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Introduction: The Historical Avant-Garde and Cultural History

The aim of this book is to explore the classic, so-called historical manifestation of the avant-garde in the radical experimentation of European cultures in the first four decades of the twentieth century. The approach is comparative, focusing on material from the six main language areas of European avant-garde activity – English, German, French, Spanish, Russian and Italian. While the core interest of the project is literary, it will also incorporate discussion of other media, more especially visual art and film, in particular where these are in dialogue with textual experimentation. The various chapters will deal with the formal challenges of avant-garde art against the context of publicity and technology, the metropolis, radical politics, psychoanalysis and gender. The avant-garde's mobilizations and distortions of the body will provide a leitmotif for the investigation. If the avant-garde proposes a new intervention or incorporation of art into life, then the body can be seen as the privileged site of its impact, socio-political, psychosexual and technological.¹

The early decades of the twentieth century saw an unparalleled set of challenges to conventions of understanding in the domains of biological and physical science, politics, philosophy, technology and psychology. The interventions of a range of radical nineteenth-century thinkers, from Darwin to Marx, Bakunin and Nietzsche, came to exert a profound influence on and beyond their respective fields. And new theorists like Einstein in the field of science, Trotsky and Gramsci in the field of politics, Bergson and Wittgenstein in the field of philosophy, Saussure and Jakobson in the field of linguistic theory, and Freud in the field of psychology, propounded their own versions of the relativity of things in contestation of accepted world pictures.

Above all, the new discourses of relativism implied a breaking down of absolute categories, a rethinking of relatedness and difference. The, in many ways trenchantly different, projects of these and other pioneering thinkers could also be seen to be related, not as part of a monolithic world-view, but through a principle that relativizes the claims of any established system. Following the Nietzschean principle of the revaluation of all values, the challenge to established modes of thinking and behaving is absolute, incorporating *all* values, but it is also differential, implying the impossibility of a solid state of valuation. Thus, while Bergsonian theories of time as duration seem to run counter to Einstein's differential theories of relativity, there is in fact a significant degree of correlation in the two positions.² Similarly, theorists like Darwin, Marx, Bakunin and Freud may seek to establish a grand narrative of things, each according to the logic of his own system, but their ideas on the subject and society inevitably provoke, question and differentiate each other, opening up the blind spots that each would see in the other's view. Bakunin challenges the centralism of Marx's revolutionary orthodoxy with a more federalist view of social change.³ And Freud, in what he calls his 'revaluation of all psychic values',⁴ pitches social Darwinist notions of the survivalist struggle against what he sees as the inflationary ideology of total community in Marxist doctrine, locating his own view of human development and interaction in a dialectical combat between these positions.

The ferment of contending versions of the revaluation of conventional values created a powerful, often contradictory sense of cultural expectation, a readiness for new ideas and new forms. Culture in the broadest, social sense placed new expectations on culture in the aesthetic sense. A principal element in the influence of Nietzsche on cultural thinking was his insistence upon the aesthetic as the primary category of philosophical justification, one that could subsume and organize the ethical and logical concerns of social order. If, following Nietzsche's famous dictum, the world could be justified only as an 'aesthetic phenomenon', then the aesthetic field is given a new pre-eminence here, but only in so far as it engages with the world, reevaluates it, and makes it significant. Nietzsche's anti-theology creates the possibility for a new cult of aesthetically ordained culture, where aesthetic meaning is always defined according to his own philosophical presuppositions. In the systems of Marx and Freud, the death of God creates room for other authorities, political or psychological, and both at once have recourse to the aesthetic as a legitimating category and challenge conventional idealizations of its workings. In each of

these, albeit antagonistic thinkers, aesthetic culture is a key testing ground for the claims of their projects. Art is a superstructure upon which the substructure, whether ethical, political or psychical, is dependent for its representation. The art of early twentieth-century Europe at once seizes the possibility of taking the place of a God declared dead, draws inspiration from radical cultural thinkers who reevaluate its cultural function, and contests the new limitations that those thinkers seek to impose upon that function.

If the early part of the century was culturally energized by innovative theories, it was also profoundly transformed in matters of social practice. The metropolitan centres of Europe attained a new scope and vigour, with the great cities of the nineteenth century – pre-eminently London and Paris – coming to be rivalled by new centres of industrial, political and cultural activity like Berlin, Vienna, Moscow, Milan and Madrid. On the industrial level, this was what Walter Benjamin famously calls the Age of Technical Reproducibility, a time when the Industrial Revolution had pervaded and reshaped most parts of Europe, and a time of new media technologies providing networks for the massive diffusion of information. On a political level, new or renewed versions of nationalism and Imperialism contended with visions of Internationalism, and these violently antithetical political movements swept the streets and fields of Europe. Technological reproducibility galvanized not least the armaments industry and new industrial forms of warfare. The Marxist idea of a proletarian revolution became a reality, but capitalism reasserted its regime and ran riot, with currency in its turn becoming subject to an inflationary machinery of reproduction. And on a cultural level, there was an unprecedented wave of new forms of aesthetic production and reproduction, a migration of artists and passage of artistic ideas between the countries of Europe, and between Europe and the rest of the world. The superstructure of aesthetic production was co-opted and thrown into question in often brutal and contradictory ways. Artists entered into the cities, the factories, the battlefields and the revolutionary struggles, asserting a new possibility for art to adopt a vanguard position in social and political developments, but they also took up positions of resistance to those developments. The ranks of the politically engaged avant-gardists were rivalled by those of the more aesthetically interested Modernists, and not infrequently individuals and groups found themselves on both sides of this divide. A cultural history of the European avant-garde will have to take the measure, however schematically, of these contradictions and ambiguities.

This is not a Cultural History of the Avant-Garde

The title of this section is a playful performance of a key avant-garde statement, the legend ‘Ceci n’est pas une pipe’ (‘This is not a pipe’), written in school blackboard style on Magritte’s textbook painting of a pipe, *Le Trahison des images* (‘The Treason of Images’ (1929)). The painting, constructed in emblematic form, with fixed and framed image and identifying *subscriptio*, raises fundamental questions about representation and reproduction. It is an emblem that challenges the very basis of emblematic meaning. Borrowed for the introductory motto for this cultural history of the avant-garde, it indicates that it will both be a cultural history (just as Magritte’s image of a pipe evidently is a pipe), and will not be (just as Magritte’s image of a pipe is evidently also not a pipe).

The title of this project incorporates multiple tensions that it will seek to exploit productively. If the concept of the avant-garde can be situated, then it is as a force that positions itself always on a mobile, leading edge. It is figured in radical opposition, therefore, to any stabilized sense of culture or of history. Its fundamental strategy is to scandalize culture and to keep history under radical review. In this sense, contradiction inheres in the very concept of a ‘cultural history’ of the avant-garde. To propose an avant-garde is to occupy a position that must be provisional, prone to be overtaken as soon as it is marked out. Its rationale is one of dialectical sublation of what is in place, a lifting or suspension of the canonical authority of tradition. This principle seems bound to extend to its own positions as soon as these are established in their turn as part of an aesthetic tradition; that is, the sublation carries the dialectical shadow meaning of the German term *Aufhebung*, preserving tradition on a different level as well as suspending it.

The avant-garde names itself after a military force that adopts a forward position in the war against the established lines of culture. It derives, in the first place, from the move in the first half of the nineteenth century towards a more engaged role for post-Romantic art. Renato Poggioli traces its coinage back to the writings of the Fourierist Gabriel-Désiré Laverdant, who sees art as adopting an initiatory function for culture at large: ‘Art, the expression of society, manifests, in its highest soaring, the most advanced social tendencies, it is the forerunner and the revealer. Therefore, to know whether art worthily fulfils its proper mission as initiator, whether the artist is truly of the avant-garde, one must know where Humanity is going.’⁵ For Laverdant, the campaign of cultural initiation lies in a form of revelation

that lays bare ‘all the brutalities, all the filth, that are at the base of our society’. That is, in 1845, the avant-garde and its rhetoric of transcendence were in the service of social realism, while for the ‘historical’ avant-garde of the first decades of the twentieth century, realism was part of the encrusted old order that had to be attacked. Laverdant’s vanguard is destined to become the rearguard for new initiators; in spite of their often zealous claims to the contrary, even the most far-sighted avant-gardists can never fully know ‘where Humanity is going’.

The heroic rhetoric of the historical avant-garde could not extend to anticipating its own incorporation into the museological hall of fame, or indeed its revision by the new avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century. The cultural battle sustained by successive avant-gardes is a curiously self-reflexive one. The avant-garde is at the leading edge, taking cultural practices forward into new territory, but always by battling with that which it leads. The war being waged here has to be pictured as divided between two fronts. Culture is established both behind and in front of the artistic vanguard. To its rear is culture as tradition, and in front is new culture waiting to become traditional. Thus, culture is always ready to accommodate the aggression of the avant-garde, to canonize its works of resistance, and the avant-garde is preoccupied in spite of itself with the history that it would seek to outstrip.

The Angel of Cultural History

There is a picture by Klee called *Angelus Novus*. An angel is depicted on it, who looks as though he were in the process of distancing himself from something, whilst staring at it. His eyes are wide open, his mouth gaping, and his wings spread. The angel of history must look like that. He has his countenance turned towards the past. Where a chain of events appear before *us*, *he* sees a single catastrophe ceaselessly piling debris upon debris and hurling it before his feet. He would gladly tarry, awaken the dead and reassemble what has been smashed. But a storm is blowing from paradise, which has become caught in his wings and is so strong that the angel can no longer close them. This storm drives him irresistibly into the future, to which he turns his back, while the pile of debris before him grows towards the heavens. That which we call progress is *this* storm.⁶

Like the angel of history, as postulated by Walter Benjamin after Klee’s picture *Angelus Novus* (1920) (see plate 1), the avant-garde directs its gaze at what lies behind as it moves forward with its back

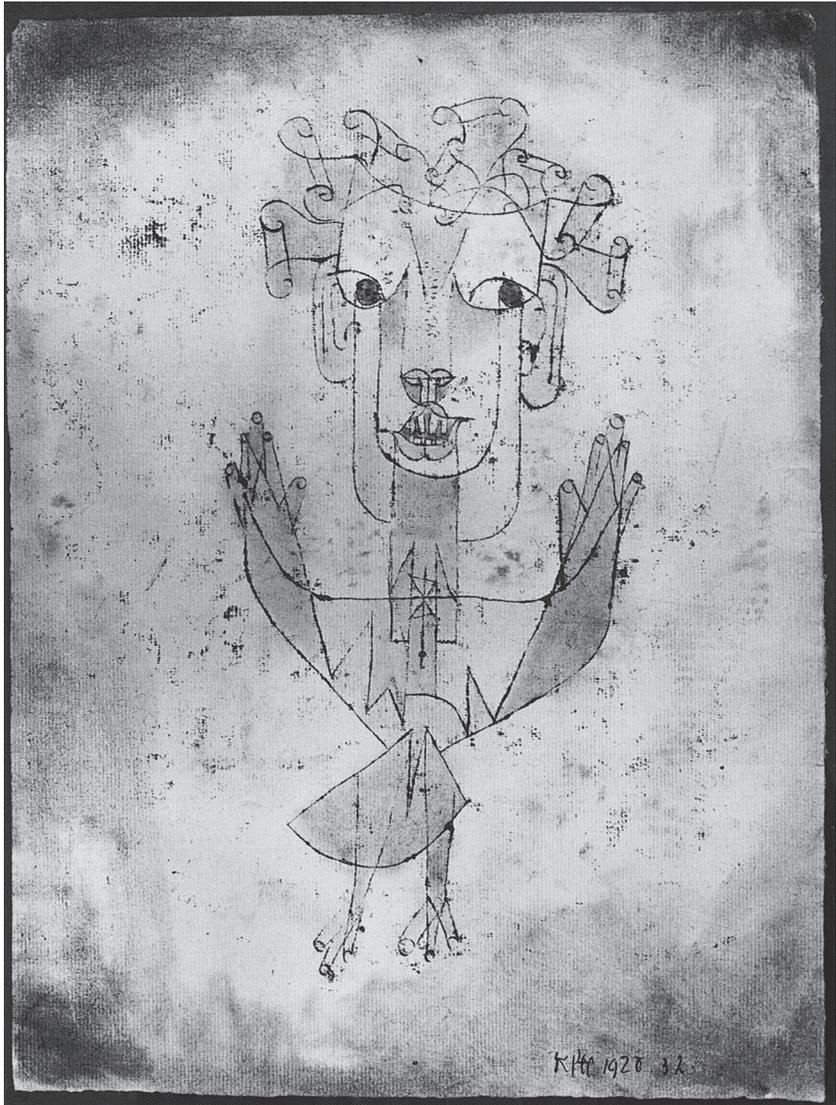


Plate 1 Paul Klee, *Angelus Novus* (1920). Collection, The Israel Museum, Jerusalem. © DACS 2004. Photograph by David Harris.

to the future. Its futurism is always disposed dialectically, set in a sort of reverse gear. Indeed Benjamin's adoption of Klee's image nicely encapsulates that double movement: an icon of modern aesthetic form comes to be read here as archetypically historical in its disposition. Benjamin, the cultural critic, historicizes the avant-garde image. He makes the modern mythical image of the new angel into an image of the dialectically viewed progression of history.

Benjamin's reading of the picture is clearly a creatively inductive one. The openness that he stresses in the representation of the angel's eyes and mouth and the unclosable wings is also indicative of an openness of signification. If it can be seen as a figure of annunciation, then the content of its message – whether joyful, melancholic, shocking or terrible – remains open. As is characteristic of many of Klee's emblematic cartoon figures from the early 1920s, the angel is represented in an emphatically static, more or less symmetrically placed, linear fashion, its barely coloured-in body tending towards the same lack of substance as the open space around it. It is without depth of field, without foreground or background perspectives, fixed in time and space. Benjamin reads the image against the grain of this fixture, energizing and extending it. He projects the angel's reverse motion into the virtual background of the image (as the space of the future), and the space between the gazes of the angel and the viewer into its virtual foreground. For the viewer this space, properly the space of the past in Benjamin's analysis, is protensive ('before *us*'), switched into a futural perspective, a successive chain of events with a forward momentum. For the angel it is a conflation of forward space ('before its feet') and the retrospective, always already past. Rather than being articulated as a chain, it is continuous and so defying any ordering differentiation. In so far as it lies before his gaze, this is to construe the catastrophe of the past as both before and behind, in a sort of future perfect tense, incorporating what will have been into this nihilistic perspective on history. The wind of historical 'progress' blows him remorselessly back into the future, projecting an ever more catastrophic heap into the virtual reality of the picture's foreground. It is perhaps worth noting a feature that Benjamin's reading overlooks: the angel's gaze is actually awry, directed obliquely rather than straight on to the conjectural debris before his feet and the viewer before that. The sort of historical analysis that it suggests is therefore one that should adopt a strategic squint in order to see the truth of what lies before it.

Klee's angel, as worked by Benjamin, corresponds to the allegory in his definition, as an image removed from its normal framework,

fitted with a textual gloss or *subscriptio*, and made to carry a special, emblematic significance. For Peter Bürger, this allegorical model (derived by Benjamin from the aesthetic conventions of the Baroque) is transferable, *mutatis mutandis*, on to the avant-garde aesthetics of montage, say in the photomontage works of John Heartfield.⁷ While Klee's picture is not as such in the mode of montage, it works by mounting a strategically removed image, the old, iconic image of the angel, into a new spatial frame. Benjamin supplies the more developed montage aspect of that framing by reading the fragments of history into its virtual space. If we follow this model, then the new angel functions something like its avatars in Baroque allegory, as analysed by Benjamin in his study *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* ('Origin of German Tragic Drama'), embodying a melancholic view of the passage of things.⁸ The forward propulsion of the avant-garde montage is also fixed by a melancholy sense of being overtaken by history.

Like Klee's angel, the avant-garde has a more complex relationship to history than its rhetoric of historical renewal might seem to suggest. There is no straightforward story of organic development to be told here, no coherent cultural campaign. The avant-garde moves back and forth, in fits and starts, through the sectarian engagements of its various -isms, and, even as history proceeds at an accelerated pace, and the avant-garde seeks to set that pace, the melancholic fixture of the emblematic angel is a recurrent feature right from the beginning. As we will see, this sense of historical impediment and alienation is even in evidence in Futurism, the movement that seems most unconditionally and dynamically to embrace the new technologies of the twentieth century, not least in the machinery of war. It is perhaps most explicitly present in Expressionism, which becomes polarized between the heady celebration of ideas of socio-political renewal and the profound melancholy of the alienated city-dweller and the shell-shocked war veteran. The avant-garde of the early twentieth century is at once protean in its reactions to, and attempts to lead, the course of history, and yet constantly reverting to certain fixed forms that can be subsumed under the figure of historical melancholia.

Theories and Histories of the Avant-Garde

To assume that we can call a period of avant-garde activity *the* avant-garde is to affirm a particular act of cultural reification of avant-garde energy. It is to lift the cultural experimentation of the early

twentieth century out of the mobility of a history that always has new avant-gardes, to define it as the mythical instance or archetype of that disruptive, counter-cultural phenomenon, and thereby to give it a select cultural status. Such a move might appear to mimic the special status given to the 'historical' avant-garde by Peter Bürger in his immensely influential *Theorie der Avantgarde* (1974), and thereby to assume a negative, epigonal view of what Bürger calls neo-avant-garde tendencies in postmodern culture. In fact, the legitimacy of this view has been persuasively challenged; as we will see in the epilogue, the work of Hal Foster and others provides a necessary corrective to it.⁹ While any substantial discussion of the avant-gardes of the second half of the twentieth century, or indeed those that pre-date 1900, cannot be accommodated in this study, it will work in its own way, from within its designated historical parameters, against the idealizing of the 'historical' avant-garde.

This 'cultural history' of the avant-garde should be understood as a strategic rewriting of the theoretical mode of understanding that has had almost axiomatic authority since the publication of Bürger's book. The tension within the avant-garde between doctrinal theory and actual praxis transfers to that between a *post hoc* theorization of it and the historical variety that has to be accounted for by the theory. Part of what will be argued here is that there is no singular theory that can encompass the avant-garde, but that it is best understood through a negotiation of a plurality of, sometimes contradictory, *theories*.

One way to understand the avant-garde is as a continuous dialogue of accommodations and contradictions between theoretical statement and aesthetic practice. Theory is applied both a priori, especially in the form of the manifesto, and a posteriori, in the form of patterning memoirs, histories and mythologies. The manifesto, as a document of intent, is, like the avant-garde itself, radically futural in its rhetorical disposition. Yet it must also work genealogically; it is made to give account of the past and the model of previous strategic disruptions in order to establish its own break with orthodoxy. In the course of the avant-garde years, the manifesto becomes an established genre, and each new one inevitably relates as much intertextually to the generic conventions of its predecessors as to its own forward-looking agenda. It becomes an artefact of cultural history. The manifesto, in other words, manifests as much as anything else the impossible desire for anti-historical singularity of different avant-garde movements or groupings, their desire to show that they are *the* avant-garde rather than part of a modular and in many ways heterogeneous arrangement of historical motions.

In keeping with this double bind, this study will negotiate between theory (political, philosophical, psychological) and historical specificities. In the style of Benjamin's reading of the *Angelus Novus*, it will work between the allegorical figure that is taken to embody a theory of history and the gaze of that figure that has to encompass so much that is different from its own shape. Specifically, in this variation on Benjamin's reading, the allegorical angel trains its gaze on the pile of cultural historical shards left by the strategic fragmentations of the avant-garde. It conforms, that is, to Benjamin's analysis of the material process of history as an abiding negotiation between the resistant fragment and the accommodating allegory.¹⁰ This analysis sees the allegory itself as a fragment, but one that is invested with a special relation to historical processes, reflecting upon the broader picture. The present study will privilege such allegorical constructs in its account, seeing them as exemplary of the tension between patterning and variety in the avant-garde. These constructs will include key works in all media, as well as the manifesto as a prototype that is intended to establish a pattern for the variety of work that first provokes and then follows upon it.

If the manifesto establishes a theoretical gesture in the culture of the avant-garde, it also has a bearing on the method of its subsequent reception, creating a rationale for theorization to prevail over empiricism. Largely as a result of Bürger's *Theorie der Avantgarde*, the avant-garde has both been conceived as peculiarly predisposed to theory in its historical operations and been given a privileged status of incorporation into the cultural theory of the twentieth century. Bürger's book sums up and extends a development that was inaugurated by the formative significance of the debate over the avant-garde for the German tradition of Critical Theory. Its key argument is that at the base of the heterogeneous manifestations of the avant-garde is a theoretical determination to reintegrate art as institution into the praxis of life.

While Bürger takes some care in his account of cultural history to respect the elements of 'countermovement' that undermine any neat epistemic definition, his mode of reading in the Marxist tradition has a telling blind spot in relation to a key countermovement to the ideological drive of that tradition: psychoanalysis. While Bürger's model of avant-garde praxis as anti-autonomous is focused on its opposition to the politically withdrawn art of late nineteenth-century Aestheticism, psychoanalysis represents an alternative focus for the debate over autonomy. The failure of this theory of the avant-garde to take any notice of psychoanalysis reveals that it is lodged in

the orthodox tradition that sees Marxist ideological critique and psychoanalysis as at base inimical. This is a view that would brand psychoanalytic theory as mythologizing, anti-historical, individualizing, and so dangerously autonomous in its relation to political imperatives. There is, however, another theoretical tradition, which has approached the orthodox opposition in a more open, dialectical fashion. The work of Fredric Jameson or, in a different mode, Slavoj Žižek has shown the potential for incorporating psychoanalytic modelling into the methodology of ideological critiques of culture. Given that this dialectically complicated disposition between Marx and Freud is already determinant in the work of the avant-garde (especially in Surrealism) and in the analysis of that work by early Critical Theory, not least as practised by Benjamin, it would seem necessary to reappraise its possibilities. This follows the cue of Raymond Williams in his analysis of Modernism, which was always alert to the disjunctive effects of the 'attempt to combine Marxist and Freudian motifs – so characteristic of the avant-garde in this period'.¹¹

What is proposed in the current study is a theory of the avant-garde that acknowledges the relative autonomy that is implied by the psychoanalytic element in its disposition. This is the aesthetic, but not aestheticist, autonomy that is represented in the techniques of automatic production in writing and visual art and in the construction of new, psychoanalytically informed mythologies. It is, in other words, the sort of autonomy that is embodied in a figure like the protagonist of Breton's *Nadja* (1928), a form of radical subjectivity motivated by psychic drives, which is, however, co-produced by and co-produces the political radicalism of the avant-garde. An adequate theory of the avant-garde must take account of the integral role of the subject and of the unconscious in the reintegration of art into the praxis of life, as well as recognizing that the model of *Nadja* reveals the profoundly problematic character of making the unconscious practicable for life in that way.

If Benjamin, through the model of Klee's angel, figures historical progression as retrospectively fixed, or fixated, then this is because his view of cultural development is one informed by what Jameson has called 'the political unconscious'. Benjamin's project provides a model of cultural historiography that attends above all to the material produced by history or the material through which history is produced. His methodology is one of analytic observation of the architectures, the places and passages of historical behaviour, and of the objects of material culture that were placed in or moved through those spaces. This materialist cultural history is, however, guided by

a principle of rooting through the vestiges of material culture to find traces of the unconscious of history. His mode of analysis is thus informed by the model of Freud's reading of everyday life, of dreams, speech and other forms of behaviour, in order to understand why certain objects are privileged over others, why they are, in Freudian terms, subject to cathexis, to special investments of libidinal interest, and to selective acts of repression.

Material culture is a culture of objects, but one that can be read as carrying the traces of the historical subjects that produce and organize it. The photograph or film in Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay appears to represent an objective imprint of such material scenes as streets, stations and domestic interiors, but it in fact registers an 'optical unconscious',¹² a subliminal sense of organization that accords with that of subjective behaviour and its psychic fixture. Film is seen to work explosively, to break the object world down into spatio-temporal fragments and thereby to reveal the 'unconsciously' worked spaces between them. In this sense it acts as a model apparatus for the avant-garde, its fragmentations driven by an analytic desire to expose effaced structures. But it also suggests a historiographic model for the analysis of the avant-garde, one that resists the homogenization of the big picture but, rather, fragments its object in order properly to understand its motivating structures. This is a model that, like the avant-garde, incorporates as a strategic first move what Benjamin calls the 'destructive character'.¹³ It rejects the museological fetishization of cultural objects, acts of conservation that make things 'untouchable', but seeks a more dialectical mode of cultural transmission, which takes hold of situations or relations between things and breaks them down (or sees them 'destructively' in their broken state) in order to show how they work and to make room for others to supersede them. This form of destruction is partly responsible for the catastrophic pile of debris upon which Benjamin's angel's gaze is fixed, but it is a form of destruction that redirects that gaze away from the fixating fragments and on to the path 'which runs through them'.¹⁴ The 'destructive character' is in itself nihilistic, but it shows the way and prepares the ground for other, more productive characters to work on.

This study of the relations that sustain the avant-garde and that the avant-garde sustains with mainstream culture will require something of the destructive character of cultural transmission. It will have to break down the structures of bad consciousness that characterize so much of avant-garde operations, in order to lay bare the 'unconscious' that drives those operations. If it works under the aegis

of Benjamin's latter-day angel, then it is in so far as the angel's backward focus sees that that history proceeds at the expense of its subjects, and that symptomatic traces of traumatic exclusion are to be found, and should be seen, amongst the material shards of cultural history. As Susan Buck-Morss has it, the focus of Benjamin's angel upon the 'destruction of material nature as it *has actually taken place*' works dialectically against 'the futurist myth of historical progress (which can only be sustained by forgetting what has happened)'.¹⁵ By analogy, it can provide a check to the element of unbridled futurism which features in so much of the rhetoric and aesthetic praxis of the avant-garde, not least in the Futurism writ large of Marinetti and his followers in Italy and elsewhere. Not for nothing does Benjamin cite part of Marinetti's manifesto on the Ethiopian war in his 'Work of Art' essay as an example of the totalitarian clarity of art in the manifest service of Fascism.¹⁶ He sees that the dialectician has a duty to co-opt and rework that rhetoric, to draw out its historical contradictions.

The method of this study, then, will follow the Benjaminian spirit of avant-garde analysis, turning the shock-tactical effect of the avant-garde back upon its objects and situations, in order to surprise out of it identities, characteristics and relationships that have been neglected or suppressed. In Benjamin's methodology, the destructive character of violent fragmentation is sublated by the 'constructive principle' of materialistic historiography. The totalized flow of history is broken, a particular monadic object immobilized, and a structural insight into history is reconstructed from it by the historian: 'He perceives it [the structure] in order to break a particular epoch out of the homogenous course of history; thus he breaks a particular life out of the epoch, a particular work out of the life's work. The yield of his procedure consists in the fact that the life's work is conserved and sublated [*aufgehoben*] *within* the work, the epoch *within* the life's work, and *within* the epoch the whole course of history.'¹⁷ History – here, the history of the historical avant-garde – is thus proposed as retrievable in the analysis of certain objects, but retrievable always in a way that is dialectically self-sublating, suspending as much as preserving the object in its historical relation.

Allegory and Case History

This study, then, will adopt the dialectical negotiation between Marxist and Freudian brands of materialism as a model for the theoretical

handling of a history of the avant-garde. A prime example of how an at once politically and psychoanalytically attuned version of cultural history can work is provided by Benjamin's principal object of scrutiny, the dominant avant-garde movement of Surrealism. Surrealism is a particularly telling form of avant-garde, not least because of a fundamental ambivalence in its relation to materialist models of historical understanding. Surrealism embraces a Marxist ideology that demands an orthodox approach to history as a product of the material interaction of collective interests; but it also embraces the more personalized ideology of psychoanalysis with its prioritizing of the case history over history writ large. Even as the Surrealists attempt to objectify the subjective through forms of materialist registration of the psyche – automatic writing or 'hasard objectif' ('objective chance') – the intrinsic immateriality of the unconscious remains a haunting presence, a ghost in their machine.

What the split affinity of Surrealism also shows, however, is that the supplementation of a Marxist-style critique of ideology by psychoanalytic attention to the cultural unconscious is only a first step in the dialectical analysis of the avant-garde. The reading of *Nadja*, a sort of history of Surrealism as constructed by its self-styled founding father, in the final chapter of this study will show up the tensions in this model. On the one hand, *Nadja* represents a version of the Freudian case history, and as such it is burdened by the theoretical limitations of the psychoanalytic methodology. If psychoanalysis can provide a productively resistant supplement to a Marxist reading of history, it, in its turn, requires strategic supplementation. In particular, the case of *Nadja* will show that an isolation of the object case as cultural historical paradigm in Benjamin's sense will only work if it incorporates a critique of gender politics that has to be adopted from outside the theoretical apparatus of psychoanalysis. The necessity of a feminist supplement in the theoretical handling of this 'case history' exposes a blind spot on the level of gender that is common to Surrealist avant-garde praxis and to psychoanalytic theory, and is a key constituent in their special relationship.

On the other hand, this is a text that seeks to describe a mythological embodiment of the Surrealist idea, a guiding spirit for the 'modern mythology' that the Surrealists espouse. *Nadja*, as a subject who resists the socialized regime of time and place, failing to meet appointments, thus also represents a wilful, mythical failure to engage with the material march of history. She corresponds, in other words, to the aspect of Benjamin's theory of history that might seem most inimical to the notion of the avant-garde, its tendency towards a

metaphysical or messianic model. Equally, and paradoxically, she embodies the sort of mystique that Benjamin sought to critique in his study of Surrealism, whilst valorizing its more politicized tendencies. The metaphysical aspects that complicate Benjamin's political theory of history from within can thus be understood as a reflection of the paradoxical disposition of his object of study. In the transcendental aspect of the angel figure we can recognize a feature not only of the painter Klee, but also of much other avant-garde production. Specifically, Nadja, as the protagonist of Surrealism, is also its visionary spirit or angel, but, like Benjamin's *Angelus Novus*, an angel with her gaze fixed upon the material damage of history. In these two senses, Nadja can be understood, like the Klee picture in Benjamin's reading, as an emblematic, guiding figure for a cultural history of the avant-garde. This is a figure that embodies intense contradictions between the idealist and the materialist, between the collective and the personal: one who seems to be able to resist the demands of the everyday, but is then brutally bound back into them; an embodiment of the collective idea of a movement who disappears into the personal world of her psyche, a place of case history where that movement cannot, or will not, follow. She carries the projections of avant-garde revolution, but also exposes its inevitable shortcomings, its failure to suspend the difference between the real and the imagined, the historical and the theoretical.

As a paradigm figure, Nadja thus exemplifies the potential for telling the cultural history of the avant-garde as a sort of 'case' history. In a study of such broad comparative scope as the present one, ranging across European culture in its diverse media over four tightly packed decades of artistic innovation, the treatment of historical specificities must be limited. Rather than assembling an overall calendar or map of historical developments, the study will take its guidance from the twin figures of Benjamin's angel and Breton's Nadja, the allegory and the case history. This involves sorting through the fragments for the figures, encounters and configurations that can serve as paradigms for the overall picture, and that therefore carry a significance that is theoretical as well as historical. As the case of Nadja shows, these paradigmatic instances are designed to show the constitutional contradictions of avant-garde praxis as much as its guiding principles. In order to achieve this, they have to be submitted to close, critical reading, both individually and in cross-reference, as they are set in relief through the methods of montage. And this reading has to be directed askance at the works in question, adopting the critical squint of Benjamin's angel.

The chapters that follow address, in turn, the principal forms of activity of the avant-garde, whilst also taking account of the subversion of conventional boundaries between forms, the intermedial and cross-generic experimentation that is one of its defining features. The second chapter, 'Manifestations: The Public Sphere', addresses the public demand that the avant-garde makes in its various forms of manifestation, from the manifesto to the exhibition, the happening, and the demonstration. This introduces a key aspect of the argument: that the avant-garde is a fundamentally performative phenomenon, defining itself through its enactments, be these pictorial, typographical or theatrical. The performativity of the avant-garde is, however, seen to be deeply ambivalent in its disposition, fixated upon problematic forms of exhibitionism. The third chapter, 'Writing the City: Urban Technology and Poetic Technique', discusses the, in many ways, troubled performance of poetic writing under the avant-garde in the shape of four epic poems of the city. The chapter considers how this poetry constructs forms of creative simultaneity between past and present times, absent and present places and figures, yet also adopts a more melancholic or abject view of the non-simultaneity of experience in the modern metropolis. In the fourth chapter, 'Modes of Performance: Film-Theatre', a prime example of avant-garde intermediality is given in the assessment of the interdependence of, and resistances between, the two key performance media of theatre and film. The tensions between the three-way demands of politics, the psyche and experimental form provide the principal focus for the framing argument and for the close reading of three canonical avant-garde films and of the lapses and accidents in their respective systems. The final chapter, 'Case Histories: Narratives of the Avant-Garde', considers the contested status of narrative under the avant-garde. It uses two particular narrative genres inherited from the nineteenth century – detective story and case history – to consider the potential and the limitations of avant-garde experimentation in narrative form, with close readings of an exemplary case of each. In this chapter, as throughout, the construction of gender and sexuality provides a central focus for the consideration of the ambivalence that is inherent in the performative project of the avant-garde.