1. [Modern art and Baudelaire]. Faced with the conservative wave against the revolutionary movements of 1848 in Europe, modern art, according to Baudelaire, was launched as a response. It derived from the radical cultural values of the French Revolution. As such, it was a response of the radicalised and independent craftsmen imbued with the fury of the plebs.

2. [Avant-garde]. Therefore, to blindly speak about avant-garde art means to succumb to the myth of autarchic art, as an isolated and self-referential phenomenon. In central economies or Western colonial powers (which are nearly synonymous), avant-garde art – with the exception of brief revolutionary episodes – did not operate as an avant-garde. More accurately, it served in the rear-guard\(^2\) and as an act of resistance. That is, it constituted a mode of symbolic struggle against the capitalistic process of modernisation.

3. [Belle époque, modern art and class struggle]. In the arts, the project and the critical accumulation envisioned by Baudelaire came under fire from a widespread formalism that followed the massacre of the Paris Communards. Formalism was closely synchronised with capitalist modernisation and the growing functionalisation of the city and all spheres of life. It thereby constituted an ideological current linked to certain tendencies of modernism, those committed to a positive view of modernisation. As an aesthetic doctrine, formalism emerged organically with impressionism and post-impressionist symbolism. In these terms, it carried the values inherent to the ideology of ‘opticality’ – or of the ‘école des yeux’ (school of the eyes), as it was called in France at the time.

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1 Re-elaboration of the introductory synthesis of the doctoral thesis A Fabricação da Pintura: de Manet a Rothko [The Fabrication of Painting: from Manet to Rothko], supervised by Paulo Arantes, São Paulo, Department of Philosophy, University of São Paulo, 2000. The new rearrangements and adjustments (titles and intertitles, deletions, addenda, and bibliographical updates) enable the independent reading of the original function, subordinate to the thesis.

2 The art critic Mário Pedrosa used the term ‘rearguard art’ in a somewhat distinct sense but not in opposition to the one employed here. See Pedrosa 1995, pp. 341–347.
But the question is: how to handle, from such a narrow base, the principles and developments of modern art as a whole?

4. [Myth and taboo]. One of the blind spots of the formalist rationale – whose principles assumed the mythological notion of the artwork as a subject endowed with its own reason, completeness and self-sufficiency – consisted precisely in the difficulty of the overcoming of art as a precious commodity or value in itself. In other words, formalism displayed resistance (in the psycho-analytic sense) against the nullification of the finished work's value, that is, the primacy of the productive processes over the results.

5. [Obsolescence]. The reason that the modern artist, in general, prioritised productive processes rather than the finished execution was that the general process of modernisation, driven by the capitalist production of goods, brought about the obsolescence of every social form. Recall the emblematic passage of the Communist Manifesto about relationships and things previously taken to be solid, which end up by melting into air.³

6. [Production vs. contemplation]. Unfinishedness, summary modelling and quickness of execution, the simultaneous production of several works and the multiplication of variants of just one process appeared as distinct ways by which artists sought to establish the primacy of production over the final form. Despite the specific temporalities of art, these approaches were aimed at preventing or delaying the emptying and ageing of forms and work modes even in the field of art.

Of course, this did not characterise a singular or exclusive aspect of modern art. But it did highlight the acceleration that marked the fatigue of materials, modes and techniques. Thus, several of Giulio Carlo Argan’s studies of late-sixteenth-century mannerism, as well as of the non-finiti of Michelangelo and certain works by the Venetian masters, emphasise the initial moment of symbolic valorisation of the productive mode rather than the finished work (previously exalted as proof of virtuosity in Renaissance classicism, due to Neoplatonic metaphysics). As such, in the new symbolic status acquired by the so-called mannerist artistic praxis and correlated feelings, Argan pointed to indications of the emerging contradiction between productive schemes and modes (Brecht highlighted similar elements in the text of Galileo Galilei).

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³ See Marx and Engels 2005, p. 44.