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*The Search for Tradition: Avant-Garde and Postmodernism in the 1970s**

by Andreas Huyssen

Imagine Walter Benjamin in Berlin, the city of his childhood, walking through the international avant-garde exhibit *Tendenzen der zwanziger Jahre*, on display in 1977 in the new Nationalgalerie built by Bauhaus architect Mies van der Rohe in the 1960s. Imagine Walter Benjamin as a flaneur in the city of boulevards and arcades he so admirably described, happening upon the Centre Georges Pompidou and its multi-media show *Paris-Berlin 1900–1933*, which was a major cultural event in 1978. Or imagine the theorist of media and image reproduction in 1981 in front of a television set watching Robert Hughes' BBC-produced eight-part series on avant-garde art "The Shock of the New."¹ Would this major critic and aesthete of the avant-garde have rejoiced in its success — manifest even in the architecture of the museums housing the exhibits — or would shadows of melancholy have clouded his eyes? Would he, perhaps, have been shocked by "The Shock of the New" or would he have felt called upon to revise the theory of post-auratic art? Or would he simply have argued that the administered culture of late capitalism had finally succeeded in imposing the phony spell of commodity fetishism even on that art which more than any other had challenged the values and traditions of bourgeois culture? Maybe after another penetrating gaze at that architectural monument to wholesale technological progress in the heart of Paris, Benjamin would have quoted himself: "In every era the attempt must be made to wrest tradition away from a conformism that is about to overpower it."² Thus might he acknowledge not only that the avant-garde — embodiment

* An earlier version of this essay was presented at the Symposium on Innovation/Renovation: Current Trends and Reconceptions in Western Culture which was held in Würzburg and Munich in June 1980.

1. Catalogues: *Tendenzen der Zwanziger Jahre: 15. Europäische Kunstausstellung* (Berlin, 1977); *Wem gehört die Welt: Kunst und Gesellschaft in der Weimarer Republik*, Neue Gesellschaft für bildende Kunst (Berlin, 1977); *Paris — Berlin 1900–1933*, Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1978). Robert Hughes' television series has also been published in book form as *The Shock of the New* (New York, 1981). See also *Paris — Moscow 1900–1930*, Centre Georges Pompidou (Paris, 1979).

2. Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York, 1969).

of anti-tradition — has itself become tradition, but, moreover, that its inventions and its imagination have become integral even to Western culture's most official manifestations.

Of course, there is nothing new in such observations. Already in the early 1960s Hans Magnus Enzensberger had analyzed the aporias of the avant-garde³ and Max Frisch had attributed to Brecht "the striking ineffectualness of a classic."⁴ The use of visual montage, one of the major inventions of the avant-garde, already had become standard procedure in commercial advertising, and reminders of literary modernism popped up in Volkswagen's beetle ads: "Und läuft und läuft und läuft." In fact, obituaries on modernism and the avant-garde abounded in the 1960s, both in Western Europe and the United States.

Avant-garde and modernism had not only been accepted as major cultural expressions of the 20th century. They were fast becoming history. This then raised questions about the status of that art and literature which was produced after World War II, after the exhaustion of surrealism and abstraction, after the death of Musil and Thomas Mann, Valéry and Gide, Joyce and T. S. Eliot. One of the first critics to theorize about a shift from modernism to postmodernism was Irving Howe in his 1959 essay "Mass Society and Postmodern Fiction."⁵ And only a year later, Harry Levin used the same concept of the postmodern to designate what he saw as an "anti-intellectual undercurrent" which threatened the humanism and enlightenment so characteristic of the culture of modernism.⁶ Writers such as Enzensberger and Frisch clearly continued in the tradition of modernism (and this is true for Enzensberger's poetry of the early 1960s as well as for Frisch's plays and novels), and critics such as Howe and Levin sided with modernism against the newer developments, which they could only see as symptoms of decline. But postmodernism⁷ took off with a vengeance in the

3. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, "Die Aporien der Avantgarde," in *Einzelheiten: Poesie und Politik* (Frankfurt am Main, 1962). In this essay Enzensberger analyzes the contradictions in the temporal sensibility of avant-gardism, the relationship of artistic and political avant-gardes, and certain post-1945 avant-garde phenomena such as *art informel*, action painting, and the literature of the beat generation. His major thesis is that the historical avant-garde is dead and that the revival of avant-gardism after 1945 is fraudulent and regressive.

4. Max Frisch, "Der Autor und das Theater" (1964), in *Gesammelte Werke in zeitlicher Folge*, vol 5:2 (Frankfurt am Main, 1976), p. 342.

5. *Partisan Review*, 26 (1959), 420–436. Reprinted in Irving Howe, *The Decline of the New* (New York, 1970), pp. 190–207.

6. Harry Levin, "What Was Modernism?" (1960), in *Refractions* (New York, 1966), p. 271.

7. It is not my purpose in this essay to define and delimit the term "postmodernism" conceptually. Since the 1960s the term has accumulated several layers of meaning which should not be forced into the straight-jacket of a systematic definition. In this essay the term "postmodernism" will variously refer to American art movements from pop to performance, to recent experimentalism in dance, theatre and fiction, and to certain avant-gardist trends in literary criticism from the work of Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag in the 1960s to the more recent appropriation of French cultural theory by American critics who may or may not call

early to mid-1960s, most visibly in Pop art, in experimental fiction, and in the criticism of Leslie Fiedler and Susan Sontag. Since then the notion of postmodernism has become key to almost any attempt to capture the specific and unique qualities of contemporary activities in art and architecture, in dance and music, in literature and theory. Debates in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States were increasingly oblivious to modernism and to the historical avant-garde. Postmodernism reigned supreme, and a sense of novelty and cultural change was pervasive.

How then do we explain the striking fascination of the late 1970s with the avant-garde of the first three to four decades of this century? What is the meaning of this energetic come-back, in the age of postmodernism, of Dada, constructivism, futurism, surrealism, and the New Objectivity of the Weimar Republic? Exhibits of the classical avant-garde in France, Germany, England and the United States turned into major cultural events. Substantial studies of the avant-garde were published in the United States and in West Germany initiating lively debates.⁸ Conferences were held on various aspects of modernism and the avant-garde.⁹ All of this has happened at a time when there seems to be little doubt that the classical avant-garde has exhausted its creative potential and when the waning of the avant-garde is widely acknowledged as a *fait accompli*. Is this a case, then, of Hegel's owl of Minerva beginning its flight after the shades of night have fallen? Or are we dealing with a nostalgia for the "good years" of 20th-century culture? And if nostalgia it is, does it point to the exhaustion of cultural resources and creativity in our own time or does it hold the promise of a revitalization in contemporary culture? What, after all, is the place of postmodernism in all this? Can we perhaps compare this phenomenon with that other obnoxious nostalgia of the 1970s, the nostalgia for egyptian mummies (Tut exhibit in U.S.), medieval emperors (Stauffer exhibit in Stuttgart), or, most recently, Vikings (Minneapolis)? A search

themselves postmodernists. Some useful discussions of postmodernism can be found in Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (Bloomington and London, 1977), especially pp. 132–143; in a special issue on postmodernism of *Amerikastudien*, 1 (1977); this issue also contains a substantive bibliography on postmodernism, *ibid.*, pp. 40–46. For a critical treatment of the appropriation of French cultural theory by American literary critics see Frank Lentricchia, *After the New Criticism* (Chicago, 1980). On recent trends in American culture see *Salmagundi*, 50–51 (Fall 1980–Winter 1981), a special issue on Art and Intellect in America.

8. Calinescu (see footnote 7); Peter Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt am Main, 1974); 'Theorie der Avantgarde': Antworten auf Peter Bürgers Bestimmung von Kunst und bürgerlicher Gesellschaft, ed. W. Martin Lüdke (Frankfurt am Main, 1976); Bürger's reply to his critics is contained in the introduction to his *Vermittlung — Rezeption — Funktion* (Frankfurt am Main, 1979); special issue on *Montage/Avantgarde* of the Berlin journal *Alternative*, 122/123 (1978). See also the essays by Jürgen Habermas, Hans Platscheck and Karl Heinz Bohrer in *Stichworte zur 'Geistigen Situation der Zeit,'* 2 vols., ed. Jürgen Habermas (Frankfurt am Main, 1979).

9. E.g., the 1979 conference on fascism and the avant-garde in Madison, Wisconsin.

for traditions seems to be involved in all these instances. Is this search for tradition perhaps just another sign of the conservatism of the 1970s, the cultural equivalent, as it were, of the political backlash or the so-called *Tendenzwende*? Or, alternatively, can we interpret the museum and tv revival of the classical avant-garde as a defense against the neo-conservative attacks on the culture of modernism and avant-gardism, attacks which have intensified in these last years in Germany, France and the United States?

In order to answer some of these questions it may be useful to compare the status of art, literature and criticism in the late 1970s with that of the 1960s. Paradoxically, the 1960s, for all their attacks on modernism and the avant-garde, still stand closer to the traditional notion of the avant-garde than the archeology of modernity so characteristic of the late 1970s. Much confusion could have been avoided if critics had paid closer attention to distinctions that need to be made between avant-garde and modernism as well as to the different relationship of each one to mass culture in the United States and Europe respectively. American critics especially tended to use the terms avantgarde and modernism interchangeably. To give just two examples, Renato Poggioli's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, translated from the Italian in 1968, was reviewed in the United States as if it were a book about modernism¹⁰ and John Weightman's *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* of 1973 is subtitled *Explorations in Modernism*.¹¹ Both avant-garde and modernism may legitimately be understood as representing artistic emanations from the sensibility of modernity, but from a European perspective it makes little sense to lump Thomas Mann together with Dada, Proust with André Breton, or Rilke with Russian constructivism. While there are areas of overlap between the tradition of the avant-garde and that of modernism (e.g., vorticism and Ezra Pound, radical language experimentation and James Joyce, expressionism and Gottfried Benn) the overall aesthetic and political differences are too pervasive to be ignored. Thus Matei Calinescu makes the following point: "In France, Italy, Spain and other European countries the avant-garde, despite its various and often contradictory claims, tends to be regarded as the most extreme form of artistic negativism — art itself being the first victim. As for modernism, whatever its specific meaning in different languages and for different authors, it never conveys that sense of universal and hysterical negation so characteristic of the avant-garde. The anti-traditionalism of modernism is often subtly traditional."¹² As to the political differences, the historical avant-garde tended predominantly to the left, the major exception being Italian futurism, while the right could claim a surprising number of mod-

10. References in Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity*, p. 140 and p. 287, fn. 40.

11. John Weightman, *The Concept of the Avant-Garde* (La Salle, Ill., 1973).

12. Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity*, p. 140.

ernists among its supporters, Ezra Pound, Knut Hamsun, Gottfried Benn among others.

Whereas Calinescu makes much of the negativistic, anti-aesthetic and self-destructive aspects of the avant-garde as opposed to the reconstructive art of the modernists, the aesthetic and political project of the avant-garde might be approached in more positive terms. In modernism art and literature retained their traditional 19th-century autonomy from everyday life, an autonomy which had first been articulated by Kant and Schiller in the late 18th century; the "institution art" (Peter Bürger¹³), i.e., the traditional way in which art and literature were produced, disseminated, and received, is never challenged by modernism but maintained intact. Modernists such as T. S. Eliot and Ortega y Gasset emphasized time and again that it was their mission to salvage the purity of high art from the encroachments of urbanization, massification, technological modernization, in short, of modern mass culture. The avant-garde of the first three decades of this century, however, attempted to subvert art's autonomy, its artificial separation from life, and its institutionalization as "high art" which was perceived to feed right into the legitimation needs of the 19th-century forms of bourgeois society. The avant-garde posited the reintegration of art and life as its major project at a time when that traditional society, especially in Italy, Russia and Germany, was undergoing a major transformation toward a qualitatively new stage of modernity. Social and political ferment of the 1910s and 1920s was the breeding ground for avant-garde radicalism in art and literature as well as in politics.¹⁴ When Enzensberger wrote about the aporias of the avant-garde several decades later, he did not just have the cooption of the avant-garde by the culture industry in mind as is sometimes surmised; he fully understood the political dimension of the problem and pointed out how the historical avant-garde had failed to deliver what it had always promised: to sever political, social and aesthetic chains, explode cultural reifications, throw off traditional forms of domination, liberate repressed energies.¹⁵

If with these distinctions in mind we look at United States culture of the 1960s it becomes clear that the 1960s can be regarded as the closing chapter in the tradition of avant-gardism. Like all avant-gardes since Saint Simon and the utopian socialists and anarchists up through Dada, surrealism, and

13. Peter Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*, in which the notion of the "institution art" plays a central role, will be published in English next year by the University of Minnesota Press in their new series "Theory and the History of Literature."

14. On the political aspects of the left avant-garde, see David Bathrick, "Affirmative and Negative Culture: Technology and the Left Avant-Garde," in *The Technological Imagination*, eds. Teresa de Lauretis, Andreas Huyssen, and Kathleen Woodward (Madison, Wis., 1980), pp. 107–122, and my essay "The Hidden Dialectic: The Avant-Garde — Technology — Mass Culture," in *The Myths of Information: Technology and Post-Industrial Culture*, ed. Kathleen Woodward (Madison, Wis., 1980), pp. 151–164.

15. See Enzensberger, "Aporien," p. 66f.

the post-revolutionary art of Soviet Russia in the early 1920s, the 1960s fought tradition, and this revolt took place at a time of political and social turmoil. The promise of unlimited abundance, political stability and new technological frontiers of the Kennedy years was shattered fast, and social conflict emerged dominant in the civil rights movement, in the urban riots, and in the anti-war movement. It certainly is more than coincidental that the protest culture of the period adopted the label 'counter-culture,' thus projecting an image of an avant-garde leading the way to an alternative kind of society. In the field of art, Pop revolted against abstract expressionism and sparked off a series of art movements from Op to Fluxus, Concept, and Minimalism which made the art scene of the 1960s as lively and vibrating as it was commercially profitable and fashionable.¹⁶ Peter Brook and the Living Theatre exploded the endless entrapments of absurdism and created a new style of theatrical performance. The theatre attempted to bridge the gap between stage and audience and experimented with new forms of immediacy and spontaneity in performance. There was a participatory ethos in the theatre and in the arts which can easily be linked to the teach-ins and sit-ins of the protest movement. Exponents of a new sensibility rebelled against the complexities and ambiguities of modernism embracing camp and pop culture instead, and literary critics rejected the congealed canon and interpretive practices of New Criticism claiming for their own writing the creativity, autonomy and presence of original creation.

When Leslie Fiedler declared the "Death of Avant-Garde Literature" in 1964,¹⁷ he was really attacking modernism, and he himself embodied the ethos of the classical avant-garde, American style. I say "American style" because Fiedler's major concern was not to democratize "high art"; his goal was rather to validate popular culture and to challenge the increasing institutionalization of high art. Thus when a few years later he wanted to "Cross the Border — Close the Gap" (1968)¹⁸ between high culture and popular culture he reaffirmed precisely the classical avant-garde's project to reunite these artificially separated realms of culture. For a moment in the 1960s it seemed the Phoenix avant-garde had risen from the ashes fancying a flight toward the new frontier of the post-modern. Or was American postmodernism rather a Baudelairean albatros trying in vain to lift off the deck of the culture industry? Was postmodernism plagued from its very inception by the same aporias Enzensberger had already analyzed so eloquently in 1962? It seems that even in the United States the uncritical embracing of Western and camp, porno and rock, pop and counter-culture as genuine popular culture points to an amnesia which may have been the

16. On Pop Art see my article "The Cultural Politics of Pop," *New German Critique*, 4 (Winter 1975), 77–98.

17. Leslie Fiedler, *The Collected Essays of Leslie Fiedler*, vol. II (New York, 1971), pp. 454–461.

18. Reprinted in Leslie Fiedler, *A Fiedler Reader* (New York, 1977), pp. 270–294.

result of cold war politics as much as of the postmodernists' relentless fight against tradition. American analyses of mass culture did have a critical edge in the late 1940s and 1950s¹⁹ which went all but unacknowledged in the 1960s uncritical enthusiasm for camp, pop, and the media.

A major difference between the United States and Europe in the 1960s is that European writers, artists, and intellectuals then were much more aware of the increasing cooption of all modernist and avant-garde art by the culture industry. Enzensberger after all had not only written about the aporias of the avant-garde, but about the pervasiveness of the "consciousness industry" as well.²⁰ Since the tradition of the avant-garde in Europe did not seem to offer what, for historical reasons, it could still offer in the United States, one politically feasible way to react to the classical avant-garde and to cultural tradition in general was to declare the death of all art and literature and to call for cultural revolution. But even this rhetorical gesture, articulated most emphatically in Enzensberger's *Kursbuch* in 1968 and in the Parisian graffiti of May '68, was part of the traditional anti-aesthetic, anti-elitist, and anti-bourgeois strategies of the avant-garde. And by no means all writers and artists heeded the call. Peter Handke, for instance, denounced as infantile the attack on all high art and literature and he continued to write experimental plays, poetry and prose. And the cultural left in West Germany, which agreed with Enzensberger's funeral for art and literature as long as it buried "bourgeois" art only, undertook the task of unearthing an alternative cultural tradition, especially that of the left avant-gardes of the Weimar Republic. But the reappropriation of the left tradition of the Weimar Republic did not revitalize contemporary art and literature in Germany the way the undercurrent of Dada had revitalized the American art scene of the 1960s. Important exceptions to this general observation can be found in the work of Klaus Staack, Günter Wallraff and Alexander Kluge, but they remain isolated cases.

It soon became clear, that the European attempt to escape from the "ghetto" of art and to break the bondage of the culture industry also had ended in failure and frustration. Whether in the German protest movement or in May '68 in France, the illusion that cultural revolution was imminent foundered on the hard realities of the status quo. Art was not reintegrated into everyday life. The imagination did not come to power. The Centre Georges Pompidou was built instead, and the SPD came to power in West Germany. The vanguard thrust of group movements developing and asserting the newest style seemed to be broken after 1968. In Europe, 1968 marks not the breakthrough then hoped for, but rather the replayed end of the traditional avant-garde. Symptomatic of the 1970s

19. Cf. many essays in the anthology *Mass Culture: The Popular Arts in America*, eds. Bernard Rosenberg and David Manning White (New York, 1957).

20. Hans Magnus Enzensberger, *Einzelheiten I: Bewusstseinsindustrie* (Frankfurt am Main, 1962).

were loners like Peter Handke, whose work defies the notion of a unitary style; cult figures like Joseph Beuys who conjures up an archaic past; or film makers like Herzog, Wenders and Faßbinder whose films — despite their critique of contemporary Germany — lack one of the basic prerequisites of avant-garde art, a sense of the future.

In the United States, however, the sense of the future, which had asserted itself so powerfully in the 1960s, is still alive today in the postmodernist scene, even though its breathing space is shrinking fast as a result of recent economic and political changes (e.g., the cutting of the NEA budget). There also seems to be a major shift of postmodernist interest from the earlier two-pronged concern with popular culture and with experimental art and literature, to a new focus on cultural theory, a shift which certainly reflects the academic institutionalization of postmodernism, but is not fully explained by it. More on this later. What concerns me here is the temporal imagination of postmodernism, the unshaken confidence of being at the edge of history which characterizes the whole trajectory of American postmodernism since the 1960s and of which the notion of a *post-histoire* is only one of the sillier manifestations. A possible explanation of this resilience to the shifting mood of the culture at large, which certainly since the mid-1970s has all but lost its confidence in the future, may lie precisely in the subterranean proximity of postmodernism to those movements, figures and intentions of the classical European avant-garde which were hardly ever acknowledged by the Anglo-Saxon notion of modernism. Despite the importance of Man Ray and the activities of Picabia and Duchamp in New York, New York Dada remained at best a marginal phenomenon in American culture, and neither Dada nor surrealism ever met with much public success in the United States. Precisely this fact made Pop, happenings, Concept, experimental music, surfiction and performance art of the 1960s and 1970s look more novel than they really were. The audience's expectation horizon in the United States was fundamentally different from what it was in Europe. Where Europeans might react with a sense of *déjà vu*, Americans could legitimately sustain a sense of novelty, excitement, and breakthrough.

A second major factor comes into play here. If we want to understand fully the power the Dadaist subcurrent assumed in the United States in the 1960s, the absence of an American Dada or surrealist movement in the earlier 20th century also needs to be explained. As Peter Bürger has argued, the major goal of the European avant-gardes was to undermine, attack, and transform the bourgeois "institution art." Such an iconoclastic attack on cultural institutions and traditional modes of representation, narrative structure, perspective, and poetic sensibility only made sense in countries where "high art" had an essential role to play in legitimizing bourgeois political and social domination, e.g., in the museum and salon culture, in the theatres, concert halls and opera houses and in the socialization and education process in general. The cultural politics of 20th-century

avant-gardism would have been meaningless (if not regressive) in the United States where "high art" was still struggling hard to gain wider legitimacy and to be taken seriously by the public. Thus it is not surprising that major American writers since Henry James, such as T. S. Eliot, Faulkner and Hemingway, Pound and Stevens, felt drawn to the constructive sensibility of modernism, which insisted on the dignity and autonomy of literature, rather than to the iconoclastic and anti-aesthetic ethos of the European avant-garde which attempted to break the political bondage of high culture through a fusion with popular culture and to integrate art into life.

I would suggest that it was not only the absence of an indigenous US-avant-garde in the classical European sense, say in the 1920s, which, forty years later, benefitted the postmodernists' claim to novelty in their struggle against the entrenched traditions of modernism, abstract expressionism and New Criticism. There is more to it than that. A European-style avant-gardist revolt against tradition made eminent sense in the United States at a time when high art had become institutionalized in the burgeoning museum, concert and paperback culture of the 1950s, when modernism itself had entered the mainstream via the culture industry, and later, during the Kennedy years, when high culture began to take on functions of political representation (Robert Frost and Pablo Casals at the White House).

All of this, then, is not at all to say that postmodernism is merely a pastiche of an earlier continental avant-garde. It rather serves to point to the similarity and continuity between American postmodernism and certain segments of an earlier European avant-garde, a similarity on the levels of formal experimentation and of a critique of the "institution art." This continuity was already marginally acknowledged in some postmodernist criticism, e.g., by Fiedler and Ihab Hassan,²¹ but it emerged in full clarity with the recent retrospectives of and writings on the classical European avant-garde. From the perspective of today, US art of the 1960s — precisely because of its successful attack on abstract expressionism — shines as the colorful death mask of a classical avant-garde which in Europe already had been liquidated culturally and politically by Stalin and Hitler. Despite its radical and legitimate critique of the gospel of modernism, postmodernism, which in its artistic practices and its theory was a product of the 1960s, must be seen as the endgame of the avant-garde and not as the radical breakthrough it often claimed to be.²²

At the same time it goes without saying that the postmodernist revolt

21. Ihab Hassan, *Paracriticisms: Seven Speculations of the Times* (Urbana, Chicago, London, 1975). See also Ihab Hassan, *The Right Promethean Fire: Imagination, Science and Cultural Change* (Urbana, Ill., 1980).

22. For an incisive critique of postmodernism from a largely conservative position see Gerald Graff, "The Myth of the Postmodernist Breakthrough," *TriQuarterly*, 26 (1973),

against the institution art in the United States was up against bigger odds than futurism, dadaism, or surrealism were in their time. The earlier avant-garde was confronted with the culture industry in its stage of inception while postmodernism had to face a technologically and economically fully developed media culture which had mastered the high art of integrating, diffusing, and marketing even the most serious challenges. This factor, combined with the altered constitution of audiences, accounts for the fact that, compared with the earlier 20th century, the shock of the new was much harder, perhaps even impossible, to sustain. Furthermore, when Dada erupted in 1916 in the placid 19th-century culture of bourgeois Zurich, there were no ancestors to contend with. Even the formally much less radical avant-gardes of the 19th century had not yet had a measurable impact on Swiss culture at large. The happenings at the Café Voltaire could not but scandalize the public. When Rauschenberg, Jasper Johns and the Madison Avenue pop artists began their assault on abstract expressionism, drawing their inspiration as they did from the everyday life of American consumerism, they soon had to face serious competition: the work of Dadaist father figure Marcel Duchamp was presented to the American public in major museum and gallery retrospectives, e.g., in Pasadena (1963) and New York (1965). The ghost of the father was not only out of the closet of art history, but Duchamp himself was always already there in flesh and blood saying, like the hedgehog to the hare: "Ich bin schon da."

All of this goes to show that the mammoth avant-garde spectacles of the late 1970s can be interpreted as the flip side of post-modernism, which now appears much more traditional than it did in the 1960s. Not only do the avant-garde shows of the late 1970s in Paris and Berlin, London, New York and Chicago help us come to terms with the tradition of the earlier 20th century, but postmodernism itself can now be described as a search for a viable modern tradition apart from, say, the Proust-Joyce-Mann triad and outside the canon of classical modernism. The search for tradition combined with an attempt at recuperation seems more basic to post-modernism than innovation and breakthrough. The cultural paradox of the 1970s is not so much the side-by-side co-existence of a future-happy postmodernism with avant-garde museum retrospectives. Nor is it the inherent contradiction of the postmodernist avant-garde itself, i.e., the paradox of an art that simultaneously wants to be art and anti-art and of a criticism that pretends to be criticism and anti-criticism. The paradox of the 1970s is rather that the postmodernist search for cultural tradition and continuity, which underlies all the radical rhetoric of rupture, discontinuity and epistemological breaks, has turned to that tradition which fundamentally and on principle despised and denied all traditions.

Seeing the avant-garde exhibits of the 1970s in the light of postmodern-

ism may also help focus attention on some important differences between American postmodernism and the historical avant-garde. In post-World War II America, the historical realities of massive technological, social, and political change, which had given the myth of avant-gardism and innovation its power, persuasiveness, and utopian drive in the earlier 20th century, had all but vanished. During the 1940s and 1950s American art and intellectual life had gone through a period of depoliticization in which avant-gardism and modernism actually had been realigned with the conservative liberalism of the times.²³ While postmodernism rebelled against the culture and politics of the 1950s, it nevertheless lacked a radical vision of social and political transformation which had been so essential to the historical avant-garde. Time and again the future was incanted rhetorically, but it never became clear how and in what forms postmodernism would help implement that alternative culture of the coming age. Despite this ostentatious orientation toward the future, postmodernism may well have been an expression of the contemporary crisis of culture rather than the promised transcendence toward cultural rejuvenation. Much more than the historical avant-garde, which was surreptitiously connected to the dominant modernizing and anti-traditionalist trends of 19th and 20th-century Western civilization, postmodernism was in danger of becoming affirmative culture right from the start. Most of the gestures which had sustained the shock value of the historical avant-garde were no longer and could no longer be effective. The historical avant-garde's appropriation of technology for high art (e.g., film, photography, montage principle) could produce shock since it broke with the aestheticism and the doctrine of art's autonomy from "real" life which were dominant in the late 19th century. The postmodernist espousal of space age technology and electronic media in the wake of McLuhan, however, could scarcely shock an audience which had been inculturated to modernism via the very same media. Nor did Leslie Fiedler's dive into popular culture cause outrage in a country where the pleasures of popular culture always have been acknowledged (except perhaps in academia) with more ease and less secrecy than in Europe. And most postmodernist experiments in visual perspective, narrative structure and temporal logic, which all attacked the dogma of mimetic referentiality, were already known from the modernist tradition. The problem was compounded by the fact that experimental strategies and popular culture were no longer connected in a critical aesthetic and political project as they had been in the historical avant-garde. Popular culture was accepted uncritically (Leslie Fiedler) and postmodernist experimentation had lost the avant-gardist consciousness that social change and the transformation of everyday life were at stake in every artistic experiment. Rather than

23. See Serge Guilbaut, "The New Adventures of the Avant-Garde in America," *October*, 15 (Winter, 1980), 61–78. Cf. also Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum*, XII (June 1974).

aiming at a mediation between art and life, postmodernist experiments soon came to be valued for typically modernist features such as self-reflexivity, immanence, and indeterminacy (Ihab Hassan). The American postmodernist avant-garde, therefore, is not only the endgame of avant-gardism. It also represents the fragmentation and the decline of the avant-garde as a genuinely critical and adversary culture.

My hypothesis that postmodernism always has been in search of tradition while pretending to innovation also is borne out by the recent shift toward cultural theory which distinguishes the postmodernism of the 1970s from that of the 1960s. On one level, of course, the American appropriation of structuralist and especially poststructuralist theory from France reflects the extent to which postmodernism itself has been academicized since it won its battle against modernism and New Criticism.²⁴ It is also tempting to speculate that the shift toward theory actually points to the falling rate of artistic and literary creativity in the 1970s, a proposition which would help explain the resurgence of historical retrospectives in the museums. To put it simply, if the contemporary art scene does not generate enough movements, figures, and trends to sustain the ethos of avant-gardism, then museum directors have to turn to the past to satisfy the demand for cultural events. However, the artistic and literary superiority of the 1960s over the 1970s should not be taken for granted and quantity is no appropriate criterion anyway. Perhaps the culture of the 1970s is just more amorphous and diffuse, richer in difference and variation than that of the 1960s when trends and movements evolved in a more or less "orderly" sequence. Beneath the surface of continuously changing trends, there was indeed a unifying drive behind the culture of the 1960s which was inherited precisely from the tradition of avant-gardism. Since the cultural diversity of the 1970s no longer sustained this sense of unity — even if it was the unity of experimentation, fragmentation, *Verfremdung* and indeterminacy — postmodernism withdrew into a kind of theory which, with its key notions of decentering and deconstruction, seemed to guarantee the lost center of avant-gardism. Suspicion is in order that the postmodernist critics' shift to continental theory is the last desperate attempt of the postmodernist avant-garde to hold on to a notion of avant-gardism which already had been refuted by certain cultural practices of the 1970s. The irony is that in this peculiarly American appropriation of recent French theory the postmodernist search for tradition comes full circle; for several major exponents of French post-structuralism such as Foucault, Deleuze/Guattari, and Derrida are more concerned with the archeology of moder-

24. I am not identifying poststructuralism with postmodernism, even though the concept of postmodernism has recently been incorporated into French poststructuralist writing in the work of Jean François Lyotard. All I am saying is that there are definite links between the ethos of postmodernism and the American appropriation of poststructuralism, especially Derrida.

nity than with breakthrough and innovation, with history and the past more than with the year 2001.

Two concluding questions can be posed at this juncture. Why was there this intense search for viable traditions in the 1970s and what, if anything, is historically specific about it? And, secondly, what can the identification with the classical avant-garde contribute to our sense of cultural identity, and to what extent is such an identification desirable? The Western industrialized countries are currently experiencing a fundamental cultural and political identity crisis. The 1970s' search for roots, for history and traditions, was an inevitable and in many ways productive off-shoot of this crisis; apart from the nostalgia for mummies and emperors, we are confronted with a multi-faceted and diverse search for the past (often for an alternative past) which, in many of its more radical manifestations, questions the fundamental orientation of Western societies toward future growth and toward unlimited progress. This questioning of history and tradition, as it informs for instance the feminist interest in women's history and the ecological search for alternatives in our relationship with nature, should not be confused with the simple minded rearguard assertion of traditional norms and values, although both phenomena reflect, with diametrically opposed political intentions, the same disposition toward tradition and history. The problem with postmodernism is that it relegates history to the dustbin of an obsolete *épistémè*, arguing gleefully that history does not exist except as text, i.e., as historiography.²⁵ Of course, if the "referent" of historiography, that which historians write *about*, is eliminated, then history is indeed up for grabs or, to put it in more trendy words, up for "strong misreadings." When Hayden White lamented the "burden of history" in 1966 and suggested, perfectly in line with the early phase of postmodernism, that we accept our lot of discontinuity, disruption, and chaos,²⁶ he replayed the Nietzschean impetus of the classical avant-garde, but his suggestion is less than helpful in dealing with the new cultural constellations of the 1970s. Cultural practices of the 1970s — postmodernist theory notwithstanding — actually point to the vital need not to abandon history and the past to tradition-mongering neo-conservatives bent on reestablishing the norms of an earlier industrial capitalism: discipline, authority, the work ethic and the traditional family. There is indeed an alternative search for tradition and history going on today which manifests itself in the concern with cultural formations not dominated by logocentric and technocratic thought, in the decentering of traditional notions of identity, in the search for women's history, in the rejection of

25. For a sustained critique of the denial of history in contemporary American literary criticism see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca, N.Y., 1981), especially chapter 1.

26. Hayden White, "The Burden of History," reprinted in *Tropics of Discourse: Essays in Cultural Criticism* (Baltimore, London, 1978), pp. 27–50.

centralisms, mainstreams and melting pots of all kinds, and in the great value put on difference and otherness. This search for history is of course also a search for cultural identities today, and as such it clearly points to the exhaustion of the tradition of the avant-garde, including postmodernism. The search for tradition, to be sure, is not peculiar to the 1970s alone. Ever since Western civilization entered the throes of modernization, the nostalgic lament for a lost past has accompanied it like a shadow that held the promise of a better future. But in all the battles between ancients and moderns since the 17th and 18th centuries, from Herder and Schlegel to Benjamin and the American postmodernists, the moderns tended to embrace modernity, convinced that they had to pass through it before the lost unity of life and art could be reconstructed on a higher level. This conviction was the basis for avant-gardism. Today, when modernism looks increasingly like a dead end, it is this foundation itself which is being challenged. The universalizing drive inherent in the tradition of modernity no longer holds that *promesse de bonheur* as it used to.

Which brings me to the second question whether an identification with the historical avant-garde — and by extension with postmodernism — can contribute to our sense of cultural identity in the 1980s. I do not want to give a definitive answer, but I suggest that an attitude of skepticism is called for. In traditional bourgeois culture the avant-garde was successful in sustaining difference. Within the project of modernity it launched a successful assault on 19th-century aestheticism, which insisted on the absolute autonomy of art, and on traditional realism, which remained locked into the dogma of mimetic representation and referentiality. Postmodernism has lost that capacity to gain shock value from difference, except perhaps in relation to forms of a very traditional aesthetic conservatism. The counter-measures the historical avant-garde proposed to break the grip of bourgeois institutionalized culture are no longer effective. The reasons that avant-gardism is no longer viable today can be located not only in the culture industry's capacity to coopt, reproduce and commodify, but, more interestingly, in the avant-garde itself. Despite the power and integrity of its attacks against traditional bourgeois culture and against the deprivations of capitalism, there are moments in the historical avant-garde which show how deeply avant-gardism itself is implicated in the Western tradition of growth and progress. The futurist and constructivist confidence in technology and modernization, the relentless assaults on the past and on tradition which went hand in hand with a quasi-metaphysical glorification of a present on the edge of the future, the universalizing, totalizing and centralizing impetus inherent in the very concept of avant-garde (not to speak of its metaphoric militarism), the elevation to dogma of an initially legitimate critique of traditional artistic forms rooted in mimesis and representation, the unmitigated media and computer enthusiasm of the 1960s — all these phenomena reveal the secret bond between avant-garde and official culture in advanced industrial societies. Certainly the

avant-gardists' use of technology was mostly *verfremdend* and critical rather than affirmative. And yet, from today's perspective the classical avant-garde's belief in technological solutions for culture appears more a symptom of the disease than a cure. Similarly one might ask whether the uncompromising attack on tradition, narration, and memory which characterizes large segments of the historical avant-garde, is not just the other side of Henry Ford's notorious statement that "history is bunk." Perhaps both are expressions of the same spirit of cultural modernity in capitalism, a dismantling of story and perspective indeed paralleling, even if only subterraneously, the destruction of history.

At the same time, the tradition of avant-gardism, if stripped of its universalizing and normative claims, leaves us with a precious heritage of artistic and literary materials, practices, and intentions which still inform many of today's most interesting writers and artists. Preserving elements of the avant-gardist tradition is not at all incompatible with the recuperation and reconstitution of history and of story which we have witnessed in the 1970s. Good examples of this kind of coexistence of seemingly opposite literary strategies can be found in the post-experimental prose works of Peter Handke from *The Goalie's Anxiety at the Penalty Kick* through *Short Letter*, *Long Farewell* and *A Sorrow Beyond Dreams* to *The Left-Handed Woman* or, quite differently, in the work of women writers such as Christa Wolf from *The Quest for Christa T.* through *Self-Experiment* to *Kein Ort. Nirgends*. The recuperation of history and the reemergence of story in the 1970s are not part of a leap back into a pre-modern, pre-avant-garde past, as some postmodernists seem to suggest. They can be better described as attempts to shift into reverse in order to get out of a dead-end street where the vehicles of avant-gardism and postmodernism have come to a standstill. At the same time, the contemporary concern for history will keep us from lapsing back into the avant-gardist gesture of totally rejecting the past — this time the avant-garde itself. Especially in the face of recent wholesale neo-conservative attacks on the culture of modernism, avant-gardism and postmodernism, it remains politically important to defend this tradition against neo-conservative insinuations that modernist and postmodernist culture is to be held responsible for the current crisis of capitalism. Emphasizing the subterranean links between avant-gardism and the development of capitalism in the 20th century can effectively counteract propositions which separate an "adversary culture" (Daniel Bell) from the realm of social norms in order to blame the former for the disintegration of the latter.

In Reply to Jürgen Habermas

In my view, however, the problem in contemporary culture is not so much the struggle between modernity and postmodernity, between avant-

gardism and conservatism, as Jürgen Habermas argues in his Adorno-prize speech which is included in this issue. Of course, the old conservatives, who reject the culture of modernism and the avant-garde, and the neo-conservatives, who advocate the immanence of art and its separateness from the *Lebenswelt*, must be fought and refuted. In that debate, especially, the cultural practices of avant-gardism have not yet lost their vigor. But this struggle may well turn out to be a rearguard skirmish between two dated modes of thought, two cultural dispositions which relate to each other like the two sides of one coin: the universalists of tradition pitted against the universalists of a modernist enlightenment. While I stand with Habermas against old conservatives and neo-conservatives, I find his call for the completion of the project of modernity, which is the political core of his argument, deeply problematic. As I hope to have shown in my discussion of avant-garde and postmodernism, too many aspects of the trajectory of modernity have become suspect and unviable today. Even the aesthetically and politically most fascinating component of modernity, the historical avant-garde, no longer offers solutions for major sectors of contemporary culture, which would reject the avant-garde's universalizing and totalizing gesture as much as its ambiguous espousal of technology and modernization. What Habermas as a theoretician shares with the aesthetic tradition of avant-gardism is precisely this universalizing gesture, which is rooted in the bourgeois enlightenment, pervades Marxism, and ultimately aims at a wholistic notion of modernity. Significantly, the original title of Habermas' text, as it was printed in *DIE ZEIT* in September 1980, was "Modernity — an Incomplete Project." The title points to the problem — the teleological unfolding of a history of modernity — and it raises a question: to what extent is the assumption of a telos of history compatible with "histories." And this question is legitimate. For not only does Habermas smooth over contradictions and discontinuities in the trajectory of modernity itself, as Peter Bürger points out poignantly in this issue. Habermas ignores the fact that the very idea of a wholistic modernity and of a totalizing view of history has become anathema in the 1970s, and precisely not on the conservative right. The critical deconstruction of enlightenment rationalism and logocentrism by theoreticians of culture, the decentering of traditional notions of identity, the fight of women and gays for a legitimate social and sexual identity outside of the parameters of male, heterosexual vision, the search for alternatives in our relationship with nature, including the nature of our own bodies — all these phenomena, which are key to the culture of the 1970s, make Habermas' proposition to complete the project of modernity questionable, if not undesirable.

Given Habermas' indebtedness to the tradition of critical enlightenment, which in German political history — and this should be mentioned in Habermas' defense — always was the adversary and underdog current rather than the mainstream, it comes as no surprise that Bataille, Foucault,

and Derrida are lumped with the conservatives in the camp of postmodernity. There is no doubt in my mind that much of the postmodernist appropriation of Foucault and especially Derrida in the United States is indeed politically conservative, but that, after all, is only *one* line of reception and response. Habermas himself could be accused of constructing a manichean dualism in his essay where he pits the dark forces of anti-modern conservatism against the enlightened and enlightening forces of modernity. This manichean view manifests itself again in the way Habermas tends to reduce the project of modernity to its rational enlightenment components and to dismiss other, equally important parts of modernity as mistakes. Just as Bataille, Foucault, and Derrida are said to have stepped outside the modern world by removing the imagination, emotionality, and self-experience into the sphere of the archaic (a proposition which is itself debatable), surrealism is described by Habermas as modernity gone astray. Relying on Adorno's critique of surrealism, Habermas reproaches the surrealist avant-garde for having advocated a false sublation (*Aufhebung*) of the art/life dichotomy. While I agree with Habermas that a total sublation of art is indeed a false project fraught with contradictions, I would defend surrealism on three counts. More than any other avant-garde movement, surrealism dismantled false notions of identity and artistic creativity; it attempted to explode the reifications of rationality in capitalist culture and, by focusing on psychic processes, it exposed the vulnerability of all rationality, not only that of instrumental rationality; and, finally, it included the concrete human subject and his/her desires in its artistic practices and in its notion that the reception of art should systematically disrupt perception and senses.²⁷

Although Habermas, in the section entitled "Alternatives," seems to retain the surrealist gesture when he speculates about the possibility of relinking art and literature with everyday life, everyday life itself — contrary to surrealism — is defined in exclusively rational, cognitive and normative, terms. Significantly, Habermas' example about an alternative reception of art in which the experts' culture is reappropriated from the standpoint of the *Lebenswelt*, involves young male workers, "politically motivated" and "knowledge hungry"; the time is 1937, Berlin; the art work reappropriated by the workers is the Pergamon altar, symbol of classicism, power, and rationality; and the status of this reappropriation is fiction, a passage in Peter Weiss' novel *Die Ästhetik des Widerstands*. The one concrete example Habermas gives is several times removed from the *Lebenswelt* of the 1970s and its cultural practices, which, in such major manifestations as the women's movement, the gay movement, and the ecology movement, seem to point beyond the culture of modernity, beyond avant-garde and postmodernism, and most certainly beyond neo-conservatism.

27. See Peter Bürger, *Der französische Surrealismus* (Frankfurt am Main, 1971).

Habermas is right in arguing that a relinking of modern culture with everyday praxis can only be successful if the *Lebenswelt* is able "to develop institutions out of itself which set limits to the internal dynamics and to the imperatives of an almost autonomous economic system and its administrative complements." As a result of the conservative backlash the chances for this may indeed not be very good at the present time. But to suggest, as Habermas implicitly does, that there are as yet no such attempts to steer modernity in different and alternative directions, is a view which results from the blind spot of the European enlightenment, its inability to recognize heterogeneity, otherness, and difference.

P.S.: Some time ago avant-garde/postmodernist artist Christo planned to wrap the Berlin Reichstag, an event which, according to Berlin mayor Stobbe, could have led to a stimulating political discussion. Conservative Bundestagspräsident Karl Carstens, however, feared spectacle and scandal, so instead Stobbe suggested the organization of a major historical exhibition about Prussia. When the great Preußen-Ausstellung will open in Berlin in August 1981, the avant-garde will truly be dead. Time for Heiner Müller's *Germania Death in Berlin*.

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