

RETRO-AVANT-GARDE: AESTHETIC REVIVAL AND THE CON/FIGURATIONS OF TWENTIETH-CENTURY TIME

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1.

The paradoxical term “retro-avant-garde” was first developed by artists working in the late socialist and post-socialist contexts of Eastern Europe, Central Europe, and the territories of the ex-Yugoslavia.¹ In general, its semantic field has been defined by a range of post-modern and mostly post-socialist art practices that draw formal, philosophical, and social inspiration from the politicized, powerfully utopian avant-gardes of the early decades of the twentieth-century, especially in the USSR and East-Central Europe. For example, the following manifesto by the Slovene art group IRWIN figured the post-communist legacy of the Cold War’s east-west geo-political divide in terms of alternative temporal zones, in which the arts of the twentieth century exhibit significantly different rhythms and narratives of development. In the former “East,” this temporality authorized – or even compelled – an artistic return to the avant-gardes of the past, which had never been allowed to play out their historical potential fully. The contemporary artist could help release those untapped utopian energies of the past, while utilizing them creatively in a historically and ideologically problematic present:

As artists from the EAST, we claim that it is impossible to annul several decades of experience of the EAST and to neutralize its vital potential.

¹The first use of the term dates back to 1983 with the exhibition of the political / conceptual rock group Laibach in the ŠKUC Gallery in Ljubljana, in which they presented art works, their first video, and a cassette tape recording of music. The exhibition’s title was “Ausstellung Laibach Kunst – Monumentalna Retroavantgarda.” For documentation and further information, see New Collectivism (ed.), *Neue Slowenische Kunst*, trans. Marjan Golobič (Los Angeles: Amok Books, 1991).

The development of EASTERN MODERNISM from the past into the present will run through the FUTURE. The FUTURE is the time interval denoting the difference.

Being aware that the history of art is not a history of different forms of appearance, but a history of signifiers, we demand that this DIFFERENCE be given a name.

THE NAME OF EASTERN ART IS EASTERN MODERNISM.

THE NAME OF ITS METHOD IS RETRO-AVANT-GARDISM.²

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

[N]ot only was Malevich an illiterate philosopher and the inventor of the artistic movement Suprematism [...] but he was also an active Commissar, one of the first of the Soviet bureaucrats who concerned themselves with the separation of good from bad in the realm of the arts. His bureaucratic heirs, having exchanged Malevich’s bad form for their own good uniforms, left his content untouched, and currently reign supreme in Russia. Recognizing this, Russian artists discovered that Lenin’s avant-garde and Stalin’s academicism are essentially only two different sides of the same socialist utopia. With the failure of this utopia its art too was discredited.³

² Eda Čufer and IRWIN, “The Ear Behind the Painting” (1991), in Miško Šuvaković and Dubravka Djurić (eds.), *Impossible Histories: Historical Avant-gardes, Neo-avant-gardes, and Post-avant-gardes in Yugoslavia, 1918–1991* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2003), p. 581.

³ Vitaly Komar and Alexander Melamid, “The Barren Flowers of Evil” (1980), in *Primary Documents: A Sourcebook for Eastern and Central European Art Since the 1950s* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), p. 270.

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

Retro-avant-garde is the basic artistic procedure of Neue Slowenische Kunst, based on the premise that traumas from the past affecting the present and the future can be healed only by returning to the initial conflicts. Modern art has not yet overcome the conflict brought about by the rapid and efficient assimilation of historical avant-garde movements in the systems of totalitarian states. The common perception of the avant-garde as a fundamental phenomenon of twentieth-century art is loaded with fears and prejudices. On the other hand this period is naively glorified and mythicized, while on the other hand its abuses, compromises, and failures are counted with bureaucratic pedantry to remind us that this magnificent delusion should not be repeated.⁴

Shuttling between the domain of artists’ manifestos and contemporary art criticism, the term “retro-avant-garde” received further elaboration by curators and theorist-practioners such Peter Weibel, Boris Groys, Marina Gržinić, and Inke Arns, who over the last decade have attached it to a number of exhibitions, catalogues, video productions, and theoretical texts.

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

⁴ Čufer and IRWIN, “NSK State in Time” (1992/93), in *Primary Documents*, p. 301.

time, rendering available for artistic manipulation and aesthetic experience its passing, its continuities and traumatic breaks, and its entwinement with the empirical contingencies of national and global histories.

It is not my intention, however, to discuss here specific interpretations of the “retro-avant-garde” term and concept by artists or critics. This is partially because the extensive research of Inke Arns, published first in her 2004 dissertation at the Humboldt University, more recently in the book based on her thesis, documents these developments in detail and with considerable critical acumen.⁵ Yet it is also because my intention in this paper is more properly philosophical, or metahistorical and metacritical, than historical and critical. Here I would echo Peter Osborne’s claim, in *The Politics of Time*, that such basic terminology like modernism and postmodernism, avant-garde and – I will add – retro-avant-garde, have generally not in themselves been taken as problems for philosophical reflection, although philosophers such as Jean-François Lyotard, Jürgen Habermas, Richard Rorty, and Gianni Vattimo (to name only a few luminaries) were actively involved in generating a critical and polemical discourse in which such notions were employed.⁶ Accordingly, in what follows, I will not be greatly concerned with practical matters of how one might do things, artistic and critical, with this paradoxical, neologistic word “retro-avant-garde,” and still less will I seek to enumerate and evaluate the various ways it has already been used. Rather I seek to illuminate the more fundamental problem of what this seemingly bizarre term would imply if we were to take it seriously as a historiographic concept. Furthermore, I wish to understand the philosophical conditions under which its conceptual content becomes thinkable and meaningful. Finally, I will also ask what these considerations might tell us about our conceptions of time, historical change, and the role of aesthetics in historical knowledge.

2.

Peter Osborne suggests that basic periodizing categories can be understood as diverse ways of “temporalizing history.” In other words, they de-

⁵ Inke Arns, *Objects in the Mirror May Be Closer Than They Appear! Die Avant-garde im Rückspiegel, Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avant-garderezeption in (Ex-) Jugoslawien und Russland von der 1980s Jahren bis in die Gegenwart*, Dissertation (Berlin: Humboldt University, 2004); Inke Arns, *Avangarda v vzratnem ogledalu* [Avant-garde in the Rearview Mirror] (Ljubljana: Maska, 2006).

⁶ Peter Osborne, *The Politics of Time: Modernity and Avant-Garde* (London: Verso Press, 1995), p. vii.

scribe ways in which we interpret and figure being in time as meaningful historical activity and experience:

‘Modernity’ and ‘postmodernity’, ‘modernism’, ‘postmodernism’ and ‘avant-garde’ are categories of historical consciousness which are constructed at the level of the apprehension of history as a whole. More specifically, they are categories of historical totalization in the medium of cultural experience. As such, each involves a distinct form of historical temporalization [...] through which the three dimensions of phenomenological or lived time (past, present, future) are linked together within the dynamic and eccentric unity of a single historical view.⁷

Two aspects of Osborne’s formulation are notable for my purpose. First is that these periodizing conceptions are not simply monodimensional metrics of chronology and the quantitative differences between successive moments – i.e. on this day in 1921 we are in the “modern,” whereas seventy years later, by 1991 we have entered the “postmodern” epoch. Rather, they also designate shifts in the *configuration* of past, present, and future that gives “history” its content and character at a given moment. In a sense, we might say that the difference between modernity and postmodernity lies less in the sheer chronological difference between 1921 and 1991, than in the different ways in which modernity and postmodernity configure the possible relations between 1921 and 1991. In this regard, 1921–1991 is not necessarily commutable with 1991–1921, since these chronological coordinates exist within a different topology of past, present, and future in the two cases. Periodizing terms are needed precisely to mark these topological shifts within an apparently homogeneous chronology. Such terms, thus, not only measure chronology, but also advance interpretations about qualitative differences in the way historicity is being represented and experienced, against the background of chronological continuity. In an essay that touches upon some of the same temporal paradoxes as retro-avant-gardism, Fredric Jameson has suggested that in our readings of cultural artifacts we must not only account for them historically, but also consider how they express epochal qualities in their very stance towards historical representation:

Historicity is, in fact, neither a representation of the past nor a representation of the future (although its various forms use such representations): it can first and foremost be defined as a perception of the pre-

⁷ Osborne, p. ix.

sent as history; that is, as a relationship to the present which somehow defamiliarizes it and allows us that distance from immediacy which is at length characterized as a historical perspective. It is appropriate, in other words, also to insist on the historicity of the operation itself, which is our way of conceiving of historicity in this particular society and mode of production; appropriate also to observe that what is at stake is essentially a process of reification whereby we draw back from our immersion in the here and now [...] and grasp it as a kind of thing.⁸

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

Second, Osborne connects this configurational aspect of time in period concepts with different modes of cultural experience, which are themselves figurally mediated by images, language, constructed spaces and artifacts, and bodily performances. We might go on to conclude – although Osborne does not develop this argument at length – that various sorts of figural acts and artifacts, such as art objects and performances, narratives and images, serve as the vehicles by which our temporalizing apprehension of historicity is experienced. Thus, historical experience and aesthetic experience of figural products of culture are intertwined, even mutually constitutive. Each provides the other with a hermeneutic framework by which the other can be interpreted and experienced as meaningful. When we read Joyce's *Ulysses*, for example, we do not merely encounter a cultural artifact that communicates something about its represented context, Dublin on the 16th of June 1904, or of the context of its production in the years of World War I and the early 1920s. We also apprehend, through our aesthetic experience of the work, the very texture and meaning of time in modernity: that particular way in which the past and future are qualified and related to the present. Thus, the canonical opinion that *Ulysses* is a paradigm of the “modernist novel,” seemingly so natural given its style and the time of its publication, is actually a highly complex correlation of an artistic figuration with a temporal configuration, which thus implies a further interpretative hypothesis about the mutual translatability of these two types of figure, the temporal into the cultural and vice versa. Moreover, we should note, it is within this periodizing framework of modernity – in which cultural figuration and temporal

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

configuration are conceived as transposable analogues of one another – that the historical sense of “avant-garde” is also developed.

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

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

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

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

actions and blind forces, only retrospectively and willfully allegorized as meaningful.

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

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

The oldest of us is thirty: so we have at least a decade for finishing our work. When we are forty, other younger and stronger men will probably throw us in the wastebasket like useless manuscripts – we want it to happen!

They will come against us, our successors, will come from far away, from every quarter, dancing to the winged cadence of their first songs,

flexing the hooked claws of predators, sniffing doglike at the academy doors the strong odours of our decaying minds, which will already have been promised to the literary catacombs.

But we won't be there. [...] At last they'll find us – one winter's night – in open country, beneath a sad roof drummed by a monotonous rain. They'll see us crouched beside our trembling aeroplanes in the act of warming our hands at the poor little blaze that our books of today will give out when they take fire from the flight of our images.

They'll storm around us, panting with scorn and anguish, and all of them, exasperated by our proud daring, will hurtle to kill us, driven by a hatred the more implacable the more their hearts will be drunk with love and admiration for us.

Injustice, strong and sane, will break out radiantly in their eyes.

Art, in fact, can be nothing but violence, cruelty, and injustice.¹⁰

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

3.

“Modernism” and “avant-garde” are generic classes of *time-images*, which correlate particular cultural figures – an archive of spaces, acts, and artifacts – with specific ways of experiencing the qualitative articulation of time. The term “time-image,” introduced by Gilles Deleuze in his Bergson-derived cinema theory,¹¹ has to date not received much consideration as a concept in historiographic theory. Yet the concept of time-image, I wish to suggest,

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

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986); *Cinema 2: The Time-Image*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Robert Galeta (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989).

holds untapped potential for the historical interpretation of cultural and aesthetic works, since it comprehends a wide range of possibilities for figuring historical experiences and for communicating history figurally. Many of the artifacts and works that may be interpreted as time-images would not ordinarily be thought to have anything to do with history more narrowly conceived, yet they reveal their historicity in light of this interpretative concept. One might, however, argue that the disciplinary concepts, authorized sources, and paradigmatic narratives of historical writing are simply special, conventionalized, and naturalized cases of a much more general repertoire of time-images by which we experience historicity. It is their privilege within a disciplinary framework of training and writing and not their inherent monopoly on historicity that defines historical texts and documents as properly "historical" materials, as opposed to fiction, myth, custom, rumor, entertainment, or other putatively "extra-historical" genres of discourse and culture.

Deleuze formulates his notion of time-image through reflection on the art of the cinema, in which the unfolding image on the screen depicts both movement in space and duration in time. These phenomenological dimensions of experience are not simply abstract, external metrics of the cinema image, however; they are also singularly qualified by the particular movements and metamorphoses within the frame and by the specific kinds of linkage between the segments of a sequence. Deleuze distinguishes between two modes of cinema image, according to the relationship between motion and time in the image. In the first case, "the movement-image," movement of bodies in space is the predominant feature, and the experience of time derives from that primary experience of spatial movement. We might imagine a fairly clichéd montage sequence in which a car passes various recognizable sights of the city of Los Angeles, and at last is seen in a long shot with highway stretching out in front of it and the desert in the distance. Even with elliptical jumps from place to place, nothing violates our sense of normal spatial continuity and movement: the highway, the automobile, and the driver form a single coordinated representation of passage through space in a proportionate, homogeneous span of time. We would understand this as a spatial journey out of the city and into the open country, and our sense of the temporality of the sequence would derive from our construction of the spatial itinerary from the montage. Yet it can also be possible that the filmmaker wishes to make the primary focus an experience of time, and s/he will shape the movements and the space in ways that violate our intuitive sense of sensory-motor continuity, so as figurally to capture an image of time. Corollary to my first example, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point* represents our drive out of Los Angeles into the desert as the passage

from the time of modernity, a hectic time of traffic and real estate speculation and political violence, into a qualitatively heterogeneous temporal order composed of chthonic nature, slow geological metamorphosis, and mythic consciousness. Consistently faithful to this primacy of time as the raw material of his image, Antonioni concludes his film with the famous slow-motion explosion of a model housing development in the desert, in a radical “unhousing” of modern space that Antonioni shows us twice, first in the imagined anticipation of the disaffected young women, then again in the actuality of the present, which is nonetheless dilated to several minutes of screen duration. Space, movement, and causality are figurally warped to the shape of a direct representation of time, a “time-image” that retains an intimate relation with the invisible thoughts and affections of mental events – in this case, the alienation of the young women from her older capitalist boss and her conversion, in an indiscernable instant, to the revolutionary nihilism of her young dead lover, with whom she had experienced the inhuman geological time-space of the California desert.

How might we apply to questions of historiography this distinction between “movement-image,” in which time derives indirectly from the spatial and causal relations in and between images, and “time-images,” which aim to represent a mode of time directly and bend movement and relation to conform to the temporal figure? Without making reference to Deleuze, Osborne in fact suggests an analogous framework. “If Aristotle,” Osborne asks, “sought to understand time through change, since it is first encountered in entities that change, might we not reverse the procedure, and seek to comprehend change through time?”¹² He goes on to conclude:

[T]here is a deeper conceptual logic to be found at work in such categories of cultural self-consciousness than is suggested by the way in which they are usually deployed, as markers for chronologically distinct and empirically identifiable periods, movements, forms or styles: a logic of historical totalization which raises questions about the nature of historical time itself.¹³

We need to distinguish two sorts of period notions, however, in keeping with this primacy of historical change or of states of time. In the first case, analogous to the “movement image,” we derive the qualities of time – i.e. crisis-ridden, stagnating, peaceful, chaotic, etc. – from the events and

¹² Osborne, p. viii.

¹³ *Ibid.*

movements of change. The time of history is derived from the rhythms of what happens “in” time. In the figure formed of them in historical writing, the facts and documents are made to reveal a pattern of evolution and movement through the successive days and months and years. In the second case, however, analogous to Deleuze’s “time image,” particular qualities and types of time express themselves in singular occurrences and mixtures, through particular images, artifacts, spaces, and movements. The historian may not be searching for direct links of narrative and causality between the different elements, which might even derive from diverse chronological or cultural contexts. Rather s/he seeks in them a virtual conceptuality that will be methodologically disclosed through techniques of montage, multimedia assemblage, play between documentary and personal memory, interpenetration of fictional and factual frameworks, or other experimental modes of figural thought typically associated more with the arts than the discipline of history.

With this framework in mind, I would suggest a similar distinction pertains to the periodizing concepts of avant-garde, in its classical sense of advanced “movements” and their succession, and retro-avant-garde, which reflexively highlights the fundamentally *temporal* content of avantgardism. Typically, theories of the avant-garde, including Peter Bürger’s influential institutional theory, have emphasized the avant-garde’s provocative and critical negativity, its transgression of conventions and public norms of communication and behavior, and its rejection of the limits of art as a specialized realm of production, practice, and perception. In turn, these characteristics underwrite its peculiar temporal dynamics as a series of conflicting movements: the rapid succession of ever-more radical “isms,” the demand for perpetual innovation in advance of the generalized adoption of the avant-garde’s utopian projections, the swift rise and fall of avant-garde movements as public provocations, and their ambivalent fellow-travelling and sometimes identification with broader revolutionary social movements of the right and left. Put more simply, however, the basic trope of classical avant-gardism is precisely “movement”: the forward thrust of the small, militant, disciplined, organized group, which is temporarily provocative, incomprehensible, and utopian, because of the historical lag of the masses behind the historical condition to come, which the avant-garde adumbrates. Critical negativity in the domain of culture and aesthetics, thus, is figuratively projected onto the temporal axis of history as anticipation and prefiguration.

Retro-avant-garde, in its paradoxical highlighting of the temporal dynamics of anticipation that it rhetorically inverts, brings this temporal element to the fore and derives its own nature as present tense occurrence

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

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