The ‘avant-garde’ is a term which pervades writing about modern art, but it is a radically unstable concept. What it originally meant in the early nineteenth century, when an old military idea was applied to art for the first time, was pretty much the opposite of what it came to mean in the second half of the twentieth century when it became ubiquitous. From the Second World War onwards it has been employed as a label for the Modern movement in general, and more particularly as an equivalent for ‘Modernism’: that conception of modern art as an increasingly autonomous field devoted not to the communication of information about a wider world of historical action, but to the production of aesthetic effects. Yet the term’s original meaning emerged in the early nineteenth century in a political milieu in which utopian socialists like Henri de Saint-Simon and Charles Fourier conceived of art as a means to the end of social progress. By the time of the ‘year of revolutions’ 1848, the avant-gardist par excellence, Gustave Courbet, was setting his own practice of a socially committed ‘realist’ art against what he called the ‘pointless objective of art for art’s sake’ (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, p. 372). Already though, during the course of the nineteenth century, this politically underwritten conception of an ‘avant-garde’ took on an increasingly significant aesthetic dimension; a shift of emphasis that was ultimately made complete on the eve of the Second World War in the early writings of Clement Greenberg, particularly the essay ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ of 1939.

It was only when the Modernist conceptualization of modern art itself began to disintegrate around the time of another ‘year of revolutions’ – 1968 – that the historical meanings of avant-gardism were reinvestigated. By this time Greenberg’s increasingly conservative politics had caused him to view the notion with suspicion, regarding its implicit dynamic of innovation as more likely to produce fashionable novelty (‘kitsch’) than genuine aesthetic achievement. And indeed, the term had overflowed its banks to become shorthand for anything vaguely fashionable, expensive and slightly risky. It adorns sites as disparate as night clubs, hairdressing salons and pop music magazines. The literature on art also remains full of references to the avant-garde; in effect, its use as a synonym for
Modernism – even for ‘postmodern’ manifestations – has remained canonical. For certain critical historians however, at the moment of Modernism’s crisis in the sixties, the point of reviewing the notion of avant-gardism was to reinstate the social and political dimension that had been increasingly occluded. Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant Garde* originated in debates conducted in German universities in the wake of the social upheavals of 1968, although it did not appear in English until as late as 1984. In contrast to Modernist writers, Bürger limited his conception of the avant-garde to Dada, Surrealism, Constructivism and a few kindred movements which emerged around the time of the First World War and the Russian Revolution. For Bürger these counted as ‘avant-garde’ precisely because they rejected aesthetic autonomy and tried to fuse art with the ‘praxis of life’. To that extent, Bürger’s work, as well as that of other critical historians such as Nicos Hadjinicolou and T. J. Clark, marked a point of reconnection with the original socialist meanings of the term. The rest of this chapter goes on to review some of the historical transformations of the concept; in particular the way in which an explicit call for the arts to assume a leadership role in social change turned into an assertion of art itself as a site of value sealed against the uncertainties of history and what Greenberg himself regarded (not unjustifiably at the close of the 1930s) as the threat of ‘ideological confusion and violence’ (Greenberg, 1939, p. 36).

It is now generally accepted that the first use of the term ‘avant-garde’ to apply to the arts occurred in writings published under the name of the French utopian socialist Henri de Saint-Simon in 1825 (though the actual passage seems to have been composed by a younger collaborator, possibly Olinde Rodriguez). The concept appears at the end of a book called *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* in a hypothetical debate between a thinker, or ‘savant’, a practically minded businessman–industrialist, and an artist. Towards the end of his peroration, the artist says: ‘Let us unite. To achieve our one single goal, a separate task will fall to each of us. We, the artists, will serve as the avant-garde: for amongst all the arms at our disposal, the power of the Arts is the swiftest and most expeditious. When we wish to spread new ideas amongst men, we use in turn, the lyre, ode or song, story or novel; we inscribe those ideas on marble or canvas. . . . We aim for the heart and imagination, and hence our effect is the most vivid and the most decisive.’ The author then continues: ‘If today our role seems limited or of secondary importance, it is for a simple reason: the Arts at present lack those elements most essential to their success – a common impulse and a general scheme’ (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, pp. 37–41).

The precise significance of this argument is however open to debate, and the ambiguities inherent in the term from the very start run through its usage down into the middle of the twentieth century. For Donald Drew Egbert, the American historian who first unearthed the actual Saint-Simonian text, the socialist writer had ushered in a tradition of thought according to which certain practices of art and certain political practices were believed to be in advance of the majority of others. In the case of art this ultimately licenses the appellation ‘avant-
garde’ as a name for those ‘movements’ whose technical radicalism marked them off from more orthodox approaches to art. In this way later movements such as Cubism or Abstract Expressionism become distinguished as ‘avant-garde’ relative to more traditional or academic styles. However, there is an alternative view. Another of the ‘revisionist’ historians, Nicos Hadjinicolou, pointed out that Saint-Simon did not in fact distinguish one approach to art making from others. What he seems to be saying is that art as such has a powerful social role to play in terms of getting ideas across: Saint-Simon’s ‘general scheme’. It is clear that this ‘general scheme’, which until then the arts are supposed to have lacked, refers to Saint-Simon’s version of socialism. What follows from this is something rather different from a concept of increasingly autonomous and technically radical art. If art is a tool for getting across important ideas, the last thing it needs is to become difficult to understand. On this reading, art has to be popular, relevant and accessible. Rather than being like modern Western art, it would be more like social – or ‘Socialist’ – Realism. If the key to the Western or ‘modern’ sense of an artistic avant-garde is its independence, on this other understanding art is anything but independent; it must communicate the ‘general scheme’. And the ‘general scheme’ does not come from art; it comes from politics. From this point of view, to assume that art as such can be in the vanguard is to be in the thrall of ideology. Indeed, as late as 1973, the *Great Soviet Encyclopaedia* remained convinced that ‘avant-gardism as a whole is saturated with capitalist and petty bourgeois individualism’ (p. 519).

Such a shift of emphasis did however start to occur in the late nineteenth century. The Neoimpressionist Paul Signac who, along with certain other Impressionists like Pissarro, embraced an anarchist politics, argued that: ‘It would be an error – an error into which the best informed revolutionaries, such as Proudhon, have too often fallen – systematically to require a precise socialist tendency in works of art.’ For Signac, the revolutionary tendency ‘will be found much stronger and more eloquent in pure aesthetics’. It is through ‘their new technique’ that the anarchist-Impressionists have best ‘contributed their witness to the great social process which pits the workers against Capital’ (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger, 1998, pp. 795–8). The idea of the radical artist as a progressive social force was increasingly inflected by the belief that the art itself must needs be radical as art, and not just as the vehicle for a politically radical critique of society. The most emphatic example of this was Rimbaud’s evocation, at the very moment of the Paris Commune, of an ‘objective’, technically radical, poetry whose rhythms, as he saw it, move in time to the social struggle. It is not clear what this actually means beyond a somewhat metaphorical sense of the staccato or the mechanical, nor is it clear how this might be translated into the terms of other art forms. But what is clear is that for Rimbaud it was not enough for the poetry to have social struggle for its subject matter; it must be infused formally with tension, stress and conflict. And to complicate matters further, what is also clear is that in Rimbaud’s view such an art would no longer merely be a response to action, but ‘will be ahead of it (sera en avant)’ (Harrison, Wood and Gaiger,
1998, pp. 568–9). That idea echoes through twentieth-century avant-gardism. But mostly in the second half of the nineteenth century, the concept of an avant-garde seems to have been employed in political contexts, where it was used by radical political groupings, not only of the Left but, as Hadjinicolou (1982) has shown, of the extreme Right too.

Avant-Garde and Political Radicalism

Despite the use made of the idea in 1870s and 80s in France by figures like Rimbaud and Signac, Seurat and Théodore Duret, it was not until the early twentieth century that the term gained wider currency in something like its modern usage. The *Oxford English Dictionary* records that its first appearance in English was in 1910. Around the same time in France, Apollinaire used it to describe contemporary Cubist and Futurist artists. The idea had a resonance in French anarchist-Symbolist circles in the late nineteenth century, but it seems to have become more widespread in the early twentieth century. It is hard to be precise as to why this should be, but it cannot have been unconnected with the increased climate of social radicalism in the years before the First World War. Around 1902, in *What is to be Done?*, Lenin formulated the conception of the ‘vanguard’ party. Bolshevism became a distinctive political force, and the term became inextricably associated with the revolutionary communist opposition to bourgeois society. It was this increased prominence of the term in its political register, allied to the emergence in the early twentieth century of increasing numbers of technically radical art movements such as Fauvism, Expressionism and Cubism – which clearly threatened conventional taste and sensibilities – that stimulated a more widespread adoption of the idea of an artistic avant-garde critical of social as well as artistic convention. Precisely this, however, means that the idea as it was current in the early twentieth century was not the idea that later became dominant. The early twentieth-century conception of the artistic avant-garde had moved on from Saint-Simon’s original view, but still had its roots in the generalized Romantic conception of artists as, in Shelley’s words, the ‘unacknowledged legislators of the world’. At that time, to be ‘avant-garde’ was to be something with a political edge. Understanding what happens in the next period is the key to the Modernist redefinition of the ‘avant-garde’.

The immediately noticeable thing is that, in the major English-language writings on art in the period up to the Second World War, compared with what came later the concept of the avant-garde is conspicuous by its absence. In the writing of Roger Fry and Clive Bell, of R. H. Wilenski and Herbert Read, and in America, of Thomas Craven and Alfred Barr, it hardly crops up at all. Virtually every general reference is to ‘modern art’, ‘the modern movement’, ‘the modern movement in art’, ‘the modern schools’ and so on. Every so often the idea leaks out, but the term almost never. I have been unable to find it in Bell or Fry (which is not of course to say that it might not occur somewhere, but it is not a major
organizing concept in their writing). It does not appear in Wilenski’s summative *Modern Movement in Art* of 1927, nor in Read’s *Art Now* of 1933.

The exception which proves the rule, however, is that Read does pay homage to the idea of artistic leadership in his Preface to *Art Now*. While strongly emphasizing ‘the independence of art and politics’, Read argues that: ‘The prejudice against modern art is, I am convinced, the result of a confined vision or a narrow range of sensibility. People forget that the artist (if he deserves that name) has the acutest sense of us all; and he can only be true to himself and his function if he expresses that acuteness to the final edge. We are without courage, without freedom, without passion and joy, if we refuse to follow where he leads’ (Read, 1948, pp. 11, 12). The point is that unlike most of his prominent colleagues, Read espoused a form of anarchist politics and so can be seen as a descendent of the nineteenth-century radical discourse on avant-gardism. In a wartime essay written in the early 1940s titled ‘The Cult of Leadership’, he embraces ‘the communism of Kropotkin and not that of Marx’ (which is to say, anarchism rather than the by-then hegemonic Stalinism), and he defines his vision of appropriate leadership. Read makes a distinction between ‘the kind of leader who impresses a group by asserting his authority, and the kind who expresses the group by being susceptible to their thoughts, feelings and desires. It is this second kind of leader, and only this kind of leader, who has a place in a community of free people.’ He goes on, ‘And who is the leader who expresses the thoughts, feelings and desires of the people – who but the poet and artist?’ Read explicitly invokes the tradition of Shelley to back up his claim: ‘the idea that it is the man of imagination, the poet and philosopher above all, but equally the man who can present ideas in the visual images of painting and sculpture or through the still more effective medium of drama – the idea that it is this individual whom society should accept as its only leader’ (Read, 1943, pp. 31–2).

We can see then that the idea of the artist being in a position of leadership with respect to society at large was present in English-language writing on modern art, but it was by no means central; and even in Read’s work there is a sense of an idea that ‘dare not speak its name’. A clue to the problem of the absence of the term ‘avant-garde’ can be gleaned from a phrase of Read’s we quoted earlier: ‘the prejudice against modern art’. Art was then, as by and large it has remained, the province of the well-to-do. Yet in the mid-1930s the well-to-do were not in confident mood. The Russian Revolution was less than twenty years behind. The crisis of international capitalism was in full swing, affecting all the western European nations and the United States. The system was anything but stable. And the concept of the ‘avant-garde’ had an extremist lineage. Read’s herbivorous version notwithstanding, the rhetoric of an avant-garde was widely associated in the West with anarchism and revolutionary communism. Hadjinicolaou has pointed out that the concept was not the exclusive property of the Left. But the fact that the Italian avant-gardist Marinetti became a fascist sympathizer did not mean that his rants about polyphonic tides of revolution sweeping away the museums and libraries were likely to be any more congenial
to the culturally aware bourgeois than the Bolshevik Mayakovsy’s stated desire to throw Pushkin and Rembrandt overboard from the steamship of modernity.

We can feel some of this sensibility at work in the early writings of Alfred H. Barr. Barr was to become the doyen of modern art in America. At the age of twenty-five, he offered the first course to study modern art in any American college, at Wellesley in Boston in 1927. He was appointed curator of the unprecedented Museum of Modern Art in New York in 1929 (it opened the week after the Wall Street crash). He virtually invented the modern art exhibition and the exhibition catalogue. In the late 1920s and early 1930s he was an adventurous figure, acquiring on a series of trips wide first-hand knowledge of the whole range of European modern art, theatre and film, including visits to Germany at the very moment of the Nazi assumption of power and, most extraordinary of all, a three-month trip to the Soviet Union in early 1928. In the brief but important programmatic writings for his new course, and subsequently for the new museum, which are reprinted in his selected writings (Barr 1986), Barr employs the concept of the avant-garde not once. The Museum of Modern Art (MOMA), as a generation of social historians of art have relentlessly pointed out, has been funded from the start by the elite of America’s elite – the Goodyears, the Crowningshields, the Sullivans, and above all the Rockefellers. Barr effortlessly defined modern art in terms that would appeal to his sponsors and avoid any of the infelicities associated with the revolutionary aspect of avant-gardism. It is interesting to see the terms which are used: ‘modern art’, of course; ‘modernist tendencies’, ‘modernist interpretations’. The tone is established in talk of ‘the relation of modern expression to twentieth-century civilisation’, and what is perhaps the keynote is struck by deploying the concept (inherited from Fry) of the ‘modern master’. Such a figure is of course on a par with the venerated ‘Old Masters’, and by the same token, his patrons will be on a par with theirs. The status of it all is driven home in a reclamation of the Fauves from their troublesome nickname. Twenty-five years on they can be enjoyed for their ‘matured powers’, and ‘celebrated not defiantly, not rebelliously, but with dignity and confidence’. As if it should be a comfort – and it probably would to MOMA’s Board of Trustees – one may rest in the knowledge that ‘even the ultramodernists of 1929 . . . are adequately rewarded financially’. The cat however really comes out of the bag when we are reassured what this newly socially acceptable figure is not. What he is not, though he is sometimes still called it ‘by the obtuse’ is ‘madman, degenerate and (more absurdly) bolshevik’ (Barr, 1986, pp. 73–6). As Barr remarked in 1934, and one can almost see a despairing shake of the head, modern art remains ‘recurrently a matter for debate . . . a banner for the progressive, a red flag for the conservative’ (Barr, 1986, pp. 66–8).

In a word, by museumizing modern art, MOMA saves it from communism, or to put it more generally, for it is not quite as one-sided as this, from ‘extremism’. In this connection it is worth remarking on the context when Barr does make glancing use of the concept of the avant-garde, as he did in 1936 in his catalogue to the exhibition Cubism and Abstract Art. This exhibition offered the
essential map of the modern movement which, however much its terms have subsequently been questioned, still functions as a kind of benchmark, pro or con: Cézanne begat Cubism, which begat abstract art, etc. In his catalogue Barr uses our term, or rather its cognates, twice; and both times the context is Russia. He writes of the abstract painter Kandinsky that, ‘During and after the war Kandinsky lived in Russia where he participated in vanguard exhibitions’ (Barr, 1974, pp. 66–8); and more generally, he notes that, ‘Highly cultured Bolsheviks, such as Trotsky and Lunacharsky, understood and supported the artists of the advance guard’ (Barr, 1974, p. 16).

Clement Greenberg and Partisan Review

It is clear that what was emerging as mainstream English-language writing on modern art during the 1910s, 20s and 30s largely resisted using the concept of the avant-garde, even though it had come into currency by then and even though the idea behind it was quite widespread. Instead of the dynamic and revolutionary connotations of avant-gardism, a more static reading was put forward of ‘modern masters’ and ‘modern masterpieces’ that could stand comparison with the canonical achievements of the past. The dominant motif for most of those who wanted to take modern art seriously was continuity, not revolutionary leadership and certainly not a revolutionary break with the past.

Although there is a sense of sanitization at work here, it is not a crude move which is being made. For though modern art is prised away from its Leftist associations, Barr’s Cubism and Abstract Art is by no means divested of a politics. As he remarks in his Introduction, ‘This essay and exhibition might well be dedicated to those painters of squares and circles who have suffered at the hands of philistines with political power’ (Barr, 1974, p. 18). This is a crucial moment in the evolution of twentieth-century ideological alignments, and it is a moment whose impact extends far beyond art, though art has been an area heavily implicated in its repercussions. It is the time when capitalism is defined as ‘moderate’, and its competitors – ideologically diverse as they may be – are equated as ‘extreme’. It is the time when Left and Right – communism and fascism – are assimilated together and distinguished from the Centre; the moment when socialism, anarchism and communism as the variegated opposition to an overwhelmingly conservative capitalism (of which militarism, fascism and nazism represent the limit points) are replaced by the simple opposition of ‘totalitarianism’ versus ‘democracy’. This fundamental shift paves the way for the subsequent reintroduction, during the Cold War period, of a very different discourse of ‘avant-gardism’: as the signifier, not of an oppositional or revolutionary anarchism or socialism, but of bourgeois, capitalist democracy and its central ideological totem, ‘the individual’.

One text, above all, established the provenance for the subsequent use of the concept of the avant-garde to define the whole international movement and in
particular its American leading edge after the Second World War; and on the
strength of that, to license its retrospective application back over the entire
modern period as far as Romanticism. That text was Clement Greenberg’s
‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ published in the New York journal *Partisan Review* in
the Fall of 1939. He writes: ‘a part of Western bourgeois society has produced
something unheard of heretofore: avant-garde culture’. Greenberg notes that
‘the birth of the avant-garde coincided chronologically – and geographically too –
with the first bold development of scientific revolutionary thought in Europe’. Yet
he then goes on to make the crucial conceptual move of detaching this artis-
tic avant-garde from the process of revolutionary development: ‘it is true that
once the avant-garde had succeeded in “detaching” itself from society, it pro-
ceeded to turn round and repudiate revolutionary politics as well as bourgeois.
The revolution was left inside society.’ The avant-garde becomes the culture of
an intellectually, and perhaps even ethically, dissident fraction of the middle class.
In a memorable phrase, Greenberg remarks that through economic necessity (for
no art can be produced without economic support) the avant-garde remained tied
to ‘the rich and the cultivated’ by ‘an umbilical cord of gold’. For Greenberg,
the mission of the avant-garde is ‘to create art and literature of a high order’,
and that eclipses all other agendas, including revolutionary social change. All the
avant-garde can do socially is keep cultural value alive, as it were in a strongroom,
deliberately closed off from ‘the welter of ideological struggle’ which in Green-
berg’s view threatened to reduce all value to the level of ‘kitsch’ (Greenberg,
1939).

Together with its immediate successor, ‘Towards a newer Laocoön’, published
in the same magazine in 1940, these early essays laid the basis for Greenberg
himself to attain a position of eminence in the world of American art. Insofar as
New York came to supplant Paris as the capital of international Modernism,
Greenberg became a cultural arbiter on a world scale. Yet in 1939, Greenberg’s
meditations on the avant-garde would not have had many readers at all. *Partisan
Review* was a classic ‘little magazine’. The argument obviously resonated
however, and very quickly ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ was taken up and reprinted
in the more widely circulated, and more mainstream, liberal periodical *Horizon*.
It is appropriate here to consider the distinction Baudelaire first made in the
1840s between the two sides of art, the ‘contingent’ and the ‘universal’, as sig-
nifying a tension inherent in the modern movement since its origin. It is as if
what Greenberg’s particular concept of the avant-garde achieved, albeit tem-
porarily, within the terms of a specific historical conjuncture, was finally to yoke
together the by no means obviously compatible ideas of cultural dynamism
and lasting value. It goes without saying that, ideologically, this fitted post-war
capitalism like a glove.

It is no idle question to ask, then, precisely where Greenberg got it from. As
we have seen, he did not get it from Alfred Barr and Roger Fry, then the two
most influential writers on art in the English language. The concept of the avant-
garde was kept at arm’s length by those who would establish modern art as itself
canonical, the heir to the classical canon, no less. It had too many links with those who fancied consigning the bourgeoisie to the ‘dustbin of history’, as Trotsky bluntly put it. But on the other side, from the late 1920s onwards Soviet communism became the property of the Stalinist bureaucracy, and as far as art went, that meant the end of the revolutionary avant-garde and the rise of Socialist Realism. The concept of the avant-garde, so to speak, got shot at from both sides. The canonizers of the modern movement did not like it because of its revolutionary affiliations. But because it had also been identified with the radical movements which had grown up within the fractures of bourgeois society, the emergent Soviet bureaucracy had no time for it either. In sum, neither the bourgeois apologists of the ‘modern movement’, nor its orthodox communist critics, produced a literature on which Greenberg could readily have drawn for his concept of the avant-garde.

Partisan Review began publication in 1934 and was almost immediately embroiled in the ideological conflicts which accompanied the policy shift in the international communist movement from the ‘Third Period’ to the ‘Popular Front’. The Third Period was a time of militant proletarianism, which set ‘class against class’. It was driven by Soviet domestic policies aimed at building ‘Socialism in One Country’ – policies such as the collectivization of agriculture and the Five-Year Plans – but internationally it was marked by a rhetoric of ‘Proletarian Culture’. The fledgling American Communist Party had organized John Reed Clubs (named after the author of Ten Days That Shook The World, the eyewitness account that had brought the Revolution to widespread notice) to promote the spread of proletarian culture: fiction, poetry, critical writing and to a lesser extent the visual arts, on working-class themes and whenever possible by working-class authors and artists. Partisan Review labelled itself the John Reed Club of New York.

However, faced by the rise of Hitler, the communist parties changed tack in the mid-1930s, and began to build cultural alliances with the bourgeois organizations they had hitherto denounced, in a ‘Popular Front’ against fascism. Leftism, tendentious art and proletarian culture were now in their turn denounced in favour of ‘realism’ and ‘human values’. In Partisan Review in 1936 Harold Rosenberg reviewed a biography of John Reed using the term ‘avant-garde’ in relatively conventional communist style to derogate bourgeois art. On Rosenberg’s account, Reed had ‘emerged from the avant-guard [sic] movement in art and literature’, which was ‘the anarchistic psychological shadow of an active liberal reformism, based in turn upon the energetic and aimless well being of the middle class’ (Rosenberg, 1936, pp. 28–9).

The pressure of keeping up with the twists and turns of Stalinist realpolitik eventually got too much for Partisan Review and the first phase of its publication ceased in October 1936. It then re-emerged in December 1937 proclaiming its independence from the Communist Party. Over the next two years, that is, to the time of Greenberg’s debut, the journal became more Trotskyist in its allegiances. This is reflected in the editorial content – which included more than one
swingeing denunciation of the Popular Front ‘Writers Congesses’ organized by the Party in New York in the late 1930s, on the basis of European and Soviet models held in Paris and Moscow. The process culminates in the Fall of 1938 in the publication of the ‘Manifesto: For a Free Revolutionary Art’ under the names of André Breton and Diego Rivera but largely composed by Trotsky himself. In it, the USSR is described as ‘a twilight of filth and blood’, and state intervention in art is contrasted with the need for ‘complete freedom for art’. The manifesto does not employ the term ‘avant-garde’, though the underlying idea is not far away from assertions such as: ‘We believe that the supreme task of art in our epoch is to take part actively and consciously in the preparation of the revolution.’ What is noteworthy however, given the sense of ‘avant-gardism’ that was shortly to be articulated by Greenberg, is that a free art with a key social role is explicitly contrasted with ‘a so-called pure art which generally serves the extremely impure ends of reaction’ (Breton, Rivera and Trotsky, 1938, pp. 49–53).

It is clear that Greenberg accords a qualitatively different status to the concept of the avant-garde than do his predecessors. On the one hand, the sense Greenberg makes of it is quite distinct both from orthodox Leftist thought and from liberal bourgeois criticism, for both of which the term carried negative connotations, albeit for almost entirely opposed reasons. But, on the other hand, Greenberg’s conception also departs from the conventional understanding of the term in the only tradition where it did have much currency: the diffuse tradition of anarchism and the contested hinterland of dissident anti-Stalinist Marxism. There the idea is still tied to a sense of wider political commitments from which Greenberg was shortly – and self-consciously – to divorce it. And it was as a manifestation of that tradition that the concept did appear in the pages of Partisan Review in the months before the appearance of ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ (1939).

The years 1938–9 saw the publication of a major study of the Soviet cinema by Dwight Macdonald, who had earlier translated the Trotsky/Breton/Rivera ‘Manifesto’. Throughout this text, Macdonald did use the term ‘avant-garde’. And we know, unequivocally, that Greenberg read it, because he takes issue with one of Macdonald’s claims in ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ itself. Macdonald uses the term in a more conventional ‘Trotskyist’ way than Greenberg, to denote the simultaneously artistically and politically radical movements which constituted the Soviet art sphere in the wake of the October Revolution. Thus: ‘The 1917 revolution, sweeping aside the lumber of the old order, opened a wide field to avant-garde art.’ These he then lists as ‘Mayakovsky and the LEF group in literature, Malievich and Kandinsky in painting, the formalist and the constructivist schools of architecture, Eisenstein, Pudovkin and Dovschenko in the cinema, Tairov and Meyerhold in the theatre’. Later in the essay he generalizes this, arguing that the Russian developments were based ‘on another phase of European culture: the avant-garde tendencies of futurism, dadaism, expressionism, surrealism etc.’; tendencies which, as Macdonald notes, shared the language
of ‘the intelligentsia of Europe and America’ (Macdonald, 1938, pp. 80–95). It is clear that the concept of an avant-garde was current in dissident Marxist circles in New York in the late 1930s. And insofar as this was an international tendency, one might speculate that at least the idea, if not the word, had some currency in those circles generally. Macdonald did not make it up.

A second thing that is evident however is that the tendency which the concept pointed to was in serious difficulties, if not dead. The Nazis were in the process of extirpating the avant-garde in western Europe. The Stalinists had finished it off in the Soviet Union, and their international organization, the Popular Front, had little time for avant-gardism. This crisis in the concept of the avant-garde becomes clear if we look at the *Partisan Review* editorial for the issue of Summer 1939, that is, the one immediately preceding the publication of ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’. Its tone is set by the title: ‘Twilight of the thirties’. In the text, Philip Rahv writes, ‘For more than a hundred years literature, on a world scale, was in the throes of constant inner revolution, was the arena of uninterrupted rebellions and counter rebellions, was incessantly renewing itself both in substance and in form. But at present it seems as if this magnificent process is drawing to a close.’ For Rahv, ‘There still are remnants, but no avant-garde movement to speak of exists any longer.’ They are in the grip of a ‘reactionary Zeitgeist’, and the condition of art reflects ‘the two great political catastrophes of our epoch: the victories of fascism and the defeat of the Bolshevik revolution’. Rahv asks, ‘Is there a basis for a new vanguard group whose members, not frightened by isolation, know how to swim against the current?’ But in 1939, the answer is negative: ‘I do not believe that a new avant-garde movement, in the proper historical sense of the term, can be formed in this pre-war situation’ (Rahv, 1939, pp. 3–15).

Rahv refers to ‘the proper historical sense of the term’, and he clearly means it to signify a radical art with a radical social role. Insofar as there can be said to be a ‘proper’ sense of such an ambivalent and contested concept, it is one that embraces both aspects of the term. What Greenberg does in ‘Avant-garde and kitsch’ and in ‘Towards a newer Laocoön’ is, quite strategically, to take one of those strands of meaning and make it over as the meaning. There is a certain defensive logic to Greenberg’s move, made on the eve of a second world war, and at the moment of the apparent triumph of Fascism and Stalinism in Europe, symbolized in the Nazi-Soviet Pact. What he could not have foreseen however, as he wrote his essay in the summer of 1939, was that in the next five years the entire map of cultural and political forces would change, on a world scale. The Left tradition out of which he wrote was about to reach a terminus. When the train of the avant-garde next pulled out of the station, the lines were going to be pointing in a very different direction. The day of Modernism, with a capital M, was about to dawn. As Clement Greenberg himself put it in 1960: ‘some day it will have to be told how “anti-Stalinism”, which started out more or less as “Trotskyism”, turned into art for art’s sake, and thereby cleared the way, heroically, for what was to come’ (Greenberg, 1961, p. 230).
With benefit of hindsight the long arc from the aftermath of the French Revolution up to the late 1960s can be seen as the epoch of the avant-garde, a time when the clash of meanings attributed to the term counted for something. In the 1840s when Baudelaire first wrote of the two halves of art, on the one side the fleeting and contingent, the imperative to address contemporary history or to become empty and irrelevant, and on the other the legacy of value, the timeless, the permanent, the sense of standards which art must keep before itself if it is not to lapse into triviality and entertainment, he prefigured the clash of some of the defining stereotypes of the modern movement: Realism and Modernism; aesthetics and politics. The concept of the avant-garde slips across these boundaries, now in one guise, now in another: the avant-gardist at one moment the agitator using art as a lever to topple the status quo, at another the aesthete careless of commitment, eyes fixed on the horizon of eternity. Yet in the closing decades of the twentieth century a new note was struck. In the wake of 1968, radical cultural historians like Peter Bürger and T. J. Clark rewrote the history of the avant-garde, reinscribing the politics which Modernism had effectively erased. But the moment of the New Left in the 1960s was itself to prove transitional, on the way to a deeper questioning of the idea of avant-gardism as such in the period now conventionally referred to as ‘postmodern’. When Greenberg sketched the lineage of his notion of the Modernist avant-garde, he located its impulse in the philosophy of Kant. It is in some senses then not surprising to discover that when Enlightenment ideals themselves have been called into question, when the ‘grand narratives’ of truth, justice and beauty have been claimed as the masks of self-interested men, the very notion of an avant-garde has been rejected.

That which is ‘in advance’ (en avant) has to be in advance of something. For long it was a commonplace that various types of modern art represent ideas and forms of consciousness, and indeed forms of social relationships which were in important respects ahead of the characteristic beliefs and norms of the wider society. In the present period, these underlying assumptions of progress and of a single way forward for society which far-sighted people can recognize, have themselves been fundamentally questioned. One of the consequences of this has been a no less fundamental questioning of the very principle of avant-gardism in the arts: not only of the particular inflections which the avant-garde assumed in modern Western societies, but the whole notion of leadership as it is implicit in the concept right back to its origins. Thus a feminist historian, sensitive both to the gender inequality internal to the practice of avant-gardism itself, and to the complicity, witting or otherwise, of the modern movement in the arts in the wider structures of Western imperialism, has written scathingly of avant-garde ‘apartheid’ (Nelson and Shiff, 1996, p. 165). While that position may not be universally shared, another historian is on firm ground when she writes that ‘to
designate a movement ‘avant-garde’ is surely no longer to bestow an accolade’ (Ward, 1996, p. 2).

What has happened is that the idea of the avant-garde has become a casualty of the conceptual earthquake that has demolished the edifice of Modernism. One consequence of this is that those who continue to use the term without thinking are living, whether they know it or not, in Modernism’s ruins. But what remains open is the question of whether some conceptual refashioning of the notion of an ‘avant-garde’ can retain its usefulness as a means of critical leverage against the ever more dominating normal forms of the mediated and commodified cultures of contemporary capitalism. It was in this register that Hal Foster rehearsed the litany of charges against the avant-garde: ‘the ideology of progress, the presumption of originality, the elitist hermeticism . . . the appropriation by the culture industry, and so on’. Despite all this, however, Foster’s point was that the idea ‘remains a crucial coarticulation of artistic and political forms’, and that, by extension, it remains a worthwhile intellectual and critical task to ‘complicate its past and support its future’ (Foster, 1996, p. 5). However problematic, the notion of an avant-garde represents an idea in terms of which the practice of modern art has been related to society at large. It is an open question whether it remains a useful device for thinking these relationships, or whether it is the symptom of a past that art and society alike have now travelled beyond.

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