity'), the chronopolitical dimension of this relationship between interiority and exteriority will become foregrounded. Especially as the question of writing about the avant-garde 'in the plural' is addressed with respect to geopolitical concerns, the particular relationship

between an 'Italian avant-garde' and the 'avant-garde *qua* avant-garde' that we have explored in this chapter will be extended and re-situated in a comparative, Benjaminian framework that will more adequately allow this particularity to become 'singular'.

III. A Singular Avant-Garde

Chapter 5

Afterness and Singularity: The Idea of the Avant-Garde after Modernism

The summer months that Benjamin spent with Brecht in Skovsbostrand in the years 1934, 1936 and 1938 involved heated intellectual exchanges about literature, theatre and current affairs, but also long sessions of game-playing: cards, Monopoly and, above all, chess.¹ Brecht and Benjamin played chess without any time-measuring devices, allowing Benjamin to develop the slow ‘tactic of attrition’ that Brecht would poignantly allude to in the poem written upon hearing of his friend’s death.² Alternatives to chess were also pondered. Benjamin recommended the ancient Chinese board game Go which, to Benjamin’s mind, bore interesting resemblances to epic theatre: rather than having pieces moved from one position to another, Go begins with an empty board and is gradually filled with pieces during the course of the game.³ Brecht proposed modifying the rules of chess itself: pieces that have occupied the same position for a while should change function, becoming weaker or stronger, and thus making the parameters of the game more dynamic.⁴ ‘As it is now’, remarked Brecht, ‘there is no development; [the game] stays the same for too long.’⁵

Benjamin noted Brecht’s remark in his diary, and this diary entry, 12 July 1934, has itself become a common reference point for Benjamin

¹ See Erdmut Wizisla, *Walter Benjamin and Bertolt Brecht: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Christine Shuttleworth (London: Libris, 2009), pp. 55-62.

² See Andrew McGettigan, ‘Benjamin and Brecht: Attrition in Friendship’, *Radical Philosophy*, 161. May-June (2010), 62-64.

³ See Wizisla, p. 58.

⁴ *Ibid*, pp. 58-59.

⁵ See ‘Notizen Svendborg Sommer 1934’, *GS VI*, p. 526. Cf. ‘Conversations with Brecht’, trans. by Anya Bostock, in *Aesthetics and Politics*, pp. 86-99 (p. 88).

commentators.⁶ Although we cannot ascertain the significance that Benjamin attached to this remark (he was, after all, an obsessive note-taker), we might nonetheless entertain the implications of Brecht's suggestion for Benjamin's thought as we take the final steps in our enquiry. For Brecht's idea effectively temporalises the piece's function and, as the passing of time enables the piece to be liberated from its fixed identity, it introduces an element of self-determination that also brings about a radical re-constitution of the game itself. No two games of chess can, of course, ever be identical but the very possibility of predicting the set of moves that will determine the course of the game is here ingeniously disrupted. The rules of this modified chess-game become variable, bringing to mind aspects of Benjamin's own work, aptly described by Miriam Hansen as a 'mode of thinking in which concepts are hardly ever stable or self-identical'.⁷ It is this figure of self-differentiation – a differentiation at once immanent and exterior – that I propose as the guiding principle for my line of enquiry in this culminating chapter and, as my analysis revisits themes and ideas from the previous chapters, for the thesis more broadly.

In unfolding the full implications of this self-differentiating principle, I begin by discussing the question of the avant-garde's singularity as it is expressed in current discourses within new modernist studies. These discourses are generally marked by an apprehension towards using the term avant-garde 'in the singular', primarily as a move against a Eurocentric or Western-centric approach to the study of avant-garde movements. While

⁶ See, for instance, Rebecca Comay's juxtaposition of the diary entry with the famous chess-game between historical materialism and theology in Thesis I from 'On the Concept of History'. Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin's Endgame', in *Walter Benjamin's Philosophy: Destruction & Experience*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (London & New York: Routledge, 1994; 2nd edn, Manchester: Clinamen Press, 2000), pp. 246-85 (p. 246).

⁷ Miriam Bratu Hansen, 'Room-for-Play: Benjamin's Gamble with Cinema', *October*, 109. Summer (2004), 3-45 (p. 5).

situating this pluralising tendency within broader intellectual debates on the status of ‘alternative’ and ‘multiple modernities’, I argue that a singular avant-garde must be defended on two grounds: firstly, with reference to the valid critical responses against the ‘multiple-modernities’ paradigm launched by Marxist and postcolonial scholars; secondly, with respect to the question of representation, which as I intimated in the introduction (Part I: ‘Which avant-garde?: Specificity and its Discontents’), remains the underlying, unspoken issue regarding the avant-garde’s mediation of generality and particularity. In order to redress the latter issue of representation, I return to the work of Benjamin *en passant* – passing through the thresholds, folds and vessels in Benjamin’s writing, in an approach indebted to Pierre Missac’s ‘indirect criticism’ in *Passage de Walter Benjamin*.⁸ Rather than argue for one kind of Benjamin over another (Marxist, mystical, etc.) or offer close textual reading of selected essays, this approach allows for a tracing of affinities and analogies across Benjamin’s early and late oeuvre, and it is in this spirit of ‘passing through’ that the epistemology of a Benjaminian singularity also emerges.

In the chapter’s final part, I elaborate on this notion of singularity, understood not in opposition to ‘plurality’ but in its philosophical sense of a multiplicity in self-differentiation. Drawing on discussions by thinkers Peter Hallward and Kojin Karatani while contrasting their articulation of a philosophical singularity with my own analysis of Benjamin, I then return to the notion of afterness through another ‘passing through’ – this time passing through the theories of the avant-garde that were previously discussed in Chapters 2, 3, and 4. In re-visiting these earlier analyses but now re-casting them in a Benjaminian light, I conclude by articulating this new reconfiguration of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism. Not unlike Benjamin’s idea in the Baroque *Trauerspiel*, or the historical compass from the

⁸ Such an ‘indirect criticism’ itself resonates with the chess move *en passant*, which entails an unusual, non-frontal way of attacking and capturing a pawn. See Pierre Missac, *Walter Benjamin’s Passages*, trans. by Shierry Weber Nicholsen (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, [1987] 1995), pp. x-xi; 1-7, 11-13, 106-121.

Arcades Project that steers *off* the North Pole in digression, the idea of the avant-garde emerges in this reading as a relational, prismatic category whose temporal self-determination also brings about a radical re-constitution of historical time itself. As the periodising categories of ‘historical avant-garde’ and ‘neo-avant-garde’ are unmoored from linear historicity, so too are the specific avant-gardes unmoored from the generality of the avant-garde as concept. As I argue below, *this* avant-garde emerges as a singularity, and so its ‘thisness’, precisely as a parallax in/of time, resists both the universalising tendencies of a homogeneous, monolithic conception of *the* avant-garde, and the particularisation of ‘local’, multiple avant-gardes whose spatiotemporal coordinates remain straitjacketed to an undialectical narrative of historical progress.

5.1 In the Plural

Should we refer to the avant-garde in the singular or the plural? For a number of scholars working within avant-garde studies today, this question remains central to the very articulation of the avant-garde or, as the tentatively pluralising formulation has it, of ‘the avant-garde(s)’.⁹ Even though current scholarship has not addressed this question with reference to the issue of temporality, it is my present aim to suggest that the question of the avant-garde’s singular (or plural) character ought to be understood precisely through a temporal, and by extension chronopolitical, lens. To do so, I will proceed by introducing the parameters of the discussion within avant-garde studies, while situating this pluralising tendency within new modernist studies and broader sociologically-inflected debates on the status of multiple

⁹ See, for instance, Stephen Forcer and Emma Wagstaff, ‘Introduction’, ‘The French Avant-Garde’, Special Issue, *Nottingham French Studies*, 50.3 (2011), 1-11 (pp. 4-5); James M. Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s): Exorcising Experimental Theatre and Performance* (Ann Arbor, MI: The University of Michigan Press, 2013).

or alternative modernities.¹⁰ Here comparative literature as discipline, and comparativism as a broader epistemological question, become critical: not only have developments in comparative literature since the turn of the millennium reinvigorated questions on literature's 'units of comparison', but they have also sharply re-drawn the contours of the discipline's assumed geopolitical centre in 'Euro-America'.¹¹ Yet, as these developments have also affected the much narrower terrain of avant-garde studies, it becomes pertinent to investigate how this tendency to pluralise might be connected to the tendency to periodise. To appropriate Fredric Jameson against himself, how might his famous injunction that 'we cannot not periodise' relate to the seemingly-unconnected injunction 'we cannot not pluralise'?¹²

It is worth noting the history of the institutional relationship between comparative literature and avant-garde studies. This relationship has received almost no scholarly attention, yet many individual figures whose texts are considered seminal contributions to avant-garde studies are intimately linked to the discipline of comparative literature. Peter Bürger may not be a comparatist in the narrow sense of the term, yet his work has

¹⁰ As an indication see, Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', *Public Culture* 11.1 (1999), 1-18; Dilip Parameshwar Gaonkar, ed., *Alternative Modernities* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2001); Special Issue: 'Multiple Modernities', *Daedalus*, 129.1 (2000); Shmuel Noah Eisenstadt, *Comparative Civilizations and Multiple Modernities* (Leiden: Brill, 2003).

¹¹ For an instructive summary of the parameters of the debates at the intersection of this new comparativism and postcolonial literary studies, see James Graham, Michael Niblett and Sharae Deckard, 'Postcolonial Studies and World Literature', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 48.5 (2012), 465-71. For a preliminary attempt to 'temporalise' the question of new modernist studies' relationship to the postcolonial, see Susan Reid, 'Global modernisms, post/colonialism and time', *Journal of Postcolonial Writing*, 50.6 (2014), 701-703.

¹² See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002), p. 94.

nonetheless involved the negotiation of intellectual and literary histories in the early modern and modern periods across the Franco-German border. The author of the first monographic study on the avant-garde, Renato Poggioli, is considered to have played an instrumental role in the foundation of comparative literature in the United States, while Matei Calinescu, who has contributed greatly to tracing the philological origins of the term ‘avant-garde’, was also a comparatist working across Romance and Slavonic languages.¹³ More decisively perhaps, major collaborative research projects that enabled the examination of parallel developments of avant-garde literary movements across national borders, and which were pivotal for the emergence of the sub-field of avant-garde studies, were undertaken under the auspices of the International Comparative Literature Association (ICLA) and the American Comparative Literature Association (ACLA).¹⁴

More recently, we might note a comparatist tendency in the geopolitical turn within avant-garde studies, which has meant greater emphasis being placed on ‘peripheral avant-gardes’, and a focus away from the urban metropolises of the long canonised historical avant-garde movements.¹⁵ Yet this geopolitical turn, rather than ‘de-linearising’ the

¹³ For Poggioli’s role in US comparative literature, see Natalie Melas, *All the Difference in the World: Postcoloniality and the Ends of Comparison* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2006), p. 4.

¹⁴ See Jean Weisberger, ed. *Les avant-gardes littéraires au XXe Siècle: Vol I: Histoire* (Budapest: Akadémiai Kiadó, 1984); and Dietrich Scheunemann, ‘Preface’, in *European Avant-Garde: New Perspectives*, ed. by Dietrich Scheunemann (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000), pp. 7-11.

¹⁵ See George Yúdice, ‘Rethinking the Theory of the Avant-Garde from the Periphery’, in *Modernism and Its Margins: Reinscribing Cultural Modernity from Spain and Latin America*, ed. by Anthony L. Geist and Jose B. Monleon (New York: Garland, 1999), pp. 52–80; Luís Madureira, *Cannibal Modernities: Postcoloniality and the Avant-garde in Caribbean and Brazilian Literature* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 2005); Fernando Rosenberg, *The Avant-Garde and Geopolitics in Latin America*

temporality of avant-garde historiography, I suggest, has further entrenched the link between periodisation and the injunction that ‘we cannot not pluralise’. This pluralising tendency has itself some variability. In some cases, the question is formulated in the general terms of inclusivity and diversity: ‘[...] is there just one story to tell about the avant-garde?’¹⁶ In others, pluralisation is proposed as a response to the fragmentation of a previously unified nation-state. In an edited collection devoted to the history of avant-garde arts in the former Yugoslavia, one contributor expressed their reservation about using the term avant-garde in the singular: ‘[O]ne cannot use the collective term “Yugoslav avant-garde” without reservations unless using the plural: avant-gardes. It is even tricky to speak of a Slovenian, or Croatian, or Serbian avant-garde. They are all linked, nevertheless, by common avant-garde features [...]’.¹⁷ Although the problem is presented here with reference to national particularity and cultural diversity within one nation-state, the concession expressed in the last sentence (‘they are all linked nevertheless, by common avant-garde features’) points to a broader issue of representation that is far from specific to the Yugoslav case (and which we will directly address below through our return to Benjamin).

At the heart of this recurring issue of pluralisation lies the status of heterogeneity within large-scale analyses of global culture. In the case of avant-garde studies, the consideration of the avant-garde ‘in the singular’ and

(Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2006); and Per Bäckström and Benedikt Hjartarson, eds., *Decentring the Avant-Garde: Towards a New Topography of the International Avant-Garde*, Avant-Garde Critical Studies Series 30 (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2014).

¹⁶ Mike Sell, ‘Resisting the Question, “What Is an Avant-Garde?”’, *New Literary History*, 41.4 (2010), 753-74 (p. 759).

¹⁷ Sonja Briski Uzelac, ‘Visual Arts in the Avant-gardes between the Two Wars’, in *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918-1991*, ed. by Dubravka Djurić and Miško Šuvaković (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 123-69 (p. 123).

by extension as a singular project, as the common critique goes, runs the risk of advocating a monolithic, hegemonically Eurocentric project. Consequently, writing of *the* avant-garde means erasing cultural difference and failing to take into account the *particularities* of avant-gardism across the globe, formed by specific cultural and historical conditions. According to one such critique, formulated by modernist scholar Laura Winkiel, European avant-garde movements such as French Surrealism may have been anti-colonial in their conviction, yet their underlying historicist conception of modernity needs to be redressed through Homi Bhabha's notion of 'time lag' or through ideas of combined and uneven development from world-systems theory, so as to tackle both the historicism and the universalising dimensions of an avant-garde expressed in the singular.¹⁸ At the same time, however, scholars who have been staunch supporters of opening the canon, have started to question the efficacy of pluralisation. In *Planetary Modernisms*, Susan Stanford Friedman admits that: 'it is not enough to add alternative modernities to the Western instance of modernity',¹⁹ while another commentator who had chosen to refer to the avant-garde as 'the avant-garde(s)' conceded that the plea to pluralise often amounts to little more than 'a passing acknowledgement that ultimately reverts back to a more generalized theory of the avant-garde'.²⁰

My own response to this impasse is informed by the critiques that have been formulated against the 'multiple-modernities' paradigm and by Benjamin's own thought, whose temporal indexicality, as I explain in the following sections, provides a model for an idea of the avant-garde that is both

¹⁸ See Laura Winkiel, 'Postcolonial Avant-Gardes and the World System of Modernity/Coloniality', in *Decentring the Avant-Garde*, pp. 97-116 (pp. 97-100). See also the key collection in the geopolitical turn within new modernist studies, co-edited with Laura Doyle: Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, eds., *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

¹⁹ Stanford Friedman, *Planetary Modernisms*, p. 4.

²⁰ Harding, *The Ghosts of the Avant-Garde(s)*, p. 9.

heterogeneous *and* singular.²¹ As Benjamin is brought into dialogue with postcolonial critiques of modernisation theory, two related issues emerge in this response: the question of centre and the question of origin. While the former may bring to mind notions such as ‘Eurocentrism’, which are crucial to critiques of modernisation theory, it is in fact the latter that best articulates the spatiotemporal and ethico-political problematic of plural modernities. For, not only is modernity as a geopolitical imaginary conflated with the location of ‘the West’ to the extent that the critique of modernisation often lapses into a critique of westernisation, as Kojin Karatani among many others has noted, but also this conflation is coupled with an imaginary of spatial expansion.²² Thus, modernity becomes this geopolitical force that originates from a particular locus (is born in the West’) and then ‘spreads’, or ‘expands’

²¹ For my critical summary below, I am indebted to a range of critical debates, including: Arif Dirlik, ‘Global Modernity? Modernity in an Age of Global Capitalism’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6.3 (2003), 275-92; Arif Dirlik, ‘Thinking Modernity Historically: Is “Alternative Modernity” the Answer?’, *Asian Review of World Histories*, 1.1 (2013), 5-44; Benita Parry, ‘Aspects of Peripheral Modernisms’, *Ariel*, 40.1 (2009), 27-55; Harry Harootunian, ‘Some Thoughts on Comparability and the Space-Time Problem’, Special Issue: ‘Problems of Comparability/ Possibilities for Comparative Studies’, *boundary 2*, 32.2 (2005), 23-52 (pp. 35-36); Harry Harootunian, *History’s Disquiet: Modernity, Cultural Practice, and the Question of Everyday Life* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2000); Timothy Mitchell, ‘Introduction’, in *Questions of Modernity*, ed. by Timothy Mitchell (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), p. xii. Alongside these Marxist and postcolonial critiques, the reservations expressed by Weberian, institutional social theorists are also far from negligible. See Göran Therborn, ‘Entangled Modernities’, *European Journal of Social Theory*, 6.3 (2003), 293-305; Volker H. Schmidt, ‘Multiple Modernities or Varieties of Modernity?’, *Current Sociology*, 54.1 (2006), 77-97.

²² See Kojin Karatani, ‘Wo liegt der Ursprung der Moderne? Interviewt von Steffi Richter’, *Deutsche Zeitschrift für Philosophie*, 44.6 (1996), 1007-1019 (pp. 1007-1008).

into territories previously 'under-developed'.²³ Modernity is here a spatial but also necessarily a *historical* movement 'from the West to the rest' – a problem famously identified by Dipesh Chakrabarty as the temporal logic of 'first in the West, and then elsewhere'.²⁴ As sociologist Gurminder K. Bhambra has also more recently remarked, postcolonial critiques of multiple modernities are necessary so as to redress the conception of modernity's global character, not as its consequence, but as its condition.²⁵ Challenging the notion that modernity happens as a consequence of modernisation, and that modernity therefore 'expands', means that we can begin to move beyond what, following Fabian, can be described as the underlying allochronism of the multiple-modernities paradigm (retaining as it does elements of the modernisation theory that Eisenstadt himself advocated in the 1950s).²⁶ Modernity, therefore, as it is proposed here does not *become* global as it 'travels' in time and space from the 'progressed' to the 'backward', but is understood as the condition of a global structure of spatiotemporal inequality.

With respect to the distinct question of 'plural avant-gardes', as opposed to 'plural modernities', we ought to return once more to the work of Benjamin. For unlike the case of the category of 'modernity', the consideration of plurality with reference to 'the avant-garde' requires an investigation into the question of representation. It is through Benjamin's theory of mimesis, especially as it intersects with his conception of history, therefore, that we can find a different articulation of the notion of *origin* and, consequently, a different articulation of the relationship between 'avant-garde-ness' as a common *attribute* and 'the avant-garde' as a geochronopolitical coordinate,

²³ See Gaonkar, 'On Alternative Modernities', especially pp. 1; 13.

²⁴ Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe*, p. 6.

²⁵ Gurminder K. Bhambra, 'Historical Sociology, Modernity, and Postcolonial Critique', *The American Historical Review*, 116.3 (2011), 653-662 (p. 662).

²⁶ On the links between modernisation theory and the multiple-modernities paradigm, see Bhambra, pp. 654-655, n. 7.

whose fixed locus in the stream of historical time will soon have been reconfigured 'out of joint'.

5.2 Vessels and Timepieces

In the opening paragraphs of *Time and the Other*, Fabian describes time as a form of exchange, analogous to money or language: 'Time, much like language or money, is a carrier of significance, a form through which we define the content of relations between the Self and the Other'.²⁷ According to Fabian's brief definition, time is not only the vessel of events, as the perennial problem that we encountered in Chapter 1 has it, but rather the vessel of social relations. Time is here a form through which we can make sense of the relationship between 'self' and 'other', but also a system of exchange that produces this very relationship. This figure of the vessel, and the limitations of its interiority or its 'ability to carry', can serve here as an illustration of Benjamin's thought on mimesis and historical time, guiding our path as we move towards a conception of the avant-garde as a singularity. Our passage through Benjamin's writing will take here a loosely chronological direction; yet rather than suggesting a linear development of his ideas, I rather seek to articulate – and to some extent narratively perform – the affinities and returns that take place in selected texts across his early and late thought.

Although the Benjamin of the 1930s is a different writer from the Benjamin of the 1910s, it is well documented that the early language essays provided the basis for the later fragments on the mimetic faculty.²⁸ Central to the early idealist essays as well as the later materialist configurations, which also drew on Surrealist dream interpretations and Brechtian theatre, is the idea of the

²⁷ Fabian, *Time and the Other*, p. ix.

²⁸ See, for instance, Benjamin's letter to Gerhard Scholem of 28 February 1933, in *CWB*, pp. 402-404.

non-communicability of language.²⁹ According to Benjamin's well-known theory, language is a carrier of meaning only insofar as it is not a carrier of signification. A non-vessel of a vessel, language for Benjamin does not signify, represent or communicate – all that it communicates is language itself. As has been noted by Christopher Fynsk among many others, language in Benjamin is 'a form of presentation that is prior to any signification in the broad semiological sense'.³⁰ Hence also the centrality of naming for these early essays: Adamic naming is deployed by Benjamin to facilitate the epistemological shift from the concept (and its object) to the idea (without an object), and from representation (*Vorstellung*) to exposition (*Darstellung*).³¹ Accordingly, in Benjamin's influential essay on translation we discover that the translator's task is not to transfer signification from one linguistic vessel to another. As Carol Jacobs has put it: 'For Benjamin, translation does not transform a foreign language into one we may call our own, but rather renders radically foreign that language we believe to be ours'.³² Since the true meaning of a language lies not in what it signifies, but in its translatability (in its potential to reach the 'pure language' of naming), the translator should not aim to show a semantic fidelity to the original but to reveal instead the

²⁹ The summary that follows draws on the *Trauerspiel* study, and the essays 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man', in *SW1*, pp. 62-74 and 'The Task of the Translator', in *SW1*, pp. 253-263, hereafter cited respectively *Origin*, 'Language', and 'Translator'.

³⁰ Christopher Fynsk, 'The Claim of History', *Diacritics*, 22. 3/4, Commemorating Walter Benjamin (1992), 115-126 (p. 120). See also Stéphane Symons, 'The Ability to not-shine: The Word 'Unscheinbar' in the Writings of Walter Benjamin', *Angelaki*, 18. 4 (2014), 101-23.

³¹ See *Origin*, especially, pp. 34-38, 44-48, 165-67; *GS I.1*, pp. 214-218; 225-28; 342-44. See also 'Language', *SW1*, pp. 65, 68; *GS 2.1*, pp. 144, 148. For a detailed analysis of Benjamin's use of biblical motifs, see Roland Boer, 'From Plato to Adam: The Biblical Exegesis of Walter Benjamin', *The Bible and Critical Theory*, 3.1 (2007), 1-13.

³² Carol Jacobs, 'The Monstrosity of Translation', *MLN*, 90.6 (1975), 755-766 (p. 756).

translatability that lies hidden in all texts worthy of translation. The translator would thus make 'both the original and the translation recognisable as fragments of a greater language, just as fragments are part of a vessel [*wie Scherben als Bruchstück eines Gefäßes*]'.³³ Therefore, fidelity for Benjamin does not address the original, but the potentiality of 'pure language' whose 'essential kernel' can be discerned in all texts that are 'translatable'. And the historicity of pure language, though not foregrounded as such by Benjamin, is here unmistakably messianic: pure language is a language-to-come, not unlike *Wandelschrift*, the international exchange-script whose singularity, as we saw in Chapter 1, replaces the false universality of Esperanto.

In the montage of aphorisms that make up *One-Way Street*, arguably the key text on the threshold between Benjamin's early and late periods, the idea of non-communicability of language is also present. In these later formulations, however, the messianic quality of pure language takes forms that express and critique the character of the commodity-form under capitalism. As in Adamic naming and the pure language of translatability, in the image-texts that Benjamin encounters in the poetic experiments of Stéphane Mallarmé, or in the advertising billboards that show the brand-name of salt '*Bullrichsalz*', there is no exteriority of signification.³⁴ In his childhood recollections, Benjamin delights over this utopian possibility of misheard and misremembered words such as *Markt-halle* (meaning, indoor market), where sounds merge beyond recognition of any known language, and both language and environment become creaturely.³⁵ In this erosion of distinction between the separate words, language becomes also an index for a new system of economic exchange, beyond the buying and selling of commodities: 'No, you

³³ 'Translator', *SW1*, p. 260; *GS IV.1*, p. 18.

³⁴ See, respectively, 'Attested Auditor of Books', *One-way Street*, in *SW1*, p. 456; *GS IV*, pp. 102-103; and *AP* [G1a, 4], pp. 173-174; *GS V*, pp. 235-236.

³⁵ See, for instance, 'The Mummerehlen', in *Berlin Childhood around 1900*, trans. by Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2006), pp. 97-99.

said “Mark-Talle”, and just as these two words were eroded through habits of speech so that neither retained its original “meaning”, in the same way the routine of this visit eroded all the images provided by it so that none offer the original concept of buying or selling’.³⁶

More thresholds are evoked in Benjamin’s writing on the urban environment. Visiting Naples with Asja Lacis in 1924, a Benjamin in-love is fascinated with the city’s porosity: ‘One can scarcely discern where building is still in progress and where dilapidation has already set in. For nothing is concluded.’³⁷ The experience of the unfinished produces a tentative condition, since not knowing where a building begins and ends, or whether construction has been completed, means the dissolution of spatial borders. Even more centrally in Benjamin’s corpus, the technological innovations of the nineteenth century that are examined in the *Passagenwerk* position architecture, literature and photography on the verge of full immersion into the market; yet, insists Benjamin, ‘they linger on the threshold’.³⁸ Described in monadological terms, the arcade is ‘windowless’, a passage without an outside.³⁹ Between a dwelling and a shell, the arcade becomes an emblem of porosity between the domestic interior and the public exterior.⁴⁰ This ‘immanent exterior’ of the arcade, as Rebecca Comay has aptly called it,⁴¹ also marks the arcade as an immanent exterior; as itself a monadological structure that provides a counterpart to Benjamin’s figure of awakening, to the

³⁶ Walter Benjamin, Notice 11, in *The “Berlin Chronicle” Notices*, trans. and with commentary by Carl Skoggard (Quebec: Pilot Editions, 2011), pp. 26-27.

³⁷ Walter Benjamin (with Asja Lacis), ‘Naples’ (1925), in *SW1*, pp. 414-421 (416).

³⁸ *AP*, ‘Exposé of 1935’, p. 13; *GS V*, p. 59. Cf. *AP* [O2a, 1], p. 494; *GS V*, pp. 617-618.

³⁹ See *AP* [L1a, 1], p. 406; *GS V*, p. 513; *AP* [Q2a, 7], p. 532; *GS V*, p. 661.

⁴⁰ See Benjamin’s reflections on the ‘shell’ replacing the ‘dwelling’ in *AP* [I4, 4], pp. 220-221; *GS V*, pp. 291-292.

⁴¹ Comay, ‘Benjamin’s Endgame’, p. 278.

spatiotemporal experience ‘where the threshold between waking and sleeping was worn away [...]’.⁴²

Taking into account the centrality of the threshold for Benjamin’s intellectual project, we might return to our earlier critique of the chronopolitics of *kairós*, proposed in Chapter 1. We can then perhaps replace the figure of the fire alarm with a different timepiece that better captures the chronopolitics of timing: not an alarm clock or fire alarm, but a charged battery.⁴³ ‘To store time as a battery stores energy: the flaneur’, writes Benjamin in his notes for the *Arcades Project*.⁴⁴ This is the person who waits, who knows to store time, and who ‘takes in the energy “time” and passes it on in altered form’.⁴⁵ Indicating a state of impatience rather than contemplation, this storing of time carries with it the anticipation of the battery being full, charged, and ready to be put to use. Alongside this secular repository of time, we might also consider another temporal figure with a more explicitly messianic, and indeed theological character: the notion of *tikkun* – the smashing of the vessels in an act that is at once destruction and restoration. As one of Benjamin’s personal interlocutors and first textual interpreters, Gershom Scholem is still relied upon for his interpretation of the ‘Translator’ essay and its links to the Kabbalistic notion of *tikkun*.⁴⁶ In large part because

⁴² ‘Surrealism: The Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia’, in *SW2.1*, pp. 207-221 (208); *GS II.1*, pp. 295-310 (296). See also *AP* <O°, 26>, p. 859-860; *GS V*, p. 1029.

⁴³ I am indebted to Jonathan Stafford for drawing my attention to the figure of the battery as a counter-image to the fire alarm.

⁴⁴ Benjamin plays here with the words *einladen* [to invite (in)] and *laden* [to charge], where one ought to invite and to charge time. See *AP* [D3, 4], p. 107; *GS V*, p. 164.

⁴⁵ *AP* <O°, 78>, p. 864; *GS V*, p. 1034.

⁴⁶ See Gershom Scholem, ‘Toward an Understanding of the Messianic Idea in Judaism’, in *The Messianic Idea in Judaism, and other Essays on Jewish Spirituality* (New York: Schocken, 1971), pp. 1-36 (p. 13). See also Gershom Scholem, *Walter Benjamin: The Story of a Friendship*, trans. by Harry Zohn (New York: New York Review of Books, [1981] 2001), pp. 40-41, 69-70, 89, 113-128, 152, 258-263; and Gershom Scholem,

Scholem's recollections and textual interpretations are still read as authoritative sources by many scholars, the status of Jewish mysticism within Benjamin's work remains highly contested.⁴⁷ It is beyond my present scope to take sides in this ongoing debate. Nonetheless, at least with respect to Benjamin's writing on historical time, the theological dimension cannot be so easily dismissed, especially since *tikkun* reveals a crucial aspect that the figure of the battery cannot: that what is being restored is not itself complete.⁴⁸ For, the storing and restoring of time that is indicated by *tikkun* (where restoring can be read as 're-storing', as a storing anew that does not repeat) bears also affinities with Penelope's labour of weaving and unweaving [*die Penelopearbeit des Eingedenkens*'] that for Benjamin expresses the dialectical relation between memory and forgetting.⁴⁹ Irving Wohlfahrt may have written decisively against a theological interpretation, yet he is correct that the structural relationship at work in Benjamin's writing on history is one where 'the partial wholes [...] *presuppose and anticipate* their ultimate

'Walter Benjamin and his Angel' [1972], in *On Walter Benjamin: Critical Essays and Recollections*, ed. by Gary Smith (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), pp. 51-89.

⁴⁷ For a frequently-cited essay that relies heavily on Scholem's interpretation, see Anson Rabinbach, 'Between Enlightenment and Apocalypse: Benjamin, Bloch and Modern German Jewish Messianism', *New German Critique*, 34. Winter (1985), 78-124. For a measured account of the theological/anti-theological disputes (though itself from the standpoint of theology), see Roland Boer, *Criticism of Heaven: On Marxism and Theology* (Leiden: Brill, 2007), pp. 57-61.

⁴⁸ Fredric Jameson's claim, for instance, that the theological in Benjamin is merely 'strategic' tells us more about certain Marxist scholars' frustration about their inability to fully assimilate Benjamin's thought to their intellectual project, than about Benjamin's own relationship to theology. See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1982), p. 69 n. 48.

⁴⁹ See 'Proust', in *SW2.1*, p. 238; *GS II.1*, p. 311.

totalization'.⁵⁰ Not a repetition of the same, but a 'filling in' that also empties out as it fills, the smashing of the vessel marks another liminal state that dissolves the 'either/or' position of interiority/exteriority and completion/incompletion.

Perhaps the exemplary vessel that defies such either/or state, however, is once again a highly personal and quotidian thought-figure drawn from Benjamin's childhood – a sock. Although we passed by this thought-figure through the 'Proust' essay in Chapter 1, it is worth re-visiting, especially as it illustrates the logic of singularity that will be elaborated in the following section. Benjamin's tale of the sock is described extensively in *Berlin Childhood around 1900* in two versions ('The Sock' and 'Cabinets') which lyrically convey Benjamin's memory of looking for, and touching, a pair of socks inside a cabinet.⁵¹ Narrated as an adventure story taking place in the lilliputian world of the drawer, the tale recounts how the hand dives into the pair of socks, which is rolled up and turned inside out. As Benjamin (as a young boy) reaches for the innermost core of the sock, which also functions as a carrier or pocket, he discovers that there is nothing inside, or rather, that as soon as what was carried has been grasped, the pocket disappears. Benjamin (now as an adult man) concludes 'The Sock' by writing: 'It taught me that form and content, wrap and wrapped [*Hülle und Verhülltes*], are the same. It led me to draw truth from works of literature as warily as the child's hand retrieved the sock from "the pocket".'⁵² The deceptive nature of the sock, where what lies inside 'turns out' (literally) to be nothing but the sock itself, becomes for Benjamin a lesson with epistemological implications: the truth in literature cannot be found in the depth of meaning, in representation. Rather, like in baroque allegory or in

⁵⁰ Irving Wohlfahrt, 'On the Messianic Structure of Walter Benjamin's Last Reflections', *Glyph*, 3 (1978), 148-212 (p. 172; emphasis added).

⁵¹ See 'The Sock', in *Berlin Childhood*, pp. 96-97; and 'Cabinets', in *Berlin Childhood*, pp. 152-158. Cf. 'Der Strumpf', *GS IV*, pp. 977-978 and 'Schränke', *GS IV*, pp. 283-287.

⁵² 'The Sock', in *Berlin Childhood*, p. 97; translation modified.

the epic theatre, the truth-import [*Wahrheitsgehalt*] is on the surface, in exposition.

In the second version ('Cabinets'), the tale carries on for a little longer. This longer version does not leave us with an identification between wrap and wrapped, container and contained, but offers a third possibility: 'They were one—and, to be sure, a third thing too: the sock into which they had both been transformed.'⁵³ This is not a Hegelian 'third' – a dialectical sublation of the two prior theses. Benjamin may himself have been partial to the idea of dialectics (most prominently in the figure of the 'dialectical image') but, as is well established, Benjamin's thought can be considered dialectical only insofar as such dialectics could accommodate a philosophy of the fragment of the Jena Romantics.⁵⁴ Benjamin's 'dialectics' in this instance, a dialectics of 'nuances' as he himself may have put it,⁵⁵ is then arguably closer to Gilles Deleuze's philosophy of individuation than to Hegelian sublation.⁵⁶ For the

⁵³ 'Cabinets', *Berlin Childhood*, p. 153.

⁵⁴ Although not as dominant as the 'Frankfurt School' or the 'Jewish-messianic' strands of Benjamin reception, the scholarship devoted to Benjamin's interest in Jena Romanticism is nonetheless well-established. As an indication see Thomas Pfau, 'Thinking before Totality: Kritik, Übersetzung, and the Language of Interpretation in the Early Walter Benjamin', *MLN*, 103.5 (1988), 1072-97; Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen, eds., *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism* (London: Continuum, 2002); Rebecca Comay, 'Benjamin and the ambiguities of Romanticism', in *The Cambridge Companion to Walter Benjamin*, ed. by David S. Ferris (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), pp. 134-51.

⁵⁵ See *AP* [N1a, 4], p. 459; *GS V*, p. 573.

⁵⁶ Although it is beyond my scope to develop a comparative reading of Benjaminian and Deleuzian individuation, such a reading would nonetheless necessitate a discussion of Deleuze's writing on Proust and on the Baroque against Benjamin's. See Gilles Deleuze, *Proust and Signs*, trans. by Richard Howard (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2000), especially pp. 150, 163, 168; and *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque*, trans. by Tom Conley (London: Athlone Press, 1993). For an insightful reading that brings both Benjamin and Deleuze into the realm of Jena Romanticism,

movement from one 'state' to another is not one of development but of interior unfolding. This is a movement, as Rainer Nägele has also remarked, often traced by Benjamin: 'moving inward to the point where the innermost "in" turns inside out into a radical outside'.⁵⁷

Our final stop in this passing-through takes us back to the point of our departure in Chapter 1: to the key epistemological fragments from the *Arcades Project's* Convolute N, and the complementing theses from 'On the Concept of History'. There, we find once again the monadological principle that has been carried over from the *Trauerspiel*, infused this time with the urgent call for class struggle, and the historical materialist's task to bring about a 'real state of emergency' against fascism.⁵⁸ The indexicality of language, which was earlier expressed through Baroque allegory and the brand-name of the commodity, becomes in its guise as 'dialectical image' explicitly historical. As Benjamin writes in what is perhaps Convolute N's most important entry [N3, 1]:

What distinguishes images from the "essences" of phenomenology is their historical index. [...] The historical index of images says [*sagt*] namely, not only that they belong to a particular time; it says above all that they come to legibility [*zur Lesbarkeit kommen*] only at a particular time. And indeed this

see Josh Cohen, 'Unfolding: Reading after Romanticism', in *Walter Benjamin and Romanticism*, ed. by Andrew Benjamin and Beatrice Hanssen (London: Continuum, 2002), pp. 98-108. See also Peter Osborne, 'On Comparability: Kant and the Possibility of Comparative Studies', *boundary 2*, Special Issue: Problems of Comparability/Possibilities for Comparative Studies, 32.2 (2005), 3-22 (pp. 21-22).

⁵⁷ Rainer Nägele, *Theater, Theory, Speculation: Walter Benjamin and the Scenes of Modernity* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), p. 66. Another instance in this movement could be provided by Benjamin's figure of the 'lining' with reference to the time of boredom as well as fashion: *AP* [D2a, 1], pp.105-106; *GS V*, pp. 161-162; *AP* [D9a, 4], p. 118; *GS V*, p. 176.

⁵⁸ See Thesis VIII, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW4*, p. 392; *GS I.3*, p. 697.

coming 'to legibility' is a particular critical point of the movement in their interior [*der Bewegung in ihrem Innern*].⁵⁹

Leaving the comparison with the phenomenological 'essences' aside, what is pertinent in Benjamin's description of the image is the manner in which the image is conditioned by the historical index. The expository simplicity of 'telling' [*sagen*], whether used intentionally by Benjamin or not, points nonetheless to the index's own non-representational or non-semantic relationship to the image. The dialectical image's historicity – a true, 'figurative' [*bildlich*] historicity that is not simply 'temporal' or 'archaic', as Benjamin insists⁶⁰ – is to be found partly within a particular time (*belonging to that time*) and partly outside it (in a *movement towards that time*). As both movement and the arrest of movement, the dialectical image is yet another articulation of a vessel that breaks at the seams, like the line that experiences its own partition outside itself: 'And thus the historical phenomenon [*Tatbestand*] polarises into fore- and after-history, always anew, never in the same way. And it does so outside itself, in its actual present instant [*Aktualität*]; like a line which, divided according to the apollonian cut, experiences its partition outside itself.'⁶¹ Once again, the force-field described by Benjamin as being at once within and beside itself expresses a

⁵⁹ *AP* [N3, 1], pp. 462-463; *GS V*, pp. 577-578; translation modified. For more examples of this historical indexicality at work, see *AP* [N9a, 8], p. 474; *GS V*, p. 593. See also: 'The past [*Vergangenheit*] carries with it a furtive index' in Thesis II, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW4*, p. 390; *GS I.3*, p. 693 (translation modified).

⁶⁰ *AP* [N3, 1], pp. 462-463; *GS V*, pp. 577-578. See also the shorter alternative version of this entry, where historical time is proposed as 'not progression but image, suddenly emergent [*sprunghaft*]': *AP* [N2a, 3], p. 462; *GS V*, p. 577.

⁶¹ *AP* [N7a, 1], p. 470; *GS V*, pp. 587-588; translation modified. Instructive here is the translator's note clarifying the possible meaning of Benjamin's reference to an 'Apollonian section' – namely, the division of a narrow line by a narrower one of a different colour, an image that clearly accords with the notion of a self-differentiating interiority. See *AP*, n. 21, pp. 989-990.

monadological movement whose completion is yet-to-come. Let us now take this movement at a standstill outside the immediate context of Benjamin's texts, and place it in dialogue with other thinkers of singularity. In this way, we will also non-linearly arrive at the idea of the avant-garde after modernism, and its chronopolitics of an afterness 'and/in' singularity.

5.3 Afterness and/in Singularity

It has become commonplace in Anglophone cultural studies to present Benjamin as a thinker of the marginal and the microscopic.⁶² There is plenty of textual evidence to support this reading, and one cannot think of Benjamin's cultural history 'from below' without the ethico-political imperative to bring the 'rags' and 'refuse' to the surface and restore their place in history.⁶³ If we attend to the fundamental distinction between the object of examination (the marginal) and the medium of examination (the microscopic), however, a different picture of Benjaminian epistemology emerges. Taking into account our earlier discussion of Benjamin's mediation of the quotidian and messianic, especially with respect to the technological imaginary that marks his later work, it might be more exact to describe Benjamin as a thinker, not of the microscopic, but of the 'telescopic'.⁶⁴ Readers will recall the famous aphorism

⁶² See, for instance, the much-anthologised essay by Janet Wolff originally published as: Janet Wolff, 'Memoirs and Micrologies: Walter Benjamin, Feminism and Cultural Analysis', *New Formations*, 20 (1993), 113-22.

⁶³ As one instance among many, see Benjamin's methodological reflections in the 'Epistemo-critical Prologue': 'The relationship between the minute precision [*mikrologischen Verarbeitung*] of the work and the proportions of the sculptural or intellectual whole demonstrates that truth-content is only to be grasped through immersion in the most minute [*genauster Versenkung*] details of subject-matter.' *Origin*, p. 29; *GS I.1*, p. 208.

⁶⁴ Alongside Miriam Hansen's already-mentioned monograph on cinema and temporal experience, for another notable study that brings Benjamin's technological

from Convolute N, which sets the parameters for a historical-materialist practice of history: 'Telescoping [*Telescopage*] of the past through the present.'⁶⁵ The telescope functions here as a technological apparatus (indeed as another vessel), which does not simply zoom into the smallest, discarded, or what cannot be perceived by the naked eye, but rather as a historical-time-machine that optically re-configures the relationship between what is nearest and what is furthest, temporally as well as spatially.⁶⁶ Like the aura, which gives 'the unique appearance of distance [*Ferne*], however near it may be',⁶⁷ the telescope alters one's perception of distance. Historical cognition is thus articulated through the practice of telescoping, which enables perception in a multi-focal, multi-scale, shifting perspective. Yet this 'multi' perspective should not be mistaken for a 'plural' perspective (in the additive sense of the plural avant-gardes that we discussed earlier), but as a multiplicity in self-differentiation or, in other words, as a singularity. Before we take our final steps towards our concluding proposition about the avant-garde's chronopolitics of singularity, let us first conceptually delimit the notion of singularity more broadly and in its Benjaminian articulation as I identify it more specifically.

In its most common definition, singularity is that which resists the structural relationship between universality and particularity. There are two parallel definitions, proposed by thinkers Peter Hallward and Kojin Karatani

imagination in relation to historicity see Eduardo Cadava, *Words of Light: Theses on the Photography of History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997).

⁶⁵ *AP* [N7a, 3], p. 471; *GS V*, p. 588.

⁶⁶ For a comparable technological apparatus that has important implications for historical perception, see the 'historical time-lapse camera' [*historischer Zeitraffer*] that Benjamin refers to in Thesis XV, 'On the Concept of History', in *SW4*, p. 395; *GS I.2*, p. 701.

⁶⁷ 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility (Second Version)', in *SW3*, pp. 104-105; *GS VII*, p. 355.

respectively, which are pertinent for our analysis.⁶⁸ Although neither Hallward nor Karatani engage with Benjamin, drawing instead on other monadological thinkers such as Gilles Deleuze, their definition of singularity can help us articulate precisely what kind of singularity a Benjaminian singularity would be. In *Absolutely Postcolonial*, his landmark critique of the category of difference in postcolonial writing, Hallward draws on a broad philosophical lineage that includes Buddhist and mystical Islamic thought alongside Badiou, Deleuze and the latter's engagement with Spinoza and Leibniz, and defines the singular as an entity which generates its own origin and its own relations with other entities; unlike the universal, which imposes its validity through a position that is external to itself, the singular is 'self-constituent, an ongoing differentiation'.⁶⁹ Hallward clarifies that singularity 'can be indifferently described as *infinitely compressed* (singular because punctual, without extension) or as *infinitely extended* (singular because all

⁶⁸ See Peter Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial: Writing between the Singular and the Specific* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2001); Peter Hallward, 'The Limits of Individuation, or how to Distinguish Deleuze and Foucault', *Angelaki* 5.2 (2000), 93-111. For Karatani's interpretation of the notion of singularity, see Kojin Karatani, *Transcritique: On Kant and Marx*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2003), pp. 100-12. On Karatani's broader intellectual project, which can itself be read as a philosophy of singularity, see Kojin Karatani, *Architecture as Metaphor: Language, Number, Money*, trans. by Sabu Kohso (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1995); Kojin Karatani, *History and Repetition*, ed. and trans. by Seiji M. Lippit (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004); *The Structure of World History: From Modes of Production to Modes of Exchange*, trans. by Michael K. Bourdaghs (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2014). See also Carl Cassegarde, 'Exteriority and Transcritique: Karatani Kōjin and the Impact of the 1990s', *Japanese Studies*, 27.1 (2007), 1-18; Harry Harootunian, 'Philosophy of History's Return', *History and Theory*, 54. February (2015), 96-105.

⁶⁹ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, p. 4.

inclusive, without horizon)'.⁷⁰ The question of measuring scale and distance is here crucial and bears strong affinities with Benjamin's telescopic thought: the singular renders the distinction between the nearest and furthest, the tiniest and the largest, redundant. We can also here recall our earlier analysis from Chapter 1 with reference to *Jetztzeit*. As a 'model' of the messianic, and as the 'enormous abbreviation' of history, isn't *Jetztzeit* precisely such a singularity? It is a moment in/of time, which is infinite while point-like, and expansive while (*and because*) compressed.⁷¹

Kojin Karatani's conception of singularity also brings us to issues that we have already encountered in Benjamin, especially his theory of language. Singularity, for Karatani, problematises the distinction between interiority and exteriority, and is 'tied to the function of the proper name'.⁷² Benjaminian singularity is also tied to language's function as proper name: 'Language [...] only expresses itself purely when it speaks in name', writes Benjamin in 'On Language as Such and on the Language of Man'.⁷³ No longer mediated through signification or representation, as we have seen, Benjamin's language as Adamic naming, or translation in its translatability, points to an interior expansion that contains within it the relationality of (particular) languages. In describing Karatani's philosophical project, one commentator has cogently expressed how we might also think of Benjaminian singularity: as 'the relation between the one and the other, in which the latter must be first traversed in order to arrive at the former, and because of which *attention on this one can*

⁷⁰ Hallward, *Absolutely Postcolonial*, p. 18 (emphases added). See also Hallward, 'The Limits of Individuation', 95.

⁷¹ Benjamin himself highlights this relationship between the 'in' and the 'of' of time when he writes with reference to epistemology: 'Historical knowledge is only possible within the historical moment. But knowledge *within* the historical moment is always knowledge *of* a moment'. New Theses B, in 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', *SW4*, p. 404 (emphases original).

⁷² See Karatani, *History and Repetition*, p. xix.

⁷³ 'Language', *SW1*, p. 65. Cf. *Origin*, pp. 36-37; *GS I.1*, pp. 216-17.

at any time be disrupted by those elements of which, in a double sense, it is a-part (that is, both belonging to and different from itself).'⁷⁴ Once again, in accord with our earlier analysis, it is possible to conceptualise *Jetztzeit* in just those terms: as both belonging to and being different from itself; as being 'a-part' of/from the entire course of history.

Precisely because *Jetztzeit* is not *fully* exterior to historical time, Benjaminian singularity differs from Hallward's conception. Whereas for Hallward singularity is not constituted by its relations to other entities (something which would render it 'specific' in Hallward's definition), Benjaminian singularity is constitutively relational. Unlike the big bang (one of Hallward's figures for the singular), *Jetztzeit* cannot be said to be entirely generative of its own conditions of space and time: it remains bound to the time of historicism, and its explosion remains partly within pre-existing conditions of spatiotemporal experience. Karatani's conception, on the other hand, demands that singularity is *not* constituted by repetition.⁷⁵ Yet Benjaminian singularity is constitutively repetitive (even if the character of that repetition remains in tension with the temporality of the ever-same). It is a repetition necessitated by a survival (*Überleben*) and by what Benjamin describes as 'an afterlife (*Nachleben*) of that which has been understood and whose pulse can be felt in the present'.⁷⁶ As Miriam Hansen has aptly observed, repetition in Benjamin oscillates between a Marxian appropriation of the Nietzschean 'eternal return' through the temporality of the commodity-form (as we also discussed with reference to John Roberts in Chapter 3), and a Proustian recollection that is made messianic as a repetition 'in the mode of

⁷⁴ Richard F. Calichman, 'Introduction', in *Contemporary Japanese Thought*, ed. by Richard F. Calichman (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), pp. 1-42 (p. 25; emphasis added).

⁷⁵ It is worth noting that Karatani discusses singularity and the proper name also in relation to allegory. See Karatani, *History and Repetition*, p. 94.

⁷⁶ 'Eduard Fuchs, Collector and Historian', in *SW3*, p. 263; *GS II.2*, p. 468. Cf. *Origin*, pp. 45-46; *GS I.1*, p. 226.

the 'yet-once-again' (it might work this time).⁷⁷ Benjaminian singularity thus *requires historical difference*; rather than being unprecedented, the singular is here relational.

It is therefore not surprising that in a contrasting definition of singularity, made this time with reference to Benjamin, Samuel Weber has articulated the singular as the 'spectral after-effect of a repetition'.⁷⁸ In Weber's influential deconstructive reading of Benjaminian afterness, 'the singular emerges through iteration as that which precisely is not the same, which does not fit in'.⁷⁹ Weber foregrounds the category of citability and thus reads Benjaminian singularity as an afterness of iteration that brings *Jetztzeit* closer to a category of the Derridian untimely, where time is out of joint.⁸⁰ Considering the Nietzschean strains of Benjamin's critique of historicism, reading Benjamin as a thinker of anachrony or *contretemps* is certainly defensible. Yet, as I have already highlighted in Chapter 1, if we read Benjaminian chronopolitics as a politics of interruption or suspension, as Weber does, we run the risk of ignoring the role that decisionism plays in Benjamin's thought.⁸¹ Not only is *kairós* not reducible to an always-already

⁷⁷ See Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), p. 195. On Benjamin's appropriation of the Nietzschean concept of the eternal return, see also Matthew Rampley, *Nietzsche, Aesthetics and Modernity* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 146-52.

⁷⁸ Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, p. 203. On singularity and repetition, see also his most recent contribution in: Sam Weber, 'Benjamin's Aura: Fort/Da', *The Germanic Review*, 91.2 (2016), 105-11 (p. 106).

⁷⁹ Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, p. 170.

⁸⁰ See Weber, *Benjamin's -abilities*, p. 171. Cf. Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, The Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. by Peggy Kamuf (London and New York: Routledge, [1994] 2006), pp. 19-22.

⁸¹ For a comparable reading that problematically turns the urgency of the fire alarm into a formal interruption and reads decision as 'de-cision', see Alexander García

iterated moment, but also the manner in which *Jetztzeit* mediates the theological and historical-materialist dimensions of historicity means that it cannot be equated with the temporal figure of 'the unfinished'. *Jetztzeit* may announce the possibility of a historical opening but, while doing so, it also announces the possibility of an ultimate and irreversible danger. (Or, to put it in the terms we deployed above, *Jetztzeit* is infinite *because* it is point-like). The monad is not always-already a monad but emerges as a monad at the moment of *kairós*, revealing itself and making itself recognisable to the historical materialist so that a specific era is 'blasted' out of the course of history.⁸² Let us also recall alongside *tikkun* and the fire alarm another mode of temporal irreversibility: the vessel of the kaleidoscope and Benjamin's famous exhortation that 'the kaleidoscope must be smashed'.⁸³ Such images of detonation and material destruction might have offered some intellectual ammunition to the likes of the Red Army Faction, as Irving Wohlfahrt's documentary evidence has shown, yet in its philological dimension that interests us here, it is imperative to stress that Benjamin's philosophical anarchy seeks to establish an order of things *exterior to the prism* offered by merely rearranging the kaleidoscope, and *exterior to the sovereign's exception to the rule*.⁸⁴ As such, it would be both philologically and ideologically questionable to simply integrate Benjamin's afterness into a temporality that

Düttmann, *The Memory of Thought: An Essay on Heidegger and Adorno*, trans. by Nicholas Walker (London: Continuum, [1991] 2002), pp. 210-17.

⁸² See Thesis XVI, 'On the Concept of History', *SW4*, p. 396; *GS I.2*, p. 703.

⁸³ 'Central Park', in *SW4*, p. 164; *GS I.2*, p. 660.

⁸⁴ On the Red Army Faction's deployment of Benjaminian notions of insurrectionary violence, see Irving Wohlfahrt, 'Entsetzen: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part One', trans. by Nick Walker and Irving Wohlfahrt, *Radical Philosophy*, 152. November/December (2008), 7-19 (pp. 12-15); 'Spectres of Anarchy: Walter Benjamin and the Red Army Faction, Part Three', trans. by Nick Walker and Irving Wohlfahrt, *Radical Philosophy*, 154. March/April (2009), 9-24 (pp. 10-13).

misrecognises the moment of finitude, and in doing so refashions *Jetztzeit's* moment of crisis-as-danger into capital-time's crisis-as-opportunity.

If – despite being relational and despite being constituted by repetition – Benjaminian singularity cannot be sufficiently articulated through the prism of a Derridian iteration, how are we then to understand the character of this afterness? In order to answer this question, I will attempt to bring my reading of Benjaminian singularity into dialogue with my earlier analyses of historical time in Peter Bürger, John Roberts, and the *Neoavanguardia*. In doing so, I am taking my cue from Karatani's 'transcritical practice' which seeks to establish a parallax structure – a move which he himself describes through the analogy of a 'displacement or derangement one experiences when one first hears one's own recorded voice'.⁸⁵ Karatani's parallax does not refer to the kind of perspectival shift that, for instance, Hal Foster has in mind when he uses the term alongside deferred action with respect to the neo-avant-garde.⁸⁶ The shift does not simply denote the subject's changed perspective on an object and thus a changed object, but also involves the subject's own displaced relation to itself. Therefore, the relationship between singularity and afterness as it pertains to the idea of the avant-garde emerges from reading Benjamin with and against the modalities of afterness articulated through these theories 'of' the avant-garde (and thus also problematising the relationship of object/attribute that the common expression of a 'theory of the avant-garde' suggests). Reading these theories in a Benjaminian constellation means, therefore, that they are themselves re-configured from theories of the avant-garde (with the avant-garde as object) into theories *indicating* the avant-garde (with the avant-garde as idea).

The mode of afterness that can be proposed through reading these theories indicating the avant-garde requires a (partly) constitutive relationship to historicism. Although the very name 'historicism' was

⁸⁵ Karatani, *Transcritique*, p. 48.

⁸⁶ See Foster, *Return*, pp. xii-xiii.

anathema to Benjamin's intellectual project, in my own adaptation of Benjaminian singularity, historicism is to be understood neither as a linear temporal orientation nor as progressivism. Rather, as I have suggested in my introduction, historicism is articulated as a chronopolitical site of contestation where different levels of historicity come into contact. In the case of Bürger, a temporality of afterness was revealed through a narratological treatment of *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Re-reading this earlier analysis in light of the terms that we have now gleaned from Benjamin, we can read narrative time in *Theory of the Avant-Garde* as a threshold or a border-crossing between two kinds of historicity. The text's proleptic mode of afterness indicated the avant-garde in a manner that both presupposed and anticipated the avant-garde *qua* avant-garde, as the parallax in/of time was produced by the dislocation between a logical *a priori* necessary for Bürger's historicism and a historical *a priori* necessary for Bürger's epistemology. The avant-garde's double relationship to *Institution Kunst*, as both determining and determined by this historical-yet-hermeneutical notion of 'institution', pointed to a double determinacy where precondition swapped temporal places with consequence. In the case of the *Neoavanguardia*, the double character of the 'modern' (encompassing the convergences between 'modernism', 'modernity' and 'modernisation') also indicated the avant-garde as that which both measures and is measured, as a vessel and content in/of time. In *Theory of the Avant-garde*, the two levels of historicity remained primarily within the confines of the textual object, as the temporal indexes of 'Adorno's death' and 'May 68' were utilised by Bürger in an attempt to historicise his own narrative. In the case of the *Neoavanguardia* and John Roberts' indebtedness to Adorno, by contrast, historicism went beyond the interiority of a single text. In the critical reception of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and the intellectual battles fought over Adorno's Marxism, as well as the *Neoavanguardia's* relationship to realism and political commitment, a broader Cold War 'context' permeated the discursive articulation of the avant-garde. (Such historical 'context' is arguably also present in Roberts' post-'89 legacy of enlisting the avant-garde

for an anti-capitalist critique in the twenty-first century.) My analysis has suggested that Roberts' own historicism is rather problematic: even in the most recent publications, the terms 'postmodern' and 'contemporary' are used interchangeably, while the historical moment of the neo-avant-gardes is conflated with the moment of its theorisation thirty years later. Yet if, empirically speaking, Roberts' historical dislocations are best described as anachronisms, from the perspective of a Benjaminian comparativism, such infidelity or miscognition – does Roberts' text 'mistake the moon for a ball' or is it play-acting *as if* it were a ball?⁸⁷ – can generate a parallaxic mediation between historical epistemology and historical time.

It is in these iterations of miscognition or temporal dislocation that the shift from a mimetic representation to an indexical exposition in/of the avant-garde occurs. Recalling my earlier, brief reference to Jean-François Lyotard's theorisation of the avant-garde as the 'unpresentable' and juxtaposing it with Benjamin's theory of mimesis can prove here instructive. Lyotard's working notion of singularity also points to an epistemology of miscognition. However, this miscognition is distinctly different from Benjamin's playful, analogic kind: Lyotard's ethico-political task rests with the ontologically exceptional, the epistemologically non-graspable – that which is 'beyond compare'. The evental figure of 'Auschwitz' provides an example *beyond* exemplarity, its liminality, as other commentators have also observed, conferring upon it 'a sense of quasi-religious awe in relation to non-divine subjects'.⁸⁸ The historical and representational exteriority that is enabled by the quasi-religious or quasi-theological status of the unpresentable will bring to mind the discussions on *Jetztzeit's* messianism and the extent to which such messianism is theological. However, what is of pertinence for us and with

⁸⁷ See my earlier analysis in Chapter 1 with reference to Miriam Hansen's reading of Benjamin, 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Reproducibility (Second Version)', *SW3*, p. 124, n. 10.

⁸⁸ Catherine Brown, 'What is "Comparative" Literature?', *Comparative Critical Studies*, 10.1 (2013), 67-88 (p. 75).

reference to the avant-garde is not the question of divine agency, or whether *Jetztzeit* might be theological only 'strategically', but the status of *exteriority* to historicism enabled by the time occupied by the theological.

Such theological exteriority necessarily entails the question of 'naming' whether *as* or *instead of* 'representation'. As I have intimated throughout the thesis, writing *in the name of* the avant-garde has been an important component of writing a theory *of* the avant-garde. In all the theorisations examined, the name 'avant-garde' has exerted its own semantic force: in Bürger's insistence that Adorno's aesthetic theory is 'historical' because it doesn't recognise the distinction between the avant-garde and modernism; in Roberts' defence of a contemporary anti-capitalist research project in the name of the avant-garde; in *Neoavanguardia's* debates over the avant-gardism of its own poetics as well as the historiographical disputes that replace the name of the avant-garde in the name of another (again, 'modernism'). Were we to see such instances of writing in the name of the avant-garde through Lyotard's unrepresentable, we would reach the conclusion that the avant-garde has the ontological and epistemological status of the proper name. In Benjaminian terms, this would be the 'pure language' of translatability, a 'script' accessible only through theology. Yet the modes of afterness articulated in and through these theorisations reveal the avant-garde not as proper name but as exchange-script (*Wandelschrift*). Through the non-linear returns of prolepsis, infidelity and belatedness, the status of the exceptional – whether as *kairós*, as Badiouian event, or 'Italian-ness' – has been questioned through the chronopolitics of 'timing', a determination that does not exclude contingency, and which produces the avant-garde as a parallax in/of time. Accordingly, *Jetztzeit's* relationship to the messianic – the messianic itself already being at one remove from the theological – is indexically mediated: 'as a model of the messianic, [*Jetztzeit*] comprises the history of all humankind in

a tremendous abbreviation'.⁸⁹ Therefore, the relational singularity of a historicity guided by comparativism alluded to in my introduction is enabled not by the figure of the 'incomparable', but by the figure of the 'model'.

The model of *Jetztzeit* is, of course, a peculiar kind of model in that it resists the very qualities of a 'model'. This is far from the ahistorical model at work in modernisation theory, where a neutral, static exteriority submits particularities to its scaled-down, ideal image. Benjamin's model is spatiotemporally 'located' only insofar as it is 'dislocated' and, like the chess-piece's relationship to its own radically-changing function, the model's own task is *not modelled* on an exterior, static set of rules; instead, its chronopolitical task is given *anew* from within each historical moment.⁹⁰ In this sense, therefore, Benjaminian comparativism would be a practically unworkable model (unworkable, that is, from an epistemological perspective that views comparativism purely in terms of applicability.) As a non-model of a model or as a non-method of a method, however, Benjaminian comparativism is perfectly 'non-applicable' to the idea of the avant-garde, precisely because it addresses the twofold issue of the avant-garde's paradoxical historicity and semantic deixis. I have previously mentioned deixis as one of the avenues through which scholars have responded to the avant-garde as a 'problem-category'. Susan Rubin Suleiman's proposition of the avant-garde as deixis certainly resonates with our present discussion on naming and the status of the proper name. Yet the contested and contingent character expressed through deixis relies on the absence of any exteriority to its referent and, philosophically speaking, it would render the avant-garde a

⁸⁹ Thesis XVIII, 'On the Concept of History', *SW4*, p. 396; translation modified. Cf. *GSI.2*, p. 703.

⁹⁰ In another instance of singular self-determination, Benjamin programmatically states that 'the chance for a completely new resolution of a completely new task [...] is upheld by the political situation'. Thesis XVIIa, 'Paralipomena to "On the Concept of History"', *SW4*, p. 402 (translation modified). Cf. 'Anmerkungen zu Seite 691-704', *GSI.3*, p. 1231.

radical particularity. In the case of a Benjaminian indexicality, by contrast, the interiority is disrupted by the parallax structure of *Jetztzeit* since, as we have seen, the radical particularity hidden in the temporal kernel of now-time is never *entirely* disassociated from universality. With regard to both linguistic representation and historical temporality, therefore, my proposition of the avant-garde *not* as a deictic 'here-and-now' but as a parallaxic 'now-time' establishes also the epistemological shift that enables the contested and contingent notion of the avant-garde (still remaining fixed to predetermined empirical coordinates) to become itself the very medium and condition of contestation and contingency.

In the introduction to this thesis, I responded to Peter Osborne's adoption of the Adornian dictum that 'modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category' by positing the avant-garde as a qualitative *and* a chronological category, as a category that is qualitative and chronological *at the same time*. This 'at the same time', connecting yet differentiating the avant-garde's twofold temporality, is precisely the locus of the time of parallax, a time which itself remains *ein Drittes*, not a dialectical sublation of experience and measurement but its excessive exteriority, like Benjamin's sock. It is through the prism of a Benjaminian singularity, therefore, that the idea of the avant-garde emerges as an afterness 'and/in' singularity. The structure of 'and/in' expresses this parallax: while the 'and' denotes a separation (and thus exteriority) between the two, the 'in' points to the monadological interiority at work. The kind of constitutive split that characterises the avant-garde in this new re-configuration is not between qualitative and quantitative time, therefore, but between (full) interiority and (full) exteriority. In other words, since Benjaminian singularity does not represent the fragmentation of the whole but rather monadologically mediates the fragment *as a whole*, the split is one between self-determination and contingency. Thus, the idea of the avant-garde, whereby the avant-garde emerges as an *idea* in a truly Benjaminian non-representational sense, produces this structural relationship not only with respect to interiority and exteriority, but also

inescapably between anteriority and posteriority, and between completion and incompleteness (in/of historical time). Placed in a Benjaminian constellation, the avant-garde no longer functions as a general concept that represents the particular phenomenon, but emerges as a singular idea that indexically mediates differentiation (with that differentiation *partly* including its *self*-differentiation). Historical difference, as a result, is not posited as a variety in diversity, but a self-differentiation in univocity. Constituted by afterness, the avant-garde as idea emerges as ahead of time (as such) and ahead of its (own) time. It is itself a historical index, a compass that navigates towards its own 'North Pole', and against a course of time that others would consider a 'deviation'.⁹¹

So what course of history does this conceptualisation of the avant-garde indicate? What 'next', and 'where' next, for the avant-garde as a Benjaminian singularity? The temporal endpoint to my own present narrative is intended here as an 'enormous abbreviation', whose expository mode 'tells', rather than 'shows', what this new avant-garde would be: no longer historically specific, the avant-garde as a parallax in/of time emerges as *historically singular*. Being ahead of its own time (and not simply ahead of others that occupy the same time, as the Saint-Simonian and etymological definitions suggest), this avant-garde is positioned diametrically against an undialectical notion of progress. In this positioning, its disruption of linear periodisation also entails the disruption of pluralisation: with the avant-garde as an afterness and/in singularity, there are no more particular avant-gardes. The relationship between the concept of the avant-garde and the phenomenon of the avant-garde in its national or regional configuration (Russian avant-garde, Japanese avant-garde, Nordic avant-garde, etc.) is thus radically rearranged beyond the kaleidoscope's mere re-ordering. The relationship between avant-garde phenomenon and avant-garde attribute is also radically disrupted: there are no more avant-garde attributes in disciplinary or representational terms

⁹¹ See AP [N1, 2], p. 456; GS V, p. 570. Cf. AP [N9, 8], p. 473; GS V, p. 592.

(architectural avant-garde, cinematic avant-garde, musical avant-garde, etc.). There can be no medium-specificity *of* the avant-garde, nor is there a plurality of media responding to the concept of the avant-garde, because in this configuration the avant-garde becomes a medial category itself. As Benjaminian idea, the avant-garde does not communicate, represent, or exemplify a certain 'avant-garde-ness'. There is no elusive 'common quality' binding together particulars that have already been nominated 'avant-garde'. The avant-garde as idea has no plural, not because it is homogeneous, but because it has *no object*. Like the dialectical image, it is not an image *of* anything. Like a tiger's leap into the past, it is a leap whose time produces the very time in which a leap can occur. Like Brecht's dynamic chess-piece, its temporal function changes during the course of history – and the 'course' of history is changed with it.

Coda:

Chronopolitics Out of Joint

Arriving at this work's conclusion while reflecting on the temporality that marks any conclusion, I am reminded of intellectual historian Martin Jay's unscholarly intervention in the footnote that closes his introduction to the monograph *Songs of Experience*.¹ Jay attaches his footnote to an utterance that directly addresses the reader, and by way of referring to his own experience of writing a book about experience, he foregrounds the temporal and experiential gap between himself and his audience: '[...] the experience of writing *Songs of Experience* may lead me where I do not expect to go. You, the reader, will soon know how it will end; I, the author, am at the moment of writing these words, still eager to find out'.² Rather than provide any evidence to this statement, the lengthy footnote that lies just beneath reveals to the reader the time it was written: 1997, six years before the writing of the footnote itself. As the footnote tells us, upon re-reading the sentence after the manuscript had been completed, the author felt the sentence 'disingenuous', yet decided to keep it and attach this footnote so as to undermine, even if subtly, the academic façade of 'retrospective coherence and closure'.³ Jay insightfully comments that scholarly convention demands that texts appear as if they came into being 'all at once', covering up the specificity of their time and place, concealing their 'deictic particulars'.⁴

Writing a conclusion may seem by comparison a far less heterochronic affair. After all, the conclusion cannot but be written last, after everything has

¹ See Martin Jay, *Songs of Experience: Modern American and European Variations on a Universal Theme* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005), p. 8, n. 21.

² Jay, p. 8.

³ Jay, p. 8, n. 21.

⁴ Ibid.

been reasoned, revised, written and re-written. Yet in a work that has concerned itself, not with experience per se, but with the conflicting tendencies of experience and measurement as they manifest themselves through the category of historical time, a similar unscholarly strategy seems to be called for. In this way perhaps I can make visible my own feeling of ‘disingenuousness’ at the incongruity between the chronopolitics presented in this work and the chronopolitics of this work’s ‘deictic particulars’ – a doctoral thesis written in a UK university during the years of 2011-2016, and therefore bound to the chronometrisation of the state-regulated, border-controlled, privately-funded neoliberal institution that demands that the work be ‘completed’. Even if the thesis had aspired to perform a kind of chronopolitical intervention, however, it would still pale in comparison to the calendrical intervention of the French social movement *Nuit Debout*, which have re-set the calendar to the movement’s beginning on March 31, and which *at the time of writing* is the 79th of March.⁵ No revolutionary calendars or clocks have been devised in this study, of course. Yet if there is a chronopolitical lesson to be learnt from this thesis’ praxis it is precisely in exposing this gap – understood perhaps as the Benjaminian singularity of *ein Drittes* – that lies hidden in the deictic particularity of ‘the time of writing’. Not a disingenuous incongruity, in this case, but a necessary gap between the time *of writing* and the time *in writing*, whereby ‘writing’ itself occupies a double temporality: a finitude as well as an opening, a point-like activity and that activity’s afterlife, of what remains *as writing*. The more particular task of writing critical theory (and of critical theory *as writing*), therefore, is necessarily embroiled in what Benjamin himself had identified with respect to the question of distance. ‘*Kritik ist eine Sache des rechten Abstands*’ [criticism is a matter of correct distance], wrote Benjamin in *One-way Street*, and in this space of assessment of what is ‘correct’ or ‘appropriate’ distance,

⁵ For an online version of the *Nuit Debout* calendar, see <<http://jcfrog.com/NuitDebout>> [last accessed 1 December 2016]. It was the 79th of March when this sentence was written *for the first time*.

we can perhaps identify a model for critical theory's relationship to historical time.⁶ In this way, critical theory's deictic particularity – its 'thisness', 'nowness' or 'hereness' – would not be subsumed by what might seem most 'timely' or 'topical' (a false urgency that often amounts to nothing more than what Adorno describes in his inimitably germanised American-English as the state of '*Uptodatesein*'),⁷ but would itself function as the medium for assessing what constitutes appropriate distance.

Being able to assess one's own timeliness in history may be easier in some cases than in others. The term chronopolitics, which has recently become topical in academic discourse, has been mapped as current precisely because discussions have focussed on historical developments that are unprecedented: the environmental transformations that are commonly referred to as 'the Anthropocene', and the prevalence of digital and network technologies where velocity (whether articulated as a defence or attack of acceleration) becomes the site of a broader contestation over the experience and production of time, and over human agency's role in effecting historical change.⁸ It is less easy to assess timeliness when it comes to the competing claims made in the name of tradition or progress. Equally, when it comes to

⁶ *SW1*, p. 476; *GS IV.1*, p. 131; translation modified. See also Gerhard Richter's biographically-oriented discussion of the notion of 'correct distance' in Benjamin. Gerhard Richter, 'A Matter of Distance: Benjamin's *One-Way Street* through the Arcades', in *Thought-Images: Frankfurt School Writers' Reflections from Damaged Life* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2007), pp. 43-71.

⁷ See Adorno, 'On the Fetish-Character in Music and the Regression of Listening', in *Essays on Music: Theodor W. Adorno*, pp. 288-317 (p. 311); *AGS 14*, pp. 14-50 (p. 45).

⁸ As an indication, see Hartmut Rosa, *Alienation and Acceleration: Towards a Critical Theory of Late-Modern Temporality* (Malmö: Aarhus University Press, 2010); Robin Mackay and Armen Avanesian, eds., *#Accelerate: The Accelerationist Reader* (Falmouth and Berlin: Urbanomic/Merve Verlag, 2014); Judy Wajcman, *Pressed for Time: The Acceleration of Life in Digital Capitalism* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015).

the avant-garde, answering the question of whether a study on the avant-garde is 'timely' becomes slippery (especially as it may entail a question on the status of the avant-garde's own temporality). There is certainly nothing topical about examining the question of the avant-garde's chronopolitics and, although the term 'avant-garde' is still current, an engagement with the avant-garde's relationship to the temporality of modernity is no timelier today than it was 30 years ago, when this question was raised with reference to the condition of postmodernity. The timeliness of a study on chronopolitics and the avant-garde in the first decades of the twenty-first century is perhaps best defended, however, not in terms of unprecedented change but in view of historical and political continuities. And the importance of such continuities, though overshadowed by the more attention-grabbing temporality of unprecedented change, is made all the more evident when the name 'avant-garde' is still invoked in claims of progress, as when deployed for instance by the Italian neo-fascist group *Comunità Politica di Avanguardia* [Vanguard Political Community], whose monthly magazine is simply entitled *Avanguardia*.⁹

It is this tension between historical continuity and historical rupture (and between 'novelty' and 'the new') that has been at the heart of my investigation. As a study that proposes a new conceptualisation of the avant-garde's relationship to historical time, *Ahead of its Time* has sought to challenge not only prevailing accounts of the avant-garde's progressivism but also its mythologised status as historical rupture. In dialogue with scholars who have

⁹ *Comunità Politica di Avanguardia* (Vanguard Political Community) forms a continuation of the extra-parliamentary organisation *Avanguardia Nazionale* (National Vanguard) that was active in the 1960s. On the group *Avanguardia Nazionale*, see Andrea Mammone, *Transnational Neofascism in France and Italy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), pp. 113-14. For the official website of *Comunità Politica di Avanguardia*, see <<http://blog.avanguardia.tv>> [accessed 23 November 2016].

approached the avant-garde philosophically, in this study I have been concerned with the notion of the avant-garde insofar as it poses the question of what it takes to be absolutely new. By focussing on the idea of the avant-garde after modernism more specifically, I have sought to explore the problem of the new from the perspective of afterness: what does it take to be absolutely new while also being 'historically new'? Rather than rejecting altogether the 'homogeneous, empty time' of historicism and treating its temporality as irrelevant or extraneous to the avant-garde's chronopolitics, I have posited the avant-garde as a notion that both inhabits and resists the temporality of historical periodisation. In this endeavour, I took my cue from scholars who have discussed the temporality of the avant-garde with reference to the Benjaminian notion of *Jetztzeit*, before extending these analyses by examining *Jetztzeit*'s exteriority to historical time in Chapter 1. Against accounts that privilege the exceptional temporality of *kairós*, I argued for a notion of *Jetztzeit* that indexically mediates the exceptional with the quotidian. Considering the relationship between Benjamin's writings on history and his reflections on language and mimesis, moreover, I suggested that a new form of comparativism founded on a telescopic perspective of the shifting scale can provide a starting point for undoing the relationship between universality and particularity, especially as it persists in current tendencies that seem to 'specify' the avant-garde.

Chapters 2, 3 and 4 (Part II) were devoted to close textual interpretations of theorisations of the avant-garde after modernism, selected as iterations of the problematic of a chronopolitics of 'the new after the new'. Chapter 2 revisited Peter Bürger's canonical theory through a narratological prism so as to analyse the different layers and intersections of historicism that were present beneath the text's progressivist surface. While analysing the proleptic syntactical structures at work in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, I also exposed the parallax in/of time that characterised the relationship between Bürger's under-determined notion of the avant-garde and his main theoretical category of the institution of art/literature – a category which, as I demonstrated, is at

once historically specific in its relationship to aestheticism and trans-historical in its heuristic function as the epistemological foundation of a new sociological analysis of art and literature. Discussing Bürger's attempts to self-historicise his own theory, I suggested that the question of afterness as an avant-garde 'inheritance' could be best articulated as a proleptic, anticipatory modality that is itself reminiscent of Benjamin's messianic prolepsis in *Angelus Novus*. The question of historical indebtedness was again taken up in the following chapter through the figures of fidelity and 'the new'. In Chapter 3, I turned to Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* and to art theorist John Roberts, whose polemical publications have defended the continuing relevance of the notion of the avant-garde for an anti-capitalist politics. I revisited Adorno's relationship to the avant-garde – as opposed to 'modernism' – and challenged the reception of Adorno's aesthetic theory as a theory of the avant-garde, while also sketching a brief intellectual history of such reception. Turning to the question of 'the new' in Adorno and elaborating on its dialectical relationship to the 'ever-same', I prepared the ground for a critical engagement with Roberts' use of the Adornian new and its application to his theory of the 'suspensive avant-garde'. My analysis revealed the centrality of repetition in considering the chronopolitics of the avant-garde after modernism, and rather than romantically embracing the avant-garde as a figure of anti-capitalist temporality, I exposed the avant-garde's implication in modernity's hellish repetition of the ever-same. Chapter 4 examined afterness through the contentious issue of 'belated modernisation' in the context of the literary circle *Neoavanguardia*. I began by situating the work of the *Neoavanguardia* in the context of the Italian New Left, discussing the centrality of the question of *impegno* [commitment] in perpetuating a realism/avant-garde dichotomy, and introduced the different positions that two of the most prominent voices of the *Neoavanguardia* (Edoardo Sanguineti and Angelo Guglielmi) took with respect to 'history'. My analysis then shifted focus onto the historiographies of the *Neoavanguardia* and re-visited the realism/avant-garde dichotomy from the perspective of literary history.

Foregrounding the auto-allochronic discourse underpinning these historical narratives, I analysed the issue of ‘translating’ the (Italian) avant-garde into (Anglo-American) modernism, showing how *Neoavanguardia* has been historicised as a transition between realism and postmodernism, and as a stage in Italian literary history that anticipates the alleged openness and diversity of postmodernism. As a unique iteration of the chronopolitics of the new after the new, therefore, the case of the *Neoavanguardia* revealed another mode of afterness, in which inheriting the avant-garde is fraught with the temporal tensions between the writing of national literary historiography and its cultural translation into the cosmopolitan aspirations of trans-national modernism.

Having examined these iterations of afterness in Part II, in the final chapter I sought to crystallise my overall argument by returning to issues that had been broached over the thesis’ narrative course. Chapter 5 began by returning to the problem of specificity as it had been outlined in the thesis’ introduction, and by way of a critical summary of scholarly tendencies within avant-garde studies, I argued against an avant-garde ‘in the plural’. While I sided with a number of critics of the multiple-modernities paradigm, I also argued that a singular avant-garde was necessary as a means of uncoupling the notion of the avant-garde (as generality) from the phenomenon of the avant-garde (as specificity). Returning to Benjamin’s writing on language and historical time, and using the figure of the vessel as means through which to foreground the relationship between historical time and mimesis, I proposed Benjaminian singularity as a model for thinking the avant-garde, not as a concept related to a phenomenon, but as an idea in constellation or – in the parallaxic terms I suggested – as an idea of afterness and/in singularity. Theorising the avant-garde after modernism was thus itself reconfigured in a Benjaminian constellation, whereby the theories were no longer *of* the avant-garde, but became temporal indexes of a chronopolitics out of joint.

Situated at the intersection of critical theory and philology, this study has been written in dialogue with scholars primarily in the fields of Benjamin

studies and avant-garde studies. In both cases, however, I have approached the fields obliquely, and with a certain distance. In the former case, my engagement with Benjamin's corpus and the vast secondary scholarship that has accrued since the 1970s has been guided by a search for a comparativist methodology, even if such search has meant foregoing a clear distinction between 'object' and 'method'. My focus on historical time in Benjamin's oeuvre has sought to foreground the importance of other kinds of temporality that co-exist alongside the still-potent, ruptural time of *Jetztzeit*, while it is hoped that my proposition of Benjamin as a thinker of singularity will open further avenues of comparison between other non-Hegelian thinkers such as Deleuze, Edouard Glissant or Georges Bataille.¹⁰ With respect to avant-garde studies, although this study has positioned itself somewhat antagonistically towards this field, its relevance for current scholarly debates within avant-garde studies is arguably greater. For the most part, avant-garde studies scholarship has tended to rely on the main categories that this thesis has refuted: the periodising categories of 'historical avant-garde' and 'neo-avant-garde'; the replacement of *the* avant-garde with the plural avant-gardes; and the all-too-easy leap between the concept 'avant-garde' and the socio-cultural formations 'of the avant-garde'. Nevertheless, in its questioning of the geochronopolitical coordinates of the notion of the avant-garde, and in its suspension of identity between 'avant-garde-ness' and the category of 'avant-garde art', this thesis can provide a starting point for other scholars who are invested in 'de-linearising' avant-garde histories and historiographies, especially as such histories are themselves deployed in certain national contexts in the name of modernisation (most prominently in post-socialist

¹⁰ Although comparisons between Benjamin and Bataille are frequently hinted at, there are few scholarly studies that have devoted themselves to such a task. As an exception, see the article drawn from a doctoral dissertation by Michael Weingrad, 'The College of Sociology and the Institute of Social Research', *New German Critique*, 84. Autumn (2001), 129-61.

countries), or when 'national avant-garde heritage' studies from the periphery interact with 'area studies' in ways that disturbingly perpetuate the allochronic institutional structures of global academe.

My proposition of the avant-garde as historically singular leaves itself open to certain ethico-political charges. I would like to briefly address these by way of conclusion. Proposing the avant-garde as a temporal self-determination that brings about a radical reconstitution of historical time *as such* could be misconstrued as a call to boundless sovereignty or unlimited 'will-to-time', with the avant-garde being pronounced as a law unto itself. Accordingly, proposing the avant-garde as a Benjaminian idea without an object could be misread as advocating a politics of immediacy or spontaneous voluntarism, which leaves no room for political representation. These dangers are indeed present in Benjamin's own work, and insofar as my proposed notion of the avant-garde is Benjaminian, they ought not to be circumvented. That said, the question of time's 'fullness' is here pivotal, and it is precisely in the testing and contesting of that fullness through a parallaxic prism that the above dangers can be confronted. For, the avant-garde is proposed here neither as a *full* determination nor as a (full) *self*-determination. Rather, in that filling-in that is also an emptying-out (exemplified by the figures of *tikkun* or the sock) and in language's translatability, where an 'other' language does not become 'our own' through translation, but rather language is itself an 'other-to-come', the idea of the avant-garde as a singularity is never *fully inside* 'its' time. The proposed conceptualisation of the idea of the avant-garde after modernism, therefore, points neither to a politics of a presence in/of historical time, nor to an ideological aspiration of *full belonging*, but rather to a site of contestation where contingency is always 'a-part'. As we take these ideas beyond the study's deictic particularity and out into our historical time, therefore, it is hoped that the avant-garde's chronopolitics out of joint can act as a modest reminder that the historical time we believe to be ours may well carry in its interiority a time radically other, a time that radically reconfigures the historical time that we, up to *this* time, had called our own.

Bibliography

The bibliography has been organised in the following categories:

- I. The term 'avant-garde'
- II. Philosophy of time, theoretical history and chronopolitics
- III. Primary and secondary literature on selected thinkers
- IV. Other works/sources cited

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