Retroactivating the Idea of the Avant Garde

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Abstract

In the late 1970s, Pierre Bourdieu argued that the field of cultural production was distinguished along class lines by three different modes of cultural habitus: bourgeois disinterestness, petty-bourgeois allodoxia and working-class necessity. Since that era, the petty-bourgeois habitus has become the dominant predisposition. Adding Bourdieu’s sociology of culture to Peter Bürger’s historicized theory of the emergence of the avant garde as a critique of the “institution art,” a new “avant garde hypothesis” becomes possible for today’s age of post-Fordist biocapitalism. Based on Jacques Lacan’s Four Discourses, the contemporary situation is shown to privilege specific forms of cultural production, in particular an activist Discourse of the Hysteric and a technocratic Discourse of the University. Psychoanalysis reveals the limits of these tendencies while also underscoring the archaic aspects of an aestheticist Discourse of the Master and the transferential logics of Analyst avant gardes.

Keywords

the avant garde – sociology of culture – psychoanalysis – culture industry – post-Fordism

In The Rules of Art, Pierre Bourdieu distinguished between professional artists who work within the field of cultural production and non-professionals who serve vested interests and make no claims to autonomy (Bourdieu, 1996). Among the former, he distinguished between the subfield of large-scale production, otherwise referred to as the culture industry, and the small-scale production of the avant garde (Adorno, 1991; Horkheimer and Adorno, 1997). While those who work in the culture industry typically have access to more economic capital, those who defend the autonomy of the work of art or the indepen-
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dence of artists from social, political and economic pressure usually exercise more cultural capital. Since the 1980s, the Marxist sociology of culture has been displaced in one way or another by postmodern theory, by new arrangements in the neoliberalized academy and museum, and by the networked activity of the creative class and activist multitude (Readings, 1996; Relyea, 2013; Groys, 2016). Despite a considerable amount of resistance to the entrepreneurialization of the self through creative industry models of cultural production, with much attention given to the working conditions for the majority of artists, the need to earn a living makes the artistic proclivity of being “with it and against it” a burden on anyone seeking to break out of conditions of cultural confinement and economic precarity (Gielen, 2009; Raunig et al., 2011; Sholette, 2011; McRobbie, 2016). In these circumstances, the postmodern critique of meta-narratives allows you to make Facebook friends and influence the zeitgeist too. For some, one can engage in biocapitalist networking while also carrying forward with the project of cultural oppositionality (Holmes, 2009; Cottington, 2013; Thompson, 2015; Shukaitis, 2016; McKee, 2016). For others, any meaningful use of the term avant-garde to describe contemporary practices must relate in some meaningful way to the legacy of revolutionary left movements (Badiou, 2007; Gordon-Nesbitt, 2015; Rasmussen, 2018). For others still, new forms of vanguardism are sure to emerge (Chto Delat, 2007; Léger, 2014 and 2019).

The neoliberal production of culture in the age of anti-globalization and the movements of the squares incorporates two intellectual phenomena that make the concept of the avant-garde difficult to sustain: the end of history ideology that admits no political options other than global capitalism and the related anti-universality of micro-political difference politics. Combined, the “post-political” coordinates of much contemporary theorizing on the avant-garde abandons most of what was once taken for granted in the writings of such figures as Renato Poggioli, Peter Bürger or Matei Călinescu and instead draws on postmodern avatars like Michel Foucault or Gilles Deleuze with Félix Guattari as standard operating assumptions for the deconstruction of the leftist canon and its transmogrification into anything at all, from cuteness to prosumerism, which makes vanguardism seem either unhelpful or simply inoperative (Poggioli, 1968; Călinescu, 1977; Bürger, 1984).

In circumstances in which post-political artists and intellectuals no longer make distinctions between the existing conditions of biocapitalism and communist struggle, the avant-garde legacy can easily be made to serve any macro-political agenda as the official art of imperialist nations, to use Nicos Hadjinicolaou’s scurrilous designation (Hadjinicolaou, 1982). Against tendencies that seek to reduce art’s non-identitarian autonomy to the immanence of power and class society, I proposed in Brave New Avant Garde that Alain Badiou’s the-
ory of the communist hypothesis could be used as a template for the notion of an “avant garde hypothesis” (Léger, 2012; Badiou, 2010). This use is problematic insofar as Badiou had attempted in his *Handbook of Inaesthetics* to distance a philosophy of the event and the truth procedures of art and politics from the legacy of historical materialism (Badiou, 2005). I nevertheless made the claim for an avant garde hypothesis by adapting Bürger’s theory of bohemian, historical, and neo-avant gardes, suggesting their compatibility, as “sequences,” with Badiou’s critique of the association of communism with totalitarianism. The avant garde hypothesis is cognizant of Bürger’s conclusions on the reification of neo-avant-garde art by the culture industry, a thesis that has been extensively chronicled by the art historian Benjamin Buchloh, who states:

As the new spectatorial subjects voluntarily accepted the annulment of social and political utopian thinking, artistic production sutured itself to the universal reign of spectacularized consumption. Embracing the new technologies and market formations, the new audiences seemed to seriously believe that an expansion of artistic practices into the registers of the culture industry would compensate for the destruction of the emancipatory promises of the avant-garde cultures of the twentieth century.

Buchloh, 2012: 255

To abandon the avant garde as a mode of inquiry for radical art practice is, however, and as Badiou asserts, to “revert back to capitalism and non-egalitarian dogma” (Badiou, 2010: 4). Needless to say, the slumbering “intervallic” period that followed May 68 has been devastating for the international left. Decades of neoliberal privatization and globalization have ironically made cultural theory more economic than it was in even its Socialist Realist variant (Sholette and Ressler, 2013; Beech, 2015). Along with other critics of Badiou, Bruno Bosteels notes that art’s ability to distance itself from other social activities conflicts with its political economy and uneven development at the level of social production and reproduction (Bosteels, 2019). In addition, as John Roberts argues, Badiou’s claim that communism is an “invariant” of universal emancipation conflicts with communism’s historical forms (Roberts, 2009: 358). What is at stake, then, are the universalist axioms of the communist hypothesis in the absence of a revolutionary movement and party organizations.

As neoliberal creative industries modify the criteria that are used in universities and museums to evaluate culture—performance indicators, opinion polls, cost-benefit analyses, economic development statistics, marketing objectives, diversity mandates—and as artists abandon critical autonomy in favour of biocapitalist creative class orientations and activism, it is now possible to
modify Bourdieu’s 1979 study of the cultural habitus of different class factions and suggest that the hegemony of the bourgeois ideology of aesthetic disinterestedness has been supplanted by the predispositions of a global petty-bourgeois habitus (Bourdieu, 1984). With the decay of the bourgeois habitus, as also theorized by Oscar Negt and Alexander Kluge, the rise to prominence of the petty-bourgeois habitus allows us to update Bürger’s historicist model of the development of the bourgeois field of aesthetic autonomy by adding to it an additional layer that shifts from the international modernism of the late bourgeois era to that of today’s new petty-bourgeois global era (Negt and Kluge, 1993; Bennett, 2007; Léger, 2012). In these circumstances, the function of contemporary art shifts from the role assigned to it by bourgeois ideology to the allodoxia that is based on anxiety about class status, transposed onto lifestyle concerns and identity politics. For Bourdieu, the petty-bourgeois habitus emphasizes the anti-hierarchical and anti-authority motifs of the counterculture, an emphasis on the euphemization of seriousness, the fun ethic, psychological therapy, an imperative of sexual relation, the taste for the new,
and imaginary distance from market forces (Bourdieu, 1984: 318–371). In terms of cultural production, this marks a shift away from individual studio art to networked forms of project work within the ambient and deregulated ecology of general intellect, where affect and connectivity substitute for skill and knowledge. According to Bill Readings, the global petty bourgeoisie refuses a specifically political self-conception in favour of a purely economic, classless and post-historical logic of administration. Consequently, the status of the work of art shifts towards biocapitalist indexes of market value or to social media that is circulated among activists and hashtag movements. Both kinds of practices are suited to the mandates of neoliberalized institutions.

The neoliberalization of culture and the rise to prominence of socially engaged art allows for not only a historical re-evaluation of the conditions of possibility for avant-garde theory and practice, but also a rethinking of the space of possibilities. In *Drive in Cinema*, I proposed the triad of petty-bourgeois and anarchist *anti-art*, proletarian and communist *anti-anti-art*, and bourgeois capitalist *anti-art* (Léger, 2015). These three groupings are readily mapped onto Gene Ray’s distinction between a *critically affirmative art* that operates comfortably within the art system, *avant gardes* that overcome theories of autonomy and express political commitment, and anti-systemic *nomadic practices* that refuse to invest in autonomy as well as the institutions of art (Ray, 2006). I also suggested that this division corresponds closely enough to Jacques Lacan’s distinctions between the Discourse of the Hysteric, Discourse of the Analyst, and Discourse of the University. In *Don’t Network*, I added to this the Discourse of the Master as the designation for classical and aristocratic notions of Art (Léger, 2018). Developed during his seminars XVI to XVIII, from 1968 to 1972, Lacan’s “discourse theory” interprets the subject of the “unconscious structured like a language” in relation to the different ways that people relate to symbolic mandates (Lacan, 1991).

Briefly explained, the Discourse of the Master has as its place of enunciation a master signifier (S1) who addresses knowledge, or the know-how of the slave, and produces desire as a function of loss. The Master is unaware that split subjectivity conditions his existence as the castrated father. The Discourse of the Analyst has desire (*objet a*) occupying the place of an analyst who initiates a relation of transference with the analysand. This discourse makes the master signifier into a symptom and is unwritten by psychoanalysis as the system of knowledge. The Discourse of the Hysteric finds the split subject ($) in the position of an agent who addresses the master signifier and seeks knowledge of his or her condition as a function of loss. The Hysteric is unaware of his or her desire. Lastly, the Discourse of the University finds that the system of knowledge is in the role of agent and that this knowledge (S2) is addressed
to a desire that produces the subject. The Discourse of the University is underwritten by the master signifier, which makes it one of the most dangerous of discourses because it is unaware of the question of power. In a lecture delivered in 1972, Lacan added to his schema the matheme of the Discourse of the Capitalist, whose structure explains the conundrum of anti-capitalist movements today (Lacan, 1978). In this discourse, the split subject is the agent who addresses knowledge and produces himself or herself as loss. Like the University, the Discourse of the Capitalist is underwritten by the master signifier and so is equally unaware of the question of power.

By relating aesthetic theory to psychoanalysis, it is possible to address the ways in which culture functions in terms of belief structures that are “interpassive” and that relate questions of subjective judgement to the unconscious (Žižek, 2001a; Léger, 2010). In relation to this, Slavoj Žižek defines three subject positions that correspond to the discourses of the Hysteric, the University and the Analyst (Žižek, 2012). These can also be related to the three different kinds of art practice mentioned by Ray. The activist anti-artist is someone who imagines himself beyond the influence of the big Other, or the impersonal system of social rules; the academic anti-art artist is the person who thinks that they can fully know or understand social rules as a kind of common sense or cultural authority; and thirdly, the avant-garde anti-anti-artist seeks
to defeat capitalism without denying the incompleteness of social relations. The divinely inspired master artist takes himself or herself to be the big Other as such, and so this designation tells us less about cultural production than it does about the kind of humanist metaphysics that have little or no bearing on the theory of the avant garde. Similarly, the capitalist artist is less concerned with art than he or she is with the exchangeability of their product and how this allows them to “flexibilize” themselves and their “virtuosity” according to notions of social advancement (Virno, 2004; Holmes, 2008). Žižek’s Lacanian reading of Hegel is not simply Kantian, as some critics contend, but a post-Kantian, post-transcendental shift towards the kind of materialist theory that rejects the “totalitarian” tendency within post-structuralist social constructionism and new materialisms (Žižek, 2001b).

With regard to this programme of research on the social space of avant-garde contestation, it is possible to consider that the Discourse of the Master and the Discourse of the Analyst have something to offer us today as alternatives to the prevalence of the Discourse of the Hysteric and the Discourse of the University. The negation of the negation that is proposed by anti-anti-art in particular is, among other things, a means to address and possibly resolve the contradictions of capital and labour. It is the name that I give to a partisan avant-garde art that is decidedly anti-capitalist, but that unlike anti-art and critical art, is concerned to salvage or build the radical institutions of the working class that could correct, rather than simply connect, the antagonisms that pit the labouring masses against neoliberal state regimes. As Žižek mentions in Less Than Nothing, the official antagonism between activists and the corporate state is reflexive, which means that the true antagonism is between the field of their opposition and an excluded third term: the organization of radical emancipatory politics (Žižek, 2012: 800–801). Whereas most cultural studies define the oppressed as the myriad of excluded marginal groups—women, gays, ethnic minorities, immigrants, impoverished nations, and so on—today’s neoliberal control of populations leads to the kinds of struggles that prohibit the formation of radical class politics (Žižek, 2000). Instead, a petty-bourgeois class of post-political activists and non-governmental forces competes with a post-ideological class of technocratic experts and middle-class managers who are directly opposed to radical politicization (Deneault, 2018). What these have in common is their mutual aversion to vanguard politics. In contemporary biocapitalism, the excluded Real are the vanguards of class struggle. Neoliberal governance operationalizes the struggle between labour and capital into a post-political regulation of various forms of anti-oppression social justice that are managed within the terms of already existing social relations of exploitation (Zamora and Behrent, 2016). The question of the relationship between a polit-
ical vanguard (or political praxis) and an artistic avant garde (or art praxis) is particularly fraught in a universe of leftist postmodernism, liberal multiculturalism and rightist nationalism.

Today’s activist tendencies and micro-political identity politics tend to instrumentalize art into life, avoiding all talk of political vanguardism as representative of state power. Among communists, especially on the Eurocommunist ‘new left,’ there are reservations about the potential agency of the working class and about party leadership (Wood, 1998; Dean, 2016). What then are the prospects for artistic avant-gardism? In Revolutionary Time and the Avant-Garde, Roberts defines today’s avant garde as a “loose collectivity of participants and networks” that is much broader and more diverse than avant-garde predecessors (Roberts, 2015: 43). Its disadvantage is that it emerges in the midst of a “second economy” that is characterized by unemployment and precarity, which itself becomes part of radical art’s praxiological materials and self-conceptualization. Whereas the primary economy of art is concerned with the objects that are made for the rarefied world of museums and markets, the vast majority of semi-proletarian artists, he says, labour in an economic context where what is produced is part of a diffuse process of socialization that is shaped by the spread of new technologies. I would add to this the fact that petty-bourgeois ideology affects and influences creative class entrepreneurialism as well as art activism. One could say, in accordance with Brian Holmes, that what is at stake today is a class struggle that is taking place largely within the class compositions of the petty bourgeoisie (Holmes, 2011). Roberts’ theory of the avant garde otherwise provides a useful reference for anti-anti-art in terms of what he defines as post-art. Roberts bases his theory of the avant garde on Hegel’s “end of art” conceptualization and argues for the kind of post-art that transcends itself through intellectual reflection, or what he terms “realized reflexivity” (Roberts, 2015: 10). Art that reflects on its historical, social and political conditions of possibility—the supersession of autonomy—abolishes itself as art and dialectically sublates art in terms of a post-medium general social technique and “art after art in the expanded field” (Roberts, 2015: 30). The avant garde is an emancipatory project and social programme that cannot be limited to its conditions of emergence and consequent destruction by either twentieth-century totalitarianism or by the hegemony of the culture industry. Whereas Theodor Adorno upheld autonomy as a critique of heteronomy, Roberts proposes a dialectical defence of autonomy for post-art, in particular for the sake of partisan practices, which he defines as a “metastasis” of art praxis and political praxis (Roberts, 2015: 35).

If anti-anti-art, or post-art, is to engage with heteronomy in any significant way, it has to retain something of artistic ontology, however non-identitarian or
anti-foundational. Against crude materialism, radical art self-alienates and self-negates as a mediated form. Art cannot escape from life, but nor can life escape from art; life cannot be dissolved into art, but nor can art be dissolved into life (Groys, 2009). The two are not mutually exclusive, nor are they the same. Priority is therefore not given to art’s conceptualization, as Roberts argues, but to conceptualization as such, defining negation as part of an active conception of praxis and critique of the existing state of things. In Brave New Avant Garde I also proposed that the structure of fantasy can be thought to span the historical divide between the bourgeois era, especially with regard to its avant-garde negations, and today’s global petty-bourgeois era, where the fantasy of avant-gardist agency covers over the reality of post-political ideological coordinates and post-Fordist working and living conditions (Léger, 2012: 100–126). In terms of the interplay between the radical legacy and contemporary conditions and practices, the “great divide,” as Andreas Huyssen once referred to it, could be “bridged” through Lacan’s study of dialectics in psychoanalysis (Huyssen, 1986; Lacan, 1977: 292–325). This in no way means abandoning the avant garde as either a depleted set of historical precedents or as a kind of ominous Saturn eating his children (Žižek, 2017).

In Lacan’s graph of the subject of the signifier we have all of the psychoanalytic elements that could be useful for linking the social space of art possibles with the question of historicity and conjuncture. The bottom arc in Lacan’s “completed” graph shows, from left to right, the arc of the signifier, where the signifier leads to its signified. This arc is crossed, from right to left, by the arc of the subject. The $ symbol that starts at the bottom right refers to the barred subject or subject of the unconscious. This second arc passes through O, the big Other that represents the anonymous social rules that regulate symbolic life. It is symbolized as voice or as screen image. On the left side, the arc of the subject passes through s(O), the Signifier or signification of the Other, terminating at the bottom left where its “truth” as the subject of language is marked as I(O), the trait in the Other. In the second phase of the graph, i(o) refers to the ideal ego, or the subject’s imaginary self-image and self-understanding, unmediated by the Other. The ideal ego is also known as the mirror stage or specular image. Bypassing the social order allows the pre-Oedipal subject to imagine itself as e (ego). This pre-social condition is defined as misrecognition insofar as $ must of necessity pass through symbolic identification. One’s Imaginary relation to the self is never unconditioned by the orders of the Symbolic and Real. The parent or the teacher’s voice, for example, is constitutive of the resulting I(O) subjectivity, which refers to the ego ideal, or, the subject as the product of Law (the Name of the Father). Whereas one might consider that the condition of I(O) is undesirable in comparison with the ideal ego, it is rightist politics that insist
on an unmediated ego, as might be the case with people who are denied their socially-sanctioned rights, or a gendered and raced subject who is denied their universality. However, against anti-humanist tenets, one can no more abandon one’s ego, or subjectivity, than one can escape social determinations.

For psychoanalysis, the self is constitutively alienated. It is a representation of the self as the origin of an illusion. The fact that the arc of the signifier and the arc of the subject have contradictory directions, the first going from left to right (or past to future) and the second going from right to left (or present to past) implies that what is primary for the subject of psychoanalysis is symbolic demand rather than biological materialism. However, against both formalism and fascist imaginings, it is not possible to fully obey symbolic demands, in part, because they are inherently contradictory and are themselves not-All. Art for art’s sake, for instance, represents the kind of self-sacrifice that presumes a pure ideology. For this reason, Lacan’s graph brings desire into play along with doubt. After the subject’s passage through the chain of signifiers, the desire of the Other functions in such a way as to suture meaning. The symbolic order is experienced as a terrifying abyss. In relation to the experience of identification, the subject responds with the query: What are you saying? What do you want from me? Why have I been given this mandate? Desire as interpellation necessarily fails, only to pass over into fantasy, which serves to conceal the inconsistency of absolute signification. One person tells me something, another something else. Instead of imaginary identification, the subject is caught in the symbolic identification that makes s(0) operative as a retroactive function of the big Other, as
though the mandate I have been given was there all along. In other words, I am always already the subject of language, without positive consistency. A retroactive effect of naming, I am what you say I am. The subject therefore dwells in a condition of jouissance, a substance-enjoyment that defines the experience of subjectivity as such.

In the complete graph, $\Diamond D$ refers to castration. The subject experiences symbolic demand as a form of destitution that goes through and beyond the desire of the Other, through the Real of enjoyment and into the field of $S(\emptyset)$, a signifier saturated with enjoyment. As an inherently paranoid, or para-nodal being, who cannot be reduced to symbolic mandates or networked biopower, the subject wonders: What do you really want from me? What is the obscene fact of existence that makes me guilty a priori? The subject thus experiences the lack of jouissance and the lack in the Other. You don’t want anything from me. This lack in the Other is then filled in with $\Diamond a$, the fantasy that supports desire and gives an answer to the question *Che vuoi?* The passion of subjectivity is complete insofar as through this destitution and loss I develop an ethics of separation. Because I accept the inconsistency and the surplus of the Real over every symbolic mandate and meaning I am able to act ethically by not giving way on my desire. In these terms, there is nothing in avant-garde praxis that has to do with compromise. One might go so far as to say that avant-gardism cannot be limited to questions of necessity. Even as an agent of class struggle, I have no a priori or post hoc consistency outside of my subjective response to the impossible-Real. Those who insist on the mandates of History without the passage through subjectivity are like Stalinists who pretend they are the direct agents of historical necessity or who, like Joan of Arc, take their orders directly from God. Such absolutism leaves no room for historical change and imagines a timeless universe of total determination. In response to this, Hegel theorizes the notion that contradiction is inherent to identity; Marx theorizes the commodity as the pathological structure of a post-transcendental subject; Eco theorizes irony as the meaningless order of signs; Althusser theorizes alienation in the symbolic process; Foucault theorizes alienation through self-production as object; and Lacan theorizes the enigma of an authentic act that is not determined by symbolic demands.

The injunction by university art programmes to be rebellious, as for instance, the California Institute of Integral Studies’ advertisement of a “radically interdisciplinary” MFA that would allow art students to “Exercise Creative Resistance,” is in Lacanian terms the fundamental form of a superego injunction. As discussed in Žižek’s *The Sublime Object of Ideology*, Lacan’s graph defines the subject of language as the effect of a retroversion that creates the illusion of symbolic identification (Žižek, 1989: 104). To brings things back to the Four
TABLE 3  Table 1 combined with Figure 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>SACRAL ART</th>
<th>COURTLY ART</th>
<th>BOURGEOIS</th>
<th>NEW PETTY BOURGEOIS</th>
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<td></td>
<td>Middle ages dynasties</td>
<td>Classical nation states</td>
<td>Modern international</td>
<td>Global</td>
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<tr>
<td>Function</td>
<td>cult object</td>
<td>representational object</td>
<td>portrayal of individual self-understanding</td>
<td>allodoxia integration life-styling</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of production</td>
<td>collective craft guilds</td>
<td>individual universities</td>
<td>individual studio</td>
<td>networked culture industry</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mode of consumption</td>
<td>collective religious</td>
<td>collective sociable</td>
<td>individual alienated</td>
<td>post-enlightenment enjoyment</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Status of the work</td>
<td>magical secrecy iconic</td>
<td>treasure pageantry alchemical</td>
<td>autonomous avant-garde symbolic</td>
<td>market value activist biopolitical</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Discourses, artists’ imagined autonomy misrecognizes their relationship to the big Other. Between activist hysteria and neurotic academic acrobatics, the pretense is that production within and outside the biocapitalist creative industries will provide the conditions of life that we seek. This fantasy fills out the lack of the subject in response to the demand to be creative or politically active. How one can traverse the fantasy without giving way on one’s desire means coming to an understanding of what distinguishes the perversion of avant-gardism from the Real of an impasse. It also means reinventing what it is that avant-gardism is and can be, without the illusion that it is nothing more than what it happens to be or that it must abandon the ambition to change the world for the better.

If one was to superimpose Lacan’s completed graph over the last two columns of Table 1—the only two that are relevant to the post-transcendent premises of radical art theory—the relationship between avant-garde internationalism and petty-bourgeois globalism would be shown to have transferential circuits through which it is possible to imagine several scenarios. With $ on the
(bourgeois, avant-garde) left side and objet petit a on the (petty-bourgeois) right side, the “vel” of alienation (desire) and separation (drive) makes for two-way interaction. A fantasy relation of $◇a would imply a loop between past and present. A trance-like $ = a relation would imply an impossible hypnotic state or even a sort of “web of life” continuity that makes for an obsession with the past or a false sense of historical mission. The relation S1–a would treat the avant garde as a symptom and therefore as the subject of a prediscursive communication saturated with enjoyment. The inverted fantasy structure of a–$ could be used as a pervert’s guide to avant-gardism, making the avant garde into the instrument of biopolitical capture and thereby having some limited potential for dislodging symbolic identification, as for instance in the work of Neue Slowenische Kunst. Could it be, for instance, that when he moved on from The Colbert Report to The Late Show with Stephen Colbert, the talk-show comedian did not sell out so much as he has carried his over-identification strategy to a new, even more radically imperceptible level? If so, the elimination of the minimal difference has caused him to shift from Analyst to Capitalist or Master. Lastly, if we were to place the $ of $◇a over the global petty-bourgeois column and the objet petit a over an unknown future, we would be acknowledging how it is that an authentic act involves psychosis to some degree. The communist future is imagined from the position of the contradictions of capitalism. Contrariwise, someone who positions themselves as objet a in this scenario places themselves in the Discourse of the Mystic and as someone who knows and has seen the future, a New Age mystic or millennial cult leader. Because there can be no material and symbolic support for this position, it can only operate as a sham. Those who consider that the art world is nothing but a ponzi scheme designed to benefit the one percent of consecrated artists, and who reject the avant-garde practices that we have known in favour of prefigurative politics, in some ways play with the wizardry of conjuration and the quackery of futurism. Just as Christianity is premised on the example of Christ more than it is on the messianism of the last judgement, vanguard aesthetics and politics are premised on programmes that are based on human knowledge and not on the great beyond or on the snake oil of miscreants and the apologetics of predatory barbarism.

In his book on the impasse between Syriza and the European troika, Badiou calls for a new emancipatory modernity that sustains the contradiction within global capitalism. To focus on capitalism as the enemy, to criticize the abuse of state power by socialist states, and to fight fascism on all fronts is equivalent to organizing collective life beyond capitalist social relations and identitarian categories (Badiou, 2018). However, to do this as an artist nowadays risks inordinate censure and marginalization. Jean-Luc Godard’s Film Socialisme of 2010
was attacked by critics of all stripes for any number of reasons that have more to
do with intolerance of avant-garde criticality than with serious critique (Léger,
2015: 185–207). The realization that someone who was so central to the post-
war French New Wave and who gave even more to the cause of radical left-wing
cinema was being brutalized by the public led to a more tempered response to
Godard’s *Goodbye to Language* (2014), even if that film was in some ways less
ambitious in scope and more of a return to the themes of bourgeois melodrama
that his early films are associated with. All the same, Michel Hazanavicius did
not hesitate to direct *Godard Mon Amour* (2017), a mawkish take-down piece
made just in time for the 50th anniversary of May 68 and that is concerned
with Godard’s “cisgender” foibles and lambasting at the hands of student ultra-
leftists. The operation might not be so contemptible if Godard’s new film work
was not similar in many ways to works like Guy Debord’s *In girum imus nocte
et consumimur igni* (1981). Taking the pseudo-heroic stance that “Godard is not
God” and that other filmmakers have the right to criticize him, Hazanavicius
détourned Godard’s press statement to the effect that Hazanavicius’ concept
for the film is a “stupid, stupid idea” and used it as ad copy for one version of
the film poster, which shows this tag line along with a pair of broken ‘Godard’
glasses (Jeffries, 2017). The bohemian avant-gardes were of course known to
crown themselves with the slander bestowed on them by the establishment. In
many ways, paradoxically, the prevalence of University and Hysteric discourses
makes it such that today’s artists, whether starving in a garret or working for the
culture industry, are bypassing the heroic, communist stage of avant-gardism,
from Dada to the Situationists, and returning to the ideology and strategies of
the nineteenth century. The reason for this is the acceptance of a Thatcherite
“there is no alternative” and a post-structuralist “there is no outside” to capital-
ism as the only viable socio-economic system (Fisher, 2009). As neoliberalism
becomes more authoritarian and the “extreme centre” less able to provide a
plausible account of reality, the fascist tactic of *épater l’avant-garde* becomes
indistinguishable from the assertion of collective power as little more than a
plebian underbelly, with some assemblages required (Hedges, 2010; Ali, 2015;
Nagle, 2017). Against Asger Jorn’s standard that “the avant garde never gives up,”
the bad faith wisdom of films like *Le Redoutable* appeals to the kind of caution-
ary license encrypted in Neil Young’s warning that rust never sleeps. Beyond
the posturing and the ideological demand, hustlers like Hazanavicius do not
stand a chance for the simple reason that we know what our enemy is.
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