

PHILOSOPHIES OF CONFRONTATION: AESTHETIC AND POLITICAL
VANGUARDISM, 1917-1956

by

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A dissertation submitted to the Graduate Faculty in English in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, The City University of New York.

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Abstract

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This dissertation examines the theoretical structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism that materialized in the first half of the twentieth century, from 1917-1956. Focusing mostly on poetry and poetics, the objective of the thesis is to trace the historical development of aesthetic and political vanguardism, beginning with the Bolshevik revolution of 1917, and the ways in which that event resounded in the European avant-garde movements, particularly in post-revolutionary Russian Futurism, in German Dadaism of the Weimar Republic, and in French Surrealism under the leadership of André Breton. The beginning chapters will focus on the politicization of aesthetic production, as much as it will attempt to assess Marxist and non-Marxist theoretical perspectives of the historical avant-garde, emphasizing the relationship between aesthetics, ideology, and revolutionary praxis. The interconnection between Marxist politics and the aesthetic response, as such, is intended to accentuate the extent to which “revolution” became a dominating signifier of avant-garde cultural production, as the standardized “manifesto” of many of these movements illustrates, and thus established a paradigm which the historical avant-garde was obliged to follow. Chapter three focuses on the “right” and “left” dialectical configurations of vanguardism, particularly Ezra Pound’s engagement with Futurist cultural politics under Fascism, and Louis Zukofsky’s

assimilation of Cubism and Russian Constructivism, a dialectical analysis that is meant to expand the theoretical structures offered in the first two chapters. In chapter four, the aesthetics and politics of Aimé Césaire are considered in relation to the crisis of European vanguardism that occurred as it resounded in the Caribbean, especially in Martinique where aesthetics and politics merged in the “oppositional praxis” of decolonization. The work of Zukofsky and Césaire represents the constructive response toward European aesthetic and political vanguardism as it traveled across the Atlantic, yet it is also through their work that it is possible to observe the ways in which the apparatus of vanguardism began to be deconstructed, an interpretation that is considered in the final chapter of the dissertation in relation to what can be called the late capitalist subsumption of historical vanguardism in the post-World War II era.

PREFACE

The following study focuses on the interrelationship between aesthetics and politics that began to materialize in the early part of the twentieth century, spanning the years 1917-1956. The intention here is to rethink the evolutionary principles of revolutionary art within a historical context in the expectation of augmenting some of the conceptual distinctions between avant-garde cultural production and revolutionary politics, particularly within movements that sought to originate alternatives to the prevailing social order of bourgeois (capitalist) society. Consistent with pre-existing theories of what has come to be known as the historical avant-garde, this project attempts to distinguish some of the characteristics of aesthetic revolt by which writers and artists desired to reclaim social autonomy beyond the confines of capitalist power. Although the subsequent analysis can be positioned in the established discourse on “revolutionary” art that has been utilized to justify the traditionally comparative features of avant-gardism, this study is designed with the intention of rethinking the process by which revolutionary art comes into being as it attempts to reinscribe itself as praxis, a formulation that is meant to broaden the theoretical discourse of the historical avant-garde by offering an alternative interpretation of its parameters. It is for this reason that the term vanguardism will be used to denote not only the practice of revolutionary art, what can be described as the aesthetic experimentalism that is often associated with avant-garde classification, but also the inclusiveness of vanguardist movements that intended to bridge the gap between revolutionary praxis and cultural production, or what can be thought of as the attempt to develop strategies whereby revolutionary art could be grafted onto the process of political transformation itself.

While the focus here is to expand upon some of the comparative studies of revolutionary art, this study also emphasizes the relationship between Marxist aesthetics and avant-garde cultural production, a revealing and yet contentious relationship that has attained a formative position in the discourse of modernism. To a large extent, the category of vanguardism is used here to politicize pre-existing theories of the historical avant-garde, a theoretical strategy that hopes to unveil the inextricability between art and revolutionary politics that emerged as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917, as the first chapter will argue. The motive for reconstructing a Marxist theory of avant-gardism, as such, has as much to do with the exclusion of revolutionary politics from the critical discourse of avant-garde cultural production, especially by those who associate themselves with postmodernism, as it does with the either-or stringency that is often characteristic of “leftist” critiques of avant-garde cultural politics. Thus, even though the sympathy toward Marxist-Leninist revolutionary thought is clearly evident throughout the entirety of the analysis, one which at moments may marginalize readers not completely immersed in Marxist literary and cultural theory, the ultimate objective of the study is to reveal the array of aesthetic and political movements that went beyond the hegemony of capitalist predominance, an examination which effectively is designed to reveal the spectrum of vanguardism from the communist left to the fascist right, so that the historical convergence of art and politics can be more readily engaged by the reader.

In attempting, then, to restructure a Marxist theory of avant-garde cultural politics, the first two chapters are deliberately more abstract than the last three, a conscious delimitation of the organization of this study that moves from the theory to the praxis of vanguardist paradigms. Specifically, what the initial chapters hope to

accomplish is a type of re-theorization of the avant-garde, which according to a Marxist critique of its historical development, formulates a context for aesthetic and political vanguardism, inasmuch as it attempts to challenge some of the recognized characteristics of revolutionary art, many of which have set varying limitations on the discourse of avant-garde cultural politics. The remaining chapters, thus, attempt to concretize the theoretical dimensions of vanguardism by examining specific authors who articulate and extend the conceptual apparatus of vanguardist cultural politics, categorical examinations which consider each author's position and significance on the spectrum of political identification, the particular construction of the aesthetics-as-politics that informs their work, and the overarching movements with which they were affiliated both historically and geographically. The distinguished authors chosen for the present study, including André Breton, Ezra Pound, Louis Zukofsky, and Aimé Césaire, all occupy an influential space within the history of avant-garde cultural politics and thus are crucial to the comparative scope of vanguardism and the conflicting materialization of its authority within the tradition of revolutionary art as well.

In terms of its limitations, the following project fails to elude the Euro-American framework of avant-garde cultural politics, what above is described as a conscious delimitation on the structural transformation of vanguardism that seems to exclude non-Western paradigms of revolutionary art. It is for this reason that the fourth chapter on the work of Aimé Césaire should be understood in relation to what will be termed the crisis in vanguardism that occurred after 1956, a decline in the overall project of revolutionary art that becomes enveloped by the residual and emergent effects of late capitalist subsumption, a problematic which is elucidated in the final chapter. The chapter on

Cesaire, although consistent in its exposing the dialectical relations of aesthetic and political vanguardism as it entered a new phase in cultural history, is also meant to expose the lack of concrete analysis of revolutionary art in non-Western social contexts. Despite the fact that the relationship between aesthetic and political vanguardism and the emergent forms of decolonizing movements needs to be examined more systematically, the hope is that some of the interconnections made here will contribute to the materialization of new forms of critical thought about revolutionary art and praxis for the purposes of reproducing confrontation on an international scale, the current necessity of which is timely, indeed.

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Introduction: The Cultural Politics of Vanguardism

Every ‘theoretical’ tendency or clash of views must immediately develop an organizational arm if it is to rise above the level of pure theory or abstract opinion, that is to say, if it really intends to point the way to its own fulfillment in practice.

—Georg Lukács

Individual personality plays a role in mobilizing and leading the masses insofar as it embodies the highest virtues and aspirations of the people and does not wander from the path.

It is the vanguard group which clears the way, the best among the good, the party.

—Ernesto “Che” Guevara

So let no one be perturbed when
I seem to be alone and am not alone;
I am not without company and I speak for all.

Someone is hearing me without knowing it,
but those I sing of, those who know,
go on being born and will overflow the world.

—Pablo Neruda

In his treatise on Marxist aesthetics, Herbert Marcuse writes, “The political potential of art lies only in its own aesthetic dimension. Its relation to praxis is inexorably indirect, mediated, and frustrating.”¹ For Marcuse, the avant-garde artwork maintains its capability toward the “radical, transcendent goals of change,” what he calls an “indictment” of external ideologies, by preserving its autonomy, a crucial notion that Marxist theorists of the avant-garde, such as Theodor Adorno, consistently have argued go beyond the Marxist traditionalism of Georg Lukács and other Marxists who rejected

¹ Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1977), xii.

the aesthetic avant-garde as being unable to express the needs of the revolutionary proletariat. What distinguishes Marcuse's position is the acknowledgment that under advanced capitalism in which we find "a universe administered by a corrupt and heavily armed monopolistic class," it is no longer feasible for the avant-gardist simply to claim identification with the proletariat, which as Marcuse rightly points out, had been incorporated into the opacity of bourgeois capitalist relations.² At the same time, the "estrangement" associated with the avant-garde impulse toward experimentation, even though the artist or writer may be "committed" to political radicalism, produces avant-gardist elitism in its failure to "speak the language of the people."³ "If the subversion of experience proper to art," he writes, "and the rebellion against the established reality principle contained in this subversion cannot be translated into political praxis...how can this potential find valid representation in a work of art and how can it become a factor in the transformation of consciousness?"⁴ Rather than trying to "solve" the predicament of the revolutionary potential of art and the revitalization of new forms of avant-gardism, Marcuse understands that "critical mimesis" inherent in the dynamic of aesthetic production must retain itself as a form of political struggle, a view which attempts to move beyond the indirectness of political expression to a more thoroughly integrated praxis.

To reformulate Marcuse's analysis, as an alternative to a traditional reiteration of Marxist theories of avant-gardism: is it possible to advance an interpretation of the avant-garde that unveils the structure of its confrontational mode, without simply falling into a debate over its assumed political objectives, specifically whether or not it succeeds in

² Ibid., 32.

³ Ibid., 35.

⁴ Ibid., 39.

“transcending” social relations under capitalism? That is, how is it possible to rethink the dialectical relations of aesthetics and politics so that the fundamental complexities of those relations make possible a theoretical inquiry into the phases of its historical representation? Finally, how has the ubiquitous dynamic of capitalist hegemony disabled the revolutionary centrality of confrontation that was integral to aesthetic avant-gardism in the first half of the twentieth-century, and does its “recovery” in the neo-avant-garde expose the limitations of its revolutionary potentiality?

Taking into consideration the questions posed above, the following study will analyze the underlying convergence of aesthetics and politics in the first half of the twentieth century and the resulting movements that challenged “ruling class” models of social relations. In slight contrast to what is generally known as the historical avant-garde, the present study will argue that the interrelations between aesthetic and political elements illustrate what can be termed vanguardism, a more suitable phrase that is designed to capture the manifestation of the relationship between aesthetics and politics and the cultural mechanisms by which vanguardist art conceptualized an alternative to what many believed was the decay of capitalist hegemony. The term vanguardism, then, is meant to investigate the residual structure of the historical avant-garde as it became more and more influenced by the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917. Specifically, what is important in the current argument is the extent to which the Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 redefined the authenticity of aesthetic revolt from which the historical avant-garde gained momentum. The category of vanguardism, in its historical context, replies not only to the critical displacement that occurs between avant-garde art and its political praxis, but it also refers to the development of Marxist aesthetics within the early

twentieth century, since what the Bolshevik vision offered was a material dimension through which the conditions of cultural production could be analyzed from an exterior, or rather a historically viable position as a result of the repositioning of the historical avant-garde after 1917. That is, as the historical avant-garde incorporated what will be termed the “revolution-as-signifier” within a foundational pretext, the autonomous dimension of avant-garde revolt experienced the possibility of transcendence, or rather the total negation of the contours of which it had been determined *as* capital. The concept of vanguardism, then, corresponds to what Julia Kristeva calls the “semiotic,” as it both nourishes the revolutionary potentiality of cultural production, while simultaneously preconditioning the organizational principle of the aesthetic act as it enters the symbolic realm of rationality and command.⁵ “Whether in the realm of a metalanguage (mathematics, for example) or literature,” Kristeva writes, “*what remodels the symbolic order is always the influx of the semiotic.*”⁶ Although not thoroughly within the scope of the current argument, Kristeva’s theoretization is adequate in traversing the distinction between the negativity of revolt of the avant-garde artist, a negativity that reproduces the illusion of revolutionary sovereignty, and the materiality of art-as-praxis that results from the convergence of aesthetic and political vanguardism after the Communist seizure of power in 1917.

Thus, the present analysis builds upon the seminal work of Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, among others, inasmuch as it attempts to integrate contemporary

⁵ Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language*, in *The Portable Kristeva* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997), 27-92.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 50. I am interested in the political dimension of the “semiotic” as it relates to the mechanism of revolt which the avant-garde artist employs in the negation of capitalist social relations, the “symbolic” in material form. It is in this sense that I am intentionally delimiting Kristeva’s theoretical originality.

studies that have reformulated the intertextuality between aesthetic and political paradigms of the avant-garde, predominantly within the Surrealist and Futurist movements.⁷ Furthermore, this study will analyze the tradition of Marxist criticism that has attempted to rethink the parameters of cultural production within the historical avant-garde, specifically as it relates to the ideological critique of revolutionary praxis through which the aesthetic dimension was able to function.⁸ Thus, the following is not an attempt to restructure the “periodization” of modernism and the avant-garde, which Fredric Jameson’s *A Singular Modernity* does to a large extent; rather, what is crucial for the present context is the historical function of the confrontational mode of vanguardism as it began to take precedence within the avant-garde tradition.⁹ To be precise, as a critical mechanism that sought an exteriority to the prevailing formations within modernist discourse, aesthetic and political vanguardism challenged the interior spaces of revolt that pervaded revolutionary consciousness by attempting to disseminate revolutionary praxis on a wider scale, a critique of the historicity of which the avant-garde had been constructed in its confrontation with the ruling class and its constituent demands on social relations themselves.

In order to define vanguardism in the first half of the twentieth-century, it is necessary to outline its dialectical representation in relation to the political transformation

⁷ Among the many notable works, see Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism* (New York: Paragon, 1988), John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, ed. Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss (Burlington: Ashgate, 2003), Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism* (Westport: Praeger Press, 2003), and Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifesto, and the Avant-Gardes* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

⁸ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984), Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1993), and Terry Eagleton, *Criticism & Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory* (London: Verso, 2006), among others.

⁹ See Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (London: Verso, 2002).

emerging in Russia after 1917, as the first chapter intends to analyze. One of the fundamental arguments of this study is that, despite the fact that Futurist and Cubist poets and painters had been attacking the bourgeois institution of art from the early 1900's, what clearly underlies vanguardism as a mode of confrontation was its incorporation of the theory of revolutionary political praxis into its methodology. The objective here is to analyze the ways in which the Bolshevik Revolution and its subsequent effects on the cultural enlightenment of twentieth century Europe ruptured the very category of revolutionary art itself. In order to uncover the immediate prospects for cultural production that resulted from the impact of the Bolshevik Revolution, the post-revolutionary framework of the Russian Avant-Gardes and Dadaism will be highlighted, since both became dependent upon the dialectical mode of political confrontation which the political vanguard provided. The final section of the chapter intends to present not only an overview of the "debates" among Marxist theorists of the avant-garde, of which the Brecht/Lukács confrontation is perhaps immediately recognizable, but also the ways in which these debates had an impact on European intellectual life. In particular, the historical conflict between socialist realism and avant-garde "progressive" art forms will be analyzed to uncover some of the recent critical examples of the ways in which the dialectical movement of aesthetic and political vanguardism has had a formative influence on contemporary interpretations of avant-garde cultural production, especially the relationship to the historical context out of which such production had emerged.

Chapter two will analyze the interconnections among art, ideology, and propaganda, some of the core elements of revolutionary art, and the reproduction of non-aesthetic forms that can be utilized to broaden the theoretical framework of the aesthetic

and political vanguard, as outlined in chapter one. One particular can be raised: how did the ideological constituents of the manifesto become concentrated in the praxis of artistic production? Furthermore, in what sense does the aesthetic manifesto function differently from the political one, in relation to their respective objectives? In other words, the manifesto form offers a view of the ways in which ideology works in and through art, which the manifesto intends to confront and transform. In the final section of chapter two, an analysis of the relation between Surrealism and Communism will broaden the intertextuality between the “subtext” of political praxis and the unambiguous production of a revolutionary art through which the Surrealist movement formulated itself. Such an analysis will elucidate the predicament of aesthetics and politics in the 1930’s, one that necessitated an urgent response to the ensuing threat of Fascism and the counterrevolutionary forces that were brought with it.

To continue with the historical progression of vanguardist art, chapter three will focus on the growth of Fascism in Europe in the 1920’s and 1930’s and its significance in the formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism; on the one hand, it suggests that the potentiality of revolutionary aesthetics, as it can be utilized for acts of mass liberation in the work of the Surrealists, could also be utilized for the legitimation of repressive authoritarianism. It is out of the aesthetic sympathies toward Fascism, that is, that the dialectical transformation of vanguardism must be analyzed, an analysis which is revealed in chapter three by examining the convergence of Italian Futurism and the cultural politics of Ezra Pound in the 1930’s. The question is not how the constituencies of aesthetic and political vanguardism can be rendered autonomous from fascist modernism; rather, how can the dialectical relations that materialize out of such an

inquiry be scrutinized to interrogate further the crisis of the avant-garde that fascist modernism provoked? As Fredric Jameson suggests, the interrogation of the past, of history itself, can only be approached “by way of some prior textualization or narrative (re)construction,” a conception in which we must include theoretical trends, academic programming, and other ideological constructs that encompass such interpretations.¹⁰ The question in relation to Ezra Pound, then, is how one deals with the contingencies of his past as a recurrent presence, a dilemma out of which emerges the impasse of historical analysis in its most basic and contingent form. It is for this reason that the chapter will focus on Pound’s relationship to the culture of Fascism, as such an analysis will also point out the historical convergence of his political modernism and the particularities of which his politics were composed. The intention is not to hurl more blame at Pound for his fascist politics, but rather to consider the originality of Pound’s work in relation to the trend of fascist modernism from the 1930’s to the end of World War II, which his association with the Italian Futurists illustrates, in order to analyze the dialectics of vanguardism in the post-War era.

Section two of the third chapter will analyze the work of Louis Zukofsky and the context of vanguardism as it traveled across the Atlantic. As early as 1922, Zukofsky began to identify himself with the modernist poetics of Cubism, as well as with the experimentalism of Pound, with whom he had a long comradeship. Yet, at the same time, his work until 1940 demonstrated a Marxist-driven attempt to subvert the bourgeois systemization of aesthetic production through the reinscription and de-reification of the proletarian subject in the body of his poetic works, a trend of political identification that

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume 2* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 150.

was evident in the American literary scene in the 1930's and early 1940's. Zukofsky's "de-reification" of proletarian consciousness, in this perspective, can be thought of as the attempt to liberate the political consciousness of the working-class that had become veiled by capitalist exploitation, or by a totalizing economic process that reduces humanity to labor itemization. As a poet who responded positively to the avant-garde poetics of a figure like Pound, yet who saw the prospects for Marxist revolutionary politics, the section intends to elaborate on the progression and transformation of aesthetic and political vanguardism by examining the dialectical forms that emerge in Zukofsky's work. The crisis that reveals itself in Zukofsky's work after 1948, after which he seemed to renounce an affiliation with Marxism in favor of a more thoroughly radical experimentalism, will be considered in the final section and in the final chapter to this study in which an investigation of the neo-avant-garde will unveil further elements of his poetic inclinations.

Considering the transatlantic movement of vanguardism that is outlined in chapter three, chapter four will analyze the work of the Martinican poet Aimé Césaire, who represents both the corollary to European aesthetic and political vanguardism and the ways in which the Western conceptualization of vanguardism began to be deconstructed, a result, that is, of the socio-political predicament the vanguard experienced as it crossed the Atlantic. Specifically, as a proponent of the confrontational aesthetic mode of the Surrealists, as well as being committed to revolutionary communism, Césaire's work demonstrates the extent to which vanguardism symbolized the "obligatory advance" toward both political resistance and artistic experimentalism. For Césaire, however, aesthetic and political vanguardism, which had roots in Westernized thought, represented

the very medium by which colonialism was naturalized and thus it existed as an impediment for postcolonial struggles of liberation in Martinique, Cuba, as well as other nationalist movements on the African continent. The crisis of vanguardism, then, is consistently materialized in Césaire's poetics from 1939, with the formation of the Négritude vanguard, to 1956, when he renounced his membership to the French Communist Party and began localizing his aesthetics and politics for the purposes of decolonization. In addition to an analysis of Césaire's poetic and theoretical texts, chapter four intends to trace the ensuing crisis of vanguardism in relation to decolonizing struggles in Martinique, which will be offered as part of a larger discussion on the materialization of the neo-avant-garde in the post World War II era.

The last section of this study will attempt to historicize the theories of vanguardism and the subsequent development toward a neo-avant-gardism, a composite movement that both recognized the political failure of the historical avant-garde, yet paradoxically embraced the aestheticizing capabilities associated with it. To outline the most immediate question in these terms: can the ideological structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism, which in its antithetical stance toward the codification of bourgeois systems of meaning attempted to formulate a context for revolutionary transformation, be utilized in the reevaluation of neo-avant-garde struggles against the totalizing capabilities of late capitalism? On the other hand, does the nihilistic "renunciation" of the political vanguard associated with Marxist-Leninist doctrine signal the end of confrontation and thus the passive acceptance of late capitalist hegemony by the neo-avant-garde, as evidenced in the work of Louis Zukofsky? Moreover, does the postcoloniality of Aimé Césaire's work embody an alternative to the nihilism of the neo-

avant-garde in its projection of a revitalized critique of aesthetic and political paradigms, or is it a symptom of the way in which late capitalism is able to fragment the collective response that would rival its hegemony? The question of the dialectical relations of historical vanguardism, which ceases to maintain its categorization of revolutionary praxis after 1956, will be discussed within the context of some key debates within postmodernism, many of which involve the Marxist critique of aesthetic and political vanguardism in the last fifty years, and which will emphasize the methodological apparatus of neo-vanguardism as it attempts to formulate a confrontational approach against postmodernity.

1

The Theoretical Framework of Vanguardism, 1917-1934

The critique of ideology is a point of departure for elucidating both the potentialities and limitations of Marxist aesthetics, (1) given that its aim is to reveal more fully the moments that are obscured by the capitalist mode of production, and (2) because the instability of the dialectic between history and ideology that Marxist criticism uncovers is able to disentangle the organizational structure of cultural production from its social context. The predicament of Marxist interpretations of avant-garde aesthetics, as Neil Larsen argues, is that the “ideological fixation” of Marxist theoretical interpretations of the avant-garde often reproduces the representational “break” between aesthetics and political praxis, an approach that neglects the building of a materialist critique “in accordance with an intuitive historical consciousness of representational crisis”:

What emerges here is a notion of a theoretical discourse of modern aesthetics as, in effect, a displaced politics. The crisis in representation that evinces the various and conflicting efforts to produce a historicized aesthetics—an aesthetics of the *real*—would itself, according to such an analysis, be read as the effect of a political crisis so radical as to resist its direct theoretical and critical appropriation. History must be made to compensate, on the level of the superstructure, that which it withholds from life in its politico-economic dimension.¹

For Larsen, Marxist theories of avant-garde aesthetic production are always compelled to begin with an analysis of the ideological configuration of the “work” in isolation from its aesthetic component, a continual tendency in Marxist theoretical interrogations of

¹ Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony*, 8-9.

aesthetics that attempts to expose the inherent acts of resistance of which the modernists were conscious, albeit ideologically.² The history of Marxist criticism from the 1930's forward, in fact, can be analyzed from the point of view of ideological multiplicity, particularly as it relates to the opposing camps that emerged out of the Realism/Modernism debates of the 1930's whose resonance can be seen in the development of Marxist criticism throughout the twentieth century.³ For Larsen, Marxist critiques of modernism and the avant-garde are confined to the process of displacement, which as an effect of ideological positioning, separate the agencies of revolutionary change from their materialist properties, a process which can be thought of as a system through which the idealism of aesthetic representation is inexorably pit against historical transformation.⁴

Similarly, as Pierre Bourdieu points out, it is this very "distance" between aesthetic and political fields that fails to maintain itself as material praxis. Paradoxically, an internal "rapprochement" of vanguard aesthetic and political interests that sought to subvert the dominant social order was initiated in part by that displacement itself, since such changeability within the dimensions of the oppositional vanguard produced an ideological stance apposite for the emergent criticality of revolutionary praxis.⁵ Bourdieu is correct in pointing out that the alliance between intellectual labor (political, economic, etc.) and cultural production (in the sense of the "pure" artist), beginning in the modern period with Symbolism and Aestheticism, created the philosophical category of

² Ibid., 11.

³ For an analysis of the 1930's debates, see Fredric Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion," in *Aesthetics and Politics* (New York: Verso, 2002), 196-213, and Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, especially 75-91; for an overview of twentieth-century Marxist criticism, see Moyra Haslett, *Marxist Literary and Critical Theories* (New York: St. Martin's Press 2000).

⁴ Larsen, Ibid.

⁵ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 44.

“confrontation,” a moveable signifier that situated the aesthetic and political avant-garde in the always-already position of critical autonomy which struggled against bourgeois “ruling class” hegemony.⁶ Although effective in his analysis of the continuing obligation of the vanguard, Bourdieu limits his argument to the mechanism of displacement of which the aesthetic and political vanguard is composed, a symptom of the “field of cultural production” that appears within its theoretical category as a “sub-field” of oppositional praxis.⁷ Bourdieu’s theorization, in this respect, erases the binary between originality, which sanctifies the myth of the avant-garde artist as being exterior to the capitalist mode of production, and repetition, a concept which in its very foundation illuminates the historical conflict of avant-garde cultural production against the “decadence” of bourgeois familiarity.⁸

What concerns both Larsen and Bourdieu is the dilemma of re-evaluating the historical context of cultural production, as well as the “ideology of art” with which Marxist aesthetics is also preoccupied; to reformulate these concerns, what is the vanguard role of the artist-producer within capitalism and to what extent can the substance of revolutionary art produce a formula that avoids the incommensurability that often occurs between aesthetic and political interests? For it seems that the usage of the terminologies that have been handed down to Marxist theorists of modernist aesthetics by bourgeois criticism have delimited the possibility of formulating a revolutionary praxis for aesthetics and politics, since the very terms that are required to theorize revolutionary praxis is already bound by the model of displacement to which Bourdieu and Larsen

⁶ Ibid., 60.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ On the origins of the avant-garde, see Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Myths* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1985), 151-171.

refer. For it is the reproduction of the tension between aesthetics and politics, an emergent conflict between avant-garde art and capitalist counterrevolutionary tendencies, that Marxist criticism had to formulate the revolutionary potentialities of the aesthetic dimension, which as Walter Benjamin argues in his “Author as Producer” necessitates an interrogation of the *attitude* of a particular work as it emerges within the prevailing mode of production: “In other words, only by transcending the specialization in the process of production that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order can one make this production politically useful; and the barriers imposed by specialization must be breached jointly by the productive forces that they were set up to divide.”⁹

In particular, opposed to the category of avant-garde revolt, which from a Marxist point of view engages the tension between the artwork and capital, the concept of vanguardism will be utilized to probe the relations of cultural production as it experienced the crisis in representation which resulted from the ideological subversion that the 1917 Communist Revolution hoped to build in its antithesis to bourgeois rationality. The first section below will attempt to evaluate the mechanism that produced vanguard art under capitalism, caught in the confines of isolationism and the philosophical nihilism of bourgeois revolt, and the effects of its being subjected to a rigorous dislodgment from the capitalist mode of production, a process that results in the oppositional forms of socialist realism and the historical avant-garde that is thoroughly analyzed in the final section of this chapter.

⁹ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections* (New York: Schocken Books, 1978), 230.

Revolution-as-Signifier: Aesthetics and Politics after 1917

The Bolshevik Revolution of 1917 had as much an impact on intellectual life as it did on the political landscape of Europe at the end of World War I. Aside from the innovations that had taken place within the Russian avant-garde movements of Constructivism, the Proletkult, *LEF*, and within the Soviet film industry, the impetus of the Bolshevik Revolution was particularly felt in the pre-existing avant-garde movements in Germany and France, the former of which had established a short-lived socialist republic in 1918. John Willett observes that by 1922 there was a continuous exchange of ideas between the Soviet avant-garde and the intellectuals within the German Weimar Republic which furnished its aesthetic avant-garde with the means to strengthen the political transformations taking shape within post-World War I Germany.¹⁰ The 1922 Soviet Exhibition of Art in Berlin, and the arrival of a number of leading intellectuals and writers who embraced the Communist vision, such as Vladimir Mayakovsky and Osip Brik, furthered this aesthetic collaboration in the hope of materializing the revolutionary praxis that had provoked the political upheaval in both countries, a collaboration that incorporated the foundations of Marxist-Leninism at its theoretical core.¹¹ David Caute also examines both the immediate and the subsequent excitement of the Bolshevik Revolution in France, where in the absence of a political revolution, the theoretical implications of Communism had a particularly crucial effect on the formation of one of the most thriving European political parties of the left.¹² The richness of the debates

¹⁰ John Willett, *Art and Politics in the Weimar Period* (New York: Da Capo Press, 1996), 70.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 74-75. For an analysis of the work of Brik and Mayakovsky, see Natasha Kurchanova, "Against Utopia: Osip Brik and the Genesis of Productivism" (Ph.D. diss., City University of New York, 2005); for an analysis of the Soviet Avant-Garde, see the second section of this chapter.

¹² David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* (New York: Macmillan, 1964), 23-48.

within the Parti Communiste Française (PCF) about the role of the intellectual in party politics, particularly how the extension of intellectual work into the proletarian revolution could be achieved successfully, holds a vital history in the structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism, particularly its materialization within the Surrealist movement and its influence.¹³

Furthermore, commenting on the manifestation of the Russian avant-garde immediately after the events of 1917, Alex Callinicos writes, “The radicalization of Modernism into avant-garde was not simply the working through of a logic intrinsic to *fin-de-siècle* Aestheticism; it depended upon political conditions, and in particular on the October Revolution, which made concrete the vision of social transformation through which art and life could be re-united.”¹⁴ This infusion of aesthetics and politics after the 1917 Revolution was a direct result of the identification artists had with the political events that had been occurring across Europe, and which would cause further polarization in left and right politics until World War II. As Raymond Williams writes, “The deep emphasis on the liberation of the creative individual took many towards the anarchist wing, but especially after 1917 the project of heroic revolution could be taken as a model for collective liberation of all individuals.”¹⁵ Williams is also careful to note that the “political ambiguities” of the newly remodeled avant-garde and their rejection of the existing social order, expressed in similar rhetoric by Vladimir Mayakovsky and the Russian Futurists on the left, as well as by the Italian Futurists on the right, led to the “extreme poles of fascism and communism,” or in other terms to commitment on both the

¹³ See Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism*; the conflict between revolutionary communism and Surrealism will be discussed below in the second part of chapter 2.

¹⁴ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 57.

¹⁵ Raymond Williams, *The Politics of Modernism* (London: Verso, 1999), 57.

left and right that would split Europe by the late 1920's¹⁶ Williams' commentary here is effective in clarifying the remarkable influence of the Bolshevik Revolution on European intellectual life that reproduced, especially, the ideological crisis of the historical avant-garde, resulting not only in the cultural refurbishment of revolutionary art, but also in the ideological ascendancy of vanguardism which concretized the junction between aesthetic and political archetypes within modernity itself.

In this respect, it is possible to see the conflict that emerged between Marxism and the avant-garde; that is, as a purely intellectual movement that finally identified with the interior dimensions of working-class actuality, the struggles of the proletariat often became contingent upon the necessity of aesthetic autonomy, the incongruity of such debates being evident in the concept of commitment which occupies a significant place in Marxist criticism, particularly in the conflict between socialist realism and avant-garde experimentalism.¹⁷ As Eugene Lunn notes, it was not until the 1920's, with the idealistic entrenchment of the Bolshevik Revolution in Germany and France, that there was a convergence between the anarchistic tendencies of avant-garde art and the revolutionary praxis of Marxist-Leninism, the latter being concerned primarily with the perpetuation of the Bolshevik vision. As Lunn writes,

If there was any avant-garde politics, it was often of an extreme libertarian and anarchist variety, as, for example, among impressionists and symbolists in the 1880's and 1890's, and among some cubists, expressionists, and futurists in the years 1907-1914. On the other hand, the official socialist parties within the Second International (1889-1914), given their rigidly deterministic and optimistic outlook, could not help showing contempt for anything that might reveal traits of social pessimism or acute aesthetic self-consciousness.¹⁸

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 58.

¹⁷ See Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (London: Oxford University Press: 1977), 199-206; for more on socialist realism and the avant-garde in the debate on commitment see the third section of this chapter.

¹⁸ Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, 67.

Lunn is correct in analyzing the importance of Georg Plekhanov, whose emphasis on the social function of art had an immense influence on Lenin and on the general development of cultural production after the 1917 Revolution. At the same time, Lunn's analysis reconstructs the developments of the historical avant-garde according to what he labels the influence of "Marxist culture," an abstract term which delimits the significance the Bolshevik Revolution had on the radical autonomy associated with the historical avant-garde, above all its relation to the ideological repositioning of aesthetic and political vanguardism and its infusion of diverse theoretical insights on the political vanguard. While the analysis of the "origins" of Marxist aesthetics is necessary in rethinking both the progression of the historical avant-garde within the overarching project of modernism, Lunn's evaluation of Marxist aesthetics neglects the historical dimension of revolutionary praxis and its configuration of vanguard aesthetics and politics, what can be described as the ideological organization of the vanguard that gained precedence after 1917.¹⁹

Looking back over the whole of the twentieth century, in fact, it is possible to argue that the events of 1917 were pivotal in the formation of the utopian divisions of capitalism and Communism in the leading industrialized nations, as well as in the movement for liberation and decolonization in the Caribbean, Asia, and on the African continent.²⁰ The current argument, however, does not intend to offer a comprehensive overview of the events of 1917, nor does it mean to formulate a thorough analysis of the

¹⁹ Ibid., 68-69.

²⁰ See Susan Buck-Morss, *Dreamworld and Catastrophe* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000); for an analysis of vanguardism and decolonization, see chapter 4 below.

interior struggles that occurred therein.²¹ What is important here is the degree to which the concept of the avant-garde artist, whose commitment to the development of an aesthetic which intended to annihilate the systematic management of art by the ruling class, experienced a crisis of representation as it discovered a revolutionary praxis beyond the configurations of capital and the stagnation of bourgeois rationality, a praxis that subjected the potentiality of autonomous cultural production to a vigorous redefinition. In particular, 1917 Revolution combined the mechanism of revolt that is central to avant-garde autonomy with the collective praxis of revolutionary communism, which as an effect would become the foundation of an intellectual vanguard capable of causing the total destruction of the capitalist class, and thus uniting the forces of artistic creativity and collective social life of which the total revolution would be composed. The “revolution-as-signifier” in this context is meant to expand the ideological basis of aesthetic and political vanguardism in three separate ways: (1) in its early form *as* “rejection,” (2) in the refoundation of a vanguard program that incorporated the characteristics of aggressive social programming and which came to be identified with revolutionary communism, and (3) in the creative dimension of the historical avant-garde, particularly in its technical qualities. The significance of aesthetic and political vanguardism, in this regard, is meant to restructure the discourse of aesthetic modernity that began with the Aestheticism movement, which relegated the category of revolution to the ideology of anarchic spontaneity, rather than to a material praxis for the purposes of social transformation that began to take precedence after 1917. The revolution-as-signifier, then, liberated avant-garde cultural production from the indeterminacy of *L’art*

²¹ For a Marxist critique of the formation of the USSR, see Louis Aragon, *A History of the USSR from Lenin to Khrushchev* (New York: David McKay, 1964), and E.H. Carr, *The Russian Revolution from Lenin to Stalin 1917-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1979).

pour art sectarianism, and in doing so, created a material framework that moved beyond the anarchy of aesthetic representation to the possibility of revolutionary praxis, toward the totality of social transformation itself.

This interpretation differs from the long-established conceptualization of avant-garde cultural production, argued most notably in Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. For what designates the historical avant-garde for Bürger was its symbolic break from the *L'art pour art* movement of the late nineteenth-century. In this sense, the attachment to the principles of bourgeois thought was thus rendered in concrete terms: the revolt of the artist became the medium through which political dissent illuminated a presence, an existential process in which individuality, as separated from the vulgarity of mass culture, was fortified by the act of aesthetic revolt itself. According to Bürger, "The praxis of life to which the Aestheticism movement refers and which it negates is the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday," what he labels "the means-ends rationality of the bourgeois everyday."²² As such, the Aestheticism movement meant to give presence to the autonomous status of the artwork and defied the rationale of utilitarianism which bourgeois art had established. The anti-bourgeois performance of the historical avant-garde artist was able to codify a social position through the attempt to reinscribe art *as* praxis, and yet the relations of praxis only reproduced an "imaginary" conception of autonomy, as it became rooted to the ideology of aesthetic revolt which masked the political praxis to which it was inscribed historically. As Bürger states, "The

²² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

avant-gardiste protest, whose aim it is to reintegrate art into the praxis of life, reveals the nexus between autonomy and the absence of any consequences.”²³

What emerges, then, is the inconsistency between avant-garde cultural production and the category of autonomy that in Bürger’s formulation was rendered inoperative by the “means-end rationality” of the bourgeoisie. In other words, the negating process by which the very structure of the avant-garde artwork articulates itself must continually subvert the process by which praxis can be rooted historically, since the justification of its oppositional existence in more “radical” forms of art like the collage form had to occur in contrast to the rationale of social relations that were dominated by bourgeois social paradigms. In more conceptual terms, the political praxis of avant-garde art is represented by the autonomy by which it imagines an exterior space to the rationale of bourgeois cultural authority; nonetheless it must also distinguish itself as separate from the social reality from which it materializes, especially since it had lacked the revolutionary praxis that will become dominant after 1917. In purely ideological terms, the avant-garde work of art is designed to “withdraw meaning” from its social representation, which both creates the conditions for the radical subversion of the recipients’ position in bourgeois society, and yet also must avoid being historically conditioned. The performance of avant-garde cultural production, in this sense, was devoid of political effect, since such attachments would need to integrate the very structure it intended to negate, and instead proposed that its form was entirely a political act, an act of subversive intent that could be associated with anarchistic spontaneity and

²³ Ibid., 22.

which would cause the predominant rift between Marxism and the historical avant-garde itself.²⁴

While Bürger's theory offers an insight into the origins of the avant-garde and the historical separation between bourgeois cultural production and the anarchic autonomy of avant-garde art, his work often neglects the transformative character of the historical avant-garde after the impact of the Revolution of 1917. Part of the problem in accepting Bürger's theorization of the historical avant-garde, then, is that the organizational mechanisms that determine the avant-garde critique of social relations simultaneously resist a prescribed historicization, a point that relates to the overall tension between aesthetics and politics within modernity and thus may require the theoretical refoundation of a plurality of "avant-gardisms" that would gratify the inherent desire for their "unconditional" independence.²⁵ Equally, it is necessary to put forward a thorough critique of Bürger's theorization of ideological praxis, what he designates as the very movement by which the separation of avant-garde aesthetics from the appropriation of art by capital occurs on the social level. It is in this sense that the dialectic of the revolution-as-signifier offered in the present context can be thought of in ideological terms: as a reconstructing set of concepts that are articulated through the crisis of revolutionary praxis which converges in the reformation of aesthetic and political vanguardism, the categorical response here is meant to scrutinize the fetishization of avant-garde cultural production after 1917. That is, to the extent that aesthetic and political vanguardism displaced the illusion of autonomous radicalism that had been traditionally associated with the avant-garde artist, in particular the naturalized spontaneity and social detachment

²⁴ Ibid., 80-81.

²⁵ For a thorough discussion of avant-gardisms, see David Graver, *The Aesthetics of Disturbance: Anti-Art in avant-Garde Drama* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1995), 1-43.

which furthered the ideological notion that avant-garde cultural production could sustain itself external to the capitalist mode of production, vanguardism linked the revolution-as-signifier that was liberated in the midst of the Bolshevik Revolution to the ways in which history itself worked through texts, a position that subjects the theoretical categories of avant-garde cultural production to a methodical redefinition. In this context, Terry Eagleton provides a basis for redefining the structure of the revolution-as-signifier and its historical contingency, quoted here in full for the purposes of further analysis:

History, then, certainly ‘enters’ the text, not least the ‘historical’ text; but it enters it precisely *as ideology*, as presence determined and distorted by its measurable absences. This is not to say that real history is ‘present’ in the text but in disguised form, so that the task of the critic is then to wrench the mask from its face. It is rather that history is ‘present’ in the text in the form of a *double-absence*. The text takes as its object, not the real, but certain significations by which the real lives itself—significations which are themselves the product of partial abolition. Within the text itself, then, ideology becomes a dominant structure, determining the character and disposition of certain ‘pseudo-real’ constituents. This inversion, as it were, of the historical process, whereby in the text itself ideology seems to determine the historically real rather than *vice versa*, is itself naturally determined in the last instance by history itself. History, one might say, is the *ultimate* signifier of literature, as it is the ultimate signified.²⁶

For Eagleton, the process by which the intersection of history and ideology testifies to the signifying dimension of textual form is precisely the methodology that preconditions the reproductive inconsistency associated with avant-gardist self-reliance, of the historicity of autonomy in its broadest sense. Eagleton, in this sense, is effective in distinguishing the non-aesthetic components from the textual structure in his externalization of the interplay between history and ideology, or rather in the process by which the ideology of aesthetic autonomy is re-interpreted in a Marxist science of the text

²⁶ Terry Eagleton, *Criticism & Ideology: A Study in Marxist Theory*, 72.

itself.²⁷ The materialist justification for the movement of history, which in the overarching dialectic of modernist discourse reveals the tension between ideology and aesthetic representation, is for the current argument what delineates the inclusive structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism; that is, in the “measurable absences” of its theoretical basis, Marxist investigations of the avant garde must expose the idealistic fixation of ascribing a revolutionary praxis to aesthetic representation itself, a fixation which in distorting the autonomy of avant-garde aesthetics, converges in the discursive mechanism of the revolution-as-signifier that became the building block for the historical avant-garde after 1917. Thus, as Fredric Jameson writes, “History [becomes] a product of human labor just like the work of art itself, and obeys analogous dynamics,” an organizational mode, in other words, by which the ideology of history mediates between form and content, not in the attempt to justify the relation between them, but in order to realize the aesthetic dynamic of aesthetic and political vanguardism and the apparatus of the revolution-as-signifier by which it formulates a presence.²⁸

Furthermore, it is not the primary concern here to determine whether or not the function of aesthetic and political vanguardism is more or less compatible with the historical avant-garde, nor is it meant to resolve the inherent tension between history and aesthetics, a problematic that, although unavoidable, has beleaguered Marxist interpretations of avant-garde aesthetics since the 1930’s, as both Larsen and Bourdieu have pointed out. Rather, what is in question here is the crisis that materialized in avant-garde cultural production after the Bolshevik Revolution, which in the subsequent form of vanguardism sought to assimilate the revolution-as-signifier for the purposes of

²⁷ Tony Bennett, *Formalism and Marxism* (London: Methuen, 1979), 12-13.

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 328.

restructuring the social character of art itself. The organizational mode of aesthetic and political vanguardism, as such, can be viewed through Lenin's theoretical interrogations of the political vanguard as it relates to cultural production; for the ideological composition of the revolution-as-signifier that was unleashed by the Bolshevik Revolution enabled the transformation of the inner-workings within the productive spaces of culture, particularly in its European context. The intention here is not to reproduce a Leninist theory of avant-garde aesthetics, nor will it render a comprehensive history of Lenin's political philosophy, even though such concerns linger on the margins and are pertinent to the interconnections between aesthetics and politics within Russian history, especially after the Revolution of 1917.²⁹ On the contrary, Lenin's theoretization of the political vanguard will be utilized to develop the structural organization of aesthetic and political vanguardism in its current usage, in relation to the interconnections between the avant-gardist rebuke of bourgeois rationality and its institutional formations, as well as in the context of the emergent crisis of the historical avant-garde that demanded the enclosure of the revolution-as-signifier within its structure, a process which begins to reorganize revolutionary art paradigms after 1917.

For Lenin, the ideology of revolution is imbedded in the class conflict which is historically shaped by the vanguard party, one whose very composition is continually produced according to the transformative character of the revolutionary struggle itself. To the extent that the formation of the vanguard is determined by the nature of that struggle, its primary objective is to promote and expand political consciousness of the

²⁹ For a critique of Lenin's philosophy, see Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy, and other essays* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1971), and Anton Pannekoek, *Lenin as Philosopher* (Milwaukee: Marquette University Press, 2003); for more on Lenin's impact on the Russian Avant-Garde and socialist realism, see section two and three of this chapter.

confrontation with capital, a concept which in its very formation must position the proletarian class as the ultimate bearers of revolutionary transformation. “Class political consciousness,” Lenin writes, “can be brought to the workers only from without, that is, only from outside the economic struggle, from outside the sphere of relations between workers and employers.”³⁰ The unfolding of the revolutionary process, as such, emerges from the radicalization of worker spontaneity and the urgency of liberation, which channeled into a creative response, is reconstructed in the continuity of the vanguard party, a continuity which, in dialectical terms, internalizes the critical dimension of the class struggle and translates it into an ideology which constitutes the materiality of the revolutionary organization: “For it is not enough to call ourselves ‘vanguard,’ the advanced contingent; we must act in such a way that *all* the other contingents recognize and are obliged to admit that we are marching in the vanguard.”³¹ As Antonio Negri writes, the “class-based party” emerges from the spontaneity of the proletarian struggle for liberation and “structures class autonomy and consciously plans its expressions” in the ideological materialization of revolutionary consciousness that is meant to sustain the resilience of vanguard organizational praxis: “This is an avant-garde party, always avant-garde, because it permanently goes beyond the material limits that the capitalist structure imposes on class movement.”³² In Negri’s formulation, the necessity to harness the “constituent power” of spontaneity and the emergence of political consciousness signifies a strategic determination on the part of the vanguard organization which reinterprets the critical developments of political consciousness in ideological terms and which defines

³⁰ V.I. Lenin, *What is To Be Done?*, in *Selected Works V. 1* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 191.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 193.

³² Antonio Negri, *Insurgencies: Constituent Power and the Modern State* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1999), 281.

the emergence of the proletarian class, whose interior formation is created by the dialectical continuity of the vanguard organization. For Georg Lukács, the crisis in proletarian representation, the composite of which transpires in the interiors of class struggle, and in the “intellectual exteriors” of the revolutionary party, typifies the tension between theory and revolutionary praxis at core of Lenin’s dialectical thought:

The vanguard party of the proletariat can only fulfill its destiny in this conflict if it is *always a step in front* of the struggling masses, to show them the way. But only *one* step in front so that it always remain leader of *their* struggle. Its theoretical clarity is therefore only valuable if it does not stop at a general—merely theoretical—level, but always culminates in the concrete analysis of a concrete situation; in other words, if its theoretical correctness always only expresses the sense of the concrete situation.... Lenin’s concept of organization is in itself dialectical: it is both a product of and a conscious contributor to, historical development in so far as it, too, *is simultaneously product and producer of itself*.³³

What is important in the present context is the extent to which the revolutionary praxis that emerges from Leninist theories of the vanguard party can be read in cultural terms, for it is the ideological position of the vanguard that fortifies its existence in total opposition to capitalist domination. It is at this point, then, that the contingent relation between the political vanguard and the autonomous aesthetics of the historical avant-garde serves to strengthen the dialectical formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism, particularly as its development expresses itself in the causality of theory and praxis. That is, the hypothetical reconstruction of aesthetic and political vanguardism that is informed by the tension between theory and praxis, which in Lenin’s explanation is unveiled in the dialectic between the class struggle and revolutionary movement, is what defines the material representation by which the historical avant-garde could

³³ Georg Lukács, *Lenin: A Study on the Unity of His Thought* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1974), 35, 37. For a thorough analysis of Lenin and party formation, see Paul Le Blanc, *Lenin and the Revolutionary Party* (Amherst: Humanity Books, 1993); see also Christopher Hill, *Lenin and the Russian Revolution* (London: Penguin, 1978), 47-99), and James D. White, *Lenin: The Practice and Theory of Revolution* (New York: Palgrave, 2001).

undermine bourgeois rationality, what in the present context underlies the critical mechanism of the revolution-as-signifier and its dialectical process. What united the conceptual distinction between avant-garde cultural production and revolutionary praxis was the mechanism of confrontation that was able to supplant bourgeois hegemony and which in the nexus of aesthetic and political vanguardism occurred through the revolution-as-signifier and the materialization of vanguard performance, the concretization of revolutionary praxis which determined its ultimate signified. As Carmen Claudin-Urondo writes, “The accession of the masses to culture-as-knowledge, or, what is the same thing, the ‘democratisation’ of this culture, which, as we have seen already, is, in Lenin’s eyes, the stage that has to be traversed in order to attain civilisation,” which in contrast to bourgeois rationale, signified the overthrow of the value systems that had been codified by capitalist doctrine.³⁴ Moreover, the formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism reorganized the social position of the intellectual as a result of the transformation of ruling class organization, thus propagating a response by the intellectual class that simultaneously “betrayed” the interior elements of its self-interest and demonstrated the reactionary challenge to the dominant production process, as Walter Benjamin points out:

This betrayal consists, in the case of the writer, in conduct that transforms him from supplier of the productive apparatus into an engineer who see it as his task to adapt this apparatus to the purposes of the proletarian revolution.... The more completely he can orient his activity toward this task, the more correct the political tendency, and necessarily also the higher the technical quality, of his work³⁵

³⁴ Carmen Claudin-Urondo, *Lenin and the Cultural Revolution* (Sussex: the Harvester Press, 1977), 23.

³⁵ Benjamin, *Reflections*, 237-238.

What the Marxist vision offered avant-garde aesthetics was the praxis upon which the revolution-as-signifier could be utilized in the expansion of the cultural rebellion against the ruling class and its project of re-directing the materiality of the vanguard toward counterrevolutionary activities, a revolutionary outlook which the historical avant-garde had desired to advance in concrete form.

As the concreteness of Lenin's theorization of the political vanguard reveals, the structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism embraced the inconsistency between historical and ideological contexts after the momentum of the 1917 Revolution began to increase, thus codifying the revolution-as-signifier as it attached itself to the process of avant-garde cultural production. In similar terms, this ideological codification informed a newly formed revolutionary praxis, which as the above analysis of Lenin is meant to reveal, radicalized the project of avant-garde aesthetics by channeling that revolutionary cogency into an assimilative project that endeavored to abolish the values attributed to ruling-class hegemony, a project, that is, that only could be achieved by the total overthrow of capitalism and its political apparatus, namely the capitalist state itself. The urgency of Lenin's appeal in his *State and Revolution* is thus made clear: *Only in communist society, when the resistance of the capitalists have been completely crushed, when the capitalists have disappeared, when there are no classes only then the state ceases to exist, it becomes possible to speak of freedom.*³⁶ The desire for the total abolishment of the bourgeoisie resulted from the convergence of art and social life that for the historical avant-garde became the very mechanism through which it articulated a response to the hegemonic formations of the capitalist state, a manifestation that

³⁶ V.I. Lenin, *State and Revolution*, in *Selected Works V. 2* (Moscow: Foreign Languages Publishing House, 1960), 373; the quotation is amended here and italics are added.

historically draws particular attention to the cultural dimension of Lenin's theoretical principles, as well as to the consequent pattern of aesthetic and political vanguardism in its reconstruction of revolutionary art paradigms.

It is the tension that is created by the aesthetic and political dimension of vanguardism that needs to be interrogated further, especially as it relates to the specific qualities of those movements that assimilated the revolution-as-signifier. That is, how does the crisis that was created by the revolution-as-signifier lend itself to the actuality of aesthetic praxis, an inconsistency which, in similar terms, reveals the dialectical movement between ideology and history itself? Moreover, was the overthrow of capitalism the ultimate objective of vanguardism or was the structure of revolt in avant-garde art simply directed toward subversion, a mechanism which confronted the limitations of bourgeois morality in its attempt to augment the influence of avant-gardist aesthetic intent without the totality of revolution itself? Finally how is the relation between art and political praxis contingent on the production process, a point that is central to Walter Benjamin's interpretation that the function of the intellectual is constructed according to the material form with which the writer or artist is confronted? In view of the theoretical questions outlined here, what follows in the next section is an analysis of aesthetic and political vanguardism as it relates to the concrete developments in avant-garde cultural production, an analysis that will broaden the scope of vanguardism by rooting it in the aesthetic field and its transformation after 1917.

The Dialectic of Subversion/Inversion: Dadaism and the Soviet Avant-Garde

The interaction of aesthetics and politics in Europe from 1918 to the end of the 1920's is of particular importance to Marxist critical interpretations of the avant-garde. The development of revolutionary art emerged from the reactionary position of the historical avant-garde, which as Peter Bürger points out reinserted art into social life, and materialized in what is described here as aesthetic and political vanguardism, which in the configuration of the revolution-as-signifier began to dominate cultural production for the purposes of advancing the potentialities of the Bolshevik Revolution that by November of 1918 spilled over into the anticipated socialist revolution in Germany.³⁷ In material terms, the intellectual development of revolutionary praxis in Germany became the focus for writers and artists who had associated themselves with the aesthetic radicalism of the historical avant-garde, notably the Dadaists in Berlin, and who merged with Marxist activists in the hope of building a structural continuity with the Bolshevik vision, the main objective of which was the overthrow of capitalism, which the leftist parties of Germany began to see as the root cause for the devastation of World War I. As Richard Sheppard and Alex Callinicos point out, the amalgamation of aesthetic and political engagement that German intellectuals developed in the post-1917 era has often been ignored by scholars who seem to accept the aesthetic radicalism of the avant-garde intellectuals, yet whose "postmodernist" aversion to Marxist politics restrict them from developing a full analysis of the association between aesthetics and politics, especially as it relates to German Dadaism which in the 1920's became contingent upon Marxist

³⁷ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49; Willett, *Art and Politics of the Weimar Period*, 44.

politics and the assimilation of revolutionary praxis into its cultural production.³⁸ What is evident, in fact, is that by 1918, a number of established artists and writers had joined the German Communist Party (KPD), among them George Grosz, Helmut Herzfelde, and Erwin Piscator, and writers like Bertolt Brecht whose association with Marxism led him to the development of an aesthetic program which drew upon the Russian avant-garde movements such as *LEF* and *Novy LEF* in the creation of a revolutionary aesthetics devoted to the building of “worker power,” as the Russian Proletkult attempted to formulate, as well as in the simultaneous radicalization of social relations under capitalism, which in general terms can be characterized within the framework of the anti-bourgeois ideology of the historical avant-garde itself.³⁹

The relevance of individual commitment by many of the artists and writers of the period is less crucial than the process through which aesthetic and political vanguardism developed the internationalist dimension of Dadaism and the influence of the Russian avant-garde in post-1917 Europe. For the crisis in representation that was fostered by the commitment to revolutionary politics within the avant-garde movements, particularly in the Dadaism and in the Russian avant-gardes, renders a view into the history of aesthetic revolt, both in the service of the existing revolution in Russia, and in the prospects of negating the counterrevolutionary groups that emerged after the “moderate” revolution in Germany in 1918. That is, if the potentiality of aesthetic and political vanguardism was contingent upon the foundational performance of the revolution-as-signifier, what can be divulged from an analysis of the structural form of the Russian avant-garde and Dadaism

³⁸ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism-Dada-Postmodernism* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 2000), 322, and Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 23.

³⁹ For more on KPD membership, see Willett; for an analysis of Brechtian Marxism, see Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, 91-127.

is what in the present context relates to the dialectic of subversion/inversion, which in other terms will attempt to materialize a more thorough interpretation of the aesthetic and political vanguard and the overarching cultural exchange that resulted from the manifestation of an internationalist component within avant-garde cultural production. More specifically, the ideology of revolt of the Dadaist movement is relegated to the position of subversion, which through the process of cultural critique reproduced its confrontational position within the space of the political instability of 1920's Europe, what can be thought of as a position which organized itself in the framework of aesthetic and political vanguardism, yet one that was cautiously dedicated to the possibilities of revolutionary praxis. The Dadaist assimilation of the revolution-as-signifier suggests that revolutionary transformation within capitalist society could only be achieved by *subverting the ethical surface of bourgeois social life*, thus the act of subversion was not simply a mode of expression that had its roots in the anarchic autonomy of the historical avant-garde. The combination of avant-garde spontaneity and the materiality of revolutionary praxis resulted in the potentiality of aesthetic revolt that characterized the authority of Dadaism itself, an authority whose cultural politics was problematically contingent on the fluctuating crises of capitalist reorganization in the post-World War I Weimar Republic.

Furthermore, the Dadaist mechanism of subversion here is contingent on its dialectical component of inversion, which varies only according to its respective historical context; that is, contrary to the process of subversion that was necessary for the Dadaist confrontation with capitalist social relations, the Russian avant-garde emerged directly from revolutionary praxis itself, thus forging a project through which the turning-

inside-out of the properties of avant-gardist art became merged with the overarching annihilation of capitalism and its legitimating ideologies. In other terms, the objective of Soviet cultural production was to reformulate the structure of the historical avant-garde in order to reinscribe its foundational components within the already-established praxis of revolution, an attempt to politicize cultural production, inasmuch as it intended to authenticate Leninist theories of the cultural vanguard as well. Thus, inversion, in this sense, is related to the Marxist dialectical category of *Aufhebung* itself: as a preconditioning mechanism that intended to restructure the historical avant-garde, it simultaneously negated ruling class cultural formations while reforming itself according to the very de-categorization that emerges in the wake of revolutionary struggle, the movement which justifies its dialectical structure. The dialectic of subversion/inversion can be understood in relation to the materialization of a revolutionary praxis that attempted to consolidate the ideologies of revolt in the movement toward the formation of an anti-art, a category which especially in the shape of Dadaist subversion sought to unmask the bourgeois fetishization of aesthetic cultural paradigms from the late nineteenth century to the 1917 Revolution and beyond.

As Sheila Fitzpatrick points out, it is the overlapping struggle between aesthetics and politics in post-1917 Russia, expressed in the conflict between the emergence of party political power and avant-garde cultural production, that characterized the “cultural enlightenment” which Lenin designated as being fundamental to the organization of Communism and the destruction of the capitalist state.⁴⁰ In a slightly less comprehensive version, the dialectic of subversion/inversion here attempts to interpret the complexities

⁴⁰ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front: Power and Culture in Revolutionary Russia* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1992), 5.

of cultural production within the interiors of the Soviet avant-garde, as it allowed for a refoundation of the theoretical dimension of aesthetic and political vanguardism within the historical context of the post-revolutionary era. For example, in the declaration of the visual arts group *October* of 1928, whose representatives included Le Lissitzky, Sergei Eisenstein, Alexander Rodchenko, and Diego Rivera who was active in Moscow from 1927-28, the continuing concern with developing an aesthetic model in the service of the revolution is illustrated in their material objectives:

The main task of this artistic service to the proletarian needs of the Revolution is to raise the ideological, cultural, and domestic level of the backward strata of the working class and of those workers who are undergoing an alien class influence; their level would be raised to that of the avant-garde, revolutionary industrial proletariat, which is consciously building the Socialist economy and culture on the bases of organization, planning, and highly developed industrial technology.⁴¹

With the end of the civil war and the planned overthrow of the Bolsheviks by the White Army in collaboration with the West, (1918-1921) and the institutionalization of the New Economic Policy (1921-1928), which Lenin hoped would remedy, on a temporary basis, the stagnation of the Soviet economy, the above declaration was written on the verge of a major shift in cultural policy that would trigger a theoretical battle between aesthetics and politics within revolutionary Russia, not to mention within Western Marxist circles, as the Realism/Modernism controversy illustrates. What is important to the present context, however, is the extent to which the *October* group attempted to integrate the propositions expounded by some of its contemporaries in the avant-garde circles of the 1920's, particularly the Proletkult, whose cultural agenda included the dissemination of the ideology of the 1917 Revolution on a mass scale, as well as by the Constructivists who

⁴¹ "October—Association of Artistic Labor Declaration, 1928," in *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, ed. John Bowlt (New York: Thames and Hudson, 1988), 276.

sought to remodel social life through the radical use of industrial techniques, which severed from capitalist society could be recreated in the collectivity of social praxis in the openness of aesthetic space.⁴²

The intention of the *October* group was to furnish a more usable version of Lenin's original delineation of the revolutionary vanguard and its model of "critical absorption," one through which the proletariat could recreate its presence out of the old society, rather than through the total abolishment of pre-revolutionary cultural tendencies, a view Lenin makes clear in his 1920 address at the Third Congress of the Communist Youth League in which he argues that the elevation of the proletariat is a result of the accumulated knowledge of social history.⁴³ Yet, as Lars Kleberg rightly states, Lenin's views on culture were less elaborate than what many scholars have attributed to him, especially as it relates to what many see as Lenin's harsh criticism of the historical avant-garde, excluding, perhaps, the Proletkult, whose sectarianism in the late 1920's seems to have prompted Lenin's critical response.⁴⁴ In fact, the inclusive aspirations of the *October* group emerged out of the intensification of cultural production after the events of 1917, the era which witnessed the succession of various movements within the Russian avant-garde, and which fostered the advancement of the Bolshevik Revolution in the desired creation of newly organized social relations. The pre-existing movements within the Russian avant-garde, predominantly in the Futurist and Cubo-Futurist movements that had been flowering since 1913, also reinforced the vision of the Communist vanguard, the most relevant example of which could be found in Natan Altman's declaration that

⁴² For more of the Proletkult, see Lynn Mally, *Culture of the Future: the Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990).

⁴³ V.I. Lenin, *Selected Works V. III*, 503-517.

⁴⁴ Lars Kleberg, *Theatre as Action: Soviet Russian Avant-Garde Aesthetics* (London: Macmillan Press, 1993), 21.

the “deeper link between Futurism and proletarian creation” could be recreated in collective form, one that destroyed the restrictiveness of class society that had separated intellectual labor from proletarian social life under capitalism.⁴⁵

The degree to which the October Revolution liberated the ideology of revolutionary praxis can be seen primarily in the work of the Proletkult, which sought to expand the industrial constituent of working class life and channel it into aesthetic form. The prospects of cultivating a proletarian culture as an extension of the 1917 Revolution was from its inception contrary to Lenin’s theory of the assimilative vanguard, a theory, that is, which intended to materialize what John Willett labels a “third force,” or rather the mechanism that would stabilize the cultural dimension through which collective social life could be moved forward rapidly.⁴⁶ In the manifesto of the founding theorist of the Proletkult Alexander Bogdanov, the rejection of bourgeois value systems is put in the context of the need to promote the culture of labor, of the proletariat as a new form of creative meaning, yet one that organically separated itself from the degeneracy of capitalist social relations:

With regard to artistic creation, the old culture is characterized by its indeterminate and unconscious methods (“inspiration” etc.) and by the alienation of these methods from those of labor activity and of other creative areas. Although the proletarian is taking only his first steps in this field, his general, distinctive tendencies can be traced clearly. Monism is expressed in his aspiration to fuse art and working life, to make art a weapon for the active and aesthetic transformation of his entire life. Collectivism, initially an elemental process and then an increasingly conscious one, is making its mark in the content of works of art and even on the artistic form through which life is perceived. Collectivism illuminates the depiction not only of human life, but also of the life of nature: nature as a field of collective labor, its interconnections and harmonies as the embryos and prototypes of organized collectivism.⁴⁷

⁴⁵ Natan Altman, “‘Futurism’ and Proletarian Art,” in Bowlt, 161-164.

⁴⁶ Willett, 41.

⁴⁷ Alexander Bogdanov, “The Paths of Proletarian Creation, 1920,” in Bowlt, 181.

Commenting on the work of the Proletkult and Bogdanov, Lynn Mally writes, “Proletarian culture was the necessary antithesis to bourgeois culture, the necessary step before a real classless culture for all humanity could be achieved,” a critique that characterizes the influence the movement acquired from the Revolution and its building of a worker culture as a separate sphere, one whose principles of radical separation were similar to the radical autonomy of the historical avant-garde and its attempted reinsertion of art into social life.⁴⁸ It is relevant here to include Leon Trotsky’s criticism of the Proletkult, which focused primarily on the designation of working class culture and the apparently insignificant prospects for creating an aesthetic movement within the ranks of the proletariat (1) when its objectives should be directed toward the nurturing of Communist social relations, and (2) since proletarian class formation in itself was an abstraction that needed to be defined clearly prior to working-class culture. Nevertheless, the disbandment of the Proletkult by 1925 by Lenin was motivated by the sectarian character of the movement, which in slight contrast to Trotsky’s criticism, resulted from Bogdanov’s cultivation of a proletarian culture external to the Communist vanguard, which after 1917 had been granted a decisive space in which to materialize a cultural politics of its own.⁴⁹

As the current argument has emphasized, it is apparent that the conceptual foundation of the Proletkult, with its emphasis on harnessing the spirit of proletarian collectivism in the reproduction of an aesthetic program within revolutionary praxis,

⁴⁸ Mally, *Culture of the Future: the Proletkult Movement in Revolutionary Russia*, 222.

⁴⁹ See Trotsky’s critique of the Proletkult in his *Literature and Revolution* (New York: Russell & Russell, 1957), 184-215; see also Herman Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories, 1917-1934* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1963), 9-19.

evokes the anti-art spirit of the historical avant-garde, its relation to the formative revolt against bourgeois aesthetic paradigms in which Dada was most effective. More specifically, the revolution-as-signifier upon which the category of aesthetic revolt became contingent was utilized by the Proletkult as a subversive mechanism through which the emptying out of bourgeois social relations resulted in the negation of whatever is external to proletarian existence. The distinguishable refoundation of collectivism by the Proletkult, which as Herman Ermolaev points out was “animated by the revolutionary ideals of international communism,” became dependent on the creativity of proletarian social life, not to mention on the presupposition that the acceptance of revolutionary communism had already been internalized by the proletariat itself.⁵⁰ In relative terms, the methodology of the Proletkult, its identification with the working class, as well as its momentum toward the formation of a classless society, is not in question here, nor is its attempt to create a revolutionary praxis of worker-culture erroneous; rather, it is the theoretical basis of the Proletkult movement, which by relying on the subversive properties of proletarian culture to carry out its program, contradicted the assimilative mechanism of the revolution-as-signifier that became foundational for the ideological expansion of revolutionary praxis within Communism. On the other hand, the dialectical position of the Proletkult anti-aesthetic figured into the structure of vanguardism relatively easily, especially as it related to the Western Marxist debates about modernist aesthetics in 1930’s, as well as in its connection to the problematical form of revolutionary art within post-revolutionary societies, a predicament which at its core became more prevalent in the structural institutionalization of socialist realism after 1934.

⁵⁰ Ermolaev, 11.

The anti-art impulse of the Soviet Avant-Garde, then, inverted the aesthetic properties of the historical avant-garde, a process that was able to promote the mechanism of revolt external to the capitalist framework of cultural production. Yet, in contrast to the radical autonomy of the historical avant-gardist, the dialectic of inversion was able to root the revolutionary-as-signifier in a material praxis. Contrary to the apparently sectarian practices of the Proletkult, the groups who put themselves in the service of the Bolshevik vision, like the October group was to do in 1928, were *LEF*, *Novy LEF*, and the *Constructivists*, all of which emerged in the New Economic Period, and yet were dissolved as early as 1930. The ideological platform of these groups, although varied to some degree, was aligned with the dynamic principles of the intellectual vanguard that Lenin had theorized, particularly in its preoccupation for leading the new society in the building of Communism, or in the continuing reorganization and remodeling of pre-existing social relations through revolutionary aesthetics, the dialectical process that characterizes inversion itself.⁵¹ As the “Manifesto” by the editors of the *LEF* in 1923 points out, the ideology of aesthetic revolt emerged out of the Futurist abhorrence for bourgeois rationality, yet in full contrast to their Italian contemporaries, attempted to utilize the revolution-as-signifier in order to reinscribe itself within vanguard praxis:

THE “LEFTS” OF THE WORLD. We know little of your name, the names of your schools, but this we do know: wherever revolutions begin, there you grow....

Only the October Revolution, which freed art from Bourgeois enslavement, has given freedom to Art.

Down with the boundaries of Lands and Studios!

Down with the Monks of the Right Art!

Long Live the Single Front of the Lefts!

⁵¹ Ermolaev, 74-75.

Long Live the Art of the Proletarian Revolution!⁵²

Perhaps the most well-known international proponent of *LEF* and *Novy LEF* revolutionary art, the ranks of which included Osip Brik and Viktor Shklovsky, was Vladimir Mayakovsky whose poetics unveiled the tension between the pre-revolutionary nihilism of the historical avant-garde and the ideological inversion that took place in its post-revolutionary Russian context, as found in his 1925 “Back home”:

Proletarians
 arrive at communism
 from below-
 by the low way of mines,
 sickles,
 and pitchforks-
 But I,
 from poetry’s skies,
 plunge into communism
 because
 without it
 I feel no love.⁵³

As well as his “At the top of My Voice” in which he exclaims,

The enemy
 of the massed working class
 is my enemy too
 inveterate and of long standing

 let our
 common monument be
 socialism
 built
 in battle.⁵⁴

⁵² The Editors of LEF “Manifesto” in *Bolshevik Visions*, ed. William G. Rosenberg (Ann Arbor: Ardis Publishers, 1984), 409.

⁵³ Vladimir Mayakovsky “Back Home,” in *The Marxist Internet Archive*
<http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/mayakovsky/1925/back-home.htm>.

⁵⁴ Vladimir Mayakovsky “At the Top of My Voice,” in *Marxist Internet Archive*
<http://www.marxists.org/subject/art/literature/mayakovsky/1930/at-top-my-voice.htm>; for a thorough analysis of Mayakovsky and Futurism, see Markov, *Russian Futurism: A History*; see also Len Richards, “Art and Soul of the Revolution,” *Peace Review* 15:2 (2003): 187-194.

Although the ideologies of the “old” in *LEF* and *Novy LEF* recall the sectarianism of the Proletkult movement and the nihilistic tendencies of the historical avant-garde, it is evident that the components of aesthetic revolt are inverted as a result of the dialectical reinscription of the revolution-as-signifier, which by completing the formulation of an anti-art infused with the revolutionary praxis of the Bolshevik vanguard resulted in the subsequent conflict with Soviet aesthetic standards by 1932 and its movement toward socialist realism.⁵⁵ However, to this extent as well, the revolutionary praxis formulated by *LEF*, which is similarly utilized by the Constructivist impetus toward the technological and functional advancement of the cultural revolution as seen most clearly in Vladimir Tatlin’s unrealized “Monument to the Third International,” came closest to the definition of aesthetic and political vanguardism proposed here, specifically in the building of a revolutionary praxis through the inversion of pre-existing ideologies of revolt associated with the historical avant-garde.⁵⁶ In order to complete the dialectic of inversion, however, it is necessary to turn to the crucial developments within international Dadaism and the tendency toward subversion and anti-art, an analysis that will elucidate the material dimension of revolutionary art and the historical context of the vanguardist impulse under capitalist authority.

By concretizing and promoting the disdain for bourgeois rationality, it can be argued that international Dadaism caused the avant-garde movements to splinter into opposing camps on the political left, thus delimiting the possibility of forming the homogeneity of revolutionary engagement which characterized their Russian contemporaries. As John Willett notes, the “weakness” resulting from the development

⁵⁵ See section three of this chapter.

⁵⁶ For an analysis of Tatlin’s work, see John Milner, *Vladimir Tatlin and the Russian Avant-Garde* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983); for more on Constructivism, see Bowlt, 205-230.

of Dadaism outside of the Weimar Republic, especially in Paris, was due to its focus on nihilistic contempt rather than the building of an oppositional praxis of art, such as had been formed within German Dada and the “Red Groups” associated with George Grosz, whose aggressive work in political satire was stimulated by the revolutionary instability of the Republic in the 1920’s.⁵⁷ The radical break with tradition which Dada and the historical avant-garde hoped to reconstruct as revolutionary praxis was thus limited by the act of negation, through its paradoxical dissociation with the category of art itself, rather than through the materiality of political revolt of which it was improperly associated, a problematic within avant-garde cultural production that will be explored in detail in the next section. For Peter Bürger, however, it is this very quality of avant-garde art, the shock attribute in particular, that broke the barrier between art and social life, a critique that for the present context has more to do with the question of aesthetic content rather than with the specificities of a cultural politics suitable for assimilating the revolution-as-signifier for the purposes of expanding the confrontational form that became associated with aesthetic and political vanguardism.⁵⁸ Richard Sheppard argues that the diversity of political engagement by the Dadaists caused a rift in the authenticity of political commitment, which somewhat contrary to the formation of the vanguard became limited to the aesthetic radicalism of which it was originally composed:

At their most characteristic, the politics of Dada are jubilantly and ironically Anarchist, concerned with releasing the irrational powers in human nature and changing our way of experiencing, seeing, and thinking about reality. For Dada, it was pointless to socialize property and create revolutionary institutions without first destroying people’s fear of their own irrational powers—the root of their urge to quire property, dominate their fellows, and settle within fixed and apparently stable patterns. Thus, the real political force of Dada lies not in any abstract

⁵⁷ Willett, *Art of the Weimar Republic*, 50-53.

⁵⁸ Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80-81.

ideas, but in its uncompromising experimentalism within a modernity that is felt not only to have come off its hinges but to have lost those hinges while its ideologues pretended everything was still in its proper place.⁵⁹

The disbelief in the structures that would establish the concreteness of social revolution, even those that would bring about the demise of capitalism and its legitimating ideologies in the cultural domain, is relevant to the notion that the revolution-as-signifier in Dadaism sustained a presence only through the indeterminacy of subversion, a movement through which the illusion of confrontation is cultivated in the spaces of aesthetic revolt, yet only to the extent that they remain suspended, unfulfilled. It is for this reason that the link between the historical avant-garde and postmodernism, as Sheppard rightly points out, can be made through the context of Dadaism and its contempt for the hegemony of bourgeois modernity itself, a critique that is often in conflict with the agenda of Marxist politics, which contrary to *LEF* or the Constructivists, sought to infuse the already-existing properties of Russian avant-garde into the insurgency of revolutionary art that emerged internationally in post-1917 Europe.⁶⁰

Nonetheless, the mode of critique inherent in Dadaist aesthetic revolt, which through the subversion of conventional reality attempted to reinscribe the potentiality of art and social praxis in the individual content of anti-art projects, revealed the extent to which avant-garde movements that flourished within the instability of capitalism began to utilize the material structure of the revolution-as-signifier in the formation of a praxis that would transcend the framework of bourgeois social and cultural paradigms. That is, to further the arguments above, the tension between subversion and its imminent reversal by counterrevolutionary forces delimited the possibility of autonomy to which the emergent

⁵⁹ Richard Sheppard, *Modernism—Dada—Postmodernism*, 342.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 87; for more on Futurism and Fascism, see chapter 3 below.

avant-garde subscribed, a condition that turned out to be more prevalent as such counterrevolutionary forces were more able to restrain the mechanism of subversion and its movement within its borders. Specifically, in the case of Dadaist revolt, the impulse toward revolution was minimalized as pure negation, thus initiating the regressive separation of the revolution-as-signifier from revolutionary praxis itself. The displacement of the bourgeois systemization of values, which occurs through Dadaist subversion, responds to what T.J. Demos calls the of Dada's "aesthetics of exile," which in referring particularly to Zurich Dada, exposed "The self as a complex negation between identity and difference," or what can be designated as the "homelessness," both geographically and theoretically, by which Dadaism is organized.⁶¹ In his "Lecture on Dada," Tristan Tzara makes this point clear:

We have had enough of the intelligent movements that have stretched beyond measure our credulity in the benefits of science. What we want now is spontaneity. Not because it is better or more beautiful than anything else. But because everything that issues freely from ourselves, without the intervention of speculative ideas, represents us....

Dada is a state of mind. That is why it transforms itself according to races and events. Dada applies itself to everything, and yet is nothing, it is the point where the yes and the no and all the opposites meet, not solemnly in the castles of human philosophies, but very simply at street corners, like dogs and grasshoppers.⁶²

Marc Dachy notes that by the late 1920's the "revolutionary impulse" of the intellectuals in the Dadaist Berlin group, who saw the political instability of the Weimar period as an opportunity to sharpen the revolutionary class struggle by aesthetically utilizing the revolution-as-signifier in the prospects of advancing revolutionary

⁶¹ T.J. Demos, "Zurich Dada: The Aesthetics of Exile," in *The Dada Seminars*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Washington: the National Gallery of Art, 2005), 25.

⁶² Tristan Tzara, "Lecture on Dada (1922)," in *The Dada Painters and Poets*, ed. Robert Motherwell (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 248, 250.

communism, dwindled as it moved across Europe into Paris, an analysis that has some merit in relation to Tzara's quotation.⁶³ At the same time, although it is evident that for Tzara and other Dadaists their dedication to revolutionary aesthetics was fostered by the emergence of the Surrealist movement which would allow for a more inclusive expression of vanguardist cultural politics, the mechanism of revolt that pervaded the Dadaist imagination illuminates for the present context the somewhat contradictory positions of spontaneous anti-art, and for this reason further demonstrates the crisis of avant-garde cultural production in the post-1917 era. In Tzara's 1918 Manifesto, for example, the determination of anti-art, which is described as "a protest with the fists of its whole being engaged in destructive action," and which demands the abolition of logic, the future, or historical pretexts, is assimilated into the revolutionary proclamations of the First International Dada Fair: "Dada is the deliberate subversion of bourgeois values / Dada is on the side of the revolutionary proletariat."⁶⁴ The confrontational dimension that established the overarching anti-art impulse of avant-garde aesthetics that emerged in relation to the anarchism of Dadaist revolt, what can be described as the impetus toward the amplification of anti-bourgeois rationality, and which Arnauld Pierre points out was deemed intolerable by the French authorities by the middle of the 1920's, seemed to move toward the foundational prospects of collectivity in the international Dadaist movement, yet by forming a loosely structured coalition that attempted to bridge the gap between revolutionary praxis and aesthetic subversion, failed to concretize the necessary

⁶³ Marc Dachy, *Dada: The Revolt of Art* (New York: Abrams, 2005), 33-34.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

properties that would allow it to advance beyond the confines of capitalist crisis to which it was obliged to respond.⁶⁵

To restate the argument here, Dadaist revolt re-established spontaneity in avant-garde cultural production and the logic of anti-art only by constantly negating the manifestation of its interior ideology, thus reproducing itself according to the paradox of which capitalist social relations were also composed. In this sense, the dialectical relations of aesthetic and political vanguardism must consider the extent to which Dadaism sustained itself according to the category of radical autonomy that had defined the anti-art impulse of the avant-garde artist, an anarchistic predisposition which continues to be its most outstanding characteristic, yet which would need to be redefined in relation to the oscillating political allegiances within its ranks that confounded its attempt to absorb the revolution-as-signifier that was released by the impetus of the 1917 Revolution. What the next section will further demonstrate is that the intensification of the revolution-as-signifier that structured the dialectic of subversion/inversion culminated in the Marxist debates of the 1930's and codified the opposing categories of modernist aesthetics and socialist realism, a conflict that illustrates the avant-garde consciousness toward formulating a materiality of revolt in the struggle against the counterrevolutionary forces that were building on the right of the political spectrum, not to mention in its continuing confrontation with ruling class ideology overall.

⁶⁵ Arnauld Pierre, "The 'Confrontation of Modern Values': A Moral History of Dada in Paris," in *The Dada Seminars*, 252-253.

Socialist Realism and the Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist

The theoretical dimension of vanguardism, as it is proposed here, is designed to highlight the critical disjunction between ideology and aesthetic praxis that became apparent in the post-1917 era, or what in other terms materialized in the cultural politics of revolutionary art within Europe of the early twentieth century. Specifically, both Dadaism and the Soviet avant-garde endeavored to reproduce spaces of confrontation against the prevailing, or remaining, bourgeois social order, which as a causal effect, advanced the spirit of vanguard cultural production in the attempt to formulate an authentic praxis of aesthetic revolt. Dialectically, this process offers a view into the development of the revolutionary projects of subsequent avant-gardes, particularly the Surrealist movement, as well as the emergence and institutionalization of socialist realism, both of which would quarrel momentarily in the early 1930's.⁶⁶ What is significant here is that the augmentation of vanguard cultural production became contingent on revolutionary model of which the Bolshevik Revolution was the only relevant example, what Georg Lukács argues exposed the weakness of institutionalized art under capitalism:

In bemoaning the collapse of the capitalist order the bourgeoisie most often claims that its real concern is with the perishing of culture; it formulates its defense of its class interest as if the basis of these interests were the eternal values of culture. In contrast, the starting point of the following set of ideas is the view that the culture of the capitalist epoch has collapsed in itself and prior to the occurrence of economic and political breakdown. Therefore, in opposition to the anxieties [of the bourgeoisie], it is a pressing necessity, precisely in the interests of culture, to bring the long death process of capitalist society to its completion.⁶⁷

⁶⁶ See Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-36," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 18-37; the conflict between Surrealism and revolutionary politics also will be discussed in detail in chapter 2.

⁶⁷ Georg Lukács, "The Old Culture and the New Culture," in *Marxism and Human Liberation*, ed. E. San Juan, Jr. (New York: Dell Publishing Company, 1973), 4.

Lukács anticipates the transformation of cultural production in the wake of the Revolution of 1917, which in the program of socialist realism would serve to promote the collective strength that the Revolution instigated, and as a consequence, to formalize the reactionary position of the historical avant-garde enduring under the capitalist counterrevolution which continually endeavored to direct the liberation of the revolution-as-signifier into an aesthetic program outside the political mandates of party-run aesthetics. What Lukács exposes, in fact, is the resulting crisis of avant-garde cultural production in the post-1917, a crisis that draws particular attention to the reactionary forces that broaden the debate associated with aesthetic and political commitment which was first generated by the consolidation of revolutionary art in the Stalinist Period. Fredric Jameson, for example, calls attention to the fact that the reevaluation of twentieth century art, particularly in the formation of a Marxist critique of avant-garde aesthetics, emerges from the persistent influence of Lukács' "ideological denunciation" of German Expressionism, which reaffirms the dialectical inheritance of aesthetic and political vanguardism and the necessity of situating such a critique within a Marxist framework.⁶⁸ Specifically, the components that determined the aesthetic vanguard of socialist realism instigated deep-rooted reactions for and against its policies by the autonomous avant-garde, reactionary positions which historically have formed the theoretical character of Marxist aesthetics as well, as Jameson points out.⁶⁹

It is often the case that critical assessments of the avant-garde have been biased toward socialist realism because of a predisposed tendency to dismiss politicized art as

⁶⁸ Fredric Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays 1971-1986, Volume 2*, 133.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 138.

being less “creative” than avant-garde cultural forms. This is partly due to the fact that the counterrevolutionary movement against vanguardist art paradigms has successfully set the ideology of experimentalism against politicized art forms, especially those that recognize their allegiance to revolutionary communism. In this sense, critical evaluations of aesthetics and politics of the 1930’s had become conditioned by an ideological justification that often obscures the historical specificities of which the dialectical movement of vanguardist art should be constructed, an obligatory ingredient to the conflict between the residual and emergent effects of avant-garde autonomy, which Fredric Jameson alludes to in his notion of interpretive criticism: “Ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal ‘solutions’ to unresolvable social contradictions.”⁷⁰ That is, to the extent that the concealment of ideology in avant-garde cultural production was re-established as a resistant discourse to the politicization of aesthetics in socialist realism, Jameson elaborates a critical mode suitable for the present context to form a point of contact for elucidating the disjunctive framework of aesthetic and political vanguardism and the unfolding of the ideological structure around which it attempts to confront social relations within Communism, capitalism, as well as in the building of a fortification against the escalating power of the fascist state.

To restate this conflict in other terms, the potentiality of revolutionary art after 1934 began to be interpreted through the lens of ideology, or rather through a material

⁷⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1981).

praxis that was intrinsic to the dialectic of subversion/inversion outlined earlier: the deification of the avant-garde artist as the bearer of creativity, whose position as innovator was always-already exterior to the hegemonic order and thus rooted in the principles of autonomy, concretized the mechanism of subversion as a political effect. It is evident that this process initiated the reactionary position which states that socialist realism counteracted the potentiality of creative independence because it was reduced to the one-dimensionality of politicized aesthetics, a characterization that reinforces the ostensible detachment that has become associated with avant-garde aesthetics and the signifying social formation to which it often corresponds. Moreover, the social exclusivity that is often assigned to the avant-garde artist is the very mechanism by which the critique of socialist realism is formed, a criticism that both compensates for the political insecurity with which the avant-garde artist is often faced, inasmuch as it fortifies the imaginary dimension of aesthetic autonomy that is associated with the historical avant-garde itself, as the analysis of Dadaism revealed to a certain extent. In other terms, it is the fetishization of individual achievement that unveils what Donald Kuspit calls the “cult of the avant-garde artist,” a position that articulates the underlying tension between aesthetic modernity and the social unraveling of authenticity to which the historical avant-garde, as a device formulated within the contextual elements of the vanguard, aspired:

Avant-garde art’s openness to the variety of so-called outsider arts, and its own variety of styles, signals the seemingly limitless possibilities of artistic creativity, in subtle and personal rebellion against society. But this vision of art as individual reparation of social injury and of the curative power of creativity—creativity as universal panacea—*degenerates...into the endorsement of innovation for its own sake....* This is the final, subtlest, most utopian decadence: innovation that leads nowhere, develops nothing, produces nothing of social or individual

consequence—that looks like rejuvenation, but is in fact senility, that is, superficial, second artistic childhood.⁷¹

The hierarchy of the avant-garde artist for Kuspit structures the medium through which the ideological struggle toward autonomous innovation is disseminated throughout the social body, a struggle that is designed to negate the “kitsch” associated with mass culture and also the overdetermination of socialist realism.⁷² Contrary to what can be viewed as an attack on the avant-garde artist, what is evident in Kuspit’s theorization is the extent to which the ideological repositioning of the avant-garde occurred as a reaction to socialist realism and its politicization of aesthetic revolt, what is often termed the “Stalinization” of vanguard aesthetics, thus demanding an inquiry into the disjunction between aesthetics and politics that emerged in the conflicting departures of revolutionary cultural production between the two World Wars. The reactionary stance of the avant-garde artist toward the doctrine of socialist realism, that is, mirrors the unyielding intentionality of the cultural revolution that produced the platform of revolutionary art in the Soviet Third Period, a radicalization of the cultural field which rejected the premises of the historical avant-garde, and which, as Sheila Fitzpatrick notes, was equally influential in the materialization of the “Stalinist Revolution” which took the immediate form of industrialization and the radical transformation of Soviet society in the advancement toward Communism in the first and second Five Year Plans, spanning the years 1928-1936.⁷³ That is, the manner in which the theoretical implications of aesthetic

⁷¹ Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 19.

⁷² See Clement Greenberg, *Art and Culture* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1965), 3-22.

⁷³ Sheila Fitzpatrick, *The Cultural Front*, 118; for a competent analysis of Stalinism and the Third International, see also John Arch Getty, *Origins of the Great Purges: The Soviet Communist Party Reconsidered, 1933-1938* (Cambridge University Press, 1985); for a Marxist revisionism of the Stalinist period, see also Grover Furr. "Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform," Parts One and Two, *Cultural Logic* 8 (2005), <http://eserver.org/clogic/2005/2005.html>.

and political vanguardism fixed the ideological mechanisms that determine the respective structures of the historical avant-garde and socialist realism are more crucial than whether or not either movement truly succeeded in obtaining the authenticity of aesthetic revolt, a critique that would be inimical to the historicization of each movement for the present context. And yet without sufficient analysis of the mirroring dialectic of the crisis in revolutionary art in the 1930's, the autonomy of aesthetic revolt is often constructed as a bulwark against "Stalinist Realism," voiced particularly within European and American avant-garde circles, even those that advocate a leftist perspective.⁷⁴ In this sense, it can be stated that, in contrast to the accepted notion that socialist realism marked the "end" of the avant-garde, especially in the Stalinist era, the radicalization of the avant-garde principles ascribed to the movements that emerged immediately after the Bolshevik Revolution was reproduced in the crisis of revolutionary praxis itself; that is, to the extent that the aesthetic became subsumed by the political function in socialist realism, its regression into a reflective aesthetic devoid of the originality generally ascribed to the principles of experimental art was used not only to validate avant-garde experimentalism, but also to demonstrate the autonomous character of radical aesthetics itself. At the same

⁷⁴ For an analysis of anti-communist sentiment by avant-garde circles in the U.S., see Barbara Foley, *Radical Representation: Politics and Form in U.S. Proletarian Fiction, 1929-1941* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 3-44 and 129-170. It is widely accepted that the anti-Stalinist camp described here was initiated by Trotskyites in Europe and the U.S., thus by Trotsky himself while in exile. In terms of his aesthetics, Trotsky argued in his *Literature and Revolution* that the development of proletarian culture was unrelated to the immediate tasks of the Bolshevik Revolution, thus denying the very category of working-class culture itself, and which has been used to fuel the reaction against Stalinist aesthetic platforms throughout the twentieth century, particularly felt in French avant-garde circles of the 1930's, as the Surrealist were to find in their battle with the Parti Communiste Française (PCF), and in the U.S., where anti-communist rhetoric flourished on the political left and right. Trotsky was equally critical of the early Soviet avant-garde writers, a point which is not often noted, especially Mayakovsky whom Stalin rehabilitated in his 1935 declaration in *Pravda*, the official Soviet-Communist journal. On Mayakovsky and Socialist Realism, see Laura Shear Urbaszewski, "Creating the first classic poet of socialist realism: Mayakovsky as a subject of 'celebration culture', 1935—1940" (Ph.D. diss., The University of Chicago, 2002); for more on aesthetics and Communism in France and Europe during the 1930's, see David Cate, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, 93-137 and section two of chapter 2 below.

time, it can be stated from a similar position that the evolution of aesthetic revolt and the seemingly autonomous position of the avant-garde artist devolved into the illusion of political praxis, reification in its most visible appearance, and thus thwarted the possibility of the social revolution itself, a position that proponents of socialist art utilized to expose the inherent decadent nature of modernist experimentalism of which the avant-gardist was the most immediate model.

This crisis of vanguard aesthetic representation becomes visible by 1934, with Andrei Zhdanov's declaration at the *First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers*: "The historical concreteness of the artistic depiction must be combined with the task of the ideological transformation and education of working people in the spirit of Socialism," a task that was meant to oblige writers in the construction of Stalin's dictum that Soviet writers were the "engineers of human souls."⁷⁵ Herman Ermolaev correctly points out that socialist realism shared the ideology of former Soviet vanguard movements, especially the platforms of Proletkult and the *October* group whose aesthetic programs sought to cultivate the aesthetics of working-class consciousness and thus a revolutionary praxis of art, the major difference that it now came under the rubric of the Communist Party, and thus, according to Ermolaev, "testifies to a marked deterioration in Soviet Literary thought."⁷⁶ Ermolaev's characterization here reflects the inclination to denounce completely the totalizing structure of socialist realism, critiques which range from portraying that the Russian avant-gardists, in the figures of Osip Brik and Mayakovsky, as being, in the words of Boris Groys, "victims of the Soviet Regime," whose original

⁷⁵ Andrei Zhdanov, "Contributions to the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers, 1934, in Bowlt, *Russian Art of the Avant-Garde*, 293.

⁷⁶ Ermolaev, *Soviet Literary Theories, 1917-1934*, 204-5.

identification with the “utopian terror” of the Communist party led to the destruction of their artistic endeavors.⁷⁷ Natasha Kurchanova also argues that the “Bankruptcy of Socialist Realism” was mediated by the inherent “violence” of the Bolshevik Party, especially as it consolidated under Stalin in the Third Period, leading ultimately to the formation of Osip Brik’s anti-utopian aesthetic, and the demise, in general, of the Russian Avant-Garde itself.⁷⁸ Many historians of the period who have mourned over the “loss” of what they see as the truly imaginative spirit that was released by the events of 1917 often mask their anti-communist sentiment by disguising it as objective discourse, a trend in critical analyses of socialist realism that often neglect the historicity which they propose to unveil, as Régine Robin commentary on socialist realism illustrates: “We must never forget that history is tragedy. Socialist realism, which strove to block out opaqueness and misunderstanding, tragically destroyed the revolutionary social imaginary.... Fostering the romance only develops the horror, and the theatre of light made kitsch opens onto the night of the spirit and the night of the camps.”⁷⁹ In a slightly more impartial tone, yet one that also fails to recognize the dialectical form of vanguard aesthetics, Vahan Barooshian argues that the concept of the avant-garde, which had taken on a thoroughly political character by the beginning of the twentieth century, attracted artists who would “subordinate their art to political and social goals as the price for political involvement,”

⁷⁷ Boris Groys, “On the Ethics of the Avant-Garde,” *Art in America* 81 no. 5 (1993): 112.

⁷⁸ Natasha Kurchanova, “Against Utopia: Osip Brik and the Genesis of Productivism,” 5-9, 106-107.

⁷⁹ Régine Robin, *Socialist Realism: An Impossible Aesthetic*, trans. Catherine Porter (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), xxxvii. Robin does provide a comprehensive history of the development of socialist realism, and her conclusions are valid, though in the context of the present analysis, it seems her objectivity is often misguided by what Barbara Foley calls the “legacy of anti-communism,” which will be discussed below. See also Vladislav Todorov *Red Square, Black Square: Organon for Revolutionary Imagination* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1995) and Matthew Cullerne Bowm, *Art Under Stalin* (New York: Holmes & Meier 1991), both of which blame both Lenin and Stalin for the destruction of the Soviet avant-garde and the institutionalization of socialist art.

and thus Barooshian writes, “In the final analysis, the debate centered on differing notions of revolution; for the avant-garde an esthetic revolution was integral to political revolution. For the Bolshevik leaders, it was not.”⁸⁰

There are two primary ramifications that can be drawn from the above criticism of socialist art after 1934: (1) there is a historical dimension to the reflexive acceptance of how socialist realism was condemned, which in other terms can be related to the political disapproval of Stalinism, and to a certain extent of Marxism in general, and (2) in the context of the present argument, the apparent asceticism in the formation of such critical assumptions often lead to the justification of the historical avant-garde as creatively “true,” which in other terms seems to fortify the reification of avant-garde art within capitalism and the social connotations which Kuspit argues derived from the cult status of the avant-garde artist itself. Furthermore, the rationalization of avant-garde cultural production often obscures the ideology by which it is constructed, especially when argued that the imperative of innovation that is denied in socialist realism is furnished by the avant-garde artist who through the very medium of art can design the path toward genuine political liberation. Barbara Foley argues that the “legacy of anti-communism” that emerges in the criticism of socialist realism, not to mention in analyses of proletarian literature generally, stems from the bias that became particularly apparent in the 1930’s and the “first generation” of anti-Stalinist critics, many of whom considered themselves Marxists, yet whose influence in relation to aesthetic matters had a formidable impact on political consciousness.⁸¹ Although limited to the development of proletarian culture in

⁸⁰ Vahan Barooshian, “The Avant-Garde and the Russian Revolution,” *Russian Literature Triquarterly* 4 (1972): 357.

⁸¹ Foley, 7.

the U.S., Foley's commentary provides an overview into the process by which the "trope" of "Stalinism" was attached onto the aesthetic program of socialist realism in the 1930's, thus relegating the production of proletarian culture to an authoritarian propaganda that repudiated the creativity associated with avant-garde art which continually surfaced in critical evaluations of proletarian culture well into post-World War II period, extending also to recent scholarship:

Until quite recently, it has been almost uncontested in U.S. critical circles that left-wing partisanship—to many writers and critics of the 1930's a sine qua non of meaningful representation—is a guarantor of moral dishonesty and aesthetic failure. Standards of literary judgment and historical scholarship have been abysmally low. All that has been routinely necessary to clinch a judgment is the ritual incantation of some highly loaded binary opposition—for example, "creative judgment" versus "party line." In the atmosphere of chilled intellectual discourse created by this pervasive anti-Stalinism, it has become difficult to inquire into the relation between the organized left and the literary proletarians, much less into the value of texts these writers generated.⁸²

Foley's criticism here is relevant to the present argument in various ways; for the binary between partisan politics and aesthetic integrity signals, among other important consequences for Marxist critiques of aesthetic agencies associated with the discordance that emerges between "Stalinist" politics and avant-garde art, that the process by which aesthetic and political vanguardism can escape the either-or criticality to which it is often ascribed needs to seek a flight out of the regressive methodology that denies the dialectical relations of which vanguardism is itself structured.

At the same time, it is evident that even in Marxist critiques of 1930's there was a tendency to overlook the dialectical relations of which both socialist realism and avant-garde art were formed, a knee-jerk mechanism interior to critical formulations in which the penchant for the anti-Stalinist binary is implemented, perhaps to avoid the political

⁸² Ibid., 29.

complications associated with the period itself, as Foley's comments reveal. In his discussion of the historical debate between Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, Eugene Lunn argues that Socialist Realism "justified the return of social hierarchy and privilege tied to an 'heroically' monumentalist culture," a position which contributed to Lukács' "deterministic view of history" and his disapproval of modernist literature.⁸³ While the overall intent of Lunn's criticism of Stalinism may have some relevance in the overall historical view of the Soviet critique of modernism, Lunn contrasts Lukács' Marxist optimism with the avant-gardist tendencies of Bertolt Brecht, who is seen as a figure whose realization of Marxist aesthetics was designed to combat both the rise of Fascism in Germany and the determinism of Stalinist realism, a point that is meant to reveal Brecht's openness to avant-gardist cultural production and Lukács' aversion to it.⁸⁴ Although Lunn's analysis is effective in bridging some of the overlooked "gaps" in the assessment of Marxism and Modernism, there are moments in which the historical engagement with the complexity of the 1930's, a period from which emerged the seminal work of Marxist aesthetics, reveals some of the biased language that critically delimits the implications that Lunn seeks to reveal, a critical overdetermination that seems to neglect at points the necessary historicization by which Marxist aesthetics has gained its influence.

The critique of Lunn's assessment here is not intended to refute the criticism of socialist realism, nor is it meant to ignore the political implications of the authoritarianism that was displayed in the Stalinist period. On the contrary, the binary operations that have emerged from the history of assigning revolutionary art to the relics

⁸³ See Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, 128-145.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*

of Stalinism allow for the construction of thoroughly valuable critiques of socialist realism through the lens of Marxist criticism. It can be argued, for example, that the function of proletarian literature became so determined by the hegemony of socialist realism that it obliterated the “agitational type of discourse,” as Foley writes, and which was inherent in the aesthetic principles of proletarian culture to the extent that it degenerated into the “essentially cognitive” character of reflective art in the wake of its becoming the predominant formula to which Soviet artists were obliged to follow.⁸⁵ The confrontational form that the vanguard artist utilized as a mechanism toward advancing and establishing revolutionary praxis, along the lines of Maxim Gorky’s model in his revolutionary novel *Mother*, became substituted by a mimetic functionalism that detached the aesthetic from the political, which in the form of propaganda, failed to recognize the dialectical relation between the completion of Lenin’s cultural vanguard and the fostering of a new form of political consciousness that focused on the continuation of class struggle.⁸⁶ The inherent contradiction by which advocates of this form of socialist realism sought to reconstruct the dialogue between avant-garde cultural politics and the revolutionary praxis from which it would sustain a formidable presence became apparent in their attempt to purify revolutionary art of the “leftist” tendencies that the Proletkult and the *October* group formulated, a purging process in which “reflection” replaced the dialectical quality of revolutionary art, and which signified to many of the proponents of

⁸⁵ Foley, 155.

⁸⁶ See Maxim Gorky, *Mother* (Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1954). The clearest example of this type of mimetic functionalism can be seen in the “heroic” painting style that began to emerge in the Third Period and which flourished in the World War II era. Many of these works represent Lenin and Stalin in an impressionistic style that over-emphasizes their commitment and leadership, such as Boris Eremeevich Vladimirov’s *Roses for Stalin* (1949) and the later Vyacheslav Vasilevich Tokaev’s, *Lenin with Farmers* (1960). This style is often criticized for its propagandistic and cult-like depictions of the two figures. For an analysis, see also Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century: The Political Image in the Age of Mass Culture* (New York: Abrams, 1997), 47-103.

the avant-garde experimentalism the overarching authoritarianism of Stalinism itself.⁸⁷ In this sense, it can be stated that the formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism in the context of rapid transformation within in the Stalinist era took on a criticality which in similar fashion to Kuspit's fetishization of the creative function associated with the avant-grade artist, forced the aesthetic dimension into an ideological corner from which it could return only through the erasure of its praxis within the framework of the class struggle, a crisis that reveals the un-dialectical character of reflective art in its historical context.⁸⁸

For Georg Lukács, it is the operation by which the critical function is displaced by the utopianism of "reflection" that restricted the possibilities of socialist realism, especially since its critical originality materialized in the fervor of the Bolshevik Revolution and the assimilative process that Lenin argued determined the dialectical relations of the Communist vanguard.⁸⁹ For Lukács, the "literature-as-illustration" associated with socialist realism in the Stalinist era neglected the confrontational program of revolutionary art, which in the present context is related to the crucial features of aesthetic and political vanguardism, and instead devolved into the "naturalistic psychology" of romanticism, as he clarifies:

⁸⁷ Foley, 165.

⁸⁸ This characterization is not to refute the social and political objectives of the Stalinist era, many of which were directed at the immediate improvement of the health, education, and industry of Soviet society, nor is it a justification for the worst elements of Stalinization itself. On the contrary, as recent critics suggest, the consolidation of internal forces, which included aesthetic ideology, occurred in such a rapid manner that the possibility of forming a more democratic medium through which the social and political fields could be united collapsed into authoritarianism, a process that also must include an analysis of the external threat of Fascism and the channeling of forces into the struggle against it. For an analysis of the move toward a more democratic form of Communism under Stalin, see Grover Furr. "Stalin and the Struggle for Democratic Reform," Parts One and Two, *Cultural Logic* 8 (2005), <http://eserver.org/clogic/2005/2005.html>; see also Fitzpatrick, 149-183 for an analysis of the reconstruction of democratic socialism in Soviet Russia in the Stalinist Era.

⁸⁹ Georg Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* (New York: Harper & Row, 1964), 120-121.

The personal, ‘egotistic’ interest in work should be seen in a wider ideological context. It is really part of the struggle for the development of a full human personality—an indispensable element in it, as Lenin recognized. Revolutionary romanticism, by neglecting decisive facts as ‘beneath its vision’, (just as naturalism ignored them as ‘above its vision’), contributed to that oversimplifying schematism which has distorted the actual grandeur of the spectacle of emergent socialism.⁹⁰

The monumental case Lukács makes for reforming the vision of realism, as Fredric Jameson points out, becomes dependent on the very fluctuation in which class struggle surfaces at critical stages, a dialectical process that contrasts sharply with the production of socialist art that occurred as a consequence of the consolidation of interior forces in the Stalinist era.⁹¹ The movement toward the materialization of a utopian literary form prior to the theoretical organization that could reproduce class consciousness, which for Lukács must reside within the milieu of the vanguard and its methodological capabilities, signaled the impossibility of socialist realism itself, thus revealing instead the regression toward the naturalistic tendencies against which revolutionary art was supposed to function. At the same time, it was equally necessary for Lukács that the realist writer avoided what he argued was the narrowness of the avant-garde: “Precisely because the latter is devoid of reality and life, it foists on to its readers a narrow and subjectivist attitude to life (analogous to a sectarian point of view in political terms).”⁹² In this sense, the realization of critical realism became even more of a necessity in the post-Stalinist era, for its rehabilitation for Lukács signaled the re-emergence of a method through which Marxism itself could correspond to the materiality of social relations, a process that could only emerge in the transformative context of the revolutionary class struggle:

⁹⁰ Ibid., 132.

⁹¹ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 204.

⁹² Georg Lukács “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 57.

“The decisive factor will be the unfolding of our social existence... although every Marxist must take account of the inevitable unevenness of ideological development, with regard to art and literature itself.”⁹³

The work of Louis Aragon at this point in the argument proves to be useful in creating a link between the praxis of socialist art and the expansion of the avant-garde in the later 1930's, as well as in providing a more concrete illustration of the aesthetic and political disjunctions between socialist realism and the avant-gardist impulse. As a leading figure in the Surrealist movement, Aragon began to formulate a representative aesthetic that would include the theoretical premises of socialist realism and the innovative techniques of the Surrealists, which as a consequence would cause the swift rupture in his relationship to André Breton and the Surrealist revolution itself.⁹⁴ With the distaste for naturalism that recalls the criticism of Lukács, Aragon's theory of “réalisme socialiste” results from his attendance at the First All-Union Congress of Soviet Writers at which he found Zhdanov's summons to develop the concept of “les ingénieurs des âmes” essential to the formation of a revolutionary praxis of art: “Writers have always been the engineers of souls without the knowledge of being so, and in the moment of consciousness which they can no longer ignore, they cease to be alchemists of an emergent science and proceed in becoming complete engineers of the mind through the scientific formulation of the word.”⁹⁵ For Aragon, the ideological function in literature was instrumental in illuminating the particulars of the class struggle which totally

⁹³ Lukács, “Solzhenitsyn and the New Realism,” in *Marxism and Human Liberation*, 219.

⁹⁴ See Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism*, 97-119.

⁹⁵ “Les écrivains ont toujours été des ingénieurs des âmes, mais sans le savoir, et à partir du moment où ils ne pouvant plus l'ignorer, ils cesseront d'être les alchimistes d'une science qui va se développer, ils deviendront pleinement ingénieurs des âmes au sens scientifique du mot ingénieurs.” Louis Aragon, *pour un réalisme socialiste* (Paris: Denoël et Steele, 1937), 11; translation mine.

opposed the naturalized perspective of purely innovative art, a characterization that approaches the critical realism for which Lukács argued. Particularly relevant to the present argument is the extent to which the political consciousness of the writer produces the method through which the class struggle of the vanguard is determined in the aesthetic dimension, a process which necessitates the commitment of the writer in the course of identifying with class struggle, and through the materiality of which the ideology function of the aesthetic reinscribes itself as praxis:

The writer is called upon to play a historic role in the transformation not only of man, but also in the opening of the man of the class-based society to the man of the society without classes.... [The writer] will no longer be the entertainment of the former ruling class; rather, he will become the pioneer of the classless society alongside the proletariat.⁹⁶

As Angela Kimyongür suggests, the elaboration of Aragon's theory of socialist realism reveals the attempt to move beyond the confines of both naturalism and the sloganeering of propagandist art, which for Aragon will converge in the "interpretive view" of social relations, as well as in the application of avant-gardist innovation to the historic role of the revolutionary writer.⁹⁷ Furthermore, it can be argued that the scope of Aragon's commitment to revolutionary art begins with his involvement in both Dadaism and Surrealism and the manufacturing of revolt in the aesthetic dimension to which both movements were devoted, which in the course of political transformation shaped the inclusiveness of Aragon's interpretive perspective, one that necessarily subjects the current framework of vanguardism to a meticulous restructuring. That is, Aragon's

⁹⁶ "les écrivains sont appelés à jouer un rôle historique dans la transformation même de l'homme, dans ce passage de l'homme de la société de classes à l'homme de la société sans classes... il ne sont plus les amuseurs de l'ancienne class dominante, ils deviennent les pionniers de la société sans classes aux côté du prolétariat." Ibid., 14; translation mine.

⁹⁷ Angela Kimyongür, *Socialist Realism in Louis Aragon's Le monde reel* (Hull: University of Hull Press, 1995), 20.

passage from fellow traveler to his absolute commitment to revolutionary communism, especially after he formally begins to adhere to the platform of the Parti Communiste Française (PCF), illuminates the role that vanguardism plays in bridging the gap between the aesthetic and political function of art, which in other terms, signals the diffusion of the revolutionary praxis itself as it deepens the historical link between art and political commitment.

What Aragon illuminates, in fact, is the issue of revolutionary art within capitalist society, a problematic question that, as the above analysis of Dadaism suggests needs to be rethought in relation to the concept of political commitment itself, or rather to the challenging quality of which political alignment is structured in aesthetic terms. In other words, the difficulty in analyzing the concept of commitment and political alignment for Marxist critics involves the rather irreconcilable dialectic that emerges between the writer and the variable of social relations under capitalism itself. For Raymond Williams, the “intended practice” of the aligned writer can be deformed by the “social reality” of which the writer is faced, a process that consigns commitment to “little more than ideology.”⁹⁸ The committed writer, on the other hand, becomes empowered by the dynamic that emerges from the differing outcomes of this dialectical process, as Williams argues: “Social relations are not only received; they are also made and can be transformed. But to the decisive extent that they are *social* relations there are certain real pressures and limits...within which the scope of commitment as individual action and gesture must be defined.”⁹⁹ In fact, as Herbert Marcuse also points out, the instability of capitalism often prevents the “aesthetic” identification with the proletariat and does not presuppose the

⁹⁸ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 204.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*

materialization of revolutionary art, a condition that exists at the very core of avant-garde theoretical praxis. Thus, for Marcuse, the artist must remain exterior to society, “not because of their nonproletarian background, their remoteness from the process of material production, their ‘elitism,’ and so on, but because of the essential transcendence of art which makes the conflict between art and politics inevitable.”¹⁰⁰ Marcuse, in arguing for a Brechtian conceptualization of revolutionary art, theorizes that the immediacy of appeal that the artist must transmit to social relations is from its inception contingent upon the extent to which there exists within that dialectical relationship a rupture in the totalizing effects of reification, a recognition in the aesthetic dimension that the dialectical moment of liberation will be able to connect the writer’s commitment to the awakening of total political consciousness.¹⁰¹

On the other hand, the prospects for obtaining a truly concrete form of commitment is for Jean-Paul Sartre an unrealizable condition, yet one that would be a consequence of the collective enthusiasm in the wake of Communist revolution, the nature of which could sustain the subversive intentionality of revolutionary art in social form:

Involved in the same adventure as his readers and situated like them in a society without cleavages, the writer, in speaking about them, would be speaking about himself, and in speaking about himself would be speaking about them.... Thus, concrete literature will be a synthesis of Negativity, as a power of uprooting from the given, and a Project, as an outline of a future order; it will be a Festival, the flaming mirror which burns everything reflected in it and generosity, that is, free invention, a gift.... In short, literature is, in essence, the subjectivity of a society in permanent revolution.¹⁰²

¹⁰⁰ Herbert Marcuse *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*, 37.

¹⁰¹ *Ibid.*, 33-35.

¹⁰² Jean-Paul Sartre, *Literature and Existentialism* (New York: Citadel Press, 1991), 157, 159.

In some sense, Sartre is redefining the providence of the committed writer in a society in which intersubjectivity is an already preconceived condition, a social relation based on a collectivity whose concrete activity will uphold the aesthetic function and reaffirm the political alignment of the writer as well. To state it differently, although conscious alignment is still a necessary condition, the mediation of experience that reveals itself in the intersubjectivity of writer and society evolves out of the necessary collapse of existential alienation, the consequential outcome of total revolution that must preexist if the materiality of aesthetic revolt is to emerge fully. Negativity, then, is the (de)constructive precondition of a revolutionary society, which is here posited as a utopian alternative to the counterrevolutionary progression of bourgeois alienation under capitalism. Sartre's supposition here is that the "active subject" in such a society will be the proletariat, whose revolutionary existence within capitalism manifests itself in the abstract yet assimilated form of the vanguard and thus the process by which the commitment of revolutionary art also recognizes its dialectical alignment.

Theodor Adorno, however, questions the validity of Sartrean commitment, for what becomes evident is the simple fact that Sartre tends to accept the impracticality of his own theoretical formation. More specifically, the concern that Adorno has with Sartre's configuration is the extent to which the autonomy of the artwork, the very element that distinguishes its subversive authenticity, is compromised in the dialectical process of social identification:

For the theory of committed art, as it is current today, presupposes a superiority and an invulnerability to the basic reigning fact of life of exchange society—namely alienation between human beings and also between objective spirit and the society that it expresses all at once. The theory of commitment demands that

art speak directly to people, as though the immediate could realize itself immediately in a world of universal mediation.¹⁰³

Instead, Adorno emphasizes that the autonomy of the artwork is the component that negates its status as a commodified object under capitalism and creates the conditions for liberation. To this extent, what Adorno theorizes is the further extension of aesthetic subversion, yet in a slightly different formation from the negativity often assigned to Dadaism. That is, for Adorno, the autonomous artwork restructures itself in an aporetic nexus of negativity, a paradoxical movement that exposes the extremity of a market society: “This is the function of the work’s immanent logic, of the lawfulness that transpires it, and that is the theodicy of the concept of purpose in art. The aim of all artworks is the determination of the indeterminate.”¹⁰⁴ The subversive characteristic of the artwork, then, in order to endure as a radical form of consciousness that enables it to invalidate the dominant ideological functions of cultural commodification, “is made possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status.”¹⁰⁵ It is that necessary distance between reality and its aesthetic reconceptualization that the artwork is both aesthetic and epistemological: autonomous artworks demand the split with a society that is administered by the hegemony of capitalism or what Adorno labels the “culture industry,” which in the context of the Realism/Modernism debate of the 1930’s, contrasts with the intentionality associated with Lukács’ conceptualization of critical realism and the necessary dialectical relation between the writer and class struggle. Rather, Adorno’s theory here is that there is an inherent masochistic tendency built into the artwork; for as

¹⁰³ Theodor Adorno *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Continuum, 1973), 120.

¹⁰⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 124.

¹⁰⁵ *Ibid.*, 162.

he recognizes, the hegemony of capitalism is able to meet the threat of subversive forces by reorganizing them into the rationalizing principle against which the artwork itself is constructed, a problematic that is reinscribed in neo-avant-gardist cultural production within late capitalism, yet one that has its roots in avant-garde cultural production as well.¹⁰⁶ What is left is the *illusion* of transcendence: the inability to sustain the subversive effects of the aesthetic dimension, in the form of the revolution-as-signifier itself, is recognized as self-negation in avant-garde cultural production regardless of the political alignment the artist proposes, which in the context of the present argument, exposes the abstract and regressive tendency of which the historical avant-garde is structured, especially as it relates to the mechanism of revolt (both in aesthetic and political terms) within capitalist society.

To conclude, the above theoretical analysis of commitment and political alignment is meant to draw attention to the historical breadth of aesthetic and political vanguardism, both in revolutionary (socialist) and non-revolutionary (capitalist) contexts. Overall, the continuity of which vanguardism is designed, to the extent that it emerges from within the historical transformation of the post-1917 era, can be understood as the determining factor in the radical reorganization of both avant-garde revolt, with its emphasis on subversion which was utilized to “de-reify” consciousness within the non-revolutionary situation, and the politicized aesthetic within post-revolutionary society, which as an effect of the already-existing appearance of the class struggle, remained within the confines of the political framework, as socialist realism projected. Thus, as the

¹⁰⁶ For more on aesthetics and politics of the neo-avant-garde, see Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, as well as the last chapter of the present study.

revolution-as-signifier became more and more inscribed within avant-garde cultural production, as well as in the process through which political alignment in an aesthetic sense became fastened to the intentionality of the “committed” artist, it contradictorily produced a disjunction between the political and the aesthetic dimensions which triggered the crisis of the historical avant-garde as it moved toward the social instability of 1930’s Europe. Particularly, the dialectical analysis of socialist realism and the cult of the avant-garde artist made clear that, as the category of aesthetics-as-politics became reconstructed in the form of revolutionary praxis, the aesthetic function was consigned to a thoroughly ideological position, which as an effect delimited the materiality of its form and thus could be properly characterized only through the attachment to its historical referent. Both movements, however, attempt to concretize the oscillating mechanism of the revolution-as-signifier of which aesthetic and political vanguardism is designed, both ideologically and historically. In this sense, as Walter Benjamin proposes, the imposed barriers to cultural production, both in revolutionary and non-revolutionary conditions, can be undone only through the disclosure of the historical forces that are unleashed by the “intellectual” in solidarity with the totality of productive qualities of which the revolutionary class is constituted: “Only by transcending the specialization in the process of production that, in the bourgeois view, constitutes its order can one make this production politically useful.”¹⁰⁷ The category of aesthetic and political vanguardism, in Benjamin’s theoretical perspective, can be utilized as an analytical instrument in the understanding of the persistent formation of revolutionary art in its later historical context. It is for this reason that the following chapter will analyze the form of aesthetics and politics in the extensive production of the manifesto, as well as in the disjunctive

¹⁰⁷ Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, 230.

relations among aesthetics, ideology, and propaganda. The following analysis, then, will attempt to broaden some of the key debates and developments of the theoretical premises of vanguardism that have been constructed to this point.

2

Art, Propaganda, and the Manifesto

This chapter will focus on the aesthetic and political tensions that resonate in the further entrenchment of vanguardism within avant-garde movements, especially Surrealism, which emerged as a formative strategy for artists and writers who identified with Communism and who sought to create a social praxis for revolutionary art. More specifically, what this chapter will draw attention to is the mechanism by which the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics in the structure of avant-garde aesthetic paradigms justifies an interrogation into the operation of non-aesthetic rhetorical devices that legitimate interpretative control, what can be described as political propaganda in its most visible formulation. It is this very tension between art and political praxis through which the radicalizing structure of the manifesto, which Mary Ann Caws argues is “a deliberate manipulation of public view,” began to assume a more decisive role in aesthetic and political vanguardism, as evident in the Surrealists short-lived tenure as members of the PCF, and their dedication to the struggle against Fascism, capitalism, and their vicious attacks on French colonialism.¹ Furthermore, the relevance of the Surrealist movement in the dialectical structure of the manifesto and the discussion of art and propaganda is significant, since the mechanism of revolt which configures the Surrealist vision becomes contingent on the production process itself, a point that is central to Walter Benjamin’s interpretation that the function of the committed intellectual must emerge in relation to the material form with which the writer or artist is confronted, which in the form of

¹ Mary Ann Caws, ed., *Manifesto: A Century of Isms* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), xix.

revolutionary art, will transform the margins of which capitalist social relations are determined.²

To the extent that the aesthetic dimension of the historical avant-garde attempted to reinscribe itself as political praxis, a power to which all revolutionary art aspires and which becomes more and more problematic in the opposition between Surrealism and the Communist International, the necessity of contextualizing aesthetics-as-politics in non-aesthetic terms had to be more thoroughly codified in order for truly revolutionary art to transcend the hegemonic relations of capitalism and its counterrevolutionary ideology. Without reiterating the intrinsic “antagonisms” among the various platforms of revolutionary aesthetics, this chapter will trace the disjunctive relations between ideology and art, which in the form of the manifesto signify a dialectical interrelation that attempts to erase the limitations imposed on the “either-or” marginalities to which aesthetics-as-politics is often ascribed. In distinguishing the “non-operational” process through which the manifesto reveals the fantasy of revolutionary praxis, it is possible to offer an insight into the mechanisms by which the aesthetic dimension attempted to overcome the qualities of which the non-aesthetic could more easily attain revolutionary status, a mechanism that is readily obtainable in propaganda form, yet also allows for the possibility of assigning the interior spaces by which the manifesto sought to reinscribe aesthetics-as-politics within a material framework. Thus, the crucial questions this chapter intends to advance are: what are the qualities that distinguish the manifesto from other political models that endeavor to influence social opinion, which in other terms calls for an analysis of the dialectical interchange between aesthetics and ideology and the pre-conditioning of the ways in which vanguardism itself illuminates a presence

² Benjamin, *Reflections*, 228.

interior to revolutionary movements within capitalism, predominantly in the period between the two World Wars in which the oscillation between competing theories of political alternatives played itself out in aesthetic praxis? In other terms, how does the convergence of aesthetics and politics in movements outside of the Soviet Union allow for an inquiry into function of revolutionary art, particularly as it relates to the ideology of revolt of which the historical avant-garde is founded and through which the manifesto itself is determined? Furthermore, does the Surrealist movement challenge the boundaries of the vanguardism in its attempt to aestheticize ideology, or do the residual effects of aesthetics-as-politics obscure the intended establishment of an oppositional praxis that could demystify counter-revolutionary subsumption, a predicament that culminates in the crisis of representation of the historical avant-garde itself? It is within the latter that a continuation of the “debate” between inconsistent positions of socialist realism and the avant-garde aesthetics of Surrealism can be broadened within the context of the advance of the vanguard against the emerging fascist state and in the persistence of revolutionary communism in the 1930’s.

To outline the ways in which the cultural contradictions of aesthetic and political vanguardism began to be shaped by some of ideological arguments that were discussed in the previous chapter, it is evident that the concealment of ideology in avant-garde cultural production which was re-established as a resistant discourse to the politicization of aesthetics of socialist art presented a suitable context for elucidating the disjunction between aesthetics and politics after 1934 as well as the unfolding of an ideological structure of revolt which simultaneously exposes and reinforces the exteriors of revolutionary praxis, in both aesthetic and non-aesthetic terms. Furthermore, the

aesthetics-as-politics of the Surrealist movement and its radicalization of the manifesto in form and content thus offers an insight into what Fredric Jameson calls the “symbolic production” that occurs between ideology and aesthetics, or rather what can be described as the historical site in which the convergence of art and politics resolved their contradictions in the move toward a systematic form of propaganda, a mechanism that is constantly at work in the dialectical organization of the manifesto itself.³

Thus, the signifying relation between aesthetic and political ideologies begins to be effaced by the structure of the manifesto, rendering the possibility of assigning a difference to one form of cultural production over another problematic, since the totalizing objective of revolutionary art is either to subvert the dominant social order or to legitimate the ideological base within post-revolutionary societies. As the above theorization of socialist realism and the overarching predicament of the avant-garde artist reveals, the intention is not to argue that the consequences of Surrealism as it works within capitalist society, or socialist realism within Communism, will materialize equally, nor does it intend to relegate the intentionality of the writer or artist who utilizes ideological art to the singularity of a propaganda model. Rather, the manifestoes of the Surrealist movement and other experimental avant-gardes, which are often set apart from the authoritarian model of socialist realism, exemplify what A.P. Foulkes calls the process of “demystification” which through the guise of subversion attempts to “defamiliarize” social consciousness without naturalizing the interior dimension of propaganda which is submerged in its structure.⁴ In this sense, the avant-garde manifesto and overtly socialist art can be distinguished only by their respective impressions on

³ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 79.

⁴ A.P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda* (London: Methuen, 1983), 56.

exterior perception, as long as the theoretical model of the way in which aesthetics-as-politics reproduces itself can be used to replace the “biased” criticism which typifies much of the reactions against revolutionary art in general, as the analysis of socialist realism versus the avant-garde exposed.

What the dialectical form within the structure of the manifesto allows for is the foregrounding of a praxis of what Marjorie Perloff calls “The central problematic in our own critical discourse,” one which articulates the underlying tension between ideology and aesthetics and the social unraveling of revolutionary action to which the historical avant-garde aspired, and which, in other terms, signifies the crisis of representation of which it is composed.⁵ The manifesto, then, unfolds the attempt to codify aesthetics-as-politics as a precondition to cultural production, the result of which is the convergence of its dialectical form, which Surrealism utilized to achieve a dominant position in European cultural circles. In contrast to the Dadaist subordination of form to content, the Surrealist manifesto, in Martin Puchner’s words, “must be regarded as a balancing act between avant-garde theatrics and socialist strategy.”⁶ Puchner’s work on the manifesto reveals the extent to which the desired codification of revolutionary praxis by the avant-garde artist, which historically has pitted political allegiances against aesthetic interests, culminated in Surrealism, since from its inception the focus had been on measuring revolt in collective terms in the attempt to construct a model for revolutionary praxis. The attempt by Breton and the Surrealists to combine the doctrine of Marxist-Leninism and the aesthetics of liberation, which was solidified with Breton’s induction into the PCF in 1927, unmasks the rupturing dialectic between aesthetics and politics of the historical

⁵ Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment: Avant-Garde, Avant Guerre, and the Language of Rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 115.

⁶ Martin Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution: Marx, Manifesto, and the Avant-Gardes*, 180.

avant-garde and the process through which the further entrenchment of aesthetics-as-politics concretized the opposing models of the social revolution which both the Surrealist movement and the Communist International systematized in their respective attempts to preside over intellectual cultural production in 1930's Europe. For Robert Short, the ambiguity of revolutionary ideology "permitted the prolonged Surrealist misunderstanding that there was real common ground between their aims and those of the Marxists," a point that is meant to disclose the limits to which the Surrealist impetus toward liberation could be assimilated into the rigidity of Marxist-Leninism, which again sets the avant-garde in opposition to the doctrine of socialist realism.⁷ The rift that occurred between the Surrealists and the PCF, which was instigated by Louis Aragon's publication of his overtly partisan *Front Rouge*, is significant to the present context, since it justifies an inquiry into the dialectical relation through which both Surrealist and Communist intellectuals reconstructed the revolution-as-signifier in the advancement of an ideological paradigm that also becomes evocatively apparent in the form of the manifesto itself. Although the conflict that resulted from *L'Affaire Aragon* is beyond the scope of the current argument, it is crucial to an understanding of the assimilative process by which the ideology of art symbolized the political exchange between the writer and society, or the desire to formalize a revolutionary praxis of art itself. In a slightly different sense, the analysis here intends to unveil the interior dimensions of ideological art and the materiality of which non-aesthetic forms of interpretive control sustain a

⁷ Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism," in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, 34.

discontinuity in the intersecting planes of aesthetics and politics of which the vanguardism is constructed.⁸

Ideology and the Praxis of the Manifesto

It can be argued that the ideological structure of the manifesto sharpens the relation between aesthetic implications and the non-aesthetic assumptions through which world views are formed, thus providing a strategy for detailing the ways in which conflictive interests of aesthetics-as-politics reconstitute themselves historically. To the extent, that is, that ideology in its cultural context translates the domain of social beliefs into what Terry Eagleton calls “collective symbolic self-expression,” it is possible to locate within the material processes of artworks an interior dialectic through which ideological functioning is simultaneously displaced and redefined.⁹ As Eagleton points out, “Ideology...is not inherently constituted by distortion, especially if we take the broader view of the concept as denoting any fairly central conjuncture between discourse and power,” a position in the ideological debate about cultural production in which the resonance of a “world view” in the form of the artwork attempts to transcend the contradictory practices which legitimize the dominant ideologies of capitalism.¹⁰ In other terms, the ideology of art signifies a process that seems to function as a mode of critique exterior to the confines of ruling class interests, thus beyond the relations of production that sustain its predominance.¹¹ The designation of ideology as mystification, or what

⁸ For more on the “break” between the Surrealists, Aragon, and the Parti Communiste Française, see Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism*, 97-119.

⁹ Terry Eagleton, *Ideology: An Introduction* (London: Verso, 1991), 29.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 28.

has come to be termed “false consciousness” in its most reductive sense, is concealed in the materiality of social relations, which through Eagleton’s definition can be categorized more systematically without distorting the antagonistic form through which ideology also determines spaces of resistance, as is the case in the “committed” artist and the recreation of revolutionary art forms that de-contextualize points of confrontation that are often obscured.¹²

Similarly, commenting on Louis Althusser’s conceptualization of the ideological state apparatus, Michel Pêcheux argues that the theoretical containment of ideological forces within social materiality has attributed to the “misrecognition” of the mechanism through which ruling class ideology dismantles interior contradictions and reconstitutes them within its reproductive base, what Pêcheux views as fundamental to the fluctuation of revolutionary class struggle against capital:

This example helps explain how the relationships of unevenness-subordination between different ideological state apparatuses (and the regions, objects and practices which correspond to them) constitute, as I have been saying, the stake in the ideological class struggle. The ideological aspect of the struggle for the transformation of relations of production lies, therefore, above all, in the struggle to impose, inside the complex of ideological state apparatuses, *new relationships of unevenness-subordination...*, resulting in a transformation of the *set* of the ‘complex of ideological state apparatuses’ in its relationship with the state apparatus and a transformation of the state apparatus itself.¹³

What Pêcheux offers here is an interrogation of the mechanism by which the displacement of the interior complexity of ideology represents itself socially, the process by which the “unevenness-subordination” that sustains mystification collapses onto itself as a result of the constancy of antagonism, or rather, in relation to the disclosure of the interiority of ideology itself. In this regard, Pêcheux and Eagleton share a commonality;

¹² Ibid., 26.

¹³ Michel Pêcheux, “The Mechanism of Ideological (Mis) recognition,” in *Mapping Ideology*, ed. Slavoj Žižek (London: Verso, 2000), 144.

that is, they both argue that the dialectical operation of ideology legitimizes the structural obscurity of ruling class formations within the social spaces in which such residual configurations embolden themselves. At the same time, it is through the repeated uncovering of such ideological obscurity, the process of unraveling capitalist reification, that alternative spaces of resistance begin to be articulated. It is evident, then, that the organizational model of the manifesto, as well as of the infusion of aesthetics-as-politics in the configurations of political art forms, restructures the possibility of ideological displacement and thus the codification of revolutionary praxis within the domain of ruling class structures, a confrontational process that justifies the movement of aesthetic and political vanguardism within non-revolutionary contexts.

Even though the ideological reinforcement that encloses the dominant relations of production has little to do with revolutionary aesthetic paradigms in the 1930's, the unfolding of ideology within the plane of social relations that distinguishes Pêcheux's theorization reveals the "unevenness" of ideological art and the effacement to which it is subjected as it enters social materiality. By recognizing the manifesto as a field in which the usual disjunction between aesthetics and politics can move toward the convergence of a form in which revolutionary praxis attains a material presence, it can be argued that, in contrast to the assumption that the totalizing movement of ideology distorts the process by which cultural production needs to aspire to the political intentionality of the committed artist, the manifesto is converted into an apparatus that simultaneously mimics the non-aesthetic qualities of political rhetoric by posturing itself as art. Thus, the displacement of aesthetics by politics that is often associated with Marxist critiques of aesthetic agencies must be revitalized in the uncovering of a theoretical discourse of

ideology, an inquiry into the fluctuating process of confrontational mechanisms which Eagleton argues are central to Marxist theories of social praxis: “It must figure as an organizing force which actively constitutes human subjects at the roots of their lived experience and seems to equip them with forms of value and belief relevant to their specific social tasks and to the general reproduction of the social order.”¹⁴

Furthermore, it is here that the enclosure of ideology within the structure of the manifesto, which has been described as the interiorizing of aesthetics-as-politics in its form, relates to the way in which revolutionary art within vanguardism aspires toward a discourse that simultaneously displaces and rearticulates the historical tension between cultural production and the counterrevolutionary tendencies which negate the authenticity of avant-garde revolt. Janet Lyon, in this respect, argues that the manifesto thus “occupies a distinct generic space in the arena of public discourse” in its challenge to “culture’s dominant ideology,” as a result of the extrinsic disjunction between the “we” of the manifesto and the “you” which it seeks to antagonize and engage in its revolutionary structure:

By alternating among the discourses of history, logic, and prophesy, the manifesto aims to legitimate its revised historical perspectives, its insistence on new hierarchies of power, and its newly invigorated metaphors that help to create new enunciative positions within ideology. In shifting the cultural position of a marginalized group, the manifesto yields an alternative historical narrative, one that foregrounds the group’s grievances and thereby struggles squarely within but also in opposition to culture’s foundational narratives.¹⁵

Indeed, the manifesto, like the ideological effect of vanguardism itself, assumes a mythological appearance which “creates a simulacrum of rupture in the dominant political order,” or rather, what can be defined in relation to the temporary dissolution of

¹⁴ Eagleton, *Ideology*, 222.

¹⁵ Janet Lyon, *Manifestoes: Provocations of the Modern* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999), 24, 14.

exteriority in its form.¹⁶ What is immediately recognizable here is the simulation of this “rupture,” especially as it relates to the building of a revolutionary praxis in the confines of the manifesto and the inclusiveness of ideology which breaches the gap between aesthetic and political difference, and instead puts forward a non-dimensional space, one that through the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics sustains a confrontational performance. The resulting instability that the manifesto reproduces, as Lyon appropriately points out, determines its structure as it confronts ruling class ideology, a mode of confrontation which in the present context endeavors to outmaneuver counterrevolutionary mechanisms that subject social materiality to ruling class predominance.

Thus, as Martin Puchner argues, it is the “theatricality” of the manifesto which enables rupturing to become apparent, a process, in other terms, which realizes its potentiality as revolt by positing a historiography in both form and content, and which continually formalizes the interior dialectic between aesthetic and political directives generically in the form of revolutionary art itself.¹⁷ The question, then, is to what extent the theatrical mode of the manifesto can produce the dynamism of confrontation to the preconditioning of ruling class ideological forms, or what in similar terms can be thought of as a regression to the residue of “manifesto art” in which the confrontational effects of aesthetics-as-politics are subordinated by the exteriors of ruling class counterrevolution? It would be beneficial, in this sense, to subject the dialectical form of the manifesto to a more rigorous conceptualization in which its ideological apparatus can be liberated from the discontinuity of “manifesto art,” a characteristic predicament within its structural

¹⁶ Ibid., 16.

¹⁷ Puchner, 29.

development which reduces its political criticality to the formalism of aesthetic practice. Such a theoretization intends to rethink the oscillating presence of ideological resistance that the manifesto reproduces in relation to the theory of vanguardism, thus allowing for a more fluid understanding of the dialectical intertextuality between revolutionary art and what will be termed the “propaganda model,” an extension of the socialist realism versus avant-garde art discussion provided in chapter one.

On the narrative level, the manifesto resolves the tension that emerges between cultural production and the revolution-as-signifier that pervades the formation of avant-garde autonomy, as the above characterization of aesthetic and political vanguardism argues. The dialogue that the advance of the vanguard creates, in both aesthetic and political terms, historicizes the counterrevolutionary forces with which it is confronted, and it is through the dialectical rearticulation of that confrontational moment that the correlation between vanguardism and the manifesto can be made, an intertextuality that legitimates the interiors of revolutionary praxis while demystifying the opposing peripheries of the counterrevolution. It is the dialectical form of the manifesto, in fact, that is equivalent to what Fredric Jameson refers to as the “ideologeme,” or rather “a historically determinate conceptual or semic” which is able to reconstruct the ideological preconditioning that embeds itself within cultural production.¹⁸ For Jameson, the “historical reflexivity” that emerges as a result of the displacement that occurs on the ideological level of cultural production dialectically reorganizes the principles of aesthetic authenticity that have been mystified by the unevenness of capitalist reappropriation:

¹⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 115.

The ideologeme is an amphibious formation, whose essential structural characteristic may be described as its possibility to manifest itself either as pseudoidea—a conceptual or belief system, an abstract value, an opinion or prejudice—or as a protonarrative, a kind of ultimate class fantasy about the “collective characters” which are the classes in opposition.... We may suggest that from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal “solutions” to unresolvable social contradictions.¹⁹

The symbolic exchange between cultural production and ideological reinvestment, which for Jameson becomes evident only through the reconstruction of the particular ideologemes that are invested within textual forms, can also be extended to describe the interior processes of the manifesto, the only difference being that the narrativity of the manifesto structure is already predisposed to generating the systematic intertextuality between aesthetic acts and ideological oscillation. The tension between history and ideology in the form of the manifesto, the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics in its structure, recognizes the subtext of which the disjunction between ideology and art also are reproduced as opposing referents, yet unlike the unconscious subtext that Jameson argues needs to be reconciled through the utilization of the ideologeme in the theorization of narrative structures, the manifesto foregrounds the representation of this discontinuity, a process that reveals its attempt to recreate a revolutionary praxis as the focal point in its construction. Thus, the manifesto, much like the interior constituents of aesthetic and political vanguardism, communicates a dynamism in which the ideology of revolutionary praxis is recontextualized as a confrontational mode which deliberately affronts the ruling class manipulation of cultural production, what Raymond Williams regards as the specificities by which avant-garde cultural practice perpetuates the autonomous status of

¹⁹ Ibid., 79, 87.

its interior “language-system” as a form of reality itself.²⁰ Furthermore, it is the internal mechanism by which the manifesto acknowledges the inclusiveness of its signifying status, a point which is made clearer in its confrontation with the “you” to which it is addressed, which also reveals the reconciliation of its collective status with the dialectical representation of revolutionary praxis through which it totalizes its social identification.

At the same time, it is also evident that Jameson’s analysis of the mechanism at work in aesthetic production allows for the reconstruction of the “ideologeme” of the manifesto within capitalism, particularly its attempt to disseminate the praxis of revolution on a mass scale. That is, the “collective fantasy” of the manifesto, the contextualization of liberation and creativity in its interiors, unveils the dialectic between propaganda and reification, or what can be considered the dualistic reproduction of the manifesto in its social context. More specifically, the re-structuring of aesthetics-as-politics suggests that the self-justifying advance of the manifesto can demystify the separation that is often made between ideology and art, demystification here signifying a particular level of propaganda in the Marxist sense. At the same time, it is this very convergence which reinforces the subordinate position of the manifesto within the hegemony of the ruling class order, a de-classification which in other terms reaffirms its reified status within the milieu of ideological reconditioning that continually unfolds as it re-enters social space. It is the “fantasy level” of the manifesto which produces its cultural significance, yet it is at this point that it is continually relegated to the position of otherness, which in the dialectical form of the manifesto, emerges as a confrontational model that reflects the struggle of the historical avant-garde and its perpetuation of

²⁰ Williams, *The Politics of Modernism*, 75.

aesthetic revolt.²¹ In this sense, the reconstruction of the ideologeme of the manifesto calls into question the problematic character of its dialectical form; for the disjunction between ideological and aesthetic operations in its interior structure can be fulfilled only through the very displacement that occurs as it attempt to reposition itself as praxis, and thus as a materiality beyond the framework of ruling class ideology. Consequently, despite its being able to function on the narrative level, the manifesto is simultaneously confronted with the ideological unevenness of which ruling class totality is structured, a process that recalls the paradoxical character of revolt by which the historical avant-garde also attempts to sustain itself.

In other terms, if the impetus of the manifesto within capitalism is to transform social relations through the reproduction of a confrontational mode that is designed to eliminate the binary between aesthetics and politics, what emerges is a propagandistic model that consolidates the operation of revolutionary activity into narrative form, a process which A.P Foulkes describes as the “art of demystification,” which has been used throughout the present argument to describe the apparatus of confrontation that functions within the manifesto’s productive capabilities:

A demystifying art...is by nature a subversive and questioning art. It challenges habits and modes of perception, and produces new ways of seeing and interpreting processes and relationships. To do this successfully, it must be unpredictable, surprising, even shocking, and it must be inventive enough to avoid being submerged by an integration propaganda which will naturalize its techniques in the guise of reproducing them. When we begin to look for examples of such art, in Marxist as well as capitalist societies, we encounter a number of apparent contradictions which shed light on, and can in turn be illuminated by, the workings of propaganda.²²

²¹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 142.

²² A.P. Foulkes, *Literature and Propaganda*, 56; for a general history of art and propaganda, see also Toby Clark, *Art and Propaganda in the Twentieth Century*, 7-47.

Foulkes justifies here what Pierre Bourdieu refers to as the systematic “production of belief” that occurs within the form of avant-garde cultural production, a reproductive function that exposes the interior sites of struggle within the form of the artwork that emphasizes the dialectical relationship between aesthetic and ideological consecration.²³ It is here that the customary divergence between socialist realism and avant-garde aesthetics becomes relevant, since the designation of the former as the totalizing form of propaganda now becomes rearticulated as a theoretical category that diminishes the subordination of its objectives to the rhetoric of avant-garde experimentalism. For what distinguishes the subversive act in the workings of the manifesto is the mechanistic provocation that reflects the anti-art theatrics of a movement such as Dadaism, a mechanism that for Bourdieu “attempts to call into question the field of artistic production, the logic of its functioning and the functions it performs, through the highly sublimated and ambiguous means of discourse or artistic ‘acts.’”²⁴ For Foulkes, the disparity between the mechanism of confrontation in demystified art and what he terms “integrated propaganda” is relegated to a systematic delimitation of the artwork that controls the reproduction of its political subtext and the possibility of generating the necessary effects that would complete revolutionary praxis. Foulkes touches here on the potentiality of neo-avant-garde cultural production, which imitates the confrontational model of vanguardism only to be thwarted by the *modus operandi* of subsumption that is pervasive within late capitalism.²⁵ For now, if propaganda signifies the attempt to “disrupt” the boundaries between literary effects and social reception, it materializes in

²³ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production*, 78.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

²⁵ See Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist* and the concluding chapter to the present study.

the manifesto as a space in which the discontinuity between aesthetic and political referents is diminished to the extent that the traditional narrative model and its “situational contexts” are effaced in the process, which as described above, allows for a reinterpretation of the function of non-aesthetic models of propaganda as historical sites of contending fields.²⁶

To continue with the reconstruction of the ideologeme of the manifesto, however, it is necessary to consider the consequences of the unfolding problematic of reification which both Jameson and Bourdieu argue emerges in the symbolic intertextuality that occurs between ideology and art, what Bourdieu above refers to as the discourse of aesthetic revolt that he associates with avant-gardism. Reification here relates to the process of ideological misrecognition that Pêcheux describes above, which in the manifesto occurs as a result of the attempt to sustain itself as reality, as revolutionary praxis. Thus, it is not only how the inherent “blindness” of the manifesto collapses into the illusion of social transcendence, the spaces in which the materiality of revolutionary praxis are supposedly realized, but also how the subsequent fetishization of the manifesto by ruling class formations brought about the demise of its transformative capabilities, especially within postmodernism.²⁷ For the manifesto, while revealing the discontinuity between aesthetic and political principles that converge in the demystified form of propaganda, additionally reveals the incongruent sacrifices that take place in its social context; that is, in attempting to create a praxis for social evolution, the manifesto must seal itself in a self-reflecting medium that can reveal only the narrative possibility of transcendence, an illusion that justifies the particularities of social action for which the

²⁶ Foulkes, 74.

²⁷ For an analysis of revolutionary praxis within postmodernism, see the final chapter to this study.

manifesto continually struggles as it attempts to legitimate the components of its interiorizing structure.

Nevertheless, the manifesto is able to penetrate the ideological systems that legitimate authorial control, both in aesthetic and non-aesthetic structures in which the ideology of the propaganda model either goes unnoticed or is glossed over as inconsequential to the analytical implications of its design. It is in this sense that the manifesto is able to acquire an autonomous status within capitalism itself, as it must compensate for the actuality of revolution by representing the experience of that transformation as narrative, as the unrealized materiality of revolutionary activity. That is, such a process creates the *illusion* of the narrative as a *real* transformative entity, which in its ineffectiveness delimits its possibility of ideological transcendence. And yet, according to Georg Lukács, the effects of reification can be overcome by "*constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifest contradictions of the total development*, what can be thought of as the advancement of a critical consciousness by which the elements of the subject-object dialectic within the mode of capitalist production are rendered transparent, a point which Jameson develops in his work that underlines the experience of capitalist reification while unveiling the establishment of new forms of revolutionary praxis.²⁸ In the present context, the manifesto allows for such a rearticulation of the dialectical convergence of ideology and aesthetics in its structure, an organizational model through which its radical materialization is conveyed in the repetitive cycle of confrontation that

²⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1971), 197; the present model of reification mirrors Jameson's analysis of Joseph Conrad in chapter 5 of *The Political Unconscious*, 206-281.

unfolds on the margins of the counterrevolutionary movement, a challenge that contradictorily unveils the work of reification embedded in its project as well.

Furthermore, as Janet Lyon argues, the “struggle against dominant forces” that the manifesto discloses “rationalizes” the instability of its structure, one in which the “inflectable, expansive, and mobile” elements are able to locate an emancipative space of resistance, much like the forces that determine avant-garde cultural production itself.²⁹ Contrary to Lyon’s conclusions that such instability moves the manifesto into the indeterminacy of which poststructuralist critiques of modernism are designed, it is evident that the dialectical logic of the manifesto strongly mirrors the evolution of aesthetic and political vanguardism, the historical determination that underscores its ability to provide an analytical model for discussing the historicity of avant-garde revolt. Specifically, as the present context has been urging throughout, in the sense that vanguardism effaces the binary between ideological and aesthetic concerns, the emergence of the manifesto as the governing principle through which revolutionary art formulated a presence demands a more rigorous analysis of the historical convergence of aesthetics and politics in the post-1917 era, an analysis that must historicize the appearance of manipulative rhetorical devices that attempted to annihilate the demands of revolutionary art within capitalist societies. This characterization does not intend to deny the implicit contradictions of the manifesto within Communism, a problematic relationship in which the ideological justification of the party dynamic formed a communicative interdependency that became frustrated after the establishment of socialist realism after 1934. It may be the case, in fact, that an analysis of the manifesto within Communism would allow for the process of de-reification to happen more

²⁹ Lyon, 29, 36.

smoothly, since the intertextual constraints that reinforce both ideological and aesthetic forms would merge into the social connectivity to which the avant-garde itself aspired. In other terms, the avant-garde manifesto within twentieth century capitalism, beginning with the Futurist movements in Italy and Russia, advancing toward the volatility of Dada and Vorticism, and culminating in the more systematically demystified aesthetic of Surrealism, insists on the reading of the latent materiality in its form through which both confrontation and self-consciousness achieve a discontinuous relation.³⁰

For Martin Puchner, the internationalism of the manifesto sharpened the historicization of Marx's originality in *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848 as it entered into the theoretical reproduction of avant-garde aesthetics by translating the criticality of the manifesto genre into a cultural historiography, thus creating a confrontational vehicle for revolutionary communication.³¹ Moreover, as Raymond Williams also argues, the substance of which the social reconstruction of literary structures gives rise to newly articulated definitions of revolutionary praxis reaffirms Marxist "Typifications" of cultural production: "the specific figure from which we can reasonably extrapolate; or, to put it the other way round, the specific figure which concentrates and intensifies a much more general reality."³² And it is this very incompleteness of the revolutionary project at work in the interior mechanisms of the manifesto that demands a view into the invaluable work of the Surrealists and their infusion of aesthetic and political paradigms into the reconstruction of vanguardism, what Williams specifies as the interacting disjunctions

³⁰ For a "very rough chronology" of the avant-garde manifesto, see Mary Ann Caws, *Manifesto: A Century of Isms*, xxxiii-xxxiv.

³¹ Puchner develops this analysis specifically in chapter 1 and 3 of his work on the manifesto.

³² Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature*, 101.

that take place among the “dominant, residual, and emergent” configurations of aesthetics and politics within the historical avant-garde, as the following section will examine.³³

The Strange Diversion: Communism in the Service of the Surrealist Revolution

As the first chapter analyzed, the implementation of socialist realism by the PCF, part of what has been termed the “Bolshevization” of the Communist International in the revolutionary Third Period (1928-1935), stemmed from the argument that the modernist aesthetic was not designed to penetrate the opacity of external reality, nor could it expose the opacity that determines social life under capitalism. For advocates of socialist realism, the ideological opacity of the avant-garde prohibited a formative attack on the progression of capitalist reification, a result of what Georg Lukács calls the *Attenuation of reality*: “Man is reduced to a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments; he is inexplicable to others as to himself.... Distortion becomes the normal condition of human existence; the proper study, the formative principle, of art and literature.”³⁴ Modernism, for Lukács, limited the hopes of building a revolutionary movement by not subordinating aesthetic radicalism to the needs of the revolutionary party, a position that André Breton saw as a primary contradiction in the abandonment of Surrealist inventiveness for the dogmatism of socialist realism, as he writes in his 1947 piece “Inaugural Break” Breton writes,

The political experiment of surrealism which, for some ten years, caused it to revolve in the orbit of the Communist party, is absolutely conclusive. To follow the Communist Party today along the path of class collaboration to which it has embarked appears contradictory to the motives which formerly decided surrealism to engage in political action—motives which themselves are as much immediate

³³ Ibid., 123.

³⁴ Lukács, *Realism in Our Time* 26, 33.

demeans in the real of the spirit, and especially in the ethical domain, as the pursuit of that distance goal which is human liberation.³⁵

The notion of cognitive liberation of the Surrealist movement, a radical position that is expressed in their 1927 *Declaration*, seems to complicate rather than solve the historical avant-gardist problematic of producing an oppositional praxis of art. Despite the fact that Breton and the Surrealists were intimately involved with the PCF from the late 1920's to the middle of the following decade, a period which saw the Surrealist movement develop a revolutionary aesthetic that was both anti-capitalist and yet capable of confronting the escalation of Fascism in Germany, Italy, and within France itself, it is often argued that Surrealism could not articulate a focal point of political accessibility that could meet the structural demands for social revolution, a conceptual problematic which could be extended to the historical avant-garde as well.³⁶ And yet, from the Moroccan War in 1925 to the *Front Populaire* of the 1930's, the Surrealist movement sought to undermine the self-righteous hegemony of the bourgeoisie in its persistent reproduction of a revolutionary aesthetic that confronted the exteriors of such counterrevolutionary tendencies. As M. Stone-Richards writes, "To this extent, their anti-capitalism was contingent upon the perception that capitalism was the expression of the values of the bourgeois modern world, and parliamentary democracy its institutionalized political embodiment," which necessitated the intermingling of aesthetic and political activity in

³⁵ André Breton, "Inaugural Break," in *What is Surrealism?*, ed. Franklin Rosemont (New York: Pathfinder, 1978), 452.

³⁶ For a general outline on the political history of Surrealism, see Raymond Spiteri and Donald LaCoss "Revolution by Night: Surrealism, Politics, and Culture," in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, 1-17; for more on the Surrealist involvement with anti-fascist causes, see David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, chapters 2 and 3.

the conditioning of an alternative social sphere.³⁷ The continuation of a “political culture,” one that attempted to rebuild the materiality of revolutionary praxis out of the mounting estrangement between radical aesthetics and Marxist politics of the 1930’s, remained a primary concern for Breton even after the vexing “break” with the PCF, as he expresses in his 1934 lecture “What is Surrealism” that is worth quoting here at length:

During the last ten years, surrealism has been obliged to defend itself almost unceasingly against deviations to the right and to the left. On the one hand, we have had to struggle against the will of those who would maintain surrealism on a purely speculative level and treasonably transfer it onto an artistic and literary plane... at the cost of all the hope for subversion we have placed in it; on the other, against the will of those who would place it on a purely practical basis, susceptible at any moment to being sacrificed to an ill-conceived political militancy.... Such dispositions are so dismaying to me that I would not care to be speaking here without first making clear my position in relation to them...affirming that today, more than ever, *the liberation of the mind*, the express aim of surrealism, demands as a primary condition...*the liberation of man*, which implies that we must struggle against our fetters with all the energy of despair; that today more than ever the surrealists rely entirely, for the bringing about of human liberation, on the proletarian revolution.³⁸

It is the 1935 rupture with the PCF that represents the “failure” of the Surrealists’ agenda in their refusal to submit to the authority of the Communist International, what those associated with Breton saw as the barbarism of socialist realism and Stalinization, and the beginning of what Stone-Richards argues was the “crisis of European political culture,” which in the extreme forms of Stalinism and Nazism, also unveiled the impasse in the Surrealist effort to contribute to an alternative discourse that could be used to resist both.³⁹ Thus, Robert Short points out that “The Communists believed that Surrealist writing and art had no appeal to the masses and that their social activity suffered for the

³⁷ M. Stone-Richards, “Failure and Community: Preliminary questions on the Political Culture of Surrealism,” in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, 328.

³⁸ André Breton, “What is Surrealism,” in *What is Surrealism?*, 170, 155.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 303.

sake of their premature artistic experiments,” a point which reflects Breton’s own remarks about the fundamental contradictions that emerged as a result of the Surrealist involvement with the PCF.⁴⁰ In this sense, the aesthetics-as-politics of the Surrealist movement elicited strong political reactions that, paradoxically, often isolated them from the organizational models of the Communist International who viewed the tenacious independence of the Surrealists as a sign of modernist decadence, a consequence of their creation of a cultural politics that favored aesthetic subversion over what Breton argued was the symptomatic de-conditioning of revolutionary art by the Communist International, particularly as it was voiced in the totalizing process of Stalinization that had spilled over into the cultural sphere with the regimentation of socialist realism in 1934.

At the same time, if the Surrealist movement came nearer than any of the avant-gardes in articulating what Benjamin calls “the Communist answer,” or rather what can be understood as the clearest response to the leftist call for a revolutionary praxis of art, then an inquiry into the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics within the conceptual framework of Surrealism should attempt to restructure the intertextuality between the subtext of political organization and the overarching demands for artistic liberation, as the dialectical form of the manifesto itself demonstrates. That is, in slight contrast to the critical evaluations of Surrealist politics which often pursue the disconnections among the Stalinization of the PCF, the inadequacies of socialist realism, and Breton’s partiality toward Trotskyism, all of which suitably outline the contextual dimensions of aesthetic and political vanguardism in the 1930’s, it would be more pertinent to rethink how the subtext of Communism operated in the Surrealist reconstruction of a revolutionary

⁴⁰ Robert Short, “The Politics of Surrealism,” in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 25.

aesthetic that intensely broadened the margins of avant-garde radicalism within non-revolutionary societies. Rather than castigate the Surrealists for involving themselves with the PCF, a position which is often misunderstood as a politicization process that denuded Surrealism of its aesthetics of liberation, it is possible to interpret Surrealism as the culmination of the ways in which the centralizing determination of the revolution-as-signifier shaped the context for vanguardism, a process that, in turn, would characterize further the emergence of a crisis in revolutionary art in its intended transcendence of ruling class ideological predominance. This is not to overlook the opposing contentions between Surrealist models of insurrection and the one to which the Communist International subscribed, for it is evident that the crucial differences between Surrealism and the Communists also reveal the subsequent incongruity between aesthetic and political influences in the formation of neo-avant-garde cultural production in the post-World War II era.⁴¹ On the contrary, the demands for a revolutionary collectivity emphasize the inherent mistrust that often occurred in theoretical versions of aesthetic and political vanguardism, the interior crisis in European intellectual circles that Benjamin observed at the core of the Surrealist movement, in spite of his overall hope that the systematic reinscription of a revolutionary praxis within the framework of Surrealism would fill in the missing aesthetics-as-politics of the revolutionary vanguard as it confronted capitalism and the escalation of Fascism:

If it is the double task of the revolutionary intelligentsia to overthrow the intellectual predominance of the bourgeoisie and to make contact with the proletarian masses, the intelligentsia has failed almost entirely in the second part of this task because it can no longer be performed contemplatively.... Only when in technology body and image so interpenetrate that all revolutionary tension becomes bodily collective innervation, and all the bodily innervations of the collective become revolutionary discharge, has reality transcended itself to the

⁴¹ See the final chapter to this study.

extent demanded by the Communist Manifesto. For the moment, only the Surrealists have understood its present commands.⁴²

In what Mary Ann Caws calls the “continuity of contradictions” of which the Surrealist movement is structured, it can be argued that the Surrealist incorporation of revolutionary communism into its form, a move which for Benjamin forced the left intelligentsia to rethink the parameters of the vanguard itself, signified both the permanence of the collective response to the “revolutionary spirit” that had been unleashed in the post-1917 era and the conflicting disjunction between aesthetic and political collaborations, the dialectical intertextuality that indicates the extent to which the political subtext of Surrealism can be rearticulated according to such historical significance.⁴³ For one of the most important contributions to the dialectical formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism by the Surrealist movement is the structural entrenchment of revolutionary ideology within its aesthetic production, a quality which points to one of the fundamental problems in forming a critical perspective of its political subtext. That is, to the extent that the mechanism of revolt within Surrealist cultural production adheres to the notion that, above all, the independence of art must be sustained, the expectation of infusing the organizational mode of Communism into that very paradigm would contradict the expectations that are originally intended by Surrealist cultural politics. Thus, although acknowledging that “Communism was the touchstone...to judge the health of the Surrealists,” their relationship to Communism could only occur as long as they remained “outside the party,” a point Robert Short

⁴² Walter Benjamin, *Reflections*, 191-192.

⁴³ Mary Ann Caws, *The Poetry of Dada and Surrealism: Aragon, Breton, Eluard & Desnos* (Princeton: Princeton University Press), 1970.

emphasizes in his declaration that the Surrealist “flirtation” with the PCF until the late 1930’s was a futile, regressive endeavor:

The Surrealist revolution was conceived, in effect, on a different plane of experience from that of the Marxists. A new ‘October’ was envisaged as the prelude to the ‘changing of life’ rather than as an organic element in it. Only the ambiguous definitions of the word ‘revolution’ permitted the prolonged Surrealist misunderstanding that there was real common ground between their aims and those of the Marxists. Their own Marxism could never be more than a ‘placage’, a flimsy façade tacked on to a philosophy that was different in kind. Their attempt to unite the two meant either the tortured readjustment of Surrealist ideas or the forcible addition to Marxism of ideas that had no place in it. Both alternatives were tried and found impracticable.⁴⁴

It is important to view the full context of Short’s critique of what he argues are the aesthetic and political implications that arose out of the Surrealist interlude as part of the Communist program, since such a critique discloses some of the crucial predispositions in the assessments of Surrealist cultural politics. Firstly, it is important to distinguish the implications of the revolution-as-signifier in the reproduction of the Surrealist aesthetic, what in the present context intrinsically relates Surrealism to the struggle of the historical avant-garde, and yet for Short exposes the fundamental “misunderstanding” between the Surrealist and “Marxist” visions of cultural politics. To this extent, Short views the Surrealist expedition into Communism as one by which their aesthetic desires were besieged by the theoretical structure of a political philosophy that contradicted the ideology of revolt to which the aesthetic project of Surrealism aspired. In other terms, this position reiterates the predetermined notion that the incompatibility of Surrealism and Communism is an ideological disagreement, a point that has merit in relation to the resulting rupture that occurred between the two movements. On the contrary, Short also suggests that the convergence of aesthetic and political ideology in the Surrealist

⁴⁴ Short, 35, 34.

movement was ineffectual due to that confrontation itself, a critique that faults the so-called rigidity of Marxism as much as it disformulates the conditions of revolutionary praxis around which Surrealist cultural production intended to organize itself. In other terms, while it is evident that the irreconcilability that materialized as a result of the Surrealist move into the ranks of the PCF produced the illusion of revolutionary praxis, the recognition of the subtext at work within Surrealism suggests that the structural affinity it had with Communism was less of a “tortured readjustment” than it was a constant disclosure of the aesthetics-as-politics that determined its formation, even while conceding to the fact that neither the PCF nor Surrealism could build the praxis needed to combat the intensification of international capital and its exploitative mechanisms that would generate some of the conditions for the next World War, not to mention a formative strategy that could fight against the rising counterrevolutionary movements on the extreme right that were themselves conditioned by the acute crisis in international capital.

Thus, it is important to emphasize that the ideology of art that enfolds the Surrealist revolution is a direct consequence of the infusion of Communism into its structural design, a process that further challenged avant-garde autonomy by reinscribing itself as praxis, and which pushed the theoretical exteriority of avant-garde revolt towards the authenticity of revolution to which it had aspired since the destabilizing events of 1917. In other terms, Surrealism effectively confronted the ruling class rationality of social relations by restructuring the intertextuality of art and writing that simultaneously emphasized and de-centered the ideology of revolutionary art itself.⁴⁵ As Mary Ann

⁴⁵ For more on the intertextuality of art and writing, see Mary Ann Caws, *The Surrealist Look: An Erotics of Encounter* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 2000), and Jemma Montagu, *The Surrealists: Revolutionaries in Art*

Caws points out, it is this “transgressive” character of the Surrealist artwork that Breton distinguished as the vital function which broke the boundaries of the historical avant-garde and led to a newly organized mode for ideological art, an expansion, that is, of the imaginary dimension of cognitive liberation which, especially for Breton, would systematize the moment of the social revolution.⁴⁶ The concept of transgression here satisfies the cognitive orientation by which Surrealism achieved a particularly rigorous form, one which signaled for Georges Bataille the “aggressive force” in Surrealist cultural production that, as a component in the formation of a revolutionary praxis of art, uncovers for the present argument some of the difficulties of analyzing its political subtext.⁴⁷ From Bataille’s contextualization it is possible to advance the theoretical argument that transgression is infused into Surrealist cultural production in the prospects of subverting the disjunction between art and social life, what can be thought of as a mechanism that utilized the ideology of revolt for the psychological de-rationalization of social relations within capitalism, or a pre-conditioning systemization of revolutionary praxis itself. For Beret E. Strong, the final legacy of the Surrealist movement is its incessant determination to create the framework for social liberation, one that in its most immediate form attempt to subvert the hegemony of ruling class ideologies.⁴⁸ The impact of the Surrealist movement, headed by Breton’s “radical revision of perception and

& *Writing, 1919-35* (London: Tate Publishing, 2002). Although Montagu’s study offers some important insights into the cross-current stylistics in visual and written texts of the Surrealists, her definition of “revolution” relegates the political dimension of the Surrealist movement to a marginal status, thus unveiling the very problematic that I am describing here in terms of critical assessments of Surrealism in the political climate of the 1930’s.

⁴⁶ Caws, *Ibid.*, 201.

⁴⁷ Georges Bataille, *The Absence of Myth: Writings on Surrealism*, ed. and trans. Michael Richardson (London: Verso, 1994), 55.

⁴⁸ Beret E. Strong, *The Poetic Avant-Garde: The Groups of Borges, Auden, & Breton* (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1997), 225.

experience,” recreated the conditions for revolutionary art by materializing the accessibility to the imaginary spaces beyond the “rational” (bourgeois) mind, a project which for Strong became hindered by the authoritarian pose that Breton exhibited in the 1930’s.⁴⁹

What is immediately relevant here is the function of ideology in the above characterizations of Surrealist visionary aesthetics, some conclusions of which allow for a reassessment of the political subtext of Communism at work in the interior spaces of Breton’s theoretical objectives. For it is evident that the criticism of Surrealist politics, in part, stems from Breton’s own writings on the mechanism by which ideological art must pave the way for the social revolution, an aspect of Surrealism that is often misunderstood as a consequence of Breton’s expulsion from the PCF, in addition to his subsequent favoring of Trotskyism over Stalinism. More specifically, the Surrealist vision aimed at subverting the cognitive dimension of bourgeois social relations and the ways in which that social formulation had come to legitimize itself as “reality.” In this sense, the Surrealist focus on cognitive liberation rather than on the plight of economic exploitation sought to reveal the extent to which capitalist opacity flattens the interrelation between self and society, not to mention the misconstrued notion that ideological art can only be constructed within the post-revolutionary moment. This notion emphasizes Breton’s sympathy for Trotsky’s categorization of proletarian culture, particularly in its being unfeasible in the immediate aftermath of the Bolshevik

⁴⁹ Ibid., 227. Martin Puchner compares Breton’s consolidation of the Surrealists to Stalin’s purges, a hasty judgment that fails to analyze the historical context of his rupture with the PCF and the extenuating circumstances. That Breton wielded a heavy hand in the advance of Surrealism is not in question here; rather, it is the characterization of Breton as a Stalinist that seems out of place, especially in the context of Puchner’s analysis of the manifesto, and in light of Breton’s own disassociation with the Communist International. See Puchner, *Poetry of the Revolution*, 186-87.

Revolution, as reflected in Breton's concern with the Surrealist position within the Communist International. In the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930), Breton expanded upon his sensitivity to Trotsky's theories of revolutionary art, revealing his defiance toward the dictates of socialist realism:

I do not believe in the possibility of an art or literature which expresses the aspirations of the working class. If I refuse to believe in such a possibility, it is because, in any prerevolutionary period the writer or artist, who of necessity is a product of the bourgeoisie, is by definition incapable of translating these aspirations.... By comparison, any attempt to explain social phenomena other than by Marx is to my mind as erroneous as any effort to defend or illustrate a so-called "proletarian" literature and art at a time in history when no one can fairly claim any real kinship with the proletarian culture, for the very excellent reason that this culture does not yet exist, even under proletarian regimes.⁵⁰

In his speech on proletarian literature before the Association of Revolutionary Artists and Writers (Association des Ecrivains et Artistes Révolutionnaires) in 1933, Breton also augmented his criticism of proletarian culture in his re-framing of what constituted revolutionary art as it emerged both from within and external to revolutionary praxis:

May it be said that the present forms of distinguishing those works summarily called proletarian, whether in the capitalist countries or in Soviet Russia, should be taken as the definitive, complete forms of proletarian literature? Such would serve only those who are incapable of conceiving these forms dynamically, it having been claimed that we are waiting for such forms to be constituted on the model of the fixed, unchangeable forms exemplified by the sonnet and the classical tragedy in five acts.... Thus I think we must be very careful in the view we adopt toward proletarian literature; we must not forget that it can only be a transitional literature between the literature of bourgeois society and that of a classless society.⁵¹

What is immediately evident is Breton's backing of Trotsky's criticism of proletarian culture, a critique which explicitly states that, despite having concretized the conditions of revolutionary praxis after 1917, proletarian society would have to be liberated further

⁵⁰ André Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, trans. Richard Seaver and Helen R. Lane (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1972), 155-156.

⁵¹ André Breton, "On 'proletarian literature,'" in *What is Surrealism?*, 124.

in order for it to move beyond the pre-existing confines of bourgeois cultural demands. It can be argued here that, to the extent that the cultural exchange in the pre-revolutionary society had been determined by capitalist social relations, proletarian culture for Breton could exist only within the determinations of bourgeois rationality, hence the desire for a thoroughly ideological art that would initiate the de-reification of social relations, or what has been described here as the process through which Surrealist cultural production attempted to shatter the illusion of existential complacency that had been fabricated by capitalist ideology.

It is clear, then, that Surrealism functions within the parameters of demystification of which the manifesto is also composed; that is, the relation between the aesthetic proportions of the Surrealist artwork and the oscillating mechanism of ideology produces and constructs the possibility of an independent art while simultaneously masking its contingency with the ideological subtext itself. Furthermore, Surrealism, like the interior mutability of the manifesto, can be understood in relation to propaganda, which here would allow for the materialization of the subtext of revolutionary communism that has often been denied a space in critical assessments of Surrealist aesthetic agencies. For Eagleton, it is the continual disturbance between the signifier and signified that produces the discourse of literary effects, a process in which the reinvestment of ideology in textual form reproduces the “relative autonomy of its structuration,” what in the present context relates to the disjunctive interdependency between the subtextual dimension of revolutionary communism, the interior propagandistic mechanism within its structure, and the exteriors of Surrealist revolt, which Eagleton clarifies to a further extent:

The text does not merely ‘take’ ideological conflicts in order to ‘resolve’ them aesthetically, for the character of those conflicts is itself overdetermined by the

textual modes in which they are reproduced.... It is, rather, a matter of the ‘ideological’ presenting itself in the form of the ‘aesthetic’ and vice versa—of an ‘aesthetic’ solution to ideological conflict producing in its turn an aesthetic problem which demands ideological resolution, and so on. It is not simply that ideology furnishes the ‘materials’ for the text’s formal aesthetic operations; the textual process is, rather, a complex mutual articulation of the two, whereby aesthetic modes so define and determine ideological problems as to be able to continue to reproduce themselves, but only within the limits and subject to the problems which their own overdetermination of the ideological sets.⁵²

The Surrealist solution to the intertextuality that is determined by the “destination and departure” of ideological and aesthetic mobilization within the theoretical framework Eagleton provides here also could be restructured according to the properties of Surrealism, which by functioning according to the logic of its own subversive content, channels the subtext of revolutionary communism into a specific mode of revolt through which the demands of the social revolution would be disseminated ideologically. The dialectical form of the Surrealist work suggests that the interdependent motivation of aesthetics and politics formulates a “dissonance” or disjunction that resolves itself only as it moves into social materiality, a point which further demands an inquiry into the mechanism by which the ideology of revolutionary communism is reinscribed within the subtext of Surrealist cultural production.⁵³

In other words, the erasure of the overtly political content that occurs on the surface of Surrealism is reconnected to the subtextual determinant of revolutionary communism, which through the dialectical form of the conflict between aesthetic and political representations of revolutionary discourse is exposed as an interdependent passage from ideology to art, a process of misrecognition that is also evident in the dissonant textures of propaganda forms, such as in the manifesto. Thus, in slight contrast

⁵² Terry Eagleton, *Criticism & Ideology*, 88.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 89.

to the notion that the “un-said” of textual production needs to be unveiled so that the ideological discourse that has been concretized in the interiors of the text can be theorized more thoroughly, Surrealist cultural production manifests the ascendant praxis of how revolutionary art should function in its confrontation with counterrevolutionary (capitalist) ideology. That is, the paradigms of revolutionary art in Surrealist cultural production, which can be extended to elucidate the culminating moment of aesthetic and political vanguardism itself, were implemented to meet the ideological requirements of revolutionary communism which in the transactions between the Surrealist subtext and the configurations of the aesthetic form emerged as ideological art in the most radical sense, a process which Breton in 1935 called the “the creation of a collective myth.”⁵⁴

For what becomes immediately evident is that Breton never abandons the stratagems of revolutionary communism; rather, the implementation of the hegemonic blueprint of socialist realism, which was the primary cause for the disagreement between his group and the PCF, conflicted with the properties of Surrealist art and the demands for transposing the advancement of human liberation in aesthetic terms: without the collapse into the unreality of which non-revolutionary society determined proletarian existence, Surrealism would have to reproduce the revolution in aesthetic terms. As Breton exclaims, “It is no less obvious that Surrealism has continued to go farther and farther beyond the strict framework within which certain of us have struggled fiercely to maintain it, to avoid seeing it turn aside onto an apolitical plane where it would lose all its historical meaning, or commit itself exclusively to the political plane, where it would

⁵⁴ André Breton, “The Political Position of Today’s Art,” in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 232.

merely be redundant.”⁵⁵ For Breton, it was evident that the ideological refurbishment of cultural production needed to move beyond the narrowness of socialist realism, particularly since the immediate prospects for revolutionary communism in France and Western Europe were absent. Moreover, the rise of Fascism after 1934 necessitated a dynamic response which engaged the deficiencies of the political left by launching a counter-offensive within the framework of the PCF and the Communist International of which Breton and the Surrealists were still attached, albeit ideologically.⁵⁶ This is not to deny both the stubbornness for which Breton was notorious, nor is it meant to contest the overwhelming attack on the Surrealist contingent, which had been brewing since the first induction of Breton and his orbit into the ranks of the PCF.⁵⁷ On the contrary, the Surrealist desire to cultivate human liberation was a direct outcome of the attempt to demystify the process by which the self / other dialectic within capitalism becomes ingested as a materiality, a disorganizing mechanism that distorted the authenticity of revolutionary praxis, thus delimiting the projection of a formative space beyond the exteriors of ruling class formations, not to mention against the emerging authority of the fascist state to which the European left was late in building an effective response.⁵⁸

To consider the implications of Surrealist cultural production within its historical and theoretical context, it is crucial that a further investigation of the Surrealist manifesto be developed, an analysis that will also draw out some of the complex relations between Breton and other conceptualizations of revolutionary art in the later 1930's. What

⁵⁵ Ibid., 233.

⁵⁶ See David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals* for more on the formation of the anti-fascist counter-offensive, especially chapters 3 and 4.

⁵⁷ See especially chapter 7 of Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism*, 119-140.

⁵⁸ For more on Fascism and the leftist response, see Eugene Lunn, *Marxism & Modernism*, chapter 5. Lunn's analysis of Brecht and Lukács in this respect is effective, yet his lumping together of Stalinism/Nazism is somewhat faulty.

distinguished the Surrealist manifesto from its predecessors, particularly Dada's dependence on anti-art and rejectionism as contingent points for amalgamating other forms of radical activities, was the historicization of the inherent junction between political and aesthetic revolution, which from the very first "Declaration of 27 January 1925" revealed the complex relation between avant-garde cultural production and the ideological recognition of social transformation: "We are determined to make a revolution. / We have coupled the word *surrealist* and the word *revolution* only to show the disinterested, detached, and even totally desperate character of this revolution."⁵⁹ The infusion of the terms "surrealist" and "revolution" represented a primary concern of the historical avant-garde and the mechanism of revolt within its structure, a challenge that elucidates here the convergence of aesthetic and political interests of which vanguardism is also composed. At the same time, the coupling of the two terms also challenged the disjunction between aesthetic and political paradigms, an attempt to erase the distinctions that had relegated the inherent mechanism of revolt within revolutionary art to a marginal status, which for Breton caused the fragmentation of the essential criticality of avant-garde cultural politics. To this extent, it can be argued that one of the fundamental characteristics of the Surrealist movement was its ability to blur the categories of ruling class ideology, a process that simultaneously produced new spaces of cognitive liberation, or what the above theoretical analysis has characterized as the mechanism of demystification in its most radical appearance.

As suggested, the mechanism of revolt that Surrealist cultural production reproduced also created a space for revolutionary praxis that would sustain a formative presence, albeit one that expressed itself at moments in anarchistic terms, as the tract

⁵⁹ In André Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, 421.

“Revolution Now and Forever” reveals: “We do not accept the laws of economy and exchange, we do not accept the slavery of labour, and, in a still wider sense, we have taken up arms against history.... We are the revolt of the spirit; we believe that bloody revolution is the inevitable vengeance of a spirit humiliated by your doings. We are not utopians; we can conceive this revolution only in social form.”⁶⁰ For Martin Puchner the Surrealist manifestos “record an astonishing zigzag trail through the cultural and political terrain of interwar France” and document not only Breton’s transformation within the dimensions of art and politics, but also the way in which the manifesto of the Surrealist movement was impelled into a new form: “the practice of and attitude toward the manifesto as a genre [becomes] a central factor in the conflicts about revolution and art.”⁶¹ Puchner’s argument here is that the oscillation between the “two poles” of aesthetic and political performance that is revealed by the Surrealist manifesto reconnected the avant-garde to the original intention proposed by *The Communist Manifesto* of 1848, with its emphasis on creating a new genre for agitational influence and direction.⁶² This is perhaps most notable in the *Second Manifesto of Surrealism* (1930) in which Breton explores the interrelationship between Surrealist commitment to politics and the disagreements that have resulted.⁶³

That the Surrealist manifesto collapses the traditional boundaries between aesthetic and political practice is crucial for the present argument, for what it reveals is the mechanism that re-established vanguardism as it came into being in the mid-1930’s.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 423-424.

⁶¹ Puchner, 182.

⁶² Ibid., 179. See also chapter 1 of his study which analyzes the manifesto as genre.

⁶³ See Breton, *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 142-149 in which Breton makes clear his allegiances to Communism in his tirade against “certain unscrupulous individuals” who had refuted from the outset the induction of Breton and the Surrealists into the ranks of the PCF.

Thus, in this sense as well, the Surrealist manifesto offers a view into the function of ideological art and the historical conditions that have determined its dialectical form, especially as it relates to the intertextuality between the limitations of cultural reproduction and the political subtext by which it shapes the aesthetic dimension. The critique of the oppositional forces working within the dimensions of the Surrealist manifesto is central to an understanding of the modalities through which the historical avant-garde also attempted to restore revolutionary praxis, and which reveals a development that is central to Theodor Adorno's critique of the process by which the aesthetic realm transforms what is external to its form:

If in art formal characteristics are not facilely interpretable in political terms, everything formal in art nevertheless has substantive implications and they extend into politics. The liberation of form, which genuinely new art desires, holds enciphered within it above all the liberation of society, for form—the social nexus of everything particular—represents the social relation in the artwork; this is why liberated form is anathema to the status quo. This is confirmed by psychoanalysis. It holds that all art, the negation of the reality principle, protests against the image the father and is to this extent revolutionary. This objectively implies the political participation of the unpolitical.⁶⁴

For Adorno, the “political posturing” of the aesthetic dimension must retain the independence of its form in order for it to become reinscribed as revolutionary praxis, which in similar terms reflects Breton's concern with developing a materiality of aesthetic revolt as a pre-conditioning mechanism for the social revolution itself. What is evident in Adorno's aesthetic theory is that the ideological formation of avant-garde cultural production within capitalism, in its critical resistance to counterrevolutionary ideology in general, had a responsibility toward reclaiming within the aesthetic dimension what had been absent from social relations, which in other terms, signifies that

⁶⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 255.

the artwork had to reclaim the immediacy of the class struggle by reorganizing it in the form of creative liberation. Thus, for Adorno and Breton, the necessity for sustaining an autonomous domain of cultural production was vital to the establishment of revolutionary praxis. In the language of Surrealism and its collapsing of aesthetic and political differences within its structure, this process would create the conditions for the de-reification of social relations on a grand scale, as proclaimed in Breton and Diego Rivera's "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art" in 1938.⁶⁵

Two major aspects can be concluded from the above theorization of Surrealist cultural production after 1934. Firstly, as Helena Lewis points out, Surrealism was the first (and perhaps most notable) movement of the historical avant-garde that interconnected its ideological vision with revolutionary communism, and thus it is crucial that the interior contradictions vanguardist revolt at its core be analyzed in relation to the overall progression of aesthetic and political vanguardism after 1917; for the convergence of Surrealism and Communism, while establishing a structure for revolutionary art that went beyond the confines of its Dadaist predecessors in its attempts to utilize the capabilities of the revolution-as-signifier as a precondition for cultural production, also exposed the critical limitations of formulating a continual point of confrontation to which the emergent vanguard could respond, a problematic disjunction that would struggle for

⁶⁵ See André Breton and Diego Rivera, "Manifesto for an Independent Revolutionary Art," in Caws, *Manifesto*, 472-477. Professor Caws points out that this manifesto was written by Trotsky and Breton for the short-lived International Federation of Independent Revolutionary Art. For more on this manifesto and the collaboration between Trotsky, Rivera, and Breton in Mexico, see Robin Adèle Greely, "For an Independent Revolutionary Art: Breton, Trotsky and Cárdenas's Mexico," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 204-225.

recognition until its final demise after 1956.⁶⁶ And yet, as a consequence to its interior objectives, Surrealism must reject the alternative designs associated with Marxist-Leninism, hence the dilemma that confronted Breton and the Surrealists after 1934 in the confrontation with the differing conceptualizations of aesthetics-as-politics, with Breton in collaboration with those associated with the anti-Stalinist factions that had emerged in the period between the World Wars radically opposed to those who fell into the socialist realist camp. For example, Louis Aragon also acknowledged that the erasure of the binary between aesthetics and politics was imperative in the move toward the creation of a revolutionary praxis for art, an art that in contrast to Breton's version, sought to radicalize the discourse of ideological art that had been determined by the directives of socialist realism, what Dominique Vaugeois argues is the "evaporation" between "political purpose" and the demands of the aesthetic field.⁶⁷ As a result, what is revealed on the critical fringes of cultural production in Breton's Surrealism, the conflicting designs of Aragon's socialist realism, as well as within the enclosure of aesthetics-as-politics of which the manifesto is composed, is that the demand for revolutionary praxis can be analyzed according to the specificities of demystification, or rather through a critical lens that could unveil not only the similarities of which revolutionary art is determined, but also in relation to the ensuing crisis of the intellectual left in the 1930's, a crisis that in the present context indicates the extent to which the building of aesthetic and political vanguardism had to come to terms with the exterior fluctuations of history itself.

⁶⁶ Lewis, 76. For more on the emergent crisis of aesthetic and political vanguardism after 1956, see chapter 4 of the present study.

⁶⁷ See Dominique Vaugeois, "'Luxe, Feinte et Vérité...': Polemics, Politics and Poetics in Aragon's *Henri Matisse*, Roman," *The Romantic Review* 92, no. 1-2 (2001): 87-98.

Furthermore, as Puchner rightly points out, the polarizing capability of the manifesto perpetuated the confrontation between the demands of revolutionary cultural production and the power of counterrevolutionary forces, especially in the run-up to World War II.⁶⁸ The propaganda model of the manifesto, in this sense, broadened the realm of avant-garde cultural production itself, thus revealing a dialectical conflict within revolutionary art paradigms that must be examined in relation to the conjunctions between political and cultural histories of aesthetic and political vanguardism as it traveled across the Atlantic into the United States, in addition to the differentiation between right and left versions of vanguard aesthetics that emerged within the overall context of modernism in general, as the following chapter will analyze in more detail.

⁶⁸ Puchner, 109.

3

The Dialectics of Vanguardism: Left and Right Movements, 1930-1948

The last two chapters have attempted to categorize the theoretical elements of vanguardism for the purposes of analyzing the Marxist response to its configurations within the European context, a conscious delimitation of its historical emergence in the post-1917 era. It is therefore necessary to reexamine the category of vanguardism within alternative formations of avant-garde cultural production that have materialized in relation to non-Marxist paradigms, or rather in relation to movements within radical modernism that emerged out of the aesthetic autonomy that the historical avant-garde originally struggled to materialize, not to mention those outside of the European contexts in which movements such as Surrealism and Dadaism surfaced.¹

With this in mind, this chapter will offer an interpretation of the dialectical movement of vanguardism through the analysis of the poetics of Ezra Pound and Louis Zukofsky, both of whom offer a challenge to the current categorization of revolutionary art in their respective political and geographical contexts. For Pound, the engagement with fascist politics allows for an understanding of the process by which aesthetic and political vanguardism manifests itself within the overarching structure of radical modernism, a process by which the exclusiveness of avant-garde rejectionism culminates in what Marshall Berman terms “political modernism” in which the signifying relations

¹ This characterization does not mean to deny the international influence both movements had outside of Europe, not to mention their continuing influence on aesthetic and political paradigms in the present.

among political and aesthetic identities became congregated in the conflicting dimensions of the social praxis of modernity.² It is evident that such an analysis must consider the mode by which the ideology of revolt that moved in the interiors of Pound's poetics were grafted onto the political program of Fascism, or the terminating annexation that Pound believed would rationalize the totality of the modernist *Paideuma*, which he describes as "The complex of ideas which is in a given time germinal, reaching into the next epoch, but conditioning actively all the thought and action of its own time."³ Specifically, the congruence of Pound's aesthetics and politics reveals the propensity toward Fascism that is integral to an aspect of radical modernism, a critique which involves a rigorous decoding of political modernism in the interiors of Poundian poetics and its continuity within the dialectic of vanguardism itself. That the inclination toward Fascism was a spontaneous outgrowth of the way in which modernism produced divergent factions in political terms both ratifies and confounds the properties associated with aesthetic and political vanguardism proposed here, a complexity that an analysis of Poundian poetics is meant to clarify. That is, by situating Pound within the continuity of what Andrew Hewitt labels "Fascist Modernism," it will be possible to rethink the contours of aesthetic and political vanguardism without being overly reproachful of Pound's political choices, since the present context argues that the fascistic consequences of political modernism are embedded within that very structural development. The divergence in the productive capabilities of avant-garde cultural politics intends to illuminate the historical

² See Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1982), especially chapter 2. Emilio Gentile also utilizes Berman's terminology in his analysis of the overarching convergence of Futurism and Fascism within modernism, a point which will be discussed in the section on Pound's political identification below. See Emilio Gentile, *The Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, 41-77. I will use the term to analyze the particular synthesis between Pound's politics and aesthetics in the attempt to critique and redefine the properties of vanguardism proposed in this study.

³ Ezra Pound, *Selected Prose, 1909-1965* (New York: New Directions, 1973), 284.

contingencies of aesthetics between 1930 and the post-World War II period, the dialectical inconsistencies which must include an analysis of fascist cultural paradigms of which Pound is the most relevant example, inasmuch as it will allow for a rearticulation of the discourse of vanguardism that has been analyzed throughout the present context.⁴

For Louis Zukofsky, the structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism was crucial in the production of a revolutionary poetics that acknowledged the artistic preoccupation with the 1917 Revolution, for it is clear that Zukofsky's work is a formalization of the cultural avant-garde of Russian Futurism combined with the disjunctive effects of Apollinaire's Cubism, yet it also emerged distinctly within the tradition of proletarian literature that dominated the 1930's American literary and cultural scene. Zukofsky's vanguardism, as such, upheld the Marxist critique of the historical avant-garde, yet perhaps somewhat contradictorily utilized the technical instruments furnished by Pound, who had a formative impact of Zukofsky's aesthetic development. Thus, it can be argued that Zukofsky's work embodies how the aesthetics-as-politics of the European avant-garde had been experiencing a crisis of representation since the 1930's, one which became even more problematic as it crossed the Atlantic. That is, it is evident that the interior formalization of Marxist aesthetics in Zukofsky's poetics often reveals the problematic nature of vanguardism in its attempt to concretize a revolutionary praxis, since the engagement with revolt that occurs at the aesthetic level was not able to formulate an exterior relation that could advance the politicization of the text itself, a predicament that Breton and the Surrealists had been experiencing in France since the 1930's.

⁴ See Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism: Aesthetics, Politics, and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993).

Ironically, although Zukofsky's work extended the revolutionary imagination of the cultural avant-garde geographically, it also signaled the process by which vanguardism became disarmed politically, a de-mechanization which can be explained in relation to the rupture that caused the imminent transformation of aesthetics and politics in the post-World War II era. At the same time, the emphasis on the predicament of aesthetic and political vanguardism in Zukofsky's work as it entered into the later 1940's, when he appears to relinquish an affiliation with Marxism in favor of a neo-avant-garde experimentalism, allows for a more rigorous interrogation of neo-avant-garde aesthetics and its relation to the emergence of late capitalist subsumption in the post-World War II era, one that will culminate in the problematic reformation the revolutionary vanguard within the historicity of late capitalism itself.

What needs to be clarified is the extent to which the work of Pound and Zukofsky corresponds to the dialectics of vanguardism proposed in the present study, for their evolution within the oscillating movement of vanguard history has often been obscured by the presupposed characterization of their aesthetic and political allegiances, categorizations that need to be elucidated more succinctly. Indeed, an argument can be made in favor of positioning Pound and Zukofsky at either end of Benjamin's political spectrum of Fascism and Communism, an aesthetic categorization that is appropriate in the present contextualization of vanguardism and its parallel relations to the overall productive process that informs the work of Zukofsky and Pound.⁵ For Benjamin, the historicity of both the "politicization" of aesthetic production and the "aestheticization" of the political field can be rendered more concretely only by restructuring the reproductive effects of the aesthetic dimension, a result, that is, of the intertextual

⁵ See Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 81.

implications by which the organizational properties of such effects materialize in social form, as the famous dictum reads: “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life.... Communism responds by politicizing art.”⁶ In material terms, Fascism provided a context for Pound’s aesthetics in its continued self-alienation both from the bourgeoisie and mass politics that is intrinsic to one facet of radical modernism and the historical avant-garde, the aestheticization of the political field that authenticates the exteriors of political modernism that Benjamin outlines above.⁷ At the same time, the formalizing process that became paramount for Zukofsky also reveals the mechanism by which the conscious interiorization of the revolution-as-signifier manifested the attempt to create a context for a politicized aesthetic that could move beyond the confines of the European model, one which for Zukofsky required a geographical re-textualization in the medium of proletarian poetry. The dialectical inclusiveness of Benjamin’s categories, as such, is crucial in the understanding of the corresponding forms that both Pound and Zukofsky determine as material praxis, a process that allows for an investigation into the conjunction of ideology and art and the polarizing characteristics that occur within their respective structures.

On the contrary, there is much to be said about the manner in which the dialectics of vanguardism blurs the rigidity of Benjamin’s reaction to what he understood as the historical determinations of aesthetics and politics; that is, as the analysis of ideology and art within the manifesto points out, it can be considered that both Pound and Zukofsky were responding to a call for a revolutionary aesthetics that proposed to de-structure the legitimating exteriors of ruling class hegemony, a move which Pound acknowledged

⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, 241-242.

⁷ *Ibid.*

would bring about the materialization of an elite society that he found integral to Fascism, and which for Zukofsky was articulated in the advance of a Marxist political consciousness within the decline of American capitalism in the 1930's. Is it possible, then, to develop a critique of both Pound and Zukofsky in which the structural constituencies of their work can be established as a functional critique of ruling class formations, or rather as an interior criticality that could be utilized in the reconstruction of the historiography of the revolt against capitalist hegemony itself? What, then, are some of the strategic elements that differentiate the fascist vanguard and its critical response to capital and the Marxist-driven form through which a movement like Surrealism was able to organize a revolutionary praxis of art, which in other terms corresponds to the structural rebuilding of vanguardism and its influential capabilities against the counterrevolution of Fascism and/or capitalist hegemony? It is within the parameters of these questions that the dialectics of vanguardism and its reproductive effects can be examined in detail, as the following will attempt to do.

Ezra Pound, Futurism, and the Culture of Fascism

The preoccupation with the social position of the artist within the development of state power is a continual point of interest in Pound's aesthetic and critical writing, one that increasingly found a place in his work with the move to Rapallo in 1931.⁸ In fact, it can be argued that the convergence of Pound's aesthetics and politics occurred only after his move to Mussolini's Italy in which he believed that the seminal transformation of the

⁸ For a comprehensive analysis of Pound in Italy, see John Tytell, *Ezra Pound: The Solitary Volcano* (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 197-284. See also Ira B. Nadel, *Ezra Pound: A Literary Life* (New York: Palgrave, 2004), 117-144.

social and cultural landscape was beginning to flourish, a struggle for the resurgence of a new society that coincided with some of his own conceptual imperatives of the relationship between the artist and the social milieu.⁹ For Pound, the insistence on artistic sensibility as a means of recreating social order necessitated the inclusion of a political ideology that could be utilized for the purposes of formulating a revolution external to the existing models, a continual reference point in his critical work that attempts to eliminate the boundaries between art and social life itself:

The artist, the maker is always too far ahead of any revolution, or reaction, or counter-revolution or counter-reaction for his vote to have any immediate result; and no party programme ever contains enough of his programme to give him the least satisfaction. The party that follows him wins; and the speed with which they set about it, is the measure of their practical capacity and intelligence. Blessed are they who pick the right artists and makers.¹⁰

Written in 1927, Pound reveals a number of important embryonic points that can be utilized to rethink the aesthetic and political intersections of his work as he entered into a relationship with Italian Fascism. For it is clear that Pound's vision of the revolutionary artist can be placed within the avant-garde tradition in its attempt to erase the imposed borders between cultural production and social life, which was thoroughly enfolded in his ideology by the middle of the 1930's.¹¹ In his *ABC of Reading*, written at the point of his turn to Italian Fascism in 1934, Pound outlines a guide to cultural history and again accentuates the obligatory association of aesthetic and social ideologies:

⁹ See Tim Redman, *Ezra Pound and Italian Fascism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

¹⁰ Ezra Pound, "The State," in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, 215. Compare Pound's concerns to Breton's comments in his "Speech to the Congress of Writers, 1935," in *Manifestoes of Surrealism*, 234-241: "From where we stand, we maintain that the activity of interpreting the world must continue to be linked with the activity of the changing the world. We maintain that it is the poet's, the artist's role to study the human problem in depth in all its forms, that it is precisely the unlimited advance of his mind in this direction that has a potential value for changing the world, that this advance...cannot help but reinforce the necessity to change this world economically."

¹¹ See Pound's "The Teacher's Mission," in *Literary Essays of Ezra Pound* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 58-63.

‘Artists are the antennae of the race’

Can you be interested in the writings of men whose general perceptions are below the average?

I am afraid that even here the answer is not a straight ‘No’....

A graver issue needs biological analogy: artists are the Antennae; an animal that neglects the warnings of its perceptions needs very great powers of resistance if it is to survive....

A nation which neglects the perceptions of its artists declines. After a while it ceases to act, and merely survives.

There is probably no use in telling this to people who can’t see it without being told.¹²

Moreover, the vehement struggle to create the conditions for a revolution in cultural terms was combined with the abhorrence for the bourgeois systemization of art and social life, a critical analysis which for Pound descended from a process that was determined by capitalism and its destructive capabilities:

The effects of capitalism on art and letters, apart from all questions of the relations of either capitalism, art, or letters, to the general public or the mass, have been: (1) the non-employment of the best artists and writers; (2) the erection of an enormous and horrible bureaucracy of letters, supposed to act as curators, etc., which bureaucracy has almost uninterruptedly sabotaged intellectual life, obscuring the memory of the best work of the past and doing is villainous utmost to impede the work of contemporary creators.¹³

In the same article, written in 1933, Pound argues that only Mussolini had understood the “quality” of the aesthetic dimension in its struggle against capital. Thus, the creation of a cultural revolution, as such, depended on the extent to which the aestheticization of ideology was sustained and which Pound believed could be brought about more rapidly within Italian Fascism and the immediacy of the cultural renaissance that he saw brewing

¹² Pound, *ABC of Reading* (New York: New Directions, 1960), 81-82.

¹³ Pound, “Murder by Capital,” in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, 232.

within its borders, an intellectual resurgence that was missing for him in London and Paris.¹⁴

What is crucial for the present context, furthermore, is that the elemental relation between aesthetic and political foundations for Pound was less a coincidence than the materialization of the conscious application of the former to the latter, a process which substantiates Benjamin's theorization, yet also suggests that the cultural conditioning that emerged from Fascism signaled a particular convergence of ideologies that had been contextualized by the historical avant-garde itself. That is, the erasure between art and social life that the historical avant-garde sought to concretize within its structure can be traced in relation to the particular form it took in Pound's poetics, a continuity that exposes some of the interior contradictions of the historical avant-garde and its disdain for the ideological rationality of the bourgeoisie and the hegemonic order of capital. It can be argued, in this context, that the continual influence of the artistic persona becomes paramount for the avant-garde artist, a particularly decisive strategy in Pound's construction of a social hierarchy that emphasized the propagation of the intellectual within the configuration of the dominant class structure.

Furthermore, it is possible to trace an interesting parallel between aesthetic and political vanguardism within the historicity of political modernism and the intellectual structure in which Pound's artistic sensibility is to be found. For it is evident that the structural dimension of the revolutionary vanguard demanded the assimilation of the intellectual class into the struggle against ruling class ideology, as Lenin had conceived it, and which for Pound was crucial to the formation of the intellectual vanguard itself. The radical difference, then, is the fact that for the fascist vanguard, the conditions for

¹⁴ Redman, 106.

praxis, or rather the material consequences of the nationalist revolution, did not sharpen the struggle of the proletariat against capital, as it did in the dialectical structure that determined the Marxist organization of aesthetic and political vanguardism; rather, in sharp contrast, Fascism must reinforce the hierarchy of the intellectual class in order to fully justify the *liquidation* of the class struggle, a process which resulted in the accentuation of the social order of fascist state power in its revolt against bourgeois ideological dominance.¹⁵

Thus, it is evident that Pound's preference for Fascism complimented his partiality toward historical figures of cultural authority, a focus that widened the possibility of an intellectual class that could control the new ideological form of the political state. Pound's development as a poet, in fact, can be traced according to his own version of "tradition," one which he contextualized in the dominant poetic heritage from the ancients, through the Troubadours, and to the modernists, as he writes in his *The Spirit of Romance*: "Great poets seldom make bricks without straw; they pile up all the excellences they can beg, borrow or steal from their predecessors and contemporaries, and then set their own inimitable light atop of the mountain."¹⁶ For Pound, historical progress evolves from those who are able to put ideas into action in the present, as he sketches in his *Guide to Kultur*, and thus the most effective means of generating "civilization" is by structuring a hierarchy of knowledge that can formulate paradigms by which the whole of the social body can be administered.¹⁷ The radical break with the past in Pound's articulation of the contemporary *Paideuma*, particularly as it is

¹⁵ See Michael Parenti, *Blackshirts & Reds: Rational Fascism and the Overthrow of Communism* (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1997, especially 1-23.

¹⁶ Pound, *The Spirit of Romance* (New York: New Directions, 1968), 162.

¹⁷ See Pound's *Guide to Kultur* (New York: New Directions, 1970), particularly pp. 44-50.

illuminated in his Vorticism stage in which his relationship to the Futurist model of political modernism was fortified, seems to contradict his persistent concern with tradition, which was central to his poetic ideology.¹⁸ To the extent that the radical break with history proceeds according to the reconstruction of its most vital elements in the formation of the “new,” Pound is consistent in formalizing the ideological praxis that the historical avant-garde offered in its dissolving the boundaries between art and social life, a characteristic that will be assimilated into the project of Italian Fascism in the nostalgic reaffirmation of the totalitarian state.¹⁹ It has been pointed out, in this sense, that Pound’s turn toward Fascism converged with his increasing reverence for Confucianism, a problematic correlation in Poundian scholarship that Feng Lan argues signaled Pound’s attempt to reiterate the “ideology of ‘individual self-assertion’” which Confucianism reveals as a structural design.²⁰ Confucius signified for Pound the immediacy of building “humanity” through the consolidation of knowledge, a necessary component that Pound saw implicit in Confucian thought and the “ideogrammic method,” both of which are utilized to a great extent in the structural form of *The Cantos*.²¹

Overall, Pound’s preference of the fascist revolution over other political models stemmed from what he understood as the totalization of orderliness: by assimilating the material properties of the state as a pre-existing basis for the determination of its social

¹⁸ For more on the relationship between Futurism and Vorticism, see Marjorie Perloff, *The Futurist Moment*, 162-194.

¹⁹ See Emilio Gentile, *Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, 86.

²⁰ Feng Lan, *Ezra Pound and Confucianism: Remaking Humanism in the Face of Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2005), 85. Lan rightly points out some of problems that resulted from Pound’s translations of Confucius, a consequence that allowed Pound to adapt his reading of Confucius to his own ideological propensities toward Fascism. For an analysis of the complexity of Pound’s translation theory, see my “Towards an Esthetic of Translation: An Examination of Ezra Pound’s Translation Theory,” *Paideuma* 29:3 (Winter 2000), 85-111.

²¹ See Pound’s *Guide to Kultur*, 15-20, and *ABC of Reading*, 26-28 for his thoughts on Confucius and the Ideogrammic Method.

and cultural existence that was articulated by the power of the leader through whose authority the dictates of the state would be maintained in conjunction with the consolidation of the intellectual class, Pound argued for a fascist alternative that would rival the Bolshevik Revolution, as he writes in his *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*:

The fascist revolution is infinitely more INTERESTING than the Russian revolution because it is not a revolution according to preconceived type....

THE SECRET OF THE DUCE is possibly the capacity to pick out the element of immediate and major importance in any tangle; or, in the case of a man, to go straight to the centre, for the fellow's major interest....

It is possible that all other revolutions have occurred only after, that is, very considerably AFTER a change in material conditions, and that the *rivoluzione continua* of Mussolini is the first revolution occurring simultaneously with the change in material bases of life.²²

Pound revered the revolutionary project of Mussolini's Fascism because he believed, in no uncertain terms, that it coincided with his own ideological predilection toward economic, social, and artistic organizational models that could move beyond the exteriors of the bourgeoisie and toward the newly rejuvenated ideal state that Pound himself envisioned. As John Tytell writes, "Pound was arguing that Mussolini should be appreciated as some sort of Confucian master whose intentions could in some mysterious aesthetic manner be separated from the actions that accompanied them," a point of interest in the present context, since it indicates the extent of Pound's rationalization of history in the formation of the contemporary model of "the leader."²³ The concreteness of Mussolini's idealization of the cultural field, expressed in terms of an institutionalized evocation of Italian heritage, a convergence of aesthetic and political interests that is akin to the technical facets of propaganda itself, in addition to an immediate consolidation of socio-economic interests, allowed for a framework in which Pound's ideological

²² Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini* (New York: Liveright Publishing, 1936), 24, 66, 127.

²³ Tytell, 242.

concerns could be reinscribed as revolutionary praxis, thus fostering his unwavering veneration of the figure of Mussolini who for Pound embodied that determination, much like the historical figures that he assimilated into his aesthetic tradition.

The argument can be made, then, that Pound's inclination toward Fascism was a direct result of his idolization of Mussolini and the resolute qualities through which his refoundation of social relations advanced. Ira Nadel argues that Mussolini's attention to Pound's aesthetic and ideological concerns meant that *Il Duce* was sympathetic to the artist's position in the social milieu, a consideration that signaled for Pound his own insertion into the political hierarchy of the state. As Nadel writes, Pound believed that Mussolini was committed to "breaking the stranglehold of international banking which he held responsible for the creation of wars," a move which subsequently was translated into anti-Semitic rhetoric to which Pound ascribed and through which he often situated his diatribe against international capital.²⁴ In this sense, the process by which Mussolini expunged the destructive elements which had brought about the de-valuation of social relations within the context of international capital was equivalent to an aestheticizing mechanism that would consolidate the best prospects for building society by interpreting and absorbing the welfare of the masses into the state and its leader, signified by Mussolini himself, a problem that for Pound would be solved through the implementation of his program of "social credit" in which Mussolini became interested after the establishment of the short-live Salò Republic in 1943.²⁵ For Bill Freind, Pound's

²⁴ Nadel, 134. As John Tytell notes, Pound regretted his decline into anti-Semitism, a lament he expressed to Allen Ginsberg in his meeting with him in 1965. See Tytell, 336-336.

²⁵ For a concrete analysis of Pound's economic program, see Alec Marsh, *Money and Modernity: Pound, Williams, and the Spirit of Jefferson* (Tuscaloosa: The University of Alabama Press, 1998), especially 68-111. Pound amalgamated economics and aesthetics, especially in the 1930's, an obsession that substantiates the argument here that the aestheticization of the political is a constant dilemma that has to be analyzed in relation to the cultural context of Fascism, as the following analysis will attempt.

ideological proclivity for Fascism was a result of his identification with Mussolini's eminence as a revolutionary leader, the characteristics of which Pound ascribed to Jefferson, Lenin, as well as others within Pound's cultural tradition, and which for Friend indicated that the ideological structure of Fascism was less of an important matter for Pound than the iconoclastic reverence for the hierarchy of power through which such figures were symbolized. "Instead," writes Freind, "Pound's politics can be described more accurately as a particularly totalitarian form of the cult of personality.... Mussolini, in Pound's depiction, comes to embody all the contradictions and apparent incoherences of both Pound himself and the *Cantos*."²⁶

While it is unmistakable that Pound's attraction to *Il Duce* stemmed in part from the notion that the hierarchy of power that flows through social relations must emanate from the dominant leader, a process which will concretize the idealized form of the state in its assimilation and consolidation of class interests, it is also the case that the boundaries between Mussolini and the structure of Italian Fascism were also made inseparable, a point which Ira Nadel also acknowledges enabled the codification of the cult status of the leader and the cultural dimension through which fascist social relations materialized.²⁷ On the one hand, it is possible to argue that Pound's iconoclasm can be taken out of the context of something that could be designated as fascist culture, a move that would deconstruct the political configurations of his aesthetic program, yet concurrently would obfuscate a systematic analysis of the ideological affiliations of Poundian poetics within the materiality of political modernism. Bill Freind argues, for

²⁶ Bill Freind, "“Why do you want to put your ideas in order?”: Re-Thinking the Politics of Ezra Pound," *Journal of Modern Literature*, XXIII, 3-4 (Summer 2000), 546.

²⁷ Nadel, 135.

example, that even though Fascism “is nothing like a unitary political movement,” studies of Pound have situated him within that tradition, a problematic condition of Poundian scholarship that denies “an historical perspective which is sufficiently attentive to the nuances, ambiguities, and vagaries which marked the varieties of Fascism, not to mention the even more prominent idiosyncrasies which characterize Pound’s thought.”²⁸

While acknowledging that a more sufficient historicization of the ideological configurations of Pound’s oeuvre is in order, there are a number of material reference points through which the cultural framework of Fascism can be seen in relation to the materiality of Pound’s aesthetics and politics, an analysis which contrasts Freind’s particular characterization. It is the principle of unity that Pound sought in his identification with Italian Fascism and into which he immersed the aesthetic possibilities of his political modernism, and not simply a consequence of his iconoclasm; for such a viewpoint would reduce the gravity of Pound’s attempt to concretize ideological praxis to a Freudian-like disillusionment. As Georges Bataille writes, “In the first place fascist power is characterized by a foundation that is both religious and military, in which these two habitually distinct elements cannot be separated: it thus presents itself from the outset as an accomplished concentration.”²⁹ Thus, the historicization of the culture of Fascism will expand the confrontational and unrealized contexts of Pound’s aesthetics and politics, a reading of his ideological underpinnings that is meant to rethink the dialectical

²⁸ Freind, 545. Freind is referring, in particular I believe, to the postmodern critiques of Pound’s work which have focused exclusively on his anti-Semitism and Fascist leanings without sufficient historical analysis, a critique with which I would also agree. Examples of postmodern critiques of Pound can be seen in Andrew Parker’s “Ezra Pound and the ‘Economy’ of Anti-Semitism,” in *Postmodernism and Politics*, ed. Jonathan Arac (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986), 50-70, and to a lesser degree in Paul Morrison, *The Poetics of Fascism: Ezra Pound, T.S. Eliot, Paul de Man* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

²⁹ Georges Bataille, “The Psychological Structure of Fascism,” in *Visions of Excess: Selected Writings, 1927-1939* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985).

relations of Poundian poetics without which the categorical denial of his fascist propensities would collapse into political meaninglessness. Moreover, if the avant-garde emerged as a reaction against the reification of aesthetic and social concerns, as Fredric Jameson and others have argued, it is possible that such an analysis will allow for the flexibility needed in re-establishing both the political affiliations by which Poundian poetics and its subtext of cultural Fascism operate, as well as the reorganization of the critical demarcations between the fascist framework of the vanguard that was crucial for Pound and the Marxist versions of vanguardism, both of which transformed the parameters of political modernism itself.³⁰

Emilio Gentile, for example, argues that the intersection of aesthetic and political interests in the formation of fascist culture has its roots in what he designates as “modernist nationalism,” or what can be described as the intimate relation between the ethical rationalization of the fascist state and the integrative role of the intellectual in affirming the symbiosis between art and social life within that political formation.³¹ Although a strategic mechanism that formed as a reaction to bourgeois social relations, the glorification of national culture, a major strategy in fascist propaganda, became paramount for fascist cultural politics and thus deviated from the inclusiveness that defined the political culture of Marxist-based vanguard art. The internationalist perspective of Surrealism, Dadaism, or the Soviet avant-gardes would contradict the proclivity toward nationalization, for the subtext of Communism that informs the Surrealist movement, for example, had to be sustained in order for revolutionary praxis to materialize in its confrontation with exteriority itself. On the contrary, it can be stated

³⁰ See Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 42.

³¹ Gentile, *Struggle for Modernity: Nationalism, Futurism, and Fascism*, 45.

here that the organizational structure of the Italian Futurist movement was designed with the intention of restructuring the role of art in social life so that it could be formatted onto a political strategy that could easily be entwined in a nationalized politics, one through which the subsequent formation of Mussolini's *Fascio d'azione Rivoluzionaria* would assimilate into its overall ideology.³² Thus, "modernist nationalism," for Gentile, reveals the model by which the cultural "roots" in the Futurist avant-garde, which materialized with the intention of aestheticizing an "Italianicity," or the creation of a new mythos of Roman history, and the ideological motives of Mussolini's *Risorgimento* converged in the strengthening of a cultural politics that would be utilized in the legitimation of the developing fascist state:

The fascist artist had a mission: with a modern sensibility, mythically to recall the great ages of Italian art, seeking to realize a new creative greatness, a synthesis between the classic and the modern, an epic transformation of fascist politics.... Intellectuals of and artists of this sort, who had been active in the modernist avant-garde and futurism, enthusiastically participated in fascism and contributed to elaborating its cultural politics and its aesthetic style. In it they saw a political weapon for realizing the avant-gardist myth of *total revolution*, understood as an intellectual and spiritual revolution that was supposed to modify the essence and values of life, giving rise to a new art, a new style of life, a new man. They participated in fascism, it must be emphasized, rather than adhering to it. For the involvement in fascism was not simply an external act of joining a political movement, but an active and self-aware collaboration in elaborating the movement's culture and political style, that went as far as substantial agreement between avant-garde culture and totalitarian political culture regarding certain fundamental themes. In fact, the futurists, in arguing for a futurist paternity for fascism, stressed those elements that could easily be integrated into totalitarian culture: from the religion of Italianismo (Italianness) to the search for an Italian modernity, to the heroicization of life and the glorification of war.³³

It is worth quoting Gentile at length here, as there are a number of crucial elements that can be elucidated for the purposes of the present study. What is clear is that

³² See Anne Bowler, "Politics as Art: Italian Futurism and Fascism," *Theory and Society* 20 (1991): 763-794.

³³ *Ibid.*, 63-64.

the juncture between F.T. Marinetti, the Futurist movement in Italy, and Mussolini's National Socialism is a constant point of contention for historians of the cultural politics of the avant-garde, especially since the convergence of aesthetic and political interests shaped the ideological configurations of the fascist *total revolution*, what Gentile argues is central to the aspirations of the historical avant-garde.³⁴ It is equally apparent that the prevailing principle of nationalist modernism, which Futurism originally utilized in the struggle between the bourgeois conceptualization of the nation state and the revolutionary nationalization of the Italian vanguard, attempted to centralize the mythos of modernist aesthetics by accentuating the greatness of its cultural history and subordinating those qualities to the ideology of the "new," the aestheticization and thus rationalization of the cultural specificities of modern social life itself. Similarly, for Anne Bowler, the polarization of class struggle that resulted from the triumph of Futurism's liquefaction of the line between the state and the eminence of Mussolini is articulated within a nationalist framework in preparation for the aestheticized celebration of a reconstructed mythos, a prospect that emerged out of the transformation that occurred between Futurist cultural politics and the fascist state in dialogue:

Marinetti's aestheticization of power and violence in the figure of Mussolini bears the curious blending of the natural, militarist, and technological metaphors that characterizes a fascist aesthetic more generally. Nationalism becomes the basis of a new system of pseudo-natural criteria for purity, inscribed on the body of Mussolini: the consummate leader of an unvillified heritage.... Conceived in terms simultaneously "natural," as the eradication of depravity and disease from the afflicted body-landscape of Italy, *and* the triumphant overcoming of nature through brute force in the figure of the new Mechanical Beauty, Futurism defines itself in the language of fascism: hygiene, the cult of the irrational, and the pageantry of power.³⁵

³⁴ For an analysis of the move from the left to the right of Mussolini and the Futurists, see Günter Berghaus, *Futurism and Politics: Between Anarchist Rebellion and Fascist Reaction, 1909-1944* (Providence: Berghahn Books, 1996).

³⁵ Bowler, 776.

In other terms, it can be argued that the convergence of aesthetics and politics under the rubric of nationalist modernism, the consequence of which reproduced the cultural politics of the fascist vanguard, manifested a process by which the de-coding of the struggle between the radical politics and the concretization of modernity provided a framework for the exclusive subjugation of social relations to the dictates of the state and its hierarchy of power, an aspect of fascist modernism in which the aesthetic absorption of class struggle was guaranteed by the coordinates of that very structure and its political corollaries.³⁶ Thus, the historicization of power would be a result of the de-reification of class struggle itself, a notion that can be reframed in relation to Lukács' attack on the avant-garde and what he understood as the weakening of the struggle for liberation, which in contrast to the emphasis of the class struggle in critical realism, was rooted in the elitism of avant-garde experimentalism, a point which has some merit in light of Futurist cultural politics and its appropriation by Mussolini in the ideology of nationalist modernism.³⁷ Andrew Hewitt, for example, argues that the "class resentment" that occurs in the radical break between base and superstructure symbolizes the extent to which "Fascist Modernism" was able to redefine the crucial characteristics of the historical avant-garde and its attempt to break down the boundaries between art and social life, a disintegration of social relations that was initiated, firstly, on the aesthetic level.³⁸ "This subjective reworking," writes Hewitt, "must be understood as itself a

³⁶ Gentile, 61.

³⁷ See Georg Lukács, "Realism in the Balance" in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 28-60. See also Fredric Jameson, "Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate," in *The Ideologies of Theory: Essays, 1971-1986* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 133-147 for an analysis of the modernist "estrangement" and its relation to consumer capitalism.

³⁸ Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 8, 66. For a Marxist analysis of Fascism and its consolidation of class ideology, see Nicos Poulantzas, *Fascism and Dictatorship: The Third International and the Problem of Fascism*, trans. Judith White (London: NLB, 1974). Poulantzas' analysis focuses, particularly, on the

historically objective mode of consciousness: an ideology made possible by a potential dissociation of economic and ideological power,” a conflict, that is, in which the historical avant-garde must confront its own historicity in the context of Fascism and the cultural politics of Futurism through which that ideology is solidified.³⁹

To redefine the configurations of fascist culture in relation to Pound’s political and aesthetic ideology, to what extent are the features of cultural fascism configured in Pound’s poetics? If fascist culture should enclose the class struggle within the totalitarian state, the excess associated with the Futurist cultural paradigms of national modernism and its classical past, and the sanitized aestheticization of the revered “leader” through which the fascist vanguard determined a totalizing revolutionary praxis, did Pound’s inclination toward fascist modernism, with its emphasis on the empowerment of the artist’s role in the construction of a modern *Paideuma*, differ in content from the historical avant-garde’s continual interest in rupturing the boundary between art and social life and the creation of a revolutionary praxis for art itself? On the one hand, it is evident that nationalism, the type expressed by the violent extremities of the cultural politics of Futurism, would not fit into Pound’s ideological interests, since the ostentatious pageantry associated with the expression of that standard was for Pound akin to Nazi decadence and the excessiveness of its design as Bill Freind rightly points out.⁴⁰ Pound’s ambivalence toward Marinetti and Futurism, especially the latter’s glorification of violence and endless war, is reinscribed in “Canto LXXII,” written in 1940:

“.... Goodbye Marinetti
Come back and talk when you want to.”

influence of petty-bourgeois ideology on Fascism as well as on the crisis of working-class power as Fascism became dominant, a problematic that the Third International was not able to theorize effectively.

³⁹ Ibid., 10.

⁴⁰ Freind, 552.

contrary, what is also clear is that the principles for aesthetic development that Pound desired to bring about in the reconstruction of the contemporary *Paideuma* were based on the hierarchy of power through which a particular nation has concretized its cultural heritage in the formation of praxis, a comparison that Pound interlaces in his aphorism: “A GOOD government is one that operates according to the best that is known and thought. And the best government is that which translates the best thought most speedily into action.”⁴⁴ In other words, it is the conditional necessity of the nation to strengthen its political ideology through the artistic sensibility, a movement Pound saw occurring rapidly under Mussolini and the fascist state, and which for Hugh Kenner formed the core of the *Cantos* entirely: “The world, [Pound] was convinced, had once known the order it now lacked, and what has been known should not be difficult to recover, a simple matter of reactivating knowledge,” a process that Pound saw in Mussolini’s attempt to “rebuild Ithaca.”⁴⁵

Thus, an analysis of Pound’s *Cantos* would have to reconsider the simultaneous affirmation and rejection of some of the ideological reinforcements by which nationalist modernism functions within the interior structure of the work itself, a thematization of the ideological incoherences that seem to form the political contours of Pound’s aestheticizing mechanisms. Moreover, such an investigation would have to locate the extenuation of fascist ideology at work in the interiorizing capabilities through which the authoritarian exterior of Fascism is legitimized and to what extent it fails to advance a

⁴⁴ Pound, *Jefferson and/or Mussolini*, 91. See also his “National Culture: A Manifesto 1938,” in *Selected Prose, 1909-1965*, 161-166 in which he states, “A national or racial culture exists when the works (art, letters) of that nation do not and do not need to ask favours [sic] because they have been produced by a member of that particular nation or race,” illuminating in this context since it reflects a similar obsession with nationalist modernism, as described above to a certain extent.

⁴⁵ Hugh Kenner, *The Pound Era* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1971), 377.

has influenced “several generations of poets.”⁴⁶ On the contrary, as Bush notes, the “ideological passions” that Pound intended to carry out in the final year of the war in his collaboration with Mussolini’s Republic, “continues to pervade” the *Pisan Cantos* in its attempt to refashion a secularized vision of the contemporary vortex, a synthetic complacency of the totalitarian divergence within political modernism itself.⁴⁷ Thus, to the extent that the *Pisan Cantos* manifest the culmination of what Emilio Gentile calls the “sacralization” of the “political mythical body,” Pound’s intention in recreating an anatomy of human consciousness in the whole of the *Cantos* must be situated within the ideology of fascist culture and the qualitative restructuring of a hierarchy of power, one that in conjunction with the mythification of the fascist state, offers a view into the mechanism of organization through which Pound sought to reconstruct historical memory as a cultural force to legitimize the collectivity of which fascist social praxis would be reconditioned as order itself.

The present characterization of the *Cantos*, however, is not intended to revoke its compelling and valuable place in twentieth century literary and cultural history; on the contrary, it is by restructuring the principles of aestheticization that were attached to the mythos of the fascist revolt that it is possible to locate the particularities of Pound’s revolutionary praxis within his major poetic achievement and the extent to which it articulates the struggle between the recreation of an exteriority to bourgeois social praxis and the mode of de-reification that political modernism provided for the artistic sensibility, the dialectics of which aesthetic and political vanguardism is itself composed. To this extent, by situating Pound within the reactionary position of the fascist vanguard,

⁴⁶ Bush, 80.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 91.

it is possible to de-code not only the aestheticization of politics which defined the fascist revolutionary program, but also the discontinuity of which the Marxist-based vanguard sought to enfold the revolution-as-signifier in the formation of a political praxis by which the ideology of revolution would formulate a similar exteriority on the aesthetic level. In a slightly different sense, the culture of Fascism to which Pound's radical modernism submitted itself could be taken as a sign of decadence, an intentional forfeiture of the identity that is associated with avant-garde radicalism, in favor of the ultimate completeness of the project of modernity that the fascist revolution offered to the vanguard sensibility, a symptom already at work in the interiors of avant-garde cultural production. For Donald Kuspit, the temporality of "advanced art" as represented by the avant-gardes "needs a model of wholeness to know its own wholeness, an illusion of completeness of being to freely be its own completeness," which in other terms demonstrates the obligatory move toward discovering origins in totalitarian form, a misrecognition that affirms the catastrophic overdetermination into which the aestheticization of the fascist political field collapsed, as Pound himself recognized only in isolation, thus rendering imperfect the utopian project of modernity that he desired in his final oeuvre.⁴⁸

**Toward a Revolutionary Formalism:
Louis Zukofsky and the Poetics of American Proletarian Literature**

Louis Zukofsky may seem like an unlikely figure to address the American context of aesthetic and political vanguardism, since he is often consigned to the latter half of the

⁴⁸ Donald Kuspit, *The Dialectic of Decadence: Between Advance and Decline in Art* (New York: Allworth Press, 2000), 47. For more on decadence and modernism, see Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1968), 74-77, and chapter 3 of Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism*, 68-102.

twentieth century and the late modernist poetics of the Objectivists, among other post-War movements.⁴⁹ Although critical evaluations have divided his work into two phases, one which emphasizes his affinity toward Marxism, and one which can be labeled his post-Marxist period, the latter half of his career is often posited as being the more crucial to an understanding of his demanding poetics, perhaps because his development occurred within the context of the emerging “late modernist” group that included Charles Reznikoff and Charles Olson, among others.⁵⁰ To distinguish the two phases in Zukofskian poetics, it can be said that, roughly speaking, Zukofsky’s early work until 1948 reveals a visibly political design in which Marxism determined the poetic form, an appropriation of aesthetic-as-politics that associates Zukofsky’s work with the prevalence of the proletarian literary movement of the 1930’s, and although there is an implicit identification with the Marxist-driven politics of that movement, Zukofsky questioned the didacticism of socialist realism, which had been incorporated into the agenda of the Communist Party (CPUSA) which rejected the aesthetics of “bourgeois” modernism.⁵¹ For Zukofsky, “No predatory manifestations—Yet a manifestation making the mind more temperate because the poem exists and has perhaps recorded both state and individual.”⁵² His persistent dedication to the notion that poetry was the medium for socio-political change revealed the conscious attempt to undermine the fragmentary effects of capitalist exploitation, the desire to shatter the mystification of human consciousness within a

⁴⁹ For example, see Ruth Louis Jennison, “The Zukofsky era: An Objectivists’ modernism (Louis Zukofsky, George Oppen, Lorine Niedecker), (Ph.D. diss., University of California, Berkeley, 2004).

⁵⁰ For an overview of Zukofsky’s aesthetic and political development, see Mark Scroggins, “The Revolutionary word: Louis Zukofsky, New Masses, and Political Radicalism in the 1930’s,” in *Upper Limit Music*, ed. Mark Scroggins (Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 1997), 44-64.

⁵¹ For an analysis of the convergence of modernism and proletarian art in America, see Michael Arend Rozendal, “On the Line: A reconsideration of 1930’s modernist and proletarian radicalism” (Ph.D. diss., State University of New York at Buffalo, 2006).

⁵² Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 13.

market-based system, one whose devastating effects in the 1930's brought a number of American artists and writers to the left.⁵³ The political commitment that emerged from his attempt to reform American revolutionary aesthetics is reminiscent of the ways in which the Soviet avant-gardists, specifically the *LEF* and the *October Group*, were recreating the mechanism by which the historical avant-garde functioned, its deliberate inversion of the structural interiors by which the assimilative vanguard constructed itself, for the purposes of formulating a revolutionary praxis of art for the liberated proletariat.

On the other hand, for the later Zukofsky, it is the distance between externality and aesthetic representation that true transformation takes place: indeterminacy is imagined as confrontation in its purest form. The renunciation of an overarching program such as Marxism, thus, reveals a condition of the neo-avant-garde itself: on the one hand, it challenges the authority of vanguardist revolutionary praxis by offering a concrete space of identification, which for Zukofsky was signified by the collectivity of familial life; on the other hand, the attempted move beyond the spaces of an overtly political poetics in his later work after 1948 signals a distinctive "postmodern" disillusionment with the utopian possibility of revolutionary art, an intentional negation of the pro-active reinscription of Marxist ideology in his earlier poetics in favor of the politics of domesticity. As Donald Kuspit theorizes, postmodernism "signals, among other things, that art has lost its therapeutic will," the Nietzschean *will to power* that defined the modernists' confrontational stance against bourgeois moral systems, which in the form of Zukofsky's later poetics allows for a more thorough analysis of the conversion from the aesthetics-as-politics of vanguardism to the neo-avant-garde

⁵³ See Alan M. Wald, *Writing From the Left: New Essays on Culture and Politics* (New York: Verso, 1994), particularly 67-125, and Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, 213-249.

diffidence toward revolutionary communism and the legitimating theories that justified vanguardism as a cultural and political force, a challenge to the constituents of its structure that following analysis will develop in relation to the crisis of aesthetic and political vanguardism in the era of late capitalism.

Nevertheless, the problem in assessing the ideological function in Zukofskian poetics has to do with how one acknowledges the demarcation between the two “periods” in his work; specifically, is such differentiation a result of a calculated effort to explicate the ideological elements of his poetics, or does the absence of explicit Marxist ideology in Zukofsky’s later poetry simply gesture in the direction of his repudiation of politicized art? It is along these lines that a newly formed dialectical critique of Zukofsky’s work needs to be sought, one that can categorize the assumptions of the two “periods” of his poetics without ignoring the abiding subtext of political and cultural transformation in his work. Rather than separate the discrepancy that is evident in Zukofsky’s poetics, it would be more appropriate to understand these two movements within a dialectical framework, one that addresses both the possibilities and limits of his aesthetic objectives, for in this way the reproductive mechanism of aesthetic and political vanguardism can be viewed more readily in its American context, particularly as it relates to the proletarian literary movement.

What is important to analyze, then, is the extent to which the seemingly obscure formality of Zukofsky’s poetics antagonized the mechanical production of socialist realism, which had become a major vehicle for cultural production in the U.S. as directed by the Communist International. Yet, without rehearsing the Marxist debates over form and content, it is evident that Zukofsky’s ideological preference for Marxism is crucial to

an understanding of his poetics, which in other terms can be thought of as the attempt to formalize the materiality of ideology as a medium for expression. Along the lines of the above characterization, what the following section hopes to elucidate is extent to which the subversive intent of his early poetics, in which subjectivity is inscribed within the other of the proletarian body, is made possible only to the extent that this process is internalized in his later work. For what becomes clear is that the constant oscillation between poetic subjectivity and the proletarian other in his early work created the conditions for his later work, which in its process of inversion signals the disintegration of intersubjectivity itself. The dissolution of intersubjectivity, a crisis of renunciation that indicates Zukofsky's regression to a privatized world of familial introversion, is the same that uncovers a newly formed process of subversion for his poetics, one that challenges the elements of which aesthetic and political vanguardism is constructed by positing a neo-vanguardism whose core is dependent on the constant erasure of exteriority. Thus, as Mark Scroggins writes, Zukofsky's work communicates "a poetics of redoubtable and revolutionary formalism, in which structure and shape are the most important elements of the poem," a characterization that draws attention to the underlying ambiguity of Zukofsky's utilization of Marxist theory as a motif in his work. What is important for the present context is the mode by which that formalizing process attempts to expand the elements of vanguardism that he inherited from the European avant-garde, a process that also will be utilized to rethink the subsequent materiality of his poetics that emerges in his neo-avant-gardist phrase.⁵⁴

In order to uncover the elements of what can be described as the two periods of Zukofsky's work, it is important to begin with his more overtly political writings, the

⁵⁴ Mark Scroggins, "Introduction," in *Upper Limit Music*, 7.

dialectical movement of intersubjectivity with the proletarian other, and then move toward a larger characterization of his later conceptual poetic designs. For Zukofsky the question that underlies the intentionality of aesthetic and political vanguardism generally has to do with overcoming the disengaged position of the artist within social relations: as a separate entity from the material means of capitalist production, the conscious artist is constantly preoccupied with the overturning of ruling class ideological formations through “intellectual” exertion, much like Pound himself intended. As early as 1930, Zukofsky wanted to create a poetics that seemed to combine the “Melopoeia” of Poundian aesthetics with the phenomenology of Cubist experience, as his manifesto “An Objective” suggests:

Writing occurs which is the detail, not mirage, of seeing, of thinking with the things as they exist, and directing them along a line of melody. Shapes suggest themselves, and the mind senses and receives awareness. Parallels sought for in the other arts call up the perfect line of occasional drawing, the clear beginnings of sculpture not proceeded with.⁵⁵

In one of the first critiques of Poundian poetics, Zukofsky, writing in 1929 at the age of 25, praised Pound’s ability to exist as “both the isolated creator and the worldly pamphleteer. To put the defense of his own being in order, he has drafted himself into the defense of innovation clarifying and making clear the intelligence.”⁵⁶ What Zukofsky was drawing attention to, especially in relation to his discussion of Pound’s *Cantos* 1-27, was the very element that he develops, in fact, in his own work: the desire to create the conditions for socio-political transformation through the production of an art that is intellectually unrestricted. Burton Hatlen rightly points out that Zukofsky, as much as Pound, intended to recreate a history of human consciousness in poetic form through the

⁵⁵ Louis Zukofsky, *Prepositions* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1981), 13.

⁵⁶ Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 69.

use of the collage, which “ostentatiously displays its indifference to the ‘common reader.’”⁵⁷ For Christopher Beach, Pound had a remarkable influence of Zukofsky’s poetic development, particularly the ideogrammatic structure by which Pound shaped the *Cantos*, and which Zukofsky attempted to employ in his “A,” to a smaller and more concise degree.⁵⁸ That is, the guiding principle for “A” functions according to the fugue, which for Zukofsky allowed for the fluidity in poetic design that both extended and challenged the “totalitarian” model of Pound’s ideogram. For Mark Scroggins it is the “totalizing tendencies” of the ideogrammatic method that Zukofsky finds too restrictive, thus applying the “constantly self-generating and regenerating ‘weave’” that allows “A” to attain the heterogeneity of the musical phrase, rather than the juxtapositional methodology by which the *Cantos* had been designed.⁵⁹

Furthermore, to the extent that Zukofsky desired to transform social relations through the artistic sensibility, it is possible to locate him within the Poundian tradition, yet one that in radical opposition to the fascist cultural paradigm to which Pound subscribed, utilized the ideology of Marxist revolution as a structural approach to writing poetry, as Sandra Kumamoto Stanley rightly points out:

The father-son relationship between Pound and Zukofsky has puzzled many—and not only because of Pound’s Fascist and ant-Semitic beliefs. Although Zukofsky and Pound both dreamed of a revitalized culture, Pound desired to preserve heroic and aristocratic values as the basis of his ideal culture, reserving political authority for a chosen elite; Zukofsky, however, desired to include the displaced and dispossessed within the framework of a transformed sociopolitical and aesthetic structure.⁶⁰

⁵⁷ Burton Hatlen, “Art And/As Labor: Some Dialectical Patterns in “A”-1 Through “A”-10,” *Contemporary Literature* 25:2 (1984), 232.

⁵⁸ Christopher Beach, *ABC of Influence: Ezra Pound and the Remaking of American Poetic Tradition* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), 78.

⁵⁹ Mark Scroggins, *Louis Zukofsky and the Poetry of Knowledge* (Tuscaloosa: The university of Alabama Press, 1998), 218.

⁶⁰ Sandra Kumamoto Stanley, *Louis Zukofsky and the Transformation of a Modern American Poetics* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 71.

What Zukofsky takes from Pound, in this sense, is the underlying premise that artistic sensibility transforms the boundaries of ruling class ideology; in the final analysis, revolutionary praxis must infuse the characteristic of the aesthetic dimension in order for it to be taken seriously, in order for it to move beyond the realm of the economic and into the consciousness of social relations as a whole. They both share a creative rationale for wholeness, for the collectivity of a movement that can exist beyond the orthodoxy of aesthetic form, which for Zukofsky, demanded the inclusiveness of proletarian consciousness and which was befitting to his receptiveness toward Marxist revolution with which he formalized his poetic subject matter.

Unlike Pound, then, whose cultural politics became identified with Italian Fascism and the hierarchy of power through which it structured itself, Zukofsky found that the intellectuality of aesthetic reproduction stemmed from his identification with the proletarian subject, whose revolutionary possibility he desired to liberate, as he demonstrates his long poem "A"-8:

Untiring action, but free
 From the lie that it can take place
 of mass action.
 We are not Xerxes who had the sea
 scourged with chains.
 But to determine the facts does not
 mean to give up the struggle.
 Learn, learn, learn!
 Act, act, act!
 Be prepared, well and completely prepared
 To make use, with all our forces,
 Of the next revolutionary wave.
 That is our job⁶¹

⁶¹ Louis Zukofsky, "A," (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978), 91. I will cite this work in-text in the following pages.

It is only to the extent that Zukofsky appeals to the collective body of the proletariat that he is able to formulate the possibility of a subversive aesthetic program. It was important to recognize, firstly, the physicality of the object, as Zukofsky describes in *Prepositions*: “the revolutionary word, if it must revolve, cannot escape having a reference, that being the particularity of things, human beings as things their instrumentalities of capillaries and veins binding up and bound up with events and contingencies.”⁶² Zukofsky attempts to subsume the subject-object relation in a particular codifying formation that rescues the proletarian other from the exploitative dismemberment of capitalist material production, or rather, an attempt to contextualize the dialectical relations of the proletarian other that has been denied a revolutionary praxis within the obscurity of capitalist mechanization. As Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari theorize, the “privatization” of the internal/external limits of capitalism is determined by the extent to which the proletarian body is dissected into quantifying pieces:

Capitalism tends toward a threshold of decoding that will destroy the socius in order to make a body without organs and unleash the flows of desire on this body as a deterritorialized field.... The body without organs is produced as a whole, but in its own particular place within the process of production, alongside the parts that it neither unifies nor totalizes.⁶³

The objective of poetic subjectivity for Zukofsky, then, is designed with the intention of reabsorbing the proletariat “body without organs” into a process whereby the justification of revolutionary praxis can unfold, a radicalization of the aesthetic field through which the imaginary transcendence of reification is rendered in locatable terms. By reclaiming a space for the proletarian body, even through the unlikely medium of the aesthetic realm, Zukofsky challenged the fundamental necessity toward division by

⁶² Zukofsky, *Prepositions*, 16.

⁶³ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Robert Hurley, Mark Seem, and Helen R. Lane (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1983), 33, 43.

which capitalism proceeds: the division of labor that mechanizes and institutionalizes the reproductive capabilities of the proletarian other, both physically and psychologically. Zukofsky's concern here materialize as a result of his identification with Marxist dialectics, especially *The German Ideology* which unveils the organizational principles of Marxist revolutionary consciousness as well as the critical presentation of the extent to which the division of labor and the legitimation of capitalist ideology are intertwined: "in imagination, individuals seem freer under the rule of the bourgeoisie than before because their conditions of life seem accidental to them. In reality they are less free, because they are more subjected to the *domination of things*."⁶⁴ For Harry Braverman, the social division of labor by the capitalist class reproduces the abstraction of human consciousness, a primary mechanism in the rationalization of ruling class ideology:

In capitalism, the social division of labor is enforced chaotically and anarchically by the market, while workshop division of labor is imposed by planning and control. Again in capitalism, the products of the social division of labor are exchanged as commodities, while the results of the operation of the detail worker are not exchanged within the factory as within the marketplace, but are all owned by the same capital. While the social division of labor subdivides *society*, the detailed division of labor subdivides *humans*, and while the subdivision of society may enhance the individual and the species, the subdivision of the individual, when carried on without regard to human capabilities and needs, is a crime against the person and against humanity.⁶⁵

The process of reclaiming the territorialized body must begin with the determinacy of a collective political consciousness that can be utilized to counterrevolutionize the reified capitalist body, which Zukofsky reinscribes in an aesthetic configuration like the following:

⁶⁴ Karl Marx and Fredrick Engels, *The German Ideology*, in *Karl Marx: Selected Writings*, ed. Lawrence H. Simon (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing, 1994), 145; italics added.

⁶⁵ Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capital: The Degradation of Work in the Twentieth Century* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1974), 73. See also Lenin's commentary in "The Taylor System—Ma's Enslavement by the Machine," in *Lenin: Collected Works, Volume 20* (Moscow: Progressive Publishers, 1972), 152-154, in which he outlines this exploitative methodology of the capitalist class and its mechanization of the proletariat.

Where orchards were...has two boys...the May view
 Tunneled heap of ruin. Shirt rags imbue
 A red, free blood, Men, Men of Madrid, girth
 Of the attacker dogs will not stop you.

Labor, light lights in air, on earth, in earth ("A"-8 104-105).

And again in "The Immediate Aim,"

your value which enslaves you
 in advance

has made your eye-pupils limited—

inanity to prate
 the injustice of it⁶⁶

As the embodiment of the subversion of capitalist exploitation, the subject-object relation that Zukofsky generates in such verses was intended to reflect an advanced intimacy with the political situation made possible through the articulation of the class struggle, the symbolic expression of a liberating and cognitive power inherent in the style and form of the artwork. In this sense, Zukofsky sustained a place in the literary radicalism of 1930's proletarian literature, yet only in the sense that his engagement with Marxist aesthetics allowed for his entry into the space of revolutionary politics; specifically, for a writer such as Zukofsky, whose aesthetic complexity shared more with the historical avant-garde attempt to formalize the structural interiors of art by politicizing its dimensions than with the socialist realism that informed the proletarian literary movement, it is evident that an expanded characterization of American proletarian cultural politics needs to be examined in relation to Zukofsky's own development within 1930's radical literature, an analysis that will unveil the recuperation of aesthetic and political vanguardism in its American exemplar as well. Barbara Foley

⁶⁶ Zukofsky, *Complete Short Poetry* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1991), 54-55. I will cite this work in-text as *CSP* in the following pages.

notes that by the middle of the 1930's there was a considerable growth of collective cultural groups that were successfully building revolutionary consciousness through the medium of theatrical and literary venues, groups which were guided by the influential publication *New Masses*, and much like the Proletkult of the early period of the 1917 Revolution, sought to disseminate Marxist revolutionary ideals on a mass scale.⁶⁷ Foley argues that American "Third Period Marxists" encouraged the production of radical aesthetics that moved beyond the rigidity of "workerist and empiricist tendencies" that had limited the expansion of revolutionary communism, a critique of the 1930's cultural left that is often shadowed by the dominance of the CPUSA, and thus the Communist International under Stalin.⁶⁸ As far as content was concerned, however, there was a resonant debate within the cultural left on what designated proletarian literary forms, a debate that stemmed from the European Marxist critique of revolutionary art that became associated with Lukács and Brecht, yet in a slightly different sense, fosters a concrete depiction of the relationship between aesthetics and politics within the American context and its merge with the particularities of revolutionary communism, as Foley argues in the relation to the proletarian novel:

Marxist critics did not specifically urge proletarian novelists to incorporate the Communist party into their narratives' subject matter. But Marxist politics still crept through the back door of discussions of the subject matter of proletarian fiction. For when it came to deciding what was essential to or representative of working-class experience, there was considerable debate: what the writer felt to be representative of typical could be, in the eyes of the critic, distorted or idiosyncratic.... In essence, [critics] were arguing that reality, the realm of the objective, supplies the terms of its own transcription without the mediation of perception, analysis, interpretation. The realm of the subjective—whence comes, presumably, the conclusion that revolution is on the agenda—is simply a reflex of that reality.⁶⁹

⁶⁷ Barbara Foley, *Radical Representations*, 100.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 125, 128. For a slightly different view, see Alan Wald, *Writing from the Left*, 100-114.

⁶⁹ *Ibid.*, 114-115.

It can be argued here that, unlike the conflict between party discipline and avant-garde autonomy that Breton and the Surrealists experienced, the end of the 1930's saw the rise of the Popular Front and the amplified encouragement by the Communist International for writers and artists to join in the anti-capitalist / anti-fascist struggles, and which would have enabled Zukofsky to contribute to a variety of leftist journals that would have endorsed his assimilative poetics. On the other hand, what can be deduced from this brief categorization of revolutionary art in 1930's America is that, while it is evident that Zukofsky was able to participate in the discourse of cultural politics within the Marxist tradition, a move which culminated in his contribution to the abandoned *Workers' Anthology* of 1935, Zukofsky's dedication to Marxist revolution seemed to be limited to the ideological transformation that occurred in the aesthetic dimension. For as Mark Scroggins points out, Zukofsky was rejected membership to the party in the late 1920's, much in part due to the way in which his poetics valued the avant-gardism of those within the tradition of Ezra Pound and Guillaume Apollinaire, and became increasingly "disillusioned at the Party literati's inability or unwillingness to publish, or to promote its causes through, such radically experimental works as his won "A"-8."⁷⁰

⁷⁰ Scroggins, *Ibid.*, 29. Although this may have been true in the late 1920's, there is no clear evidence to suggest that Zukofsky was put off either by the CPUSA's literary doctrines or its political platform. To the contrary, Zukofsky advanced an ideological aesthetic that incorporated the elements of revolutionary Marxism, as we have seen. Barry Ahern also questions Zukofsky's Marxist leanings, even to the point of arguing that his "'Mantis,' *An Interpretation*" "opposes collectivism and Party discipline," since it offers an individual poetic identity that defies Communist logic, an exaggerated characterization which, as I describe above, in fact represents Zukofsky's attempt to politicize the proletarian other in the aesthetic dimension of the poem for the purposes of revolutionary organizing. I see these critiques, again, as an attempt to reduce the political dimension of vanguardism to a subordinate position, much like the conflict between socialist realism and the avant-garde described in chapter 1. Furthermore, it is not usually pointed out that Zukofsky's poetry was marginalized by the "established" literati as well, only to be given full recognition by the Beat poets, the Black Mountain Poets, especially Robert Creeley, and by neo-avant-garde poets of the New York School. See Barry Ahern, "Zukofsky, Marxism, and American Handicraft," in *Upper Limit*

While there seems to be a discrepancy between Zukofsky's aesthetic and political aspirations here, it is at this point that some of the unrecognized elements of what can be described as his "abandonment" of revolutionary communism and the intended re-establishment of the intersubjectivity of proletarian experience can be elucidated. For at its basis, what distinguishes the attempt to restructure that subversive dialectic is the collage form, a model that Zukofsky found particularly crucial in assimilating the fugue form that he takes from his immersion in Cubism. The problem with the collage form, as Donald Kuspit writes, is that "[The Artist] is split the way the distorted work of art is split, torn between contradictory elements and tendencies."⁷¹ In other terms, it is important to reformulate the subversive function of Zukofsky's poetics in relation to his infusion of the collage in his poetic designs, an analysis which will illustrate this crisis which became apparent in his work after 1948. The critical supposition here is that, even though it is apparent that Zukofsky identifies with the radicalism of Poundian modernism and the revolutionary paradigms that were offered by Marxist cultural politics through which he consciously sought to materialize a revolutionary praxis of art, his work can also be situated within a variegated Cubism, an influence that resulted from his intimate readings of Guillaume Apollinaire on whom he published a curious book in 1934. This dimension of Zukofskian poetics has not been readily scrutinized, and thus a brief inquiry into the poetic affinities of the two poets will reveal how Zukofsky's utilization of the Cubist collage may be one of the obstructions to the subversive dialectical structure he intended to propagate, not to mention the displacement that occurs on the ideological level as he relegates the political intentionality of his vanguardism to the thoroughly

Music, 80-93 and Timothy Stephen Woods, "Poetics and Politics in the Writings of Louis Zukofsky, Charles Olson, and the 'Language' Poets" (Ph.D. diss., University of Southampton, 1992).

⁷¹ Donald Kuspit, *Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 32.

centralized paradigm of the poetic fugue, and thus to the domesticated space of social relations after 1948.

Both Apollinaire and Zukofsky illustrate what can be understood as a repetitive process of extrication in which decontextualization gives way to reformulated experience in aesthetic space. As Zukofsky writes in his *Le Style Apollinaire*, this process is needed to diminish the multiplicity of contingencies that define the struggle for modernity itself: “The complexity of our social structure and our more varied interests allow us to see the beauties that are closed to the senses of people living in a narrower culture,” by which he means the primitive society that Franz Boas describes in his *Primitive Art*.⁷² The proper expression for the avant-gardist for Zukofsky, then, can be realized in what Peter Quartermain calls a “disjunctive” poetics in which elements of reality are in a constant process of dissection; that is, in slight contrast to Pound who utilized the metonymic process of juxtaposition to create “the universal, existing in perfection, in freedom from time and space,” a disjunctive poetics, although working within a metonymic progression, does not give definition to the whole presentation but illuminates the elements of its construction within the structural process of de-coding, what Serge Gavronsky calls the “de-subjectification” of the subject-object relation of the poetic form.⁷³ As Pound’s Vorticism revealed, the particularity of images that the artist utilized in the formalized structure of the aesthetic dimension had a sense of permanence and

⁷² Louis Zukofsky, *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire: Le Style Apollinaire* (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2004), 176.

⁷³ See Peter Quartermain, *Disjunctive Poetics: From Gertrude Stein and Louis Zukofsky to Susan Howe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992) and Serge Gavronsky’s “Introduction: Guillaume Apollinaire Subsumed under Louis Zukofsky’s Gaze,” in *The Writing of Guillaume Apollinaire: Le Style Apollinaire*, xiii-1. Gavronsky rightly interconnects Apollinaire, Zukofsky, and André Breton’s Surrealism, a particularly important juncture that is beyond the scope of the current project, yet suggestive of the ways in which Zukofsky inherited the tradition of European vanguardism as it infused itself in American poetics.

In “*Mantis, An Interpretation,*” we can see a divergent variation of how Zukofsky utilizes the collage in order to give dimension to the subject-object dialectic through which he politicizes the presence of the proletarian other:

The voice exhorting, trusting what one hears
 Will exhort others, is the imposed sensuality of an age
 When both propaganda and sensuality are necessary against—

 But it remembers even more constantly
 the poor
 than
 com’huom pietra sott’ erba
 as one should hide a stone in grass.

Nor is the coincidence
 Of the last four lines
 Symbolism,
 But the simultaneous,
 The diaphanous, historical
 In one head.
 (CSP 72, 73)

The underlying principle of the collage, as Peter Bürger argues, excludes the possibility of “synthesis” by its very construction, thus allowing only the illusory impression of a total presence: “A system of representation based on the portrayal of reality, i.e., on the principle that the artistic subject (the artist) must transpose reality, has thus been invalidated.”⁷⁶ It can be argued, in this sense, that Zukofsky’s attempt to assign a materiality to the proletarian body is rendered incomplete because the experience of intersubjectivity dissembles its own rationalizing intentions, an interior mechanism of displacement that is reproduced by the collage form itself. The “aestheticizing strategy” of Zukofsky’s poetics, what has been described as the attempt to formalize the subjectivity of the proletarian body in order to emancipate it as a result of the process of exteriorization that reconfigures the fragmented proletarian body as a re-politicized

⁷⁶ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 78.

totality, does not actualize its subversive intentionality as a result of the very formalizing capability that structures Zukofsky's poetics, a process that becomes more and more pronounced by 1948. As Jameson writes, the system of de-reification needs to maintain a reference point beyond the formalization by which it reappears as subversion, as a fortified collectivity that could deconstruct the exteriors of capitalist social relations:

The very structure of sense perception has nowhere to go in a world in which science deals with ideal quantities, and comes to have little exchange value in a money economy dominated by considerations of calculations, measurement, profit and the like. This unused surplus capacity of sense perception can only recognize itself into a new and semi-autonomous activity, one which produces its own specific objects, new objects that are themselves the result of a process of abstraction and reification, such that older concrete unities are now sundered into measurable dimensions.⁷⁷

The revitalized perception of the proletarian other within the collage form, subsumed in the historicity of "contemporary particulars," creates the illusion of embodied completeness in the aesthetic process that could restore its authenticity, a dilemma for the poetic restructuring of a revolutionary praxis of art that Dadaism itself faced in its confrontation with ruling class ideological formations.⁷⁸ And it is here that the ability to create a space for the reappropriated proletarian body falls back on itself, disabling the possibility of its subversive presence. That is, Zukofsky's attempt to write the body into an ostensible totality of the collage, out of which would generate the unification of the subject-object dialectic, is fetishized by the overarching presence of the poetic voice, whose desiring repetition to create transcendence in otherness displaces the effect of that subversive act. Fetishization of the other, expressed in the impossible extremity of subject-object relations, finds itself in a tautological movement in which the recognition of poetic subjectivity in the other involves a "loss," and as the above analysis of the

⁷⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 229.

⁷⁸ See section 2 of chapter 1.

disjunctive poetics of Zukofsky's early work reveals, the unification of the subject-object dialectic collapses into an eternal repetition of fetishization.

The quandary of Zukofsky's poetry, then, reflects the failure to recognize the possibilities for intersubjectivity, and thus there is a steady, painful journey toward the dissolution of the self-other relation, a conscious extinguishing of revolutionary mobility, resulting in the destabilization of aesthetic intentionality, as he reveals in part 4 of his "Light":

I want to resign
 What's mine ain't mine
 What ain't mine is
 Thine,

SOS

I want to resign.

And again in "All of December Toward New Year's":

A tired—much less—an old
 man does not talk of justice
 —much less an old man
 having nothing, nothing like content

A WORLD ATLAS in a globe base:
 Who turned the print to us?
 We don't need to read it. (CSP116-117, 144)

As Edward Schelb argues, Zukofsky's renunciation of externality "should be recognized as a reintegration of repressed emotions *and* a refusal of coercive relations toward nature, language, and history."⁷⁹ Schelb proposes that the conscious process of "abstraction" reflects Zukofsky's "attempts to destroy the abstractions of a capitalist economy," an

⁷⁹ Edward Schelb, "The Exaction of Song: Louis Zukofsky and the Ideology of Form," *Contemporary Literature* 31:3 (1990): 336.

fluctuation and destabilization, as a result of the triangular relationship. Yet, in this sense, it creates the conditions for total subversion of externality: in contrast to his earlier poetics, in which the desire to reassemble the proletarian other into the body of the text is extinguished in its incompleteness, a process that is described as the fetishization of the proletarian other, the irreconcilability with the external world is what underlies the synthesis of negation in his later sections of “A.”⁸¹ Moreover, the interiority of this structure allows Zukofsky to unchain his poetic voice from material consumption, the negation of market quantification which de-reifies the opacity of social relations that further elucidates a revitalized consciousness that Antonio Negri describes as “liberated time”:

The concept of liberated time is given as omnilaterality, as universal versatility. Within the massive totality of real subsumption, liberated time is not the residue of exploited time, but is rather the force that breaks up and destroys all the links of capitalist society.... Liberated time is collectivity. The process of struggle and emancipation, followed by the process of struggle and liberation, have led us to that rational paradox where liberated time is time that cannot be measured, precisely because liberation consists in the destruction of the structural dimensions of time-as-measure.⁸²

The similarity between Negri’s theorization and Zukofsky’s neo-vanguardism is the articulation of a space beyond measurement, one that renounces the exterior demands of capitalist time, and yet recreates a dimensionality through which the essentials of social relations can emerge systematically. Incidentally, both Zukofsky and Negri reorganize the principle of liberation through the philosophical insights of Spinoza, who locates the ontological form of collectivity in love: “Love is the desire of the common, the desire that traverses physics and ethics—Spinoza said as much,” which for Negri is crucial to the

⁸¹ For a thorough analysis of the later sections, not to mention a general overview of “A,” see Barry Ahern, *Zukofsky’s “A”: An Introduction* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), especially 168-195.

⁸² Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, trans. Matteo Mandarini (London: Continuum, 2003), 121.

reformation of revolutionary praxis.⁸³ For Zukofsky, though, external relations are substituted for familial love, within which we find an Oedipal configuration that delimits the political potentiality of the aesthetic dimension, yet simultaneously allowing a newly formed synthetic quality to emerge. In his “Barley and wisely,” it is possible to see how this transpires:

love
 they say—
 in these words—
 of Paul
 “barely
 twelve”
 and of me
 “widely
 published
 throughout
 a long career”
 So unknown
 Cecelia
 you are the peer-
 ess of this
 song
 making the news notes
 sing (*CSP*161).

Uniquely, Zukofsky’s turn toward domesticity, in which a triangular love is delineated in the poetic function, attempts to subvert capitalist time-measured consumption through a process in which internal perpetuation of a destabilizing structure resists being reoriented into consumption, thus it intends to move beyond the abstraction of capitalist time itself, a move that, paradoxically, is limited to the aesthetic dimension. In this sense, Zukofsky seems to realize the primary function of what Adorno hypothesizes to be the “irreconcilability of form” in the artwork: in the midst of its own deconstruction, the artwork reorganizes itself within a “positive nothingness,” one that is

⁸³ Ibid., 209. The importance of Spinoza for both Negri and Zukofsky offer an interesting view into the concepts by which both authors sought to rethink revolutionary praxis, albeit in opposite directions.

pushed beyond an abstraction and into the real of silence, much like Samuel Beckett's unnamable.⁸⁴ As noted above, however, the actualization of this process can occur only to the extent that it reveals itself within the triangular configuration of Oedipus, which has been shown to be Zukofsky's renunciation of external relations, in favor of domesticity. The progression of the poetic function, then, becomes dependent upon the repetition of this configuration which both fulfills and threatens the aesthetic obligation of the text. To reformulate the argument here, the confrontation with productive-time, out of which arises the necessary means to demystify social relations on a massive scale, must undergo a radical transformation in order for it to transcend the deconstructive effects internal to its own design. As such, the unfolding of inversion within Zukofsky's text is reduced to the desire to maintain an intrinsic cycle of pleasure that derives from and is associated with the controlling nature of the poetic voice: subjectivity in the text, delineated within the confines of familial textual reproduction, is reconstructed as a narcissistic regression that negates possibility of external collective action.

In conclusion, is it possible to recognize that the rejection of exteriority creates a resistant space for subjectivity in Zukofsky's later poetics as an *irrationality to-come*, an irrationality that in its very antithetical mechanism could resist capitalist subsumption of the ideological apparatus of subversion? For Antonio Negri, true subjectivity expresses a "liberated time," and through its "creativity" manifests "the form of imagination and hope."⁸⁵ For Negri, as well as Zukofsky, if only the drive towards the transparency of liberation could become detached from bourgeois subsumption, which in its progressive

⁸⁴ Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, 153.

⁸⁵ Negri, *Ibid.*, 121.

homogenization of antithetical formations negates the potentiality of subversion as an authentic act, then perhaps a reoriented dialectic of liberation could materialize to shatter the desiring-reproduction that organizes the absolutism of capitalist doctrine. On the other hand, “A” never fully actualizes this process, and instead suggests that the possibility for poetic truth is encased within an ideological framework that repudiates its potential to be utilized precipitously, symbolically, much like a particular facet of the neo-avant-garde itself.⁸⁶ In this sense, the meaningfulness of Zukofsky’s poetics can only be realized in its ambivalence to illuminate a utopian alternative to capitalist exploitation, specifically its disobedience toward the codification of alternative systems of meaning that could easily be re-appropriated by the demands of bourgeois aesthetic principles. Thus, it may be the case that Zukofsky’s criticality, similar to that of Pound’s, descends into social ineffectuality and impotence.

At the same time, the ability of Pound and Zukofsky to transcend the effects of mystification, which they both attempt to concretize in their respective epics, indicates the extent to which their confrontation with the historical avant-garde allows for the potential reevaluation of the confrontational horizons of aesthetic and political vanguardism to which they both were responding, and which created the prospects for a newly expanded capacity by which that very operation was historically positioned. For as this chapter has revealed, the “ideology of the aesthetic,” to utilize Terry Eagleton’s phrase, determines the dialectical formation of vanguardism on both the political left and right; that is, as a symptomatic expression that is built into the dialectic of vanguardism itself, it is possible to unveil the corresponding mechanism by which both Pound and Zukofsky structured their aesthetics-as-politics in the struggle against capitalist

⁸⁶ See the conclusion to this study for an analysis of the dialectical forms of the neo-avant-garde.

modernity, against the hegemony of capitalist predominance, a struggle that in the aesthetic dimension was directed toward dissimilar revolutionary endeavors. As Neil Larsen writes, “Aesthetics recuperates a present, a history in the revolutionary sense, in which freedom can, theoretically at least, be given as something subjective and immediate.”⁸⁷ As such, the oscillating presence and absence of aesthetics-as-politics in Zukofsky and Pound seems to preserve the materiality of that assertion.

⁸⁷ Neil Larsen, *Modernism and Hegemony*, 18.

4

Aimé Césaire and the Crisis of Aesthetic and Political Vanguardism

It has been noted that Aimé Césaire's resignation from the Parti Communiste Française in 1956 reveals both his condemnation of party politics, and as an effect, his renunciation of Marxism in favor of Négritude, an aesthetic and political movement which he believed best articulated the needs of decolonization.¹ In his *Lettre à Maurice Thorez*, the controversial document which established his split with the party, Césaire argues that the French Communists had been reluctant to address the "particularities" of decolonization in Algeria, the Caribbean, and on the African continent, and was concerned about the party's moribund adherence to the Marxian idealization of the Western proletariat as the subject of revolutionary transformation:

The colonial question, cannot be treated as a subsidiary part of some more important global matter, as part over which deals can be arranged or upon which others patch up compromises they think they have a right to seek in the name of an overall situation which they retain the exclusive right to interpret... our colonialism, the struggle of coloured people against racism, is much more complex, indeed, it is of a totally different nature than the struggle of the French workers against French capitalism, and cannot in any case be considered a part, as a fragment, of that struggle.²

¹ See Gregson Davis, *Aimé Césaire*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 97, and Susan Frutkin, *Aimé Césaire: Black between Worlds*. (Miami: University of Miami Center for Advanced International Studies, 1973), 42.

² Quoted in Frutkin, 39. For the full text, see Aimé Césaire, *Lettre à Maurice Thorez* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1956). It is widely argued that Césaire's break with the PCF, as noted above, stemmed from his disgust with the Communist International's reluctance to address the crimes committed under Stalin's rule, particularly the "cult of personality" that was described in Khrushchev's speech at the 20th Congress of the Communist Party of the Soviet Union, 1956. It has also been argued that the soviet invasion of Hungary the same year solidified Césaire's split with the PCF, a fact that has been refuted by Davis, since Césaire composed his *Lettre* months before the invasion. While it is clear that Césaire had been frustrated with the party line on the colonies since the 1940's, it is unclear whether his repudiation the party had anything to do with Stalinist Communism itself, which in his *Discours sur le colonialisme* he argued was the guiding

Although it is clear that Césaire was responding to the turbulence over Khrushchev's "speech" in 1956 in which Stalinism was denounced, and who like many intellectuals that had joined the party in the post-war era formally broke with the Communist International in the wake of such revelations, Césaire's criticism is directed more so at the party's reluctance to address imperialism and the struggles that emerged from within the colonies themselves, a point which he understood as an internalized racism within the PCF leadership which he found to be a systemic problem of Western Communism in general.³ Gregson Davis points out that Césaire's break with the PCF had less to do with party politics than with Césaire's "fidelity to the prior cause of Négritude and its corollary, the struggle to eradicate racism, which he saw as a deeply rooted problem."⁴ In fact, Césaire originally believed that working within the PCF would bring about an opportunity to broaden the struggles against imperialist racism, which he maintained was inbuilt within the structure of capitalism itself, and which he understood as a theoretical weakness of Western Marxism that stemmed from its fetishization of the European working-class, a predicament which he attempted to rectify as early as 1950.⁵ His alignment with the party, then, signified an attempt to synthesize the elements of Westernized Marxism within decolonization, a process he thought was hindered by the stringency of the party line after 1956, yet nonetheless a critical element in the formation of a revolutionary

light for world liberation, a contradiction in his aesthetic and political commitments which is central to my argument here. For more on the PCF and de-Stalinization, see David Caute, *Communism and the French Intellectuals*, pp.215-237.

³ Frutkin, 37.

⁴ Davis, 98.

⁵ See Aimé Césaire, *Discours sur le colonialisme* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1950); see his later position on the formation of revolutionary decolonization in his post-PCF years in *Toussaint Louverture: La Révolution française et le problème colonial* (Paris: Présence Africaine, 1961), and Gary Wilder's critique in his "Race Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation," *Radical History Review* 90 (Fall 2004): 31-60.

praxis through which the relationship between international communism and the colonized other could be materialized.

Thus, contrary to what can be construed as a renunciation of Marxism, in fact, Césaire later makes clear his commitment to revolutionary communism, as it represented to him the necessary step in the building of a mass movement, as he states in his *Lettre*: “It’s neither Marxism nor Communism I repudiate... what I want is that Marxism and Communism be harnessed into the service of colored peoples, and not peoples into service of Marxism and Communism.”⁶ His emphasis on Négritude was meant to unveil what he called the “doubly proletarianized and alienated” position of the colonized other, which unlike the white proletariat of Europe and America, had been “denied even the notion of humanity.”⁷ As Janis Pallister remarks, the subsumption of decolonizing struggles under the rubric of Western Communism without the recognition of the effects of colonization, especially the legitimizing practices of racism in the colonies, caused Césaire to question the implicit “chauvinism” of Western Communist parties: “[Césaire] looks not to Europe for regeneration of the Antilles but to Black Africa, for although he espouses the concept of the universal, his universal embraces many particulars.”⁸ Specifically, in order to construct an oppositional praxis that channeled forces into decolonization, Césaire utilized Marxism as a formative methodology. In his 1959 speech “L’Homme de Culture et Ses Responsabilités” (“The Responsibilities of the Intellectual”) at the Second Congress of Negro Writers and Artists, Césaire writes, “in brief, our task is not one of repositioning colonialism or interiorizing servitude. We must

⁶ Quoted in Frutkin, 41.

⁷ Aimé Césaire, “Interview with René Depestre,” in *Discourse on Colonialism*, Trans. Joan Pinkham (New York: Monthly Press, 1972), 78-9.

⁸ Janis Pallister, *Aimé Césaire* (New York: Twayne Publishers, 1991), 105.

destroy it, annihilate it in the true sense of the word, or to be exact, to tear it out at the roots, and that is why true decolonization will be revolutionary or will not be at all.”⁹

The configuration of imperialist racism in the colonies is what normalized the mass proletarianization of social relations within Western domination, a critique that both anticipates and contextualizes the work of Franz Fanon who extends Césaire’s analysis in order to formulate a phenomenological praxis of decolonization, as his *Peau Noir, Masques Blancs (Black Skin/White Masks)* and *Les damnés de la terre (The Wretched of the Earth)* would demonstrate subsequently.¹⁰

Taking into consideration the above characterization of Césaire’s political background it is evident that Césaire’s resignation from the PCF and his subsequent channeling of revolutionary Marxism into the ideology of Négritude can be read in relation to what Raymond Williams has described as the dialectic of the “residual” and “emergent” effects of cultural production, specifically as it relates to the crisis of aesthetic and political vanguardism that results from Césaire’s influential break with the formal structure of Communist International and the ways in which the constituencies of his aesthetic principles coincide with its political framework, as the present study has emphasized. That is, as a proponent of the confrontational aesthetics of the French Surrealists, as well as being committed to revolutionary communism, Césaire’s work demonstrates the extent to which vanguardism symbolized the “compulsory” step toward both political resistance and artistic experimentalism, particularly within the colonized

⁹ Aimé Césaire, “L’homme de culture et ses responsabilités, *Présence Africaine* 24-25 (1959), 119; translation mine.

¹⁰ See Franz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (New York: Grove Press, 1967), and his *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove Press, 1963); for an analysis of Fanon, Césaire, and Négritude, see the final section to this chapter.

regions that were beginning to formulate a strategy against imperialism in the post-World War II era. For Césaire, however, aesthetic and political vanguardism, which had roots in Westernized thought, represented the very medium by which colonialism was naturalized and thus it existed as an impediment for decolonization in Martinique, as well as for other nationalist movements on the African continent. Césaire's work, as such, represents both the corollary to European aesthetic and political vanguardism and the ways in which the Western conceptualization of vanguardism began to be concentrated in the ideology of Négritude, a result, that is, of the socio-political predicament it experienced as it crossed the Atlantic.

In this respect, Césaire's reformulation of aesthetic and political vanguardism exposed the widening crisis of representation that the historical avant-garde had been experiencing since the early 1930's. More concretely, since the historical framework of the avant-garde sought to externalize its primary assault on the institution of art in order to recreate that potentiality as a material praxis of opposition that would subvert the hegemony of capitalist production, the materialization of the historical avant-garde, as noted above, was contingent on the extent to which it could be realized as political praxis, as it began to rely on the mechanism of confrontation through which its association with political awakening could be reproduced on a broader scale. As a way to advance an ideological position within non-revolutionary society, the avant-garde artist became reliant on political party lines, which is the reason a detailed critique of the crisis of the historical avant-garde must begin with an explanation of the overall determination of vanguardism and its attempt to mirror and emulate the material conditions of social revolution, especially after 1917. The question, then, is to what extent the non-European

vanguard, represented here by the formation of Négritude, should assimilate the structural requirements of Western revolutionary art? That is, what effects did the historical avant-garde have in the emergence of Négritude both before and after Césaire's resignation from the PCF? More specifically, as a process through which aesthetic and political resistance is formulated, did Césaire's work after 1956, which can be described as a neo-avant-gardism, produce a continual space of confrontation that is able to destroy the ideological configurations of imperialism, even though it apparently nationalized a confrontational mode external to the dominant structure of European aesthetic and political vanguardism? Furthermore, to what extent does Césaire's reformism of the historical avant-garde succumb to the disformulating process of late capitalist subsumption, a critique that situates Césaire's post-1956 aesthetic and political vanguardism in the context of the Marxist debate about postmodern aesthetics in general?

To this extent, it is possible to negotiate the ways in which neo-vanguardism, which emerged from within the configurations of political modernism, was able to de-contextualize the hegemony of that structure in the struggle to attain an independent formation beyond the confines of its predecessor, not to mention beyond the exteriors of capitalist hegemony. Thus, Césaire's work reflects a categorical response to vanguardism, yet in slight contrast to Zukofsky's renunciation of politicized art in favor of the radicalization of the aesthetic form, Césaire attempts to localize the political dimension in the development of decolonization. What is evident, in this sense, is that there is an inherited dialectical movement within the structure of the neo-avant-garde reaction to vanguardism, an interiorized crisis that is apparent in the work of Césaire and Zukofsky that will be analyzed in the final chapter to this study, yet for now lends itself

to an understanding of the progression of aesthetic and political vanguardism after 1956, particularly the ways in which the decolonizing task that Césaire initiated restructured the paradigm of vanguardist art in its non-European geographical context.

The Poetics of Négritude in the Context of the Historical Avant-Garde

The form that Césaire's Négritude takes after 1956 contrasts to the way in which it was revealed in his first published collection, *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal*. Although original in its attempt to restructure colonized subjectivity in the body of the text, much like Zukofsky's proletarian other, it is evident that Césaire had adapted the European model of aesthetic and political vanguardism as a medium through which his version of Négritude could be expressed. As such, the poetics of Négritude must be read as a dialectical interchange that emerged from within the effects of modernist discourse, or more specifically, in relation to the critical representation of the historical avant-garde and its revolt against the bourgeois institutionalization of art. Moreover, in the current context, it is clear that, precisely because the poetics of Négritude became a methodology of collective action that rigorously critiqued the authenticity of European models of aesthetic and political vanguardism, it also exposes the crisis of representation that the historical avant-garde experienced throughout the first half of the twentieth century, a crisis that culminates in the formation of the neo-avant-garde itself.¹¹ To be more specific, the crisis of the historical avant-garde stems from its inability to formulate an oppositional political praxis that could sustain a mode of confrontation external to the

¹¹ This critique will be elucidated much further in the final chapter. The present argument will focus on the development of this crisis, and thus I am arguing that Césaire, like Zukofsky, is on the verge of the neo-avant-garde, and in fact perpetuates it as a reactionary position to the historical avant-garde, a point that will be clarified later.

confines of its aestheticized space. That is, to reformulate it in the current argument, how does Césaire's Négritude, which paradoxically articulates and critiques the crisis in representation of the historical avant-garde, resolve the apparent incongruity that existed between revolutionary art and building of an oppositional praxis, one that becomes more apparent as it became globalized?

In his *Modernism and Negritude*, James Arnold locates Césaire's poetry within the tradition of modernism, which he argues was a necessary step in Césaire's formulation of the poetics of Négritude. As Arnold writes, "There is probably no direct connection to be made between Césaire and Pound, Yeats, or Malraux. Yet Césaire had at his disposal the same European intellectual tradition as these writers when he set out to become the poet of negritude."¹² Arnold refers to the aesthetic manifesto "Poetry and Cognition" of 1945 in which Césaire outlines the intellectual tradition out of which he establishes a line of influence. "The poet," writes Césaire, "is that very ancient yet new being, at once very complex and very simple, who at the limit of dream and reality, of day and night, between absence and presence, searches for and receives in the sudden triggering of inner cataclysms the password of connivance and power."¹³ Arnold contends that this essay and a number of others produced within the same period and published in the short-lived journal *Tropiques*, represents a further development in Césaire's revolt against Western thought, particularly in his use of the work of Nietzsche whose hostility toward Western rationalism Césaire found adaptable to his own

¹² James Arnold, *Modernism and Negritude* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1981), 52.

¹³ Aimé Césaire, "Poetry and Cognition," in *Lyrical and Dramatic Poetry, 1946-82*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Charlottesville: The University of Virginia Press, 1990), 56.

subversive position.¹⁴ In fact, it is rationalism that for Césaire structures imperial racism within Empire, an ideological component of subjugation that socialized the colonies themselves. In this respect, Négritude is meant to be the “enrichment” of Western culture in its affirmation of black collectivity, a position that highlights the philosophical criticality in Césaire’s work in its parallel incorporation and repudiation of Eurocentric models of cultural production. The Western intellectual tradition of modernism, which Césaire suggests is a precursor to the *radical return* of black collectivity, is embraced in what Fredric Jameson characterizes as a “paradoxical turning around of a phenomenon into its opposite of which the transformation of quantity into quality is only one of the better known manifestations.”¹⁵ This is not to specify the poetics of Négritude as a process of negation; rather, it is meant to draw out the particular construction of what can be called the dialectic of subversion that Césaire incorporates as creative revolt, a process that becomes aesthetic form in *Cahier d’un retour au pays natal*:

Leaving Europe utterly twisted with screams
the silent currents of despair
leaving timid Europe which
collects and proudly overrates itself
I summon this egoism beautiful
and bold
and my ploughing reminds me of an implacable cutwater
[et mon labour me remémore d’une implacable étrave]
.....
But in so doing, my heart, preserve me from all hatred
do not make me into that man of hatred for whom I feel only hatred
for entrenched as I am in this unique race
you still know my tyrannical love
you know that it is not from hatred of other races
that I demand a digger [bêcheur] for this unique race
that what I want
is for universal hunger
for universal thirst

¹⁴ Arnold, 55.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 309.

to summon it to generate,
 free at last, from its intimate closeness
 the succulence of fruit.¹⁶

Through the attempt to reinscribe the severed body of the colonized other in textual form, much like Zukofsky's concretization of the proletarian body, it is possible to view the extent to which Négritude confronted systemic forms of imperialist doctrine, ingredients of subjugation which for Césaire were intrinsic to Eurocentric socio-cultural experience. In this respect, the poetics of Négritude, rather than being a consequence of modernist hegemony, revolted against the contours of its formation, since its aesthetic dimension extended toward the subversion of ideological positions within bourgeois rationalism and the forms of legitimizing practices that erected and sustained the particularities of colonial rule and capitalist exploitation. As Abiola Irele writes, "Césaire's literary work, especially when considered in conjunction with his political activities, represents more than the expression of an attitude or a symbolic gesture, but a privileged form of action—that is, poetic action whose direction is the activation of the mind of the West Indian and whose purpose is the total transformation of his mode of insertion in the world order."¹⁷ It is in this sense that Michelle Wright also argues that the counterdiscourses within the tradition of the African Diaspora, the representative of which was the poetics of Négritude, challenged the "central tenets" of European racism in the attempt to recreate the subjectivity of the black-as-other.¹⁸ Wright argues that racist

¹⁶ Aimé Césaire, *The Collected Poetry*, trans. Clayton Eshleman and Annette Smith (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1983), 59, 71; hereafter cited in-text as *CP*.

¹⁷ Abiola Irele, *The African Experience in Literature and Ideology* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1990), 133.

¹⁸ Michelle Wright, *Becoming Black: Creating Identity in the African Diaspora* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 13.

ideology emanated from two seminal philosophical works, Hegel's *Philosophy of History* and Arthur de Gobineau's *Essai sur l'inégalité des races humaines*, both of which invent the otherness of black subjectivity as a means of legitimizing Eurocentric notions of white superiority. The Négritudists, of which Wright maintains Césaire and his long-time colleague and friend Léopold Senghor were the primary figures, developed a materialist critique of colonialist discourse through conceptual narratives that in their moment of negation recognize the "fallacy of Western logos," which as a consequence replaced the abstraction of black subjectivity with a commonality of black collective identity, an identity that struggled with the predicament of Western rationalism itself.¹⁹ "Césaire," Wright asserts, "must grapple with the contradiction of being Othered while being deeply implicated within an antagonistic and exploitative Western environment."²⁰

Césaire's poetics of Négritude, then, while emphasizing the paradoxical position of the black intellectual of the African Diaspora, empowers the methodology of confrontation that antagonizes systemic forms of bourgeois rationality, both aesthetically and politically. Rather than simply considering Césaire as being subordinate to modernist discourse, it is necessary to view Négritude as a pivotal movement within the historical formation of aesthetic and political vanguardism, since it both sustained and expanded the mode of confrontation that was systemic in the historical avant-garde attack on socio-cultural production. Furthermore, by analyzing the poetics of Négritude in the context of Césaire's relationship to the Surrealist movement, it is possible to resolve the internal tensions between the aesthetic and political dimensions of its construction and

¹⁹ Ibid., 107.

²⁰ Ibid., 109.

the process by which Césaire confronts the limitations of vanguardism, one that becomes reformulated in the praxis of decolonization, specifically after 1956.

Negritude, Surrealism, and the Critique of Imperialism

As Robert Short points out, Surrealism sought to revolutionize the cognitive dimension of society through aesthetic production, an objective that often conflicted with the interests of the PCF as a result of the Surrealists' reluctance to embrace socialist realism, which became an official part of the party line after 1934.²¹ It is important to emphasize here the political position of André Breton and the Surrealist movement, as their commitment to revolutionary upheaval also focused on the decolonizing struggle against Empire, a struggle which Breton also realized was relegated to a subordinate place even in the predominant Marxist analyses of the global revolution, especially after his own break with the PCF in the late 1930's. As chapter two analyzed, the Surrealist critique of Western rationalism and its emphasis on the development of confrontational aesthetic models did not fully concretize until it was later connected to the Bolshevik revolutionary movement of 1917 and to revolutionary communism generally, as evidenced by their period in the PCF and the later anti-colonial position that the movement took, particularly by Breton.²² It was also out of that commitment that an anti-racist position began to be formulated by the Surrealists, since they recognized that the ideological configurations of racism established the groundwork for intensified exploitation in the colonies. In the opinion of Amanda Stansell, 1930's France was a place where "racial discourses could

²¹ Robert Short, "The Politics of Surrealism, 1920-1936," in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 27.

²² See the second part of chapter 2 to the present study.

substantially influence political change.”²³ The agitation for a campaign against racism from within France was encouraged by the Surrealists in both aesthetic and political works, and as early as 1925, the most identifiable leaders of the movement headed by André Breton began to direct opposition to French colonialism more aggressively. In the seminal piece “La Suppression de l’esclavage,” Paul Eluard prophesied that the end of Western civilization would be a direct result of imperialist racism upon which colonizing ideologies were built. “The people struggling for their independence will soon perceive that they are capable of overthrowing their masters, whether native or foreign....how is it possible that the most stoic of these slaves would put up with the imbecilic cruelties of white decadence forever?”²⁴ In the 1932 tract “Murderous Humanitarianism,” signed by, among others, Breton, Eluard, André Thirion, René Char, and Benjamin Péret, a more penetrating accusation of French colonialism is proclaimed:

In a France hideously inflated from having dismembered Europe, mad mincemeat of Africa, polluted Oceania and ravaged whole tracts of Asia, we surrealists pronounced ourselves in favor of changing the imperialist war, in its chronic and colonial form, into a civil war. Thus we placed our energies in the service of the revolution—of the proletariat and its struggles—and defined our attitude toward the colonial problem, and hence toward the colour question.²⁵

This effort gained significant attention in the controversial exhibition “La Vérité sur les Colonies,” which ran from September 1931- to February 1932. It was created to oppose the “International Colonial Exhibition” that opened in Paris in 1931 and offered a material point of anticolonialist protest for activists within the Surrealist group and extending to many members of the PCF. In fact, according to Stansell, a number of

²³ Amanda Stansell, “Surrealist Racial Politics at the Borders of ‘Reason’: Whiteness, Primitivism, and Négritude,” in *Surrealism, Politics, and Culture*, 112.

²⁴ Quoted in Helena Lewis, *The Politics of Surrealism*, 30.

²⁵ “Murderous Humanitarianism,” in André Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, 431.

members of the PCF organized rooms within the exhibition displaying photography and other material about forced labor and other methods of colonialist oppression.²⁶ Helena Lewis also notes that this period represented “a brief period of tranquility” between the Surrealists and the PCF, a relationship that was solidified in 1927 with Breton’s induction into the party ranks, yet made continually unstable as a result of the differing theories of social revolution.²⁷ In the manifesto *Ne Visitez pas l’exposition coloniale*, Breton and eleven other participants exclaim that the Colonial Exhibition “clearly expresses the complicity of the entire bourgeoisie in the birth of a new and particularly intolerable concept” ‘La Grande France,’” and contended that colonized people and the proletariat within capitalist countries shared a common objective.²⁸ Although somewhat rushed in terms of their conflation of the colonized other and the proletariat, a point which is the essence of Césaire’s consternation with the development of the PCF party line in the early 1950’s, the exhibition and subsequent declarations against French and European colonialism by Breton and the Surrealists lent itself to what Stansell argues was a “racial politics” that “avoids a humanist liberalism based on universal similarity, and a separatist essentialism based on unbridgeable alterity.”²⁹

It is of course evident that the influence of Surrealism on Césaire’s early formations of the poetics of Négritude was immense. André Breton was greatly impressed with Césaire’s development within the Surrealist tradition, and perhaps in the context of his own struggle against colonialist rule, he viewed Césaire’s work as a crucial

²⁶ Stansell, 117.

²⁷ Lewis, 96.

²⁸ Quoted in Lewis, 95.

²⁹ Stansell, 118.

step in the resistance against Westernized versions of socio-cultural production.³⁰ In his 1943 study, “Un grand poète noir,” which would later become the 1944 preface to Césaire’s *Cahier du retour au pays natal*, Breton exclaims, “This poem was nothing less than the greatest lyrical monument of our times.... And here, written in capital letters, is what has always been the first article in the program of surrealism: to deliver a fatal blow to ‘common sense’ which has impudently arrogated itself to the title of reason.”³¹ In his 1967 interview, Césaire recounts his encounter with surrealism and the way in which he sought to utilize its techniques:

Surrealism had provided me with what I had been confusedly searching for. I have accepted it joyfully because in it I have found more of a confirmation than a revelation. It was a weapon that exploded the French language. This was very important because the traditional forms—burdensome, overused forms—were crushing me.... Surrealism interested me to the extent that it was a liberating factor.³²

Later in the interview, Césaire characterizes his experience with Surrealism as a “process of disalienation,” a decisive concept that needs some explanation in the context of Césaire and his evolution within the tradition of aesthetic and political vanguardism.³³ For Césaire, as for Franz Fanon, it is not through alienation that the *poète noir* is able to rescue black collectivity from colonialist abstraction; that is, since the institution of colonization initiates alienation as a precondition of existence, as an ascendancy of material and psychological control that delimits the possibilities of genuine liberation, disalienation, then, becomes a necessary step in the conceptual founding of black

³⁰ For a thorough analysis of Césaire, Breton, and Surrealism, see Jean-Claude Michel, *The Black Surrealists* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, 2000), 59-95.

³¹ Breton, *What is Surrealism?*, 306, 310. Frantz Fanon correctly points out that there is a racist exterior in Breton’s characterization of Césaire in this essay, a critical focus of Fanon’s own work that is meant to expose the systematization of racism, and not simply an attack on Breton, whom Fanon would have regarded as a true revolutionary. See *Black Skin / White Masks*, 17-63.

³² Aimé Césaire, “Interview with René Depestre,” in *Discours sur le colonialisme* 67-8.

³³ *Ibid.*

collectivity to the extent that it becomes a method which demystifies the imposed abstraction of the colonized other by the ideological and de-humanizing normalization of colonial rule. Disalienation, then, is a “dialectical subversion” of the condition of alienation, which as an effect opposes and antagonizes the reification of subjectivity. The theme of disalienation, in fact, becomes a central theme in the work of Fanon, whose *Black Skin/White Masks* engages the dialectical experience of black consciousness to inform a radical methodology in which the black other must confront the psycho-existential of decolonization and its consequences.

In this context, then, it would be useful to analyze Jean-Paul Sartre’s contention in his essay “Black Orpheus” that Négritude delineates a “revolutionary moment of immediacy,” which for Sartre determines the existential subjectivity of the colonized subject: “It is through having had some contact with white culture that [the poet’s] Blackness has passed from the immediacy of existence to the meditative state. But at the same time, he has more or less ceased to live his negritude.”³⁴ Thus, as an act against the systematic configurations of oppression that prevented the colonized other from constructing a context of liberation through language, the poetics of Négritude demystified cultural formations of colonization and exposed the ideological configurations of imperialist racism and mass exploitation. It is for this reason that the method of disalienation became a process of “rediscovery” to struggle against the deforming effects of colonialist racism and represented an oppositional praxis that Sartre argues was lacking after the decline of the Surrealist movement:

³⁴ Jean-Paul Sartre, “Black Orpheus,” in *What is Literature? and Other Essays* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1988), 298.

In Europe, Surrealism languishes and pales, rejected by those who could have given it a transfusion of their own blood. But at the very moment when it was losing contact with the Revolution, it is, in the Antilles, grafted onto another branch of the universal Revolution; it develops into an enormous somber flower. Césaire's originality lies in his having directed his powerful, concentrated anxiety as a Negro, as an oppressed, as a militant individual, into this world of the most destructive, free, and metaphysical poetry at the moment when Eluard and Aragon were failing to give political content to their verse.³⁵

Sartre distinguishes in Césaire's poetics of Négritude a type of *Surrealism beyond Surrealism*, as the European movement, in Sartre's estimates, had been defunct in terms of its commitment to social revolution. For Césaire, Surrealism represented the immediacy of subversion, since it activated the mechanism of destabilization through which Eurocentric determinations of cultural production materialize.

In this sense, Césaire's dedication to revolutionary communism and his joining of the PCF in 1945 marked his evolution as a pivotal figure in the transformation of the avant-garde, or rather as the inheritor of aesthetic and political vanguardism that began with the Surrealists' commitment to the expansion of its aesthetic base by associating it with revolutionary communism. The poetics of Négritude, in the form of aesthetic and political vanguardism, attacks the legitimacy of the Eurocentric socio-political domain in order to reconstruct colonized subjectivity within history, an attempt to annihilate the system of dehumanization that was systemically inbuilt in imperialist racism. In *Cahier du retour au pays natal*, we can see that the reconstituted "body" of colonized subjectivity, abstracted under the continual and obscuring presence of the totalizing effects of alienation, achieves a formative reconciliation with black collective identity,

³⁵ Ibid., 312-13. Sartre shared Césaire's concern with Stalinism, leaving the PCF after the invasion of Hungary, and subsequently rethought the dimensions of his Marxist commitment in his *Critique of Dialectical Reason*, trans. Alan Sheridan-Smith (London: Verso, 2004) volumes I&2.

and to this extent, a newly realized oppositional praxis to confront Westernized models of socio-cultural production:

oh friendly source of light
 oh fresh source of light
 those who have invented neither powder nor compass
 those who could harness neither steam nor electricity
 those who exploited neither the seas nor the sky but those
 without whom the earth would not be earth
 gibbosity [gibbosité] all the more beneficent as the bare earth even more earth
 silo where that which is earthiest about earth ferments and ripens
 my negritude is not a stone, its deafness hurled against the clamor of the day
 my negritude is not a leukoma [une taie] of dead liquid over the earth's dead eye
 my negritude is neither tower nor cathedral
 it takes root in the red flesh of the soil
 it takes root in the ardent flesh of the sky
 it breaks through the opaque prostration [troué l'accablement] with its upright
 patience (*Collected Poetry* 68-9)

Commenting on what he calls the “Epic of Negritude,” James Arnold writes, “At the outset the Martinican poet, whose literary culture is essentially European, cannot but use the elements of style provided by the colonizer. The language and literary forms at his disposal belong to the very tradition that he must attack in order to affirm the uniqueness of his own community.”³⁶ *Cahier*, as such, represents Césaire’s attempt to subvert the language of the colonizer to recreate a black collectivity that had been denied the concreteness of expression, a process which derives from the Surrealist concern with the intensification of collective activity and the subversion of reified forms of socio-cultural production.

What the above poem reveals, in fact, is the struggle that would later culminate in Césaire’s reorganization of the prospects for revolutionary communism, a conflict that for him would begin with the localized radicalization of social relations, particularly within the Caribbean Diaspora. For the “rootedness” that Césaire describes in the above poem

³⁶ Arnold, 166.

articulates the concern with locality, with nurturing a collectivity with the “flesh” and “soil” in order to illuminate its existentiality, the very expression that, in fact, negates the abstractness by which colonized subjectivity has been determined. Although not clearly located in the text above, the objective of *Cahier* is the reformulation of lost identity, which as a fortification against the systemization of imperialism and the legitimating ideologies of racism, sought to reconnect with the physicality of *pays natal* itself. Nascent in the subsequent confrontation with the overarching project of the Communist International, which for Césaire never had formulated an effective theory against imperialist racism, *Cahier*, in this sense, illuminates the ensuing conflict between localized and international cultural politics; for, on the one hand, the demand for reinstating a colonial identity, which by localizing its being in the materiality of community, challenges the obfuscation of the colonizer’s identification of otherness, or what can be thought of as a revolutionary process that validates decolonization itself. On the other hand, the Third International presupposed that the revolutionary process stemmed from the totalization of working-class social relations, which Césaire after 1956 believed would not transpire without sufficient analysis of the differences between the European proletariat and the liquefaction of the colonized other that continually took place on the fringes of Empire. Thus, the paradoxical character of Césaire’s decolonizing project here is that, while locating himself within the tradition of European aesthetic and political vanguardism, Césaire necessitates a denaturing process that opposes the structures associated with Westernized hegemony, yet within that pursuit to reconstitute colonized subjectivity, he must displace and subvert the very foundational elements upon which the process of revolt is built and through which he sought to rejoin the totalizing

system of revolutionary communism. Césaire’s intention, it seems, is to break out of what Pierre Bourdieu calls the “Imperialism of the universal,” a totalizing mechanism, which by draping itself “in the legitimacy of international bodies” can subsume and re-insert the “revolt against the reason which cannot be separated from the abuses of power which are armed or justified by reason,” a paradoxical dimension of Césaire’s Négritude that through the analysis of Fanon will reveal some important discrepancies between national culture and the global revolution.³⁷

For now, it is important to continue with an analysis of the ways in which aesthetic and political vanguardism is revealed through Césaire’s other major poetic works. In his next three full-length books of poetry, *Les Armes miraculeuses*, *Soleil cou coupe*, and *Corps perdu*, Césaire utilizes the poetics of Négritude to demystify the subjectivity of the colonized other through a process of semantic dissection, which Janis Pallister suggests draws attention to the sometimes irresolvable ambiguities of Césaire’s work after *Cahier*.³⁸ As Pallister rightly argues, it would be a mistake to assume that Césaire was simply employing the Surrealist renunciation of words in favor of objective chance, as that would diminish the intent to reinscribe the colonized other in the body of the text.³⁹ Gregson Davis’ suggestion that Césaire’s infusion of Surrealism into the poetics of Négritude is associated with “Magical Realism” also overlooks the structure of Césaire’s revolutionary project, especially since such the implicit elements of “Magical Realism” simply relegates Césaire’s socio-political agenda to a marginalized escapism, rather than recognizing it as an attempt to formulate an oppositional praxis within the

³⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, *Acts of Resistance: Against the Tyranny of the Market* (New York: The New York Press, 1998), 19-20.

³⁸ Pallister, 29.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 114.

aesthetic itself.⁴⁰ Instead of seeing Césaire’s utilization of Surrealism as a way of valorizing the psychic dimensions of “the marvelous,” it is evident that the desire to de-rationalize expression, an overall aesthetically predicted process, is manifested in Négritude as an ideological process in which the potentiality for building revolutionary consciousness on a wider scale was the definitive concern. The emphasis on exploration, then, is dramatized as a process of dissection, which in its dialectical inversion endeavors to demystify the colonized space within which it emerges and becomes visible. What this draws attention to is the fact that the poetics of Négritude, as E. San Juan Jr. realizes, is not abstraction, but a concrete process of “gaining consciousness,” a specific dimension of Surrealism that Césaire incorporates to materialize the corporeality of black collectivity:

Césaire’s identity evolved from a particularizing of Communism in the moment of Négritude. His conceptualization of Négritude sublated the inside and outside into a world-historical movement. But Négritude encompassed the solidarity of all black people in various parts of the world, not only in Africa; hence Césaire’s belief that the Harlem Renaissance, the insurrectionary past of Haiti, the revolutions in Algeria and Brazil and elsewhere, are all registered in his sensibility as part of a global ‘Negro Situation’.⁴¹

The poem “Batouque” from the collection *Les Armes miraculeuses* affords a look into the poetics of Négritude at its most concentrated. James Arnold argues that “Batouque” and other parts of *Les Armes miraculeuses* represent Césaire most thorough attempt to amalgamate Surrealism and his vision of Africa, a combination that reveals a “hybridized view” of the poetics of Négritude.⁴² Janis Pallister contends that “Batouque” is structured to “epitomize the oppression suffered by the colonized Martiniquais,” as it

⁴⁰ Davis, 73.

⁴¹ E. San Juan, Jr., “Aimé Césaire’s Insurrectionary Poetics,” in *Surrealism, Politics and Culture*, 226-246.

⁴² Arnold, 109.

calls for a rebellion through the ritualism of black Brazilian dances to which the term “batouque” itself refers.⁴³ While acknowledging Arnold’s characterization of the poem as being hybrid, since it seems to represent Césaire’s commitment both to the Surrealist vision and to non-Westernized social relations, such a term restricts the extent to which the dialectic of subversion is able to affect the autonomous movement that the poem exhibits and to which it responds politically. That is, in a somewhat differing version to what Pallister writes is a “call to arms” through dance, an act which wouldn’t seem to fulfill the potentiality of subversion that the terminology “Batouque” assumes, it is evident that the poem symbolizes an erasure of limitations, the “dialectical reversal” which informs Négritude itself. More specifically, the term “batouque” exists to the extent that it is non-locatable: it internalizes its own determinative referent and in the process dissolves spaces of definition, a movement which effectively inscribes a concreteness of subjectivity within and not external to the potentiality of revolt the text delineates:

Floodgate open, the words perforated in my saliva
 paler above the cities, resurface as cities
 O transparent cities mounted on yaks
 slow blood pissing the last memory into filigreed leaves
 the boulevard bruised comet brusque crossed bird
 strikes itself right in the sky
 drowned in arrows

 batouque
 once the world is naked and russet
 like a womb burned to a cinder by the great suns of love
 batouque
 once the world is without inquest
 a wondrous heart where the scenery of glances
 splintered to bits is embossed
 for the first time
 [un coeur merveilleux où s’imprime le décor

⁴³ Pallister, 3.

des regards brisés en éclats
pour la première fois]

once the attractions entrap the stars
once love and death are
a single coral snake resoldered [réssoudé] around a gemless arm
without soot
without defense
(*CP* 147)

Césaire's Surrealism reveals itself in the first section in its dissection of the layers of rationalized structure that would locate a lyrical presence in the poem, a process which simultaneously fleshes out the repetitive dimensions of "batouque" as a newly formed symbolic order through the residual encouragement of rebellious activity. It is by repeating the call for "batouque," in fact, that the medium for restructuring the framework of collectivity cultivates an oppositional praxis and thus an operative mode of being that the colonized other has been denied as a result of the fragmentary effects of exploitation:

having raped to the point of transparency the narrow sex of the dusk
the tall Negro [nègre] of the morning
to the depths of the cracked stone sea
takes on the hunger fruit of knotted cities
batouque
.....
batouque of the night without a seed pit [sans noyau]
of night without lips
cravatted [cravatée] by the jetsam of my nameless slave gallery
by my boomerang bird
I threw my eye into the rolling into the guinea of despair and death
All strangeness solidifies Easter Island Easter Island
All strangeness cut off from the cavalries of darkness
A fresh brook flows in my hand a Sargasso of melted screams
(*Ibid.*, 149, 151)

The transformation of spatial and figurative dimensions occurs through the non-locatable dimension of "batouque," which determines the extent to which collective response can

create the potentiality for political subversion and evocative upheaval: “Liberty my only pirate water of the New Year my only thirst/love my only sampan / we shall slip our fingers of laughter / between the icy teeth of the Sleeping Beauty” (Ibid., 153).

Similarly, in his next two collections of poetry, *Soleil Cou Coupe* (1948) and *Corps Perdu* (1950), Césaire sustains the tensely associative relation between his poetics of Negritude and his affiliation with revolutionary communism, which in his “Barbarity” takes on a concreteness of form:

Barbarity
of the rudimentary language
and our faces beautiful like the true surgical power
of negation

Barbarity
of the dead circulating in the veins of the earth
who at times come and break their heads against the walls of our ears
and the screams of revolt never heard
which turn in tune with musical tones
(Ibid., 213)

The poem begins with an incantation, “This is the word that sustains me / and smacks against my brass carcass,” a type of fortification of the “power of negation” that the poem builds. What it suggests, in fact, is that the barbarity of the colonized other is an ideological construct of imperialist racism used as a buttress for mass exploitation. Césaire here, as in *Cahier*, aims to create through his aesthetic paradigm a racial politics that can be utilized toward the negation of categories of reified meaning, categories that have nourished subjugation and have mystified the possibility of black collectivity. By redefining the word “barbarity,” a term which physically textualizes the system of imperial racism, Césaire denotes a politics of race that is akin to Fanon’s revolutionary call to abolish the “pre-existing meaning” of black identity: “It is not out of my bad

nigger's misery, my bad nigger's teeth, my bad nigger's hunger that I will shape a torch to burn down the world, but it is the torch that was already there, waiting for that turn of history.”⁴⁴

What is significant in the two poetic works outlined above is the erasure of what Antonio Negri calls the “time-as-measure” of reified socio-cultural production, particularly as it relates to the non-locatability of “batouque.” In this sense, Césaire and Zukofsky share a primary concern with eradicating the exteriors of capitalist time itself, the justification for mass exploitation. More specifically, if we consider that Césaire defines “batouque” as a beat, as a point of rhythmic temporality, it is able to confront the divisive objective of capitalist time-as-measure, which in its very structure specifies the latitudes of being itself. Thus, similar to the destruction of the “time-as-measure” that Antonio Negri defines as crucial to the overthrow of capitalist ideology and its structuralizing capacity, “batouque” represents the imaginative suspension of structured time by which exploitation becomes a normative mode of being, of subjectivity as an abstract dimension that is restructured according to the commonality of liberation, a materiality of praxis.⁴⁵ Furthermore, contrary to the process of elimination of the political dimension that characterizes Zukofsky's poetics, Césaire achieves a model for liberation that escapes the ideological configurations of imperialist temporality, which as a formalizing structure perpetuates the valorization of capitalist predomination. The non-locatability of “batouque,” as a time-beyond-measure that calls for collective action, is consistent with the Surrealist aesthetic of revolt, as it strikes at the rationalizing process of cultural production. Furthermore, as a theory that calls into question the hegemony of

⁴⁴ Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin/White Masks*, 134.

⁴⁵ See Antonio Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 225-261.

capitalist functionality, it is possible to understand Césaire's utilization of Marxism as a tool for decolonization and thus as a means of creating a future for liberation that would conclude in the ascendancy of global communism, beginning, in the current context, with the liberation of black collectivity. It is for this reason that the convergence of the poetics of Négritude and Marxism results in a convincing relationship that, in turn, will become a focal point in the analysis of Césaire's comparative position in the crisis of historical avant-garde, as it will also draw attention to the constituent developments in Césaire's struggle to materialize an operative dialectic of subversion in his own aesthetic and political vanguardism.

Négritude, Marxism, and the Political Implications of Decolonization

The politics of Négritude, what Césaire later calls "Négritude in action," engages the associative process of the aesthetic dimension, which requires the commitment to revolutionary communism to bind a methodology that puts Césaire in continual dialogue with the logic of vanguardism, as proposed in the present study. *Les Armes miraculeuses*, the focal point of which is the compelling movement of "batouque," represents the foundation of Césaire's effort to reconcile his poetics of Négritude and the universalism of Marxism, a relationship that transpired as a result of his relationship to the PCF that begins in 1945. Césaire's tenure in the PCF occurs at a point in which he was inducted into the Surrealist fold, a peculiar development since the group of Surrealists led by Breton had become frustrated by party centralism by the early 1930's. The *position politique* of Surrealism and its frequent battles with the PCF's line is important in this context, since it illustrates the incapacity of the historical avant-garde to

locate the praxis of opposition that could move beyond the aesthetic medium. At the same time, the circumstances by which Surrealism accommodated the potentiality for revolutionary praxis, the example of which is Breton's concern for the decolonizing struggles against the French empire, needs to be taken into consideration in the context of the aesthetic and political implications of Négritude and Césaire's blueprint for the consolidation of black collectivity. Such an analysis is not meant to suggest that Césaire's own break with the PCF simply mimicked the Surrealist disillusionment; on the contrary, what the current argument means to accentuate is that the incompleteness of the Surrealist project is expressed in the project of Négritude, a conscious internalization of the ensuing crisis that Césaire reveals in his post-PCF period.

What is also important to point out in the discussion of the politics of Négritude is that Césaire's discouragement with the PCF does not stem from the aesthetic disagreement that the Surrealist movement experienced. That is, the residual effects of the break between Surrealism and Communism are felt in Césaire's Négritude after 1956 to the extent that he refuted the party line on colonialism, not to mention its disinclination toward recognizing the transformation that had been occurring within the configurations of the revolutionary proletariat, especially in the colonies themselves. In fact, as the above analysis of *Les Armes miraculeuses* demonstrates, Césaire pursued Surrealism in his aesthetic work at the moment he was a deputy in the PCF. To a certain degree, then, it is possible to argue that the poetics of Négritude was successful in politicizing black collectivity through an aesthetic medium, as the subsequent influence Césaire had in literary and political circles in the Caribbean and on the African continent demonstrates. As James Arnold points out, however, by 1950 Césaire came to the conclusion that his

poetry had become a “hindrance” to his political work, a frustration out of which grew his major theoretical work, *Discourse on Colonialism*.⁴⁶ It is at this point in Césaire’s development that the aesthetic dimension of his politics, which originates out of the poetics of Négritude itself, is assigned an ancillary role within the overall context of his commitment to the wider expansion of revolutionary consciousness to subvert what he calls the “tyranny of a dehumanized bourgeoisie.” Thus it can be argued that the politicization of Négritude, a project that was originally meant to impel colonized subjectivity beyond the margins of the aesthetic dimension, contributed to Césaire’s realization of his subordination to Westernized configurations of liberation, a situation that facilitated a transition in his political life that culminated in his eventual break with the PCF.

The animosity between Marxism and Négritude, in this sense, has often been seen by critics as one that fundamentally emerged out of Césaire’s imminent political transformation. Susan Frutkin even suggests that Césaire’s “Letter to Maurice Thorez” is testament to the incompatibility of Communism and Négritude, since she argues Négritude “is far more a vital force for the world’s Black people.”⁴⁷ While it is veritable that Césaire’s alienation from and disappointment with the PCF occurred as a result of his inability to accept the subordination of decolonizing struggles to the universalism of Eurocentric idealism, Césaire’s intention was not to dismiss the principles of Communism, only to redirect its responsibilities toward the immediate needs of the colonized other. As Gregson Davis points out, such efforts became the foundation for Césaire’s *Parti Progressiste Martiniquais* in 1958 which focused on what has been

⁴⁶ Arnold, 178.

⁴⁷ Frutkin, *Aimé Césaire: Black Between Worlds*, 42.

labeled a “Third World Marxism” and the building of solidarity among black leaders in the Caribbean and on the African continent.⁴⁸ “In that sense,” writes Davis, “it did not so much mark a new intellectual tangent as bring memorably into the open [Césaire’s] fidelity to the prior cause of *négritude* and its corollary, the struggle to eradicate racism, which he saw as a deeply rooted problem.”⁴⁹ The emphasis on the particularities of black experience and the questioning of whether or not revolutionary consciousness rests with the proletariat or with the oppressed of the colonies is what distinguishes Césaire’s politics of *Négritude*, a point that James Arnold asserts puts Césaire in dialogue with Latin American and African brands of Marxism and theories of decolonization. Arnold argues that *Négritude* and Marxism are interconnected to the degree that the latter allows for a more thorough analysis of the politics of race and the establishment of a reformist socialism that would cater to the potentiality for sustaining popular decolonizing movements, as the independence of Guinea led by Césaire’s friend Sekou Touré revealed. As Arnold writes, “The insistence on recognizing the particular nature and needs of societies in what has since come to be called the Third World assures Césaire a modest place among those who have gradually transformed Marxist theory.”⁵⁰

However, Arnold is somewhat mistaken in suggesting that Césaire’s ultimate break is a result of the French Communist Party’s adoption of socialist realism as an official line. As much as Césaire disagreed with sole usage of socialist realism, the cultural position of Césaire’s aesthetics, as it especially related to the poetics of *Négritude*, presupposed enough of a revolutionary approach that such a conflict would

⁴⁸ Davis, 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid.

⁵⁰ Arnold, 46, 171.

not have given cause for his resignation, in contrast to what Breton and his faction of the Surrealists had experienced. Rather, the practicality of Césaire's Marxism, which begins in *Discourse on Colonialism*, represents, thematically at least, an assertion of localized resistance as a formula that articulates the unfolding of a voice for the colonized other, a challenge both to the structural determinant of colonization and to the hegemony of Westernized Communism. The alternative perspective that Césaire offered is similar to the vernacular of Mao Tse-tung's inclusive availability of Marxism which categorically shaped a movement that concretized the ambiguities of Marxist-Leninism. Commenting on Chinese Marxism, Arif Dirlik writes, "Politically, it pointed the way to the possibility of a genuinely universal Marxism in its insistence that a Marxism that refused to incorporate local voices into its structure reintroduced in a radical form the Eurocentric hegemony that was built into its historical origins."⁵¹ The function of the politics of Négritude was designed to assume responsibility for the "reinsertion" of the colonized other into the milieu of a revolutionary praxis that focused on the specialized needs of localized struggle. It is for this reason that the affinity with Maoism, as Dirlik's interpretation claims, puts Césaire's Third World Marxism in a synecdochic relationship to the overall objectives of Western Marxism, as an embodiment on a pragmatic level of the universal significations of the total overthrow of capitalist hegemony. The identification with localized struggle is what also leads E. San Juan, Jr. to label the politics of Négritude an "insurrectionary poetics" that "does not omit, elide or forget the

⁵¹ Arif Dirlik, "Mao Zedong and 'Chinese Marxism,'" in *Marxism Beyond Marxism*, ed. Saree Makdisi, Cesare Casarino, and Rebecca E. Karl (New York: Routledge, 1996), 144. There is no evidence to suggest that Césaire favored Maoism over Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, though it is clear in the context of his movement toward the formation of a national culture after 1956 that Césaire sought to displace the Eurocentric universality of Communism in the construction of a revolutionary discourse similar to the Maoist vernacular. See especially Mao Tse-tung, "The Role of the Chinese Communist Party in the National War," in *Selected Works of Mao Tse-tung* (New York: Harper & Row Publishers, 1970), 160-166.

catalyzing power of the subaltern peoples of colour without which revolution in the ‘first world’ is impossible.”⁵²

The politics of Négritude for Césaire, then, is a process that both negotiates and reforms the institutional organization Westernized thought as a means of interiorizing struggles for decolonization, an emergent praxis that is designed to empower the colonized other within a concretized framework of anti-imperialist collectivity. The political structure of Négritude dismantles the utopianism of the historical avant-garde by shifting the emphasis from form to a praxis that, on the aesthetic level, presents a new means of measuring concrete social relations that have not been given a fixed and objective reality within the context of human history. Négritude thus subjects the mechanisms of revolt inherent in the structure of avant-garde production to a rigorous interrogation, one that challenges the institutionalization of its originality and significance. The inconsistent relation between the aesthetic and political elements of the historical avant-garde becomes the very operating mode by which Négritude is able to postulate an alternative vision to the European model, which as an effect characterizes the expressive dimensions of the neo-avant-garde itself. What becomes clear, then, is that the conceptual apparatus of Négritude is not an external development to the European model, even though it attempts to entrench a permanent figure of resistance as a methodological approach to decolonization; rather, in order for it to exist as a radical critique of European cultural models, Négritude must perpetually exist at the center of domination, an attribute of its construction that demonstrates its preoccupation with the development of national culture as a bulwark to imperialist doctrine.

⁵² E. San Juan, Jr., “Aimé Césaire’s Insurrectionary Poetics,” 245.

Furthermore, it is for his reason that Négritude cannot simply be understood as an antithesis to the historical avant-garde, an analysis which would reconstruct a pre-colonial African “spirituality” that informed newly situated value systems exterior to Eurocentric cultural production. Instead, Césaire’s synthetic concept of Négritude consisted of a participatory approach that aimed to establish a concretized rationale for black collectivity as a continuity of resistance that was separated from Eurocentric visions of liberation. His efforts to designate an oppositional praxis that addressed the problems relative to black identity and the colonial situation became the foundation of his major essay of the period, “Culture et colonization,” delivered at the First Congress of Negro Writers and Artists in 1956. The basis of his argument is that the imposition of civilization, a term that has been juxtaposed through European dominance, has divested the colonized other the “particularism” of cultural identity, what he labels “cultural anarchy”:

This can mean only one thing; namely, that a political and social system that suppresses the self-determination of a people thereby kills the creative power of that people. Or, what amounts to the same thing: wherever colonialism has existed, whole peoples have been deprived of their culture, deprived of all culture.... Wherever European colonization has occurred, the introduction of an economy based on money has led to the destruction or weakening of traditional links, the break-up of the social and economic structure of the community.... When a member of a colonized people makes this kind of remark, European intellectuals tend to reproach him with ingratitude and to remind him complacently of what the world owes Europe.⁵³

This speech is often put in the context of Césaire’s preface to Daniel Guérin’s *Les Antilles décolonisées* in which he argues that the immediate rise of social consciousness would be concretized through the evolution of national identities that would not only

⁵³ Aimé Césaire, “Culture and Colonization,” in *The Short Century: Independence and Liberation Movements in Africa, 1945-1994*, ed. Chinua Achebe and Okwui Enwezor (New York: Prestel, 2001), 420.

address the particularisms of each culture, but also widen the possibility of collective action.⁵⁴ Frutkin argues that both works suggest Césaire's final replacement of Marxism with a commitment to Négritude, as the former "could only be valid to the degree that it was applicable to the colonial situation."⁵⁵ For Frutkin, Césaire's call for a national consciousness is equivalent to the abandonment of his initial commitment to revolutionary communism, a characterization which fails to recognize the discourse of Marxism which Césaire sought to infuse in the structure of Négritude. On the contrary, what is evident is that the inherent reformism of his post-1956 Négritude can be understood within the context of his overall critique of European aesthetic and political vanguardism, which consigned the liberating possibilities of localized struggles for decolonization under the totalizing line of the PCF itself. Césaire's commitment to Négritude, which for him represented the concretization of an oppositional praxis, allowed him to disseminate the tools for liberation on a wider scale, an act that incorporates rather than imposes the paradigms of European aesthetic and political vanguardism to the extent that it is subsumed by a newly formed indigenous heritage beyond the framework of colonization:

A process of naturalization, ascribable to the dialectic of *having*, has taken place. Foreign elements have become mine, have passed into my being because I can dispose of them, because I can organize them within my universe, because I can bend them to my uses, because they are at my disposal, not I at theirs. It is precisely this operation that is denied to the colonized people.

Wherever colonization occurs, native culture begins to wither. And among the ruins there springs up not a culture, but a kind of subculture, a subculture that, because it is condemned to remain marginal as regards the European culture and to the province of a small group, an "elite," living in artificial conditions and deprived of life-giving contact with the masses and with popular culture, is thus prevented from blossoming into a true culture.⁵⁶

⁵⁴ Pallister, 104.

⁵⁵ Frutkin, 35.

⁵⁶ Césaire, "Culture and Colonization," 433.

By exploiting the features of the historical avant-garde, Césaire simultaneously removes the boundaries that had determined the framework of colonial liberation and reinscribes the potentiality of aesthetic emancipation in the form and content of black collectivity. The distance that is apparent between the explorative characteristics of Négritude and its reassessment of European aesthetic and political vanguardism proves to be more complex than what has been deemed his “break” with revolutionary communism. That is, the politics of Négritude that Césaire “chooses” after 1956 seems to provide a vehicle for discussing the estrangement of the historical avant-garde from a truly unique oppositional praxis that reappropriates the materialist construction of revolutionary subversion. The question of whether or not the historical avant-garde can lay claim to the knowledge and praxis of revolution has occupied Marxist theory since the Realism versus Modernism debates of the 1920’s and 30’s. The emphasis here, on the contrary, is the comparison between the critical effects of Négritude and what Fredric Jameson calls the overall “crisis of historicity” that has consumed Marxist critical reflections on aesthetic agencies.⁵⁷ The work of Herbert Marcuse is the most relevant in this context, since it addresses specifically the ideological effects of the historical avant-garde and its intended articulation in the era of late capitalism in which social relations began to be subjected to corporate centralization on a multinational scale. The provocation of a new stage of capitalist development becomes evident in the dynamic of subsumption that neutralizes the effect of the avant-garde cultural politics and its promise of liberation, a corollary to

⁵⁷ Fredric Jameson, “Reflections in Conclusion,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 198.

the crisis that is thematized in the materialization of postmodernism and a neo-avant-garde movement to which the politics of Négritude is inherently linked.

Marcuse enters the Marxist debate about the conditions of aesthetic production by discussing the old Left's critique of Modernist aesthetics, specifically the differing perceptions of Lukács and Brecht. Writing in his *Counterrevolution and Revolt*, he points out the inevitable conflict between the aesthetic and political objectives of the historical avant-garde, as it struggles to reformulate its antagonism to the historical conditions of advanced capitalism:

The relation between art and revolution is a unity of opposites, an antagonistic unity. Art obeys a necessity, and has a freedom which is its own—not those of the revolution. Art and revolution are united in “changing the world”—liberation. But in its practice, art does not abandon its own exigencies and does not quit its own dimension: it remains non-operational. In art, the political goal appears only in the transfiguration which is the aesthetic form. The revolution may well be absent from the oeuvre even while the artist himself is “engaged,” is a revolutionary.⁵⁸

For Marcuse the concrete possibility offered by the aesthetic dimension is the illusion (Schein) it offers to political praxis, to the constituents of liberation itself. And yet cultural production of historical avant-garde is rendered inoperative by its dissociation from a revolutionary class that has been abstracted by the “counterrevolutionary organization of suppression,” what in the current context is relevant to the effects of capitalist subsumption on a global scale. The connection between Marcuse's position and Césaire's critique of the historical avant-garde is the acknowledgment that the validity of finding in the elitism of the avant-garde position a voice with which to confront the hegemony of capitalist subsumption and its particular configurations in social reality requires a means of sustaining “the subversive potential of art... in which

⁵⁸ Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1972), 105.

alone the radical force of art becomes communicable.”⁵⁹ It can be argued, then, that the politics of Négritude is reminiscent of Lukács’ call for critical realism to answer the process of capitalist reification that produces a rift between art and social life. As Lukács writes in his response to Ernst Bloch, “Whether a writer really belongs to the ranks of the avant-garde is something that only history can reveal, for only after the passage of time will it become apparent whether he has perceived significant qualities, trends, and the social functions of individual human types, and has given them effective and lasting form.”⁶⁰ In this sense it is possible to locate in the ideological representation of Négritude a similar polemic against the historical avant-garde, one that may also reduce the conceptual crisis between Négritude and the European model of liberation to the question of autonomy.

Such an assumption, however, denies the originality of Négritude in its pursuit of an equality of representation that realizes the potentiality of liberation in its form and content. What should become consistently evident is the tension that is produced by the seemingly irreconcilable categories of aesthetic autonomy and political engagement become reaffirmed in the transitional character of Négritude—a development that not only illustrates the crisis of the avant-garde and its re-emergence in the neo-avant-garde and in its various forms, but also the ways in which it is disarmed by the subsumptive influence of late capitalism itself. To this extent, both Césaire and Zukofsky expose the parameters of the neo-avant-garde reaction to vanguardism, especially in their conscious reformation of a revolutionary discourse that focused on the particularities of experience, rather than the universal probability of a working-class revolution that would result in the

⁵⁹ Ibid., 110.

⁶⁰ Georg Lukács, “Realism in the Balance,” in *Aesthetics and Politics*, 48.

strengthening of the proletariat as the vanguard class. At the same time, in the case of Césaire, such an analysis necessitates the inclusion of Franz Fanon's critique of Négritude as a means of concluding whether or not Césaire is able to sustain the transformative effects of his aesthetic and political paradigm in the context of late capitalism and the apparatus of subsumption that is at the core of neo-avant-garde cultural production, an analysis that will also uncover some the dialectical movement of the neo-avant-garde that distinguishes the historicity of its struggle for recognition.

Beyond the Vanguard: Frantz Fanon and the Critique of Négritude

It is important to outline briefly Fanon's critique of Négritude in this context, for Fanon's critique will allow for a more thorough interpretation of Négritude's relationship to the process by which the structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism became subjected to a crisis that could be resolved only in the dialectical re-structuralization of the neo-avant-garde, a point that will be elucidated fully in the conclusion to the present study. The proposition here is that, in order for the revolutionary specificities of Césaire's Négritude to be formed into a living praxis, it was imperative that a national project be developed to destabilize the reformist impasse of the black intellectual who has not sought to cultivate a nativism separate from the European derivative, a position that Fanon brings to the fore into his work. The incompleteness of Césaire's Négritude, then, is not a result of his lack of interest in decolonization, for the politics of Négritude was fundamental in constructing a confrontational theoretical exemplar for liberation, as it was created as an ideology of otherness that could be utilized in the formation of a critique of what Fanon refers to as "The White Gaze," or rather the totalizing mechanism by which black

subjectivity is immersed in the Eurocentricism of cultural production. The importance of Négritude for Fanon here is that it initializes a confrontation with the enclosing mechanism of the white gaze, the hegemonic capability of Eurocentric definitions of subjectivity itself, and it is for this reason that Fanon responds to the “cultural imposition” of which colonized subjectivity has been defined.⁶¹ For Gary Wilder, Négritude created an ideology of Africanness “as a standpoint from which to critique the violent implications of European modernity” and thus “to counter the evolutionary argument” of African culture that had been determined by European scholars, a reason, in fact, why Fanon criticizes Sartre’s interpretation of Négritude, despite the fact that the intention was to legitimate the powerful mechanism of its ideological position.⁶²

On the contrary, it is the extent to which the neo-avant-garde character of Césaire’s Négritude, which proposed to channel Western Marxism into decolonization, excludes the operation of native identification that could be utilized for insurrection and as a basis for subverting ideological forms of imperialist racism, thus uncovering its fundamental contradictions into which the black intellectual of Négritude is coerced. This becomes paramount for Fanon, as he attempts to contradict the imposed authority of colonial ideology in his “Decolonization and Independence”:

The oppressed peoples know today that national liberation is part of the process of historic development but they also know this liberation must be the work of the oppressed people.... It is the colonial people who must liberate themselves from colonialist domination.... True liberation is not that pseudo-independence in which ministers having a limited responsibility hobnob with an economy dominated by the colonial pact.... Liberation is the total destruction of the colonial system, from the pre-eminence of the language of the oppressor and

⁶¹ See Robert Bernasconi, “The Assumption of Negritude”: Aimé Césaire, Frantz Fanon, and the Vicious Circle of Racial Politics,” *Parallax* 8, no. 2 (2002): 69-83 for analysis of Fanon’s critique of the “White Gaze.”

⁶² Gary Wilder, “Race, Reason, Impasse: Césaire, Fanon, and the Legacy of Emancipation,” 48.

“departmentalization,” to the customs union that in reality maintains the former colonized in the meshes of culture, of the fashion, and of the images of the colonialist.⁶³

Nigel Gibson argues that Fanon’s critique of Négritude begins with his emphasis on the “bourgeois individualism” that the black intellectual inherits from colonialism, which must be shed in order for cultural identification to be integrated in the struggle for liberation.⁶⁴ Fanon distinguishes between the political objectives of Négritude, which he believed should be employed to annihilate colonialist ideology, and the failure that results from the black intellectual’s contradictory reliance on European models of revolutionary confrontation.⁶⁵ It is the emphasis on developing a national culture that Fanon sees as the project of the black intellectual, a project that facilitates the building of patterns of revolt:

While at the beginning the native intellectual used to produce his work to be read exclusively by the oppressor, whether with the intention of charming him or of denouncing him through ethnic or subjective means, now the native writer progressively takes on the habit of addressing his own people. It is only from that moment that we can speak of a national literature.... This may be properly called a literature of combat, in the sense that calls on the whole people to fight for their existence as a nation. It is a literature of combat, because it moulds the national consciousness, giving it form and contours and flinging open before it new and boundless horizons; it is a literature of combat because it assumes responsibility, and because it is the will to liberty expressed in terms of time and space.⁶⁶

For David Hanley, Fanon’s revolutionary conceptualization of national culture is contingent on the interiority of the localized struggle, which in relation to the ideological tools needed for such a process, situates Négritude at the core development of that conflict.⁶⁷ The ideology of “blackness” by which Négritude revolted against the hegemony of the white gaze, then, fostered a “political consciousness and the will to

⁶³ Frantz Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, trans. Haakon Chevalier (New York: Grove Press, 1988), 105.

⁶⁴ Nigel Gibson, *Fanon: The Postcolonial Imagination* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2003), 82.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, 81.

⁶⁶ Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, 240.

⁶⁷ David Hanley, “Frantz Fanon—Revolutionary Nationalist?,” *Political Studies* 24, no. 2 (1976): 122.

mobilize at the level of the nation,” a point which for Fanon is central to the concept of national consciousness and the uses of its tenets for the purposes of revolutionary action.⁶⁸ Furthermore, it is within the interior spaces of national culture, in fact, that revolutionary action will move beyond spontaneity, which Fanon, like Lenin, saw as a necessary progression toward revolutionary praxis, especially in relation to the immediacy of alleviating the conditions of the suffering peasantry, yet also as a contradictory process in its relation to the totalizing objectives of national struggle.⁶⁹ The inherent conflict between national and international revolution, then, has to do with the constitution of the revolutionary organization, which in the case of decolonization lacked the essential characteristics of the European proletariat and thus necessitated an alternative ideological dialogue through which the movement toward total liberation could be achieved, which for Césaire and Fanon revealed itself, at first, in the cultural ideology of Négritude.

Moreover, it is nationalism rather than national culture that needs to be obliterated, which Lenin had been arguing as early as 1914, and yet still the national struggle normally found itself in opposition to the predominant position of the Communist International.⁷⁰ As Michael Löwy explains, the divergence between international revolution and the national struggle can be recognized in relation to its organizational type, a clarification that unveils the alleviating mechanism of national liberation versus the projection towards the totality of revolution:

Although Marxism is as such opposed to nationalist ideology, it must clearly distinguish between the nationalism of *the oppressors and the nationalism of the*

⁶⁸ Ibid, 123.

⁶⁹ Ibid. For more on Fanon’s analysis of spontaneity, see the *Wretched of the Earth*, 107-148.

⁷⁰ See Lenin, *Collected Works*, V. 20 for his writings on the national question.

oppressed. It has to support all struggles for national liberation of for oppressed nations' right to self-determination, even if their ideology... is nationalist.... By making the capital distinction between nationalism of the oppressed and of the oppressor, socialist internationalists do not have to adhere to the former. But they perceive its contradictory nature: its emancipatory dimension as a rebellion against unjust oppression and its limits as a particularistic ideology. It is therefore logical that all truly social revolutionary movements in an oppressed nation necessarily put national liberation at the centre of their struggle, while linking it to the social emancipation from capitalist exploitation.⁷¹

For Edward Said, in slight contrast, Fanon's shift from "national independence to the theoretical domain of liberation" begins with the elaboration of the black intellectual's self-identification with his native culture, an act which in turn confirms Fanon's rigorous critique of imperialism itself.⁷² The potential effect of national liberation "leads the nation to play its part on the stage of history," the "international dimension" that results from the associative expression of conflict that the narrative of combat contributes to the external progression of internal struggle.⁷³ Here is evidenced the dialectical movement of Fanon's thought, which is often connected to nationalism, rather than to a Marxist-based critique of imperialist ideologies.⁷⁴ This does not mean that Fanon intended to adopt Marxism as a tool for decolonizing struggles, since such a move would not be adequate in overcoming racism to which the black intellectual responded on a psychologically embedded level. In fact, to continue with Said's interpretation, it becomes clear that Fanon seeks to critique Western Marxism's weakness on the question of imperialism; that is, Fanon and other "Third World" Marxist theorists were able to critique Empire from within the colonies, rather than from an external position that, for Fanon, disallowed a

⁷¹ Michael Löwy, *Fatherland or Mother Earth? Essays on the National Question* (London: Pluto Press, 1998), 58-9.

⁷² Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York: Vintage, 1994), 268.

⁷³ Fanon, *Ibid.*, 247.

⁷⁴ For a thorough analysis of Fanon's dialectical thought, see Ato Sekyi-Otu, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1996).

genuinely programmatic model for colonial liberation. It is for this reason, furthermore, that the applicability of such a program sought to fortify an interior decolonizing model through the abolishment of hybrid frameworks, which of course meant excluding an outside influence of party politics, as Said observes:

That there was a conscious attempt not only to write history saturated in, taking maximum account of, the struggle between imperial Europe and the peripheries, but to write it in terms of subject matter and of treatment or method, from the standpoint of and as part of the struggle against imperial domination.... If this meant, as it usually did, adopting a partisan position of advocacy, then so be it; it was impossible to write of liberation and nationalism, however allusively, without also declaring oneself for or against them.⁷⁵

By locating Fanon's critique of Négritude within the framework of the Marxist critique of postmodern hegemony, it is possible to "liberate" interpretations that often restrict the dimensions of Césaire's development to an either-or position, one that oddly has an affinity with Said's interpretation above. More specifically, the "failure" of Négritude is an effect of Fanon's radicalization of its premises, a process which was perhaps a necessary reaction to the violent repression against decolonization he saw in Algeria. It is evident that the localization of struggle, which begins with the abolishment of colonial influence in favor of a cultural nationalism, represented Fanon's subjective solution to the structuring process by which Empire internalizes its own crises, an interpretation which is at the core of his critique of Césaire's Négritude and its reformist framework. For what is revealed is the ways in which the restructuring of revolutionary cultural politics sheds light upon its relation to the overarching problematic of aesthetic and political vanguardism after 1956 and the ways in which Césaire's move from the proletarian revolution associated with Communism to national liberation, which

⁷⁵ Said, 279.

depended upon the ideology of Négritude and its localizing capabilities. More specifically, as an expression of the crisis of the historical avant-garde agenda that reveals itself in a critique of the Eurocentric authority of cultural production, an inquiry into the objectives of Césaire's Négritude needs to be reconsidered in relation to the critical responses that were sparked by the political institutionalization of Négritude in the form of a neo-avant-gardism that emerged in decolonizing societies in the Caribbean and on the African continent, one that for Fanon is intimately ascribed to the character of reformism that distinguishes Césaire's own dissatisfaction with the utopian magnitude of the Communist International. For what should be emphasized here is that the crisis in representation of vanguardism is categorically related to the critique of Négritude only to the extent that they both fall victim to the hegemonic paradigms of late capitalist subsumption; that is, in contrast to the nihilism of postmodernist regression, which to a certain extent characterizes the Zukofskian line of the neo-avant-garde, the discontinuity of Négritude's response became the basis for constructing decolonization as an alternative to European centralism, one that challenges the subsumptive effects of late capitalism only by localizing its revolutionary program in the reformist project of national culture. Specifically, Négritude is exposed as a form of perpetual negotiation, one that as a concrete negation of Eurocentric influence must continue to build itself through the predicament of crisis that structures the totalizing configuration of postmodern social relations. Négritude's failure, then, lies in its inability to recognize the historicity of late capitalist subsumption and its enduring project to globalize itself, its inability, that is, to reexamine itself in relation to what exists external to the localization of struggle. And yet it is also possible, for this reason, that the neo-avant-garde

assimilation in Césaire's *Négritude* is rendered inadequate in the context of late capitalism; for the ultimate contention of this chapter has been utilized to unveil the dialectical process of subsumption that resides within the structure of late capitalism as it inscribes itself in real time in anti-imperialist movements, thus diffusing their intended objective of total subversion.

And yet, as Gary Wilder writes, "Rather than dismiss Césaire and Fanon for failing to resolve the predicament of colonial racism, we need to recognize the way that their work illuminates that predicament, as well as the way it bequeaths to us alternatives for "working through it politically."⁷⁶ It is for this reason that the mechanism of confrontation that *Négritude* in its attempt to subvert and expose the wide-ranging effects of racism, a continuing necessity in the legitimizing strategies of contemporary neo-imperialist formations, needs to be "liberated" further so that the qualitative response of its legacy may be utilized effectively in future models against the incursion of the seemingly intractable hegemony of late capitalist subsumption. For Césaire and Fanon, that is, it is systemic racism, the institutionalization and formalization of its praxis that obscures colonized social relations and thus needs to be confronted and abolished prior to the social revolution, or rather as a pre-condition for the "revolution from below," as Fanon writes:

Racism stares one in the face for it so happens that it belongs in a characteristic whole: that of the shameless exploitation of one group of men by another which has reached a higher stage of technical development. This is why military and economic oppression generally proceeds, makes possible, and legitimizes racism.

⁷⁶ Wilder, 56-7.

*The habit of considering racism as a mental quirk, as a psychological flaw, must be abandoned.*⁷⁷

Furthermore, what is also evident in Césaire's decolonizing project is the extent to which its rupturing effects created a divergence in the dialectical project of aesthetic and political vanguardism, one that signals a crisis in the reproduction of a revolutionary praxis for art after 1956. For, on the one hand, the neo-vanguard within Western capitalism, reflects the "loss" of the will-to-power of which radical modernism was designed, which in other terms perpetuates the recognition of the localized capability of the aesthetic dimension as the source for political confrontation, what can be characterized as the decentralization of vanguard aesthetics in its most extreme form.

On the other hand, this localization of a revolutionary program for art initiated the necessary mechanism for the decolonizing mission, one which for Césaire became rooted in the cultural refoundation of which Négritude is designed in its structural reinscription of aesthetic and political vanguardism, yet one that had little chance of creating a global context for revolutionary praxis, contrary to what he saw as at the very core of his project. For Ato Sekyi-Otu, the contradictions of postcoloniality and its process of "disassembling particularism" are interconnected with the absolutism of Westernized notions of subjectivity, and thus through a dialectical analysis it is possible to render a more comprehensive "reading" of post-colonized cultural formations, a mechanism that is intrinsic to Fanonian thought itself.⁷⁸ Along the same lines, the predicament of the neo-avant-garde in its conscious marginalization from totalizing structures associated with the cultural politics of modernity, especially the objectives of the Communist International, is simultaneously re-conditioned by the paradoxical forces by which the

⁷⁷ Fanon, *Toward the African Revolution*, 37-8; italics mine.

⁷⁸ Ato Sekyi-Out, *Fanon's Dialectic of Experience*, 22.

structure of historical vanguardism had been determined, a crisis that can be explored only in relation to the historical junctures between late capitalism and the reproductive capabilities of the neo-avant-garde, as the final chapter will attempt to do.

5

Late Capitalism and the Historical Context of the Neo-Avant-Garde

The above assessment of aesthetic and political vanguardism has attempted to demonstrate the extent to which the mechanism of revolt through which the historical avant-garde manufactured its resistance to bourgeois cultural hegemony was simultaneously displaced by the historical contingency of the revolution-as-signifier that became liberated as a result of the Bolshevik Revolution, which signified a determining challenge to the limitations of revolutionary art itself. It is evident, then, that the years 1917-1956 have provided a historical context for analyzing the ideological structure of systems of representation through which the effects of aesthetic and political vanguardism could be readily seen not only through the lens of Marxist aesthetics, an intentional limitation that has been placed on its structuration for purposes of definition, but also in relation to recognized theories of modernist cultural politics and the historical avant-garde.

In this sense, the significance of the present study can be illustrated according to the very problematic of which vanguardism is composed; that is, the dialectical form of vanguardism, which by unifying aesthetic and political configurations simultaneously posits a crisis in the historical field of revolutionary praxis, a crisis which in the context of the ever-confining non-exteriority of late capitalist postmodernity calls attention to some of the difficulties in expanding the argument into a discussion of neo-vanguardism in the post-War era, particularity after 1956. If the project of the aesthetic and political

vanguard failed to realize the rupturing capabilities that would enable social revolution to transpire, a further argument can be made to augment the extent to which the residual structure of vanguardist revolutionary art, including that which correlates the dialectics of postcoloniality as well, became infected by the dominant influence of postmodernity, thus forcing neo-vanguardism either into a constant withdrawal from social praxis, as Zukofsky's later work demonstrates, or into the ever-shifting position of localized resistance. In other words, if it can be argued that postmodernist art mechanically surrenders to the reifying effects of late capitalist subsumption, which is able, through a process of adaptability, emasculate attempts to subvert its hegemony by sustaining itself as social representation, the displacement that is twisted by the mystifying influence of late capitalist subsumption is due to the synthetic command of influence it materializes in its engagement with aesthetic space, a process that Antonio Negri argues is intrinsic to the properties of postmodernism and its ability to organize crises materially.¹ The decentralization process of postmodernity, then, can be reformulated according to the principles of internalization, or what can be thought of as the mechanism of real subsumption whose innovation of control is able to reverse the performance of subversion that is crucial to the structure of aesthetic and political vanguardism, acts which reveal themselves in postmodern cultural production in the *illusion* of subversion. This is not to deny totally the mechanism of subversion in postmodern art, but rather an attempt to situate the predicament that neo-vanguardism finds itself in relation to the postulation of an alternative space in which paradigms of resistance are meant to redeem the overarching dialectics of revolutionary art in the hope of surpassing "absorption" itself.

¹ See Antonio Negri, *The Politics of Subversion* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2005), 140-152.

An analysis of Zukofsky's later poetics will form some important distinctions between postmodern decentralization and the project of neo-vanguardism. Similar to the configurations of postmodernist art in the post-War period, it is evident that Zukofsky sought to materialize a revolutionary praxis within the confines of late capitalist subsumption, albeit one that reverted to the haven of domesticity. Marine Parsons accurately points out that an understanding of the complexity and obscurity of Zukofsky's later work, particularly the imposing "A"-24, should begin with Cecelia Zukofsky's collaborative involvement in its development, as Parson notes: "A"-24 is less a composition than a process of "de-composition, of dis-creation": the movement is a conscious fragmentation of Louis Zukofsky's work until the late 1960's, set to the "Harpichord Pieces" of Handel, the musical "voice" of the sections.² Aesthetically speaking, "A"-24 reflects the structural transformation of Zukofskean poetics in which systems of meaning are simultaneously posited and obliterated within conceptual mechanisms that repudiate a constancy of representation, an anti-aesthetic that has been assimilated into numerous cultural paradigms of American postmodernism.³ Parsons reveals the similarity between Zukofsky's later poetics and Cecelia's de-composition in the following way: "Cecelia Zukofsky achieves temporally what her husband achieves spatially, compactly; she accomplishes in the larger field of this movement what Zukofsky strives for in the moment of the word. And in so doing, she lifts to the surface

² Marine Parsons, "A More Capricious Shoulder: "A"-24, Nonsense, and the Burden of Meaning," in *Upper Limit Music: The Writing of Louis Zukofsky*, 240.

³ See *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (New York: The New Press, 1998), and Donald Kuspit, *The Cult of the Avant-Garde Artist*, 1-28.

the tenuous and furtive chaos of his work.”⁴ In the “Fugues” section (Act II Scene 4), it is possible to see the ways in which decentralization occurs:

T: each incident of his life a parable of his son forsaking the Mother to go about
His Father’s business
D: ...death, you numberless infinities / Of souls, and to your scattered bodies go.
S: anxious to go on writing the story that in the dark hours did not let me rest.
P: Naturata- / Nature as created / He who creates / Is a mode of these inertial /
systems. (“A”-24 734-35)

The “P” line, a reiteration of Spinoza’s *Ethics*, encompasses the entirety of this section: it exists, that is, as a transgression in which the sacrificial “death” (castration) of the “He who creates” by the female other of “Nature” signifies a patriarchal disfigurement that is homogenized into poetic experience. The continuity of that experience in the text, then, is realized as a result of the degeneration toward knowable spaces, ones which in their abandonment of overarching problematic of revolutionary praxis, attempt to restructure itself as aesthetic transgression, symbolized by the movement from masculine to feminine manipulation.

To reformulate the anti-aesthetic of postmodernist subversion within the current argument, it can be argued that the de-construction of Zukofsky’s work by Cecelia manifests itself as an act of concession and recognition: by accepting his “emasculatation,” Zukofsky sacrifices his dominance as Father/poet, the primary component of the revolutionary dialectics that informed his earlier work, and in so doing, relinquishes his dominance to Cecelia, a process of *feminization* that radically modifies the aesthetic reproduction in his poetics. Specifically, its subordination of the Father/poet dominance reconstitutes that authorial position within a newly formed mechanism of subversion, a mechanism that challenges the hegemony of control and which is used within

⁴ Parsons, 239.

postmodernist art in order to establish the instinctual desire for liberation, or what here can be described as a newly reinscribed consciousness that somehow will render late capitalist subsumption inoperative. On the contrary, the illusion of transcendence is what determines the reproduction of postmodernist art, thus subjecting the potentiality toward revolt which Zukofsky's later poetics struggles to the disformulation of reification, the effects of late capitalist subsumption, and which Donald Kuspit argues is at the core of postmodernism itself:

The rise of postmodernism signals, among other things, that art has lost its will, one might say its will to heal its audience (which may be incurable). It no longer engages the audience's deepest needs, and in fact has no sense of its audience's existence. It makes no investment in the audience's experience. It does not attempt to transmute its audience's values, enhance its strengths and purge its weaknesses, or rejuvenate its audience by restoring its will to live. It exploits its audience's susceptibility to art, its unconscious hope for transfiguration by art, but offers little in return.... The only existence it believes in is its own. It exists for itself, not for others.⁵

Zukofsky's turn toward what can be labeled an anti-modernism, then, reveals the overall situation of cultural production within postmodernity, particular in the formation of neo-vanguardism and its challenge to the authoritative mechanisms of reification that become paramount within late capitalism. For what becomes evident is that postmodernist art is inimical to the creation of a truly revolutionary praxis, one that could rupture the process of internalization and the obscurity of control by which postmodernity is determined. Subsumption, then, as a mediating process that is able to turn models of liberation into its own antagonistic re-configurations of control, becomes the dominant feature of postmodern social relations, subjecting any attempt to form an alternative to its hegemony to the intrinsic process of forced adaptability, a regressive mechanism which surfaces particularly in neo-imperialist adventures on a global scale. In his "Modernity

⁵ Kuspit, *Ibid.*, 12-13.

and Revolution,” for example, Perry Anderson argues that a “genuine” revolution would “abolish” the project of modernity, since it would seek to install “a diversity founded on far greater plurality and complexity of possible ways of living that any free community of equals, no longer divided by class, race, or gender, would create,” rather than the accentuation of the inner conflict between difference and diversity which postmodernity imposes.⁶ Anderson argues that the revolutionary project of the historical avant-garde movements is inconsistent with the ideology of postmodernism, which Anderson defines as “the pervasive collapse of the tension between the institutions and mechanisms of advanced capitalism, and the practices and programmes of advance art,” or rather a false attempt to administer the effects of revolution through the fetishization of aesthetic indeterminacy:

Revolution is a term with a precise meaning: the political overthrow from below of one state order, and its replacement by another. Nothing is to be gained by diluting it across time, or extending it over every department of social space.... In the advanced capitalist world today, it is the seeming absence of such prospect as a proximate or even distant horizon—the lack, apparently, of any conjecturable alternative to the imperial status quo of a consumer capitalism—that blocks the likelihood of any profound cultural renovation comparable to the Age of Aesthetic Discoveries in the first third of this century.⁷

Anderson illustrates what can be thought of as the socio-cultural process of subsumption, which as an effect disformulates the interconnecting points of radical aesthetics and relegates them to an expressive mode in the continual decoration of “revolution,” which becomes a necessary component to the surface character of postmodernism. Anderson’s examination of postmodernity and its historical correlation to the revolutionary project within modernity is consistent with the Marxist critique of postmodernist cultural production, one which must avoid collapsing into the nostalgia for the originality of the

⁶ Perry Anderson, “Modernity and Revolution,” *New Left Review*, no. 144 (March-April 1984): 113.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 108, 112.

avant-garde by restructuring the material conditions that have given precedence to a new social order, which for the present context emerges in relation to international crises and economical and political decentralization.⁸ This paradoxical movement within postmodernism, as such, reveals its own logic of displacement, or rather a decentralizing interiority which corresponds to the realm of culture as a trope to which aesthetic production adhered in the absolute aestheticization of the political dimension of revolutionary art, as it is evident in the work of the later Zukofsky and what David Lehman calls the “Last Avant-Garde” represented by the New School Poets, and as a consequence, in the rejection of totalizing formations that moved beyond the locality of art, or in the context of Césaire’s work, that deferred the hegemony of Westernized Marxism in favor of cultivating a revolutionary praxis in the expression of a nationalist culture.⁹

Such a theorization, as Anderson implies, would require that cultural production be able to demystify the ideologies through which capitalist space structures lived reality. On the contrary, the imagined subversion of those ideologies in the aesthetic dimension, as Aimé Césaire’s poetics of Négritude demands, is often subjected to the limitations of

⁸ I am referring not only to the Soviet invasion of Hungary in 1956, an international event that caused various splits on the left, but also to the overall destructuralization that had been taking place within the post-War period, both in Western Capitalism, and as a consequence of the process of de-Stalinization in the Soviet Union, which is outlined in Khrushchev’s speech of 1956. The question of decentralization, in this sense, includes (1) the economic remodeling which initiated the movement into monopoly capitalism, (2) the end of the totalizing system that had occurred within Stalinization, and (3) the formative emergence of decolonization movements within Empire. The convergence of ideological and material processes of decentralization structures postmodernity itself and which in the cultural field has traces within the work of Zukofsky and Césaire, as I have attempted to argue here. For an overview of the Hungarian Revolution, see Victor Sebestyen, *Twelve Days: The Story of the 1956 Hungarian Revolution* (New York: Random House, 2006); see also S. Lash and J. Urry, *The End of Organized Capitalism* (Wisconsin: The University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), Harry Braverman, *Labor and Monopoly Capitalism*, 251-293, David Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1989); for an overview of these theories, see Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 133-144.

⁹ See David Lehman, *The Last Avant-Garde: The Making of the New York School of Poets* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), and Mark Andrew Silverberg, “Beyond Radical art: The New York poets and the neo-avant-garde (Frank O’Hara, John Ashbery, Kenneth Koch) (Ph.D. diss., Dalhousie University, 2000).

creative spontaneity, which historically has not succeeded to advance an oppositional praxis *to the extent* that late capitalist subsumption could be negated. Fredric Jameson similarly laments a lack of distance between postmodern art and consumptive dimension of late capitalist social relations from which cultural production is generated. Jameson argues that an art capable of representing the complex realities of a “global” economic order, one that through the formulation of a revolutionary praxis could shatter the ideological conditioning of postmodernity, is required in the ever-expanding hegemony of late capitalist subsumption. In contrast to the pessimism of Kuspit’s theorization above, Jameson attempts to link these stylistic features of contemporary art to a more general account of the current social order, adopting a fairly traditional Marxist notion that art reflects the material conditions of history:

The new political art (if it is possible at all) will have to hold to the truth of postmodernism, that is to say, to its fundamental object—the world space of multinational capital—at the same time it achieves a breakthrough to some as yet unimaginable new mode of representing this last, in which we may again begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our special as well as our social confusion. The political form of postmodernism, if there ever is any, will have as its vocation the invention and projection of a global cognitive mapping, on a social as well as a special scale.¹⁰

Postmodernism negates the possibility of an effective critique of the material conditions that determine its influence, thus necessitating a reactionary position that would confront the relations of consumerism, administered and habituated by the spectacle, by creating a revitalized artistic practice. As Jameson states, this is not a call for a regression to an “older kind of machinery,” but a means to substitute the hegemony of the “Consciousness Industry,” which through the mimesis of image-domination disables the process of

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism; or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1999), 54.

historical memory itself, for an aesthetic that both encloses and contradicts the homogeneous “logic” of multinational capitalism.¹¹ For it is the disguise of “resistance” that perpetuates the illusion of postmodern art which Alex Callinicos points out reduces the trajectory of political radicalism to the theoretical embodiment of cultural consumption: “The kind of ironic distance from the world which was so important feature of the great works of Modernism has become routinized, even trivialized, as it becomes a way of negotiating a still unreconciled reality which no one longer believes can be changed.”¹²

The question of how to construct creative “spaces” of resistance, then, so that a materiality of opposition can reinscribe itself within collective praxis, a central notion to what many see as the continuing project of modernity itself, becomes mediated by the reproductive mechanisms that control the interior forces of postmodernity, those forces that are able to redirect confrontation to the “specter” of resistance, an in-built apparatus in the aestheticization process of postmodernism which manufactures what Samir Amin calls postmodernism’s “disconcertedness at foresight, will, and consequential action.”¹³ What is implicit in Amin’s theorization is that the possibility of revolutionary praxis can only occur with the sustained recognition that the systematic domination of capitalism, which within postmodernity recreates itself in the non-exteriority of real subsumption, must be destroyed, a conscious determination which is central to vanguardism itself:

Modernity is still unfinished, and it will remain so as long as the human race continues to exist. Currently, the fundamental obstacle setting its limits is still defined by the social relationships specific to capitalism. What the

¹¹ Ibid., 152.

¹² Callinicos, 170.

¹³ Samir Amin, *Spectres of Capitalism: A Critique of Current Intellectual Fashions*, trans. Shane Henry Mage (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), 113.

postmodernists refuse to see is that modernity can progress further only by going beyond capitalism. Unfortunately this possibility seems inaccessible at the present moment. For the “failures” of modernity and the aggravation of conflict that has brought with it that wave of violence—recognition of which is the source of the postmodernist thesis—are the results of the evolution of that same capitalism and signs that it has reached the end of the historical path at whose earlier stages it could still, despite its specific contradictions, appear synonymous with progress. Today the choice “socialism or barbarism” is truly the choice confronting the human race.¹⁴

Following Amin’s characterization here, capitalist crisis emerges within postmodernity as the historical culmination of modernity itself and thus signals that the former has materialized a space beyond the dialectical configurations of the latter. In this sense, rather than dismiss the totality of postmodern cultural production as being immediately subsumed by late capitalism, the difficulty of theorizing the prospects for a neo-vanguardism that attempts to confront the dictates of subsumption needs to be understood not only in relation to the reification process to which such a challenge is subjected, but also in the extent to which the possibility of revolutionary praxis has been transformed historically, something which Césaire’s aesthetics of decolonization has demonstrated already. More precisely, (1) what is revolutionary praxis within the era of real subsumption, an era which Antonio Negri describes as the ever-expanding determination of biopolitical control that resides at the core of postmodernity, and (2) how is it possible to sustain creative and militant models of neo-vanguardism which could be utilized to confront the hegemony of late capitalism and its mechanism of effacement and reappropriation? Furthermore, is it conceivable to reconstruct a neo-vanguardism from within the dimension of late capitalism, one that is able to delimit the internalization process that real subsumption acquires within postmodernity, and which creates the possibilities for confrontation at the roots of domination itself? This type of neo-

¹⁴ Ibid., 103.

vanguard, then, must be able to emerge within the context of real subsumption through the constant recognition of critical resistance by which it is already determined within postmodernity, a recognition that must model itself not in the nostalgic remnants of modernism, but in the futurity of liberation. The intention here is to evaluate the ways in which the possibility of collective praxis can occur within postmodernity, a project that can be thought of in terms of the possibility of true creativity not on the margins of a transcendent imagination, but instead an attempt to illuminate what Antonio Negri calls “the activity of negation of an irrepressible antagonism,” or a continually dynamic resolve through which collective praxis becomes an absolute form of disobedience and confrontation from within the totality of real subsumption.¹⁵

For Negri, real subsumption is a predetermined mechanism of crisis that, as a continual effect, flattens social relations across the exploitative horizon of late capitalism. As he writes in *Time for Revolution*, “At the level of real subsumption, no *standard*, no *meaning* is given outside of collective time; no nature is given because *nature is realized subsumption*. It is comprehended, reproduced by collective capital.... The reality of capitalist dominion is realized as systemic and totalitarian. The time of production is the time of life.”¹⁶ In Negri’s theorization, social relations within postmodernity are continually subjected to the reifying effects of crisis, which through a process of adaptability, weaken acts of resistance centrally. As Negri writes, “The entire society [within postmodernity] becomes one enormous factory, or rather, the factory spreads throughout the whole society.... This allows capital, having itself become social, to

¹⁵ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 90.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 69, 44.

disguise its hegemony over society and its interest in exploitation, and thus to pass conquest off as being in the general interest.”¹⁷

The circular appropriation of the ontological fabric of social relations by capital, occurring on the multi-national level and thus without an exteriority, necessitates a creative response in the production of a material praxis through which the totality of liberation can be constructed. This realization of an interior power-structure must emerge out of the annihilation of capitalist time-as-measure. The building of that praxis begins with the superstructural horizon of temporality, or the leveling mechanism that subsumes resistance from within its non-existent borders, in order to generate what Negri calls “the immeasurability of the to-come,” or what amounts to the perpetual reproduction of collective subversion by the multitude.¹⁸ For Negri, as for Césaire, it is the emphasis on creativity that is crucial to the emergence of the transformative qualities of subversion; collective creativity, thus, signals a rupturing point which already resides in the interior of capitalist time-as-measure and which is always on the verge of radicalization. In this sense, both Negri and Césaire articulate a reformist project of revolutionary communism which relies on the determination of the subversive mechanism that is already apparent in collective form, yet one that must seek a flight out of real subsumption in order for the process of genuine transformation to materialize. To this extent, the confrontational mechanism that determines the totality of the subversion process that becomes infused in the reconstructed ontology of the multitude is the imagination: the newly accumulated dimension of creative communication that as a productive force realizes a commonality of revolutionary potential in the manifestation of the destruction of capitalist time-as-

¹⁷ Negri, *The Politics of Subversion*, 204.

¹⁸ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 227. For more on the multitude, see Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004).

measure, a neo-vanguardist project which for Negri and Césaire are expressed in the self-valorization or non-locatability of collective praxis.

As a refoundation of revolutionary communism, one that attempts to reform the interiors of real subsumption, a newly formulated project of aesthetic and political vanguardism is required over the traditional spaces through which a materialist estimation sought to revolutionize the potentiality of labor:

Communism must be conceived as a total critique in the Nietzschean sense: not only a destruction of the present values, but also a creation of new values; not only a negation of what exists, but also an affirmation of what springs forth. Critique of the State-form thus means also proposing an effective alternative. This positive aspect of a Marxist critique must also assume as its basis the idea and experience of living labor. Living labor is the internal force that constantly poses not only the subversion of the capitalist process of production but also the construction of an alternative. In other words, living labor not only refuses its abstraction in the process of capitalist valorization and the production of surplus value, but also poses an alternative schema of valorization, the self-valorization of labor.¹⁹

For Negri and Hardt, the interior development of *Communism-as-critique* must begin with the process of reconstructing the spaces of resistance as an already-exteriorized point, which as an activity of antagonism diffuses the attempt by collective capital to reappropriate or subsume its material authority. The emphasis on the localization of power in Césaire's work, for example, necessitates the emergence of Négritude, a locus of productive activity that revolutionizes the colonized other who has been controlled by the temporality of imperialism. In this sense, the collective praxis of subversion for Césaire retains the mobility of resistance, thus creating disalienation as a necessary step in the conceptual founding of Négritude to the extent that it becomes a method which demystifies the imposed abstraction of the colonized other by the ideological and de-

¹⁹ Antonio Negri and Michael Hardt, "Communism as Critique," <http://www.generation-online.org/fp/negri11.htm>.

humanizing normalization of imperialist racism and the mechanization colonized subjectivity.

As the above critique of Césaire's work reveals, disalienation, then, forms the ontology through which the temporality of imperial rule is interrupted so that it may materialize in the collective form of creativity and as a network of reinscribed subjectivities, which after 1956 became the overriding mechanism by which his aesthetic of decolonization was constructed. In Negri's formulation as well, resistance also must become the catalyst for creating the imminence of what he terms the "Kairòs" of liberation, a *coming-out* of subjectivities that is beyond measure and that, paradoxically, emerges within the confines of the non-exteriority of real subsumption. Exploitation has a temporal delineation in postmodernity, and thus confrontation, according to Negri, must establish itself ontologically so that it can appear as "a diffusion of singular behaviors of resistance.... Rebellion is neither a punctual event nor is it uniform; on the contrary, it traverses the expanse of the common and defuses itself in the shape of an explosion of behaviors of singularities that it is impossible to contain."²⁰ In other words, the configuration of revolutionary praxis must be converted into an inclusive expansion of singularities that can be used as an interior reinforcement which erases real subsumption and that can release the irreversibility of confrontation in collective form. In this respect, rather than beginning from an external position that must work itself through the effacement that is continually looming in real subsumption, Negri intends to rethink the constituencies of subversion and its already-existing circulation as an accumulative

²⁰ Negri, *Time for Revolution*, 200-201.

power in the interior spaces of collective capital.²¹ Real subsumption, as a mediating process that is able to turn models of confrontation into the opposite re-configuration of biopolitical control, needs to be addressed continually in the postulation of an alternative space in which paradigms of resistance are able to combat the hegemony of late capitalism and its projection of a globalized doctrine of “absorption.” The most important resource in the theoretical skeletons that Césaire and Negri offer is the means by which the historical separation between aesthetics and politics unfolds as a mechanism of creativity that traces a significant path toward a newly-organized dimension of revolutionary communism.

The question that remains, then, is to what extent such theorizations of neo-vanguardism are able to maintain the revolutionary praxis of confrontation that is central to the reproduction of a movement beyond late capitalism, a movement that would disallow the invasive aporias that circulate in collective capital to maintain their power of effacement. For, on the one hand, the conditions that have activated the need to produce a revolutionary art in the overall battle for human liberation never have been one-dimensional, a point that is meant to move beyond the orthodoxy of traditional Marxist-Leninism within modernity which had a relatively weak line on the decolonizing struggles within Empire. On the other hand, these struggles have become more and more

²¹ Negri’s theorization, in this sense, contradicts the Marxist-Leninist view that the party will create the conditions for revolutionary praxis, a view that Césaire also rejected after 1956, and which Fanon also critiques in *The Wretched of the Earth*, in which he argued for a more thoroughly organic movement within the colonies themselves. In terms of theory, then, it is possible to see the ways in which Negri’s critique of Marxism is often situated within the cultural politics of poststructuralism and its dismissal of the “grand narrativity” of which Marxist-Leninism is often accused. Although Negri is generally critical of what he has called the “suffering tradition” of Marxist-Leninist orthodoxy, his analysis offers a much-needed insight into the materiality of postmodernity and real subsumption by which the dimensions of neo-vanguardism can be more easily examined. See Antonio Negri, *Marx Beyond Marx: Lessons on the Grundrisse*, trans. Harry Cleaver, Michael Ryan, and Maurizio Viano (New York: Autonomedia, 1991); for an analysis of Marxism and poststructuralism, see Barbara Foley, “Marxism in the Poststructuralist Moment: Some Notes on the Problem of Revising Marx,” *Cultural Critique* (Spring 1990): 5-37.

pronounced not only in the era of new imperialism and the re-entrenchment of inter-imperialist rivalries, but also in the immediate response toward those mechanisms that legitimize and globalize capitalist exploitation.²² The argument, then, that there is a historical immediacy in the refoundation of a revolutionary praxis for art that reflects the intrinsic concerns of historical aesthetic and political vanguardism, as have been outlined here, may become disformulated in the very subsumptive mechanisms that delimit postmodern art itself, what Jameson and Kuspit describe as the nostalgia for the past that indicates decadence and regression. The struggle of neo-vanguardism, in this sense, needs to be designed with the intention of creating revolutionary mechanisms that could rupture the stronghold of the new imperialism and late capitalist subsumption, especially in relation to Latin America, the Caribbean, and the African continent, all of which have experienced the devastating burden of such exploitative practices. An extension of the current project into a more thorough analysis of the neo-vanguardist impulse, especially in its non-European context, would have to consider the impact of the Cuban Revolution on the aesthetics and politics of revolutionary decolonization from the mid-century to the present, or the resonance of the Latin American poet Pablo Neruda in the formation of an neo-vanguardism which utilized the aesthetic subtext of Communism for the purposes of advancing the struggle for revolutionary praxis, particularly one that combated the expanding threat of neo-imperialism.²³ It may be too simplistic to argue that neo-vanguardism must call for a return to the Marxist-Leninism of the modernist era and the reconstruction of such vanguardist paradigms of revolutionary struggle, since the

²² See David Harvey, *The New Imperialism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

²³ For more on the struggle against neo-imperialism, see Vijay Prashad, *The Darker Nations: A People's History of the Third World* (New York: The New Press, 2007); see also Sheldon B. Liss, *Marxist Thought in Latin America* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984).

supposed rigidity of those narrative structures are often said to be extinct and spark intense debates, ones that often splinter the revolutionary left and thus serve the interests of ruling class ideology that has been assimilated by postmodernist subsumption itself. Although the particularities of such arguments are beyond the scope of the present study, it is obvious that the historical materiality of those larger narratives continually informs a vital perspective of the struggle against ruling class ideology. Accordingly, they command a space in the larger discussion of revolutionary praxis and the unfolding of its future potentiality.

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