

WCTU

# JUST AHEAD

---

Frédéric  
Neyrat

Philosopher

---

AVANT-GARDES AND EMERGING ANTICIPATIONS

Translated by  
Vincent Broqua

“Poetry will no longer give rhythm to the action; it will be ahead of it.”  
Arthur Rimbaud

Advertising campaigns, *soft* propaganda and political discourse all seek to tell stories which incite us to buy, vote or behave the way they want us to; *storytelling* is the word.<sup>1</sup> These *strongly oriented* stories, whose aim is first and foremost to induce belief, are built on a technological and imaginary foundation: *preventive surveillance*. It aims at foreseeing people’s behaviour in order to modify it, to prevent it before it even happens. Such is the aim of data mining, which consists in collecting and processing data in order to point out correlations, in other words, knowledge; knowledge about a client whose profile shows that he or she is on the verge of breaking their contract; insight into the mind of a citizen who might be plotting some sort of civil disobedience... Politico-commercial fiction, police surveillance technology and preventive anticipation characterise what we term *clairvoyance societies*.<sup>2</sup> Against these technologically assisted fictions that tend to pare down the “possible,” and to prevent any unprecedented, in other words, stereotyped action, it has become urgent to confront this—politically and aesthetically—with an imagination that is capable of opening the “possible” or, more precisely, the possibility of the “possible,” the future as unpredictable data. But what does opening the future with imagination really mean? If we try to give a shape to the future with images and propositions, we annihilate it! We diminish its scope in advance and we become guilty of the *preventive anticipations* mentioned above... However, there is a way to anticipate which we could call *chaosmic* (Guattari), *emerging*, or *dissipative* (Prigogine). This does not amount to foreseeing the future but to *opening the present* in itself, finding a space where it is made possible without it being fixed there forever. These emerging anticipations specifically characterise

1. Christian Salmon, *Storytelling. La Machine à fabriquer des histoires et à formater les esprits* (Paris, La Découverte, 2007). Storytelling is not about recounting a past experience, it is about “tracing behaviours, orienting emotional flows” in order to “identify with models” and “conform to protocols” (p. 16-17). These stories “do not explore the conditions of a possible experience, but the modalities of its surrender” (p. 199). The goal is not to seduce or convince but to “produce the feeling of belief” (p. 42).

2. See our article “Avant-propos sur les sociétés de clairvoyance” (*Multitudes*, no. 40, spring 2010), and Eric Sadin, *Surveillance globale*, Paris, Climats, 2009.

the artistic forms of the avant-garde. And these forms are what we are currently in dire need of if we wish to free ourselves of this society of control and surveillance, and make the present possible. There is no present without breakthroughs, beliefs and promises.

### Acts and Manifestos

It is widely acknowledged that the avant-gardes are dead and gone. And this is fine too, for they have been too excessive, wildly out of control, para-totalitarian and complicit in their fascist environment (Marinetti, Pound), unheeding of consequences or—to use a modern term—terrorist (Breton defined “the most simple” surrealist act as “going out in the streets” and “shooting at random in the crowd”), dogmatic (constantly excommunicating in the name of programmatic purity), hermetic and hence elitist, and finally reusable—how ironic!—by the entertainment industry, which is always looking for new sensations. Dreadful... The only thing left is to dig them up for a retrospective (fittingly so named) in order to verify, museologically, their final disappearance. Yet these are only *superficial effects* of the avant-gardes analysed *in lieu* of their intrinsic characteristics. In order to grasp these characteristics, let us refer to the analysis offered by Jacques Rancière in *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, in which he describes perfectly the tension at work in the foundation of the avant-gardes: its foundational movement is double. It seeks to radically change the art forms, either making them “identical to the forms of the construction of a new world where art no longer exists as a separate reality” or “preserving the autonomy of the artistic sphere, preserving it from any form of compromise with the practices of power and political struggle or the forms of aesthetisation of life that a capitalist world promotes.”<sup>3</sup> This “founding paradox” goes back to the “aesthetic economy of art” inaugurated by German romanticism and updated by the avant-gardes of the 19th and 20th centuries. It can be described as follows: “in the loneliness of the artwork lies the promise of emancipation. But the actual accomplishment of this promise is the abolition of art as a separate reality and its transformation into a form of life.”<sup>4</sup> These lines hint at the fundamental problem the avant-garde has to deal with but without analysing it: “new,” “mutation,” “accomplishment,” “promise”? The avant-gardes define themselves first and foremost through a specific relationship with time—but what relationship? One is tempted to argue that it is a relationship with the future. Yet one cannot be so sure. In *Le Siècle*, Alain Badiou contends that the rupture with the previous artistic schemata—instrumental in the foundation of the avant-gardes and often conducive to scandal, incomprehension

3. Jacques Rancière, *Malaise dans l'esthétique*, Paris, Galilée, 2004, p. 169-170.

4. *Ibidem*, p. 53. See Elie During's thought provoking review of Rancière's book: “Le malaise esthétique” in *Art Press*, no. 306, November 2004.

or ban—is geared towards the construction of the present as “a pure art of today, immediate, without posterity, it is an artistic struggle against scleroses and death, here and now (...). As the present is constantly under the threat of the past and is fragile, it must be brought there by a provocative intervention of the group that will protect the spontaneous against the established and the institutionalised.”<sup>5</sup> Whereas classicism goes back to the continuous past of art, the avant-garde says “we’re beginning.” There’s one problem, though: how do we know that a “we” has begun? The answer is: “the beginning can only be identified by virtue of the vital *intensity* of artistic creation.”<sup>6</sup> The demand for immediate intensity explains why the avant-gardes have often preferred act over artwork, a punchy *manifesto* a manifest and hard-hitting gesture executed without further ado. Badiou nonetheless sees a difference between the programmatic promise, which points to the future, and the act, which determines the present. He cites Breton: “Beauty will be convulsive or will not be at all” (*Nadja*). This image “calls for urgency” but doesn’t really prove that “there actually is anything going on.” Such is the very function of manifestos: trying to name that which, in the act of artistic rupture experienced in the present by the avant-gardes, is structurally lacking in words—“the Manifesto is the reconstruction in an undetermined future of something that cannot be named in the present for it pertains to acts and to vanishing revelations.” It is impossible to account at once for the meaning and the consequences of acts viewed as the essence of the present. Or else, the act would negate its very nature in the here and now, so much so that it would be apprehended as already past (in other words as classical...).<sup>7</sup> Hence the necessity for a stated future, “the rhetorical invention of a future,” which will only be able to say what has happened after it has happened. Even so, this future will be completely indexed to the present.

### **Advances, delays, and disappearances**

This is precisely what Guy Debord said in 1963.<sup>8</sup> The avant-garde, to his mind, means “novelty,” it “describes and *begins* a possible present” and “it doesn’t impinge on the future”; what remains to be determined is the form of a radical present including, paradoxically enough, an *avant-garde*. To really begin with the “possible,” one must fight against the present in its *actuality* because it bears the “weight of the past” and is “belated”

5. Alain Badiou, *Le Siècle*, Paris, Seuil, 2005, p. 189-197.

6. The concept of intensity allows POUND to keep Vorticism separate from Futurism, regarded as too extensive—still too impressionist, too interested in the issue of movement and doomed to dissolve into cinema (*Ezra Pound*, Paris, L’Herne—Fayard, 1997, art. Le Vorticisme).

7. We could almost read Hal Foster’s theories (*Le Retour du réel. Situation actuelle de l’avant-garde*, Brussels, La lettre volée, 2005) as a consequence of this logical structure: the new-avant-garde (Minimalism, Pop’art, and Hyperrealism) updates the “historical” avant-garde (that of the ready-made, collages, monochromes, and “counter-reliefs” (Tatlin)). The historical avant-garde expresses itself through “statement” and “performing acts” (Duchamp, Rodchenko), whereas the “neo-avant-garde” (Broodthaers, Haacke, Buren) creates something while it questions and analyses the institutional environment in which its performative acts happen (p. 45-47). In this sense, through its deconstructive repetition, the historical avant-garde somewhat “comes back from the future” (p. 59).

8. Guy Debord, “L’avant-garde en 1963 et après” in *Œuvres*, Gallimard—Quarto, 2006, p. 638-641.

in relation to what should begin soon. Yet, the avant-garde is mistaken when it relates to such a beginning as “going further” as in a “strong and generalised” sense, the avant-garde is what “goes beyond the social totality.”

This is the reason why all true cultural avant-garde must merge with the “real political” avant-garde. When this combination occurs it is impossible to distinguish the produced object from the subject of the production, *poiesis* from *praxis*.

The avant-garde then generates itself, invents itself as a new form of life.

“The first *creation* of an avant-garde today is *the avant-garde itself*,” and not the artworks, which can only be “by-products” of the “central self-formation activity” of the “authentic” avant-garde.

Herein lies the crucial twist: if one’s unique aim is the production of artworks, one will be confined to the cultural world, to museums and exhibitions, in other words, to the creation of the past. That is why “fake” avant-gardes are always *belated*. They don’t so much lag behind in terms of what one should do as in terms of what one should stop doing to let the present happen, at last.

The true avant-garde can only aim at its own demise and not seek continuity (in itself or in the artworks). To seek continuity would end up restricting the present to what it is, i.e. to its topicality and the gratification it provides. If the present is to happen as such, it must integrate, almost in advance, its own disappearance. If it considers lasting into the future, it would literally block it, close a door to it and condemn it to duration, which extends *from the present to the future*. The idea is to show the future the door in order to be able to usher in the present. Otherwise, the dominating past could well be projected into the future. Going beyond the avant-garde, Debord says, means “building a praxis, constructing a society in which *the present always dominates the past*.” This doesn’t aim at the final shape of the artwork (which is how it was construed, wrongly, by those who wished to “go on ahead” transporting and transposing the weight of a mortifying past), but rather at the socio-economic and political conditions of creation. Were this to happen the avant-garde would be no more, because it can only be given one definition: “resisting against the domination (or predominance, or authority) of the past upon every moment of the present. The true avant-garde which goes beyond itself is unassailable, for *it is present in itself*.”<sup>9</sup>

And it will stay that way as long as it resists the persistence of the past and the future. The following sentence can be heard in Debord’s movie *Hurlements en faveur de Sade*: “We live like the lost children of our unfinished adventures.” In another movie, *Critique de la séparation*, Debord shows these children as the “crossroads” where two things come together: “loss” (“past time”, “the erosion of things”) and “discovery, the exploration of unknown territory; i.e. the very forms that research, adventure and the avant-garde take.”

9. Debord also argues that if sociology wishes to explain or understand the avant-garde it should “enter its language,” lest it should only use the language of the past. Sociology should enter the language of the avant-garde because this language is the only one to evaluate its own criteria—sociology should take the same “bet” as the avant-garde. “Cold scientific” observation is impossible “with this unique phenomenon and observing it somehow means that one already has an opinion about it.” Whilst Badiou says that the avant-gardist replaces an impossible “metalanguage” by inventing a future (*Le Siècle, op. cit.*, p. 195), he applies to the artist himself what Debord says of the impossibility to use a language that is not integral to the work of art that self-defines itself as present. With that in mind we should re-read Rimbaud’s *Seer Letter*: “Romanticism has never been properly judged. Who would have judged it? The Critics! The Romantics, who prove so well that the song is so rarely the work, in other words, the sung and understood thought of the singer? For I is someone else.”

Originally the lost children were young soldiers sent on missions from which they never came back. They were sent as the vanguard in a desperate situation. For Debord they are the metaphor of the avant-garde.

### **The imaginary and the breaking point**

What? What on earth is Debord saying? Does he say that we can be in the present, or even worse, that we can be *the* present? And this in an “authentic” manner? With a taste for sacrifice! At this point comes the defamatory epithet: “romanticism.” Meaning: infantilism, idealism, purism and hence fascism. Mix these together and the avant-garde becomes an idealist myth of romanticism with a totalitarian bent. You can find this statement more or less anywhere. One example is the title of Rosalind Krauss’s book *The Originality of the Avant-garde and Other Modernist Myths*.<sup>10</sup> It’s all about contesting the avant-garde myths of originality and origin—“of absolute self-creation”<sup>11</sup>—showing that while Malevitch, Léger, Mondrian, Reinhardt, Sol Lewitt, Ryman and others may think

they have invented something with their grids, zeros and monochromes they are in fact but repeating each other; by choosing these fatherless structures, they condemn themselves to repetition: the origin of the copyright for the grid “cannot be traced for this figure fell in the public domain centuries ago.”<sup>12</sup>

Consequently, Rosalind Krauss promotes a “demythologizing criticism and a truly post-modernist art,”<sup>13</sup> such as the work of Sherrie Levine which “deconstructs explicitly the original notion of modernism” stating that a so-called origin is always already a copy of something else.

Art of “the multiple without an original” and of “reproduction.”<sup>14</sup>

Saying such a thing is to misunderstand what Debord is trying to articulate: the question of reinstating the origin loses much of its sense if one is to leave aside its political dimension, and what Castoriadis called the “imaginary institution”: it is this function that the avant-gardes confront, it is an institutive imagination that they try to stir up. Such an imagination aims at the *breaking point* of the present. By using original forms (grid, silences, “zero of forms” (Malevitch)) as material for the construction of the now-as-never of the present. Our belief is that the debarment of such a breaking point will always have for effect the evacuation of the dimension of presence which requires the full force of the imagination. It doesn’t follow that the present is like an egg

10. Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths*, The MIT Press, 1987.

11. *Ibidem*, p. 157.

12. Moreover, the grid still remains a “figure”: “Through its mesh, it creates an image of the woven infra-structure of the canvas. Through its network of coordinates, it organises a metaphor for the plane geometry of the field; through its repetition, it configures the spread of lateral continuity. The grid thus does not reveal the surface, laying it bare at last; rather it veils it through repetition.”

13. *Ibidem*, p. 170.

14. *Ibidem*, p. 187.

about to hatch. Yet an egg that one always considers as broken will never grow into a chicken. In other words, the fact that the present should always “be different” from what it is (Derrida) and that “delay” should be “originary”<sup>15</sup> doesn’t show how the difference stretches away from its unreachable origin to its delayed original repetition. We cannot be sure that the work of Sherrie Levine for example will escape this blissful creative duration. This stretch of time can create a bridge from present to future. The use by Hal Foster of the Freudian concept of “afterwardsness” to characterise art is certainly fruitful as long as it doesn’t belittle the extent to which invention inheres in repetition. In other words, this approach might be used one day for the so-called “neo-avant-gardes” to show the present they produced, without being able to make for themselves the presentation of this presentation. Which means that once this hermeneutic circle has been thought through, we must come back to the starting point. Here and now.

### Here and now

In some ways, what the avant-gardes make possible is the belief in the present as such and for itself. Thus, in 1915 Marinetti stated that “futurism is not, nor will ever be prophetism” (1915 *In that futuristic year*). Yet this present is not the topicality, which is never envisaged as something already gone, replaced, always already consumed. Capitalist anticipations imply that the future is set and that it already contains what we are supposed to do as consumers—the present is therefore reduced to predictable behaviour and thus cancelled. On the contrary, the lost children of the avant-garde explore unknown territories which sustain the present, give it a substance, and expand it beyond the instant. This is why all creative anticipation is *dissipative*: it must destroy what impedes the senses in order to accomplish Rimbaud’s program that “the poet turns himself into a *seer* by a long, immense and reasoned *derangement of all the senses*.” Let’s destroy that which impedes sight, sensations and life. But such destruction can only be the condition of creation. Dissipation is the chaotic ground from which anything unexpected could emerge. Such is the other side of the avant-garde, which can be felt even in the most completed of monochromes. Emergent as it is, anticipation becomes a promise to whom takes the path he or she wasn’t supposed to take. Art must make such a promise in order to stand up—picture against picture, belief against belief—against the re-colourised past, the immune future and the disused present.

15. Jacques Derrida, *L’Écriture et la différence*, Paris, Seuil, 1967, p. 301-303.