The Marginalisation of Art
The Avant-Garde, De-Realisation, and the Art Attack
Richard Murphy

In January 2006 at the Dada exhibition in the Beaubourg museum in Paris an incident took place involving one of the foremost icons of the avant-garde, namely Marcel Duchamp's famous *Fountain*, the urinal which he signed "R. Mutt, 1917". A French conceptual artist, Pierre Pinoncelli, attacked the celebrated object with a small hammer causing slight damage, for which he was subsequently fined €150,000. According to reports this was in fact the second time that he had attacked Duchamp's piece. On the previous occasion he had given way to an urge of a slightly different kind and had attempted simply to urinate in it.[1] Similarly, when the pop musician Brian Eno visited Duchamp's *Fountain* in the Museum of Modern Art in New York he had carefully hidden in his trousers a system of tubing which allowed him to open his fly and aim several drops of his own, previously collected bodily fluids into the porcelain. In comparable fashion, at a 1999 exhibition for the Turner Prize at Tate Britain two Chinese conceptual artists took advantage of the availability of Tracey Emin's *My Bed* and stripped off for a quick romp in the sheets. One of them was apprehended before he had a chance to take off his own underwear and replace it with the rather grubby pair that Tracey Emin had thoughtfully included as part of her exhibit of this typical scene from her own boudoir. The artists described their action as a "performance" (with the title *Two Naked Men Jump Into Tracey's Bed*) and as an artistic intervention, claiming that they were "improving" Emin's work, which in their opinion had "not gone far enough".[2]

Obviously this is not the first time that an exhibit in an art museum has been attacked. But it seems significant that rather than involving a mindless attack with a sharp instrument on a recognised masterpiece simply to inflict damage the assaults on these avant-garde pieces are of a rather different order, and have a method to their own particular madness. Avant-garde works appear to be especially prone to

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[1] See John Lichfield. "'Performance artist' stages second attack on Duchamp's urinal," *The Independent* (London, 7/1/2006).

[2] On the incidents with Eno and *My Bed*, see the article "Art attacks" by Mark Blacklock, *The Daily Telegraph* 26/06/2003.. Although Yuan Chai and Jian Jun Xi were arrested for their action no charges were pressed. Chai had written the words "ANTI STUCKISM" on his bare back. They said they opposed the Stuckists, who are anti-performance art.

such onslaughts, and art attacks such as these—clearly not isolated cases—appear to imply the critique that an earlier "tradition" of the avant-garde is dead or, as in the case of Tracey Emin's bed, that it may need help in producing any shock. At the most basic level it could be argued that such art attacks are indeed also interventions, that is, a form of continuation of the original joke or even an elaboration of the original artistic conception. For in a sense the attack actually *renews* the avant-garde impetus by asking certain questions about the piece, for example regarding its museum setting, its canonisation as art, and in the case of the "real" or "found" object, about its relationship to the world beyond. With a "found" object for example the art attack reminds us of its original significance as a mundane object, and so helps to recover the source of that originally startling effect which in the passage of time has been canonised and overlaid by the veneer of familiarity, fame or notoriety.[3]

As real-life actions, it could be argued that art attacks such as these draw our attention to an important characteristic of the avant-garde and the modernist period in general: they are emblematic of a change in the role of the audience, involving a much more active and autonomous relationship to the work. And this is linked to the attempt to re-draw the reality-frame of the work anew and so encourage the recipient to rethink the relationship between art and life. In this they function in a manner similar to the image of the nail that Braque painted into his modernist picture *Violon et palette* (Autumn 1909), from which the painting was jokingly supposed to be hanging.[4] Like the avant-garde work itself, the art attack draws our attention to the division between art and reality precisely by playing with the indicators of the frame and the boundary dividing the work from its context in a notionally "external" reality.

A consideration of the art attack helps to highlight a number of key characteristics and functions of the avant-garde. For example it appears significant firstly that if the avant-garde work is meant to shock and provoke its spectator, then these art attacks respond to this provocation by demonstrating a correspondingly *heightened participation* on the part of the audience, a commonly observed feature of modernism and the avant-garde, as we shall see. To the extent that this heightened

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[3] I agree with Hal Foster's wariness regarding Peter Bürger's tendency to focus on narrower notions of the ready-made, and with Foster's observation that "not all readymades are everyday objects." See Foster. *The Return of the Real*, Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1996, p. 231 note 8.

[4] A reproduction of this painting can be found at:
http://www.guggenheimcollection.org/site/artist_work_lg_23_6.html .

participation creates an artistic "situation" similar to a "happening" it also dramatically "stages" the avant-garde's fundamental realignment of the relationship between the art object and the recipient: the idea that the audience is no longer simply the passive beholder of a fixed art object but the active producer of its meaning.[5] Secondly as an intervention the attack highlights another key aspect of avant-garde art, namely that the object is no longer a unique, eternally fixed and *determinate* art "work" but can also take a slightly different physical form, without this change affecting its fundamental concept (for example the bed as an installation could also be reinstalled in a slightly different fashion; another urinal could be found as a replacement for Duchamp's).[6] Thirdly, the intervention as an "event" foregrounds the way that the avant-garde also extends the conceptual boundaries of the work, and that it exists over and beyond its appearance as an object in the here and now. This also changes the art object's relation to the contingencies of the "outside" world. Fourthly, when the attacker steps into the ontological frame of the work, so to speak, this not only breaks the "aura" of the work but also involves a blurring of the boundaries between the work and its outside, thereby bringing together art and life—another key feature of the avant-garde.

In each case the art attack draws our attention to the relationship between the art object and its recipient as well as to its surrounding context in reality, and so raises a wider question: the relevance of the aesthetic sphere. For the tensions between the realms of art and reality, and the blurring and questioning of their boundaries were crucial for the historical or modernist avant-garde's self-critical investigation of the literary and artistic culture of the early twentieth century. The continued importance of such questions of boundary within progressive literature and art up to the present-day also provides evidence of an ongoing avant-garde impulse even within contemporary culture, aiming not only to explore the categories of the work of art, but to uncover once more its radical or oppositional potential, and ultimately its wider social relevance.

I have argued elsewhere that the means by which the avant-garde fulfils its key principle of bringing together art and life is frequently by taking art down to the level

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[5] See Robert Dunn. "Postmodernism: Populism, Mass Culture, and Avant-Garde", in *Theory, Culture and Society*, 1991, p.242.

[6] It is worth noting for example that Duchamp replaced the original 1917 model – documented in an Alfred Stieglitz photo but subsequently lost – with a slightly different model (containing fewer drainage holes!) in a series of replicas in 1964. See the reproductions in Leah Dickerman, (ed.), *Dada*, Washington: National Gallery of Art, 2006, p. 308.

of the mundane.[7] This strategy also renews the main tension behind such pieces: the link between, on the one hand, its place and mundane status in the real world, and on the other, the aesthetic aura with which it is endowed within the world of art when the everyday item is placed in the unusual context of a museum. This tension between the two realms is crucial, since as the case of the "ready-made" makes clear, its very innocence or neutrality—a characteristic that Marcel Duchamp associated with Dada and its force as what he called a "blank"—has the function of eliciting the range of aesthetic preconceptions and generic expectations already present within the audience.[8] For these preconceptions are suddenly called up by the unanticipated placement of the mundane object within this new context, at which point, given the banality of the object, such artistic expectations are highlighted when they appear so clearly surplus to requirements. As Peter Bürger has argued, it is in this way that "certain general categories of the work of art were first made recognisable in their generality by the avant-garde".[9]

Bürger maintains that the central principle of the avant-garde is the bringing together of art and life, and he points to the movement of aestheticism as the high point of a development in which the artist tended only to look inwards towards art itself with little interest in the world beyond. This development also signified the complete social isolation of art and its lack of wider influence, and Bürger also seizes on aesthetic autonomy as an example of this self-containment. Yet as I have argued elsewhere the critical distance that the term "aesthetic autonomy" implies is clearly a necessary and indispensable component even of progressive and critical art and literature, and the bringing together of art and life cannot therefore represent a goal in its own right.[10] What I want to argue instead is that the primary issue for the

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[7] Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism and the Problem of Postmodernity*, Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999.

[8] In an interview Marcel Duchamp described Dada as a "purgative", a way of creating such blanks that made one aware of one's dependence or orientation on existing "landmarks". Dada was "a way to get out of a state of mind – to avoid being influenced by one's immediate environment, or by the past: to get away from clichés – to get free. The 'blank' force of Dada was very salutary. It told you 'don't forget you are not quite so "blank" as you think you are.' Usually a painter confesses he has his landmarks. He goes from landmark to landmark. Actually he is a slave to landmarks – even to contemporary ones". Quoted in Lucy Lippard. *Dadas on Art*, Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall, 1971, p. 141.

[9] Peter Bürger. *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984, p. 19.

[10] *Murphy*, 1999, pp. 26–27.

avant-garde when we look more closely is really that the sublation of art and life is only the means to a more important end, which is to highlight the *marginalisation of art in society*. My argument is that what has frequently been overlooked is that the avant-garde object's "shocking" relationship to the real represents less an attempt to sublate art and life than a way of protesting the diminished social relevance of art. Furthermore, many of the avant-garde's most familiar strategies are more readily understood as a means of highlighting the problem of art's social position, and working out new possibilities for avant-garde criticality associated with the attempt to *de*marginalise literary and artistic culture.

Readers in History: Audience, Affect and Social Relevance
Clearly the lack of wider social relevance, which sparked the emergence of the modernist avant-garde, is not a universal feature of art. In two long-ranging studies of the history of critical theory and literary affect, Jane Tompkins and Karin Littau have each surveyed the changes that have occurred in the social and moral functions of art since the Greek classical period.[11] Both studies observe not only the key changes in the direction of literary criticism, but the historical transformations in the audience's expectations regarding literary texts and their possible public functions.

As Littau observes, it is only relatively recently, from the modernist period onwards, that the contemporary recipient's "engagement with literature is confined to acts of contemplation, understanding, sense-making" while the function of the literary work is transformed so that it becomes "an object to be interpreted for its meaning" (p. 86). And as Tompkins notes, what all forms of modern criticism have in common, whether oriented towards reader response, psychoanalysis, structuralism, formalism, or thematics, is the principle that *meaning* is the essential object of critical discussion, the reason being that "unlike the ancients we equate language not with action but with signification" (p.203). What emerges from these studies is that this emphasis on signification, which the contemporary critic takes for granted, is in fact a very recent development in the long history of criticism, and that prior to this the dominant and much longer tradition was one of "affective

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[11] Jane Tompkins. "The Reader in History", in *Reader Response Criticism: from Formalism to Poststructuralism*, Tompkins (ed), Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980, pp. 201–232; Karin Littau. *Theories of Reading*, Cambridge: Polity Press, 2006.

criticism". This involved nothing less than influencing social behaviour and the shape of society.

Although classical commentaries are also preoccupied with audience response, the goal in the classical period was, according to Tompkins, not to produce a discussion of the *meaning* of a particular passage but to draw the reader into the scene of the action, and into its language, so that "the question of what the passage 'means' does not arise. Once the desired *effect* has been achieved, there is no need, or room, for interpretation" (p. 203). Language was viewed "as a force acting on the world, rather than as a series of signs to be deciphered" (ibid.). Citing Aristotle, Tompkins shows that when he is describing pity and fear he is interested above all in the "vividness of impression", in the "concentrated effect", and in the extent to which the work of art achieves its main goal, which is to be "striking" (ibid.). With Plato too the text is not important as an object of analysis, precisely because literature is there not for its own sake but in order to produce results, for example to affect behaviour, to shape civic morality and to make better citizens (p. 204). At this stage then, literary and artistic culture is clearly oriented towards its social impact.

In Renaissance art a social function still predominates, and literature is conceived in terms of guiding behaviour and public morals. Sir Philip Sidney encapsulates a common sentiment with the notion that literature has a moral dimension, and "moveth to virtue".[12] At the same time the operative critical values are also often linked to the needs of literary patronage and public relations. Far from being associated with an autonomous aesthetic value, literature here is aimed at a particular audience and specific forms of social influence, namely the need to memorialise, praise, thank or petition. In the Enlightenment there is a turn away from the classical emphasis on rhetoric as the art of persuasion and as the means by which discourse can exert an influence upon the world, and instead there is an increasing tendency to view the aesthetic as a value in its own right. As Littau discerns, "the greater emphasis on affect, as opposed to effect, signals a retreat from a public into a more intimate sphere: the private world of emotions and sensations" (p. 89). And what develops here is of course a new conception of human subjectivity, now defined increasingly according to the values of understanding, emotion and individualism. By the time of the Romantics this move towards the private sphere has developed such that the emphasis is less upon the way that the work moves the audience to act in a particular way, than upon its significance for

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[12] Philip Sidney. *An Apology for Poetry*, quoted in Littau, *Theories of Reading*, p. 88.

the particular sensibility of the literary genius, and for the mental and emotional powers of the poet. And at the same time that "claims are made for the power of poetry to transform human consciousness" the poet starts to be described as lonely and ineffectual (Tompkins p. 217). Consequently, as Littau points out, "with the reader increasingly distant […] literature becomes a subjective expression of its author's personality, an introverted form of communication by a solitary artist to a reader, whose reaction this author can barely gauge" (p. 91).

The concentration on the isolated poet-genius, and on poetry as feeling and confessional, means that literature appears increasingly to be written for its own sake. Correspondingly literary criticism demonstrates less interest in the effect of literature upon the audience or upon the wider world, and increasingly concerns itself with what literature *is*, in other words, with literature as an end in itself. If the separation of literature from everyday life was already observable in Romanticism, with the beginnings of modernism in the late nineteenth century the ever-widening gap between literary activity and social-political life becomes crucial in triggering the response of the modernist avant-garde.[13] For the line of development sketched out by Tompkins and Littau regarding affect and the social function of literary culture can also be read as mapping out what I have called the progressive *marginalisation* of literary and artistic culture, that is, its alienation and separation from society and history. This trend culminates in what Peter Bürger in his *Theory of the Avant-Garde* has linked to the idealisation of aesthetic autonomy, epitomised by the late nineteenth-century movement of aestheticism. Art in the case of "l'art pour l'art" is an end in itself with no social or moral use. The writer is entirely self-absorbed and completely alienated from society, and speaks at most to a small group of like-minded thinkers, with an ideal audience of just one.

The Modernist Avant-Garde and Modernist Order
Yet if the modernist avant-garde emerges to react against aestheticism and art's increasing social and political marginalisation, at the same time there is an equally powerful trend within modernist literary and artistic culture oriented towards the critical goal of keeping culture separate from contamination by practical or political ideas. Contemporaneous with some of the high points of modernism, the influential criticism of the American "New Critics" holds fast to a literary culture of social and political "disinterestedness," geared to preserving a stable, organised and balanced

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[13] On this separation of art and life see also Tompkins, 1980, p. 217.

response to the chaos and disorder of modernity. These critics are interested above all in organic unity, structure and meaning, whether reconciled within the text itself or within the reader. The complexities, contradictions and paradoxes in the text are ultimately brought to a harmonious resolution because, as Littau observes, what matters is that poetry "provides a degree of order and harmony, through unity, which is missing from life, and in particular modern life with all its confusion and disorder" (p. 97).

This urge to reconciliation is by no means limited to the Anglo-American field, and it is worth noting that similar discussions regarding modernist writing took place on the continent during the so-called "Expressionism Debates" of the 1920s. Indeed, none other than Georg Lukacs had argued there against the way that the expressionist writers for example had reacted to the chaos of modernity by merely reflecting the fragmented and alienated surface of society with their similarly fragmented and disunified texts. In other words he criticised the fact that with techniques such as the montage they had precisely failed to provide unified forms and meanings, or the kind of rounded, unified and organic formal structure that would offer a sense of "closure" or "covering over" ("Zudecken") in response to modernity's disorder. Setting the agenda for an avant-garde form of modernism Ernst Bloch however had countered Lukacs by asking ironically, "would it have been better if [the expressionists] had served as doctors at the sickbed of capitalism? If they had stitched together the surface of 'reality' rather than ripping it open even further?"[14]

This discussion points to the basis for what could turn out to be a crucial distinction between two very different artistic approaches within modernism. On the one hand there is the version of a "harmonious" modernism (advocated by the New Critics) that responds to the experience of modernity and to its characteristic turmoil, alienation and disarray in a compensatory fashion by providing the basis for a sense of unity, cohesion and order. And on the other, the opposing tendency within modernism—and frequently within the same work—is associated with the historical or modernist avant-garde, and reflects the chaotic and fragmented face of modernity through correlative forms, such as its strategies of interruption, discontinuity and montage. It resists any sense of overall narrative coherence or pattern, and postpones closure.

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[14] On these debates between Lukacs and Bloch see my *Theorizing the Avant-Garde*, p. 16.

While both of these modernist approaches make increased demands upon the audience, clearly the modernist avant-garde's disruptive strategies will call for heightened activity, and for new and creative modes of response on the part of the recipient. For example the uprooted fragments of the "real" world in collage and montage works will make the demand most forcefully of all that the recipient needs to become an artistic collaborator and to forge the links between these fragments in order to construct a new and meaningful context. The blank meaninglessness of the avant-garde text (such as a found object, or a dada or surrealist sound poem) will also present the very idea of meaning-construction as a challenge, and will tend to function by bringing to light the (frustrated) expectations and conventional aesthetic criteria of the recipient, rather than by presenting any meanings "contained" within the artwork itself.

Thus if all modernist works bring to fore this heightened activity and highlight the enhanced role of the reader, this is most pronounced in the case of the art and literature of the modernist avant-garde, which escalates this tendency and vastly multiplies the number of textual discontinuities, gaps and "semantic vacuums" in its typical montage works and reality fragments. It is perhaps no coincidence then that the boom in critical theory in 1960s and 1970s saw the rise to prominence of reader response theory, and that one of the principal methodologies posing the question of how the audience makes sense of the text was the reception theory (or "Wirkungsästhetik") of Wolfgang Iser, with its focus on the mainstay of the avant-garde: discontinuities, interruptions, textual blanks and indeterminacies.

Wolfgang Iser: Blanks, Gaps and the Aesthetics of Fragmentation
If the historical trend in literary criticism indicates an attempt to exclude the recipient (along with discussions of affect and personal feelings), with the emergence of reader response theory the audience is put back into the frame. Rather than *discovering meaning*, as a kind of "figure in the carpet" hidden away and waiting simply to be discovered within a stable and fixed text, critics such as Wolfgang Iser begin to set out the parameters for the reader's role in *making meaning*.

Essential for Iser's model is the idea that all literary texts contain "empty spaces," places of indeterminacy, "vacancies" or semantic "blanks" that the reader must fill, as for example when the reader is obliged to make sense of a narrative or plot development by connecting various sections of the text, or to resolve a contradiction between the differing viewpoints of characters or narrators. The reader is guided in this activity by signals within the text, some of which are

themselves left for the reader to determine. The unformulated aspects of the text are crucial in encouraging reader's activity of understanding.[15] For as Iser demonstrates, these gaps of indeterminacy in the text do not have to be completed by the reader in a predetermined fashion, but can be resolved by readers so as to produce a variety of meanings in a variety of ways. Thus, "one text is potentially capable of several different realisations, and no reading can ever exhaust the full potential" (p. 280). The image he gives in order to convey the constraints involved in the play between determinacy and indeterminacy is that of a starry sky, in which the stars themselves are fixed, but the constellations and links that we draw between them, (whether a European "Plough" or a North American "Big Dipper"), remain unfixed and open to our imagination.

The gaps can take a variety of forms: undelineated aspects of plot or character; anticipations of developments in a narrative; or missing connections at the level of word or sentence, and so on. Obviously the gap or blank is never to be associated with a textual deficiency, since the function of indeterminacy is to encourage the reader's participation. To this extent Iser shares with contemporary critics such as Roland Barthes a tendency to promote the "writerly" texts that resist closure, and to find disappointment in the textual determinacy of the "readerly." As Iser says in *Prospecting*,

> A text that lays things out before the reader in such a way that he can either accept or reject them will lessen the degree of participation, as it allows him nothing but a yes or no. Texts with such minimal indeterminacy tend to be tedious, for it is only when the reader is given the chance to participate actively that he will regard the text, whose intention he himself has helped to compose, as real. For we generally tend to regard things that we have made ourselves as being real. And so it can be said that indeterminacy is the fundamental precondition for reader participation.[16]

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[15] Wolfgang Iser observes that indeterminacy in the form of a negation can become the "propellant which enables the unformulated cause to become the theme of the imaginary object ideated by the reader. Thus negativity acts as a mediator between representation and reception: it initiates the constitutive acts". *The Act of Reading*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1978, p. 228.

[16] Wolfgang Iser. *Prospecting,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989, p. 10.

Consequently in Iser's view, what is not formulated by the text is just as important as what is. The unsaid functions as a means of critical negation, for rather than simply mirroring the world, the text will tend instead to attract the reader's own projections of those social constructions which he or she inhabits. One of the most important textual strategies is that of calling up the norms of the social system in which the reader lives in order to defamiliarise and question them. For by creating a position from which these norms appear dubious, the text can produce the effect of a critical negation, thereby unsettling, disrupting and interfering with the dominant cultural constructions in society. Thus to the extent that the text involves the reader in dramatizing his or her own world, and in dismantling and reconstructing his or her role within it, the critical or negative function of literature is to encourage an interrogation of both identity and these inhabited social formations.[17]

While Iser's theories apply in principle to texts of different kinds and historical periods, it obviously has a special relevance to modernism, and to the modernist avant-garde in particular. For a text will function as a critical intervention in proportion to its discontinuity, its use of blanks and its degree of textual indeterminacy. Iser's own observation is that the historical trend of literary history is characterised by the marked increase in indeterminacy over time, reaching a high point with the difficult and demanding texts typical of modernism. And as we have seen, within modernism it is precisely the avant-garde with its strategies of interruption, discontinuity, fragmentation and montage that is most prominent in creating blanks and gaps, and so correspondingly demands the most active participation of the reader in filling these gaps with projections from his or her own social experience.

Now if the history of critical theory, as Tomkins and Littau have argued, is a history of the waning of affect, and if this development can also be read alongside the movement of literature and art towards its own social and political marginalisation, then the insights into indeterminacy provided by the aesthetics of reception also reinforce this view that the avant-garde is a critical moment within this evolution of art. For the aim of the avant-garde is not only to react against the social isolation associated with aesthetic autonomy and with the institutionalisation of art, as Bürger would maintain, through sublating art and life. Rather, the

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[17] I am indebted to Gabriele Schwab's insightful discussion of Iser's theory of negation in "'If Only I Were Not Obliged to Manifest': Iser's Aesthetics of Negativity", *New Literary History* 31.1 (2000) p. 78.

overriding goal of the avant-garde is to de-marginalise art and literature. And in this the avant-garde's strategies of discontinuity and interruption are also the most radical in bringing about a dismantling of the reader's world, for it is paradoxically the fractured and indeterminate character of its texts which is the precondition for its social and critical engagement. They vastly propagate indeterminacy through blanks and gaps, and so dramatically heighten the audience's involvement by calling up and defamiliarising the audience's own expectations and conventional standpoints. In this fashion they provide an enhanced basis for a critical negation of the dominant cultural and social constructions inhabited by the audience.

Hayden White, Narrative Emplotment and De-realisation
If the avant-garde work is characterised by an emphasis on the "writerly" approach, and by a resistance to closure and to the ordering function of narration, then this also aligns it with a further important critical function within modernism that has an effect parallel to Iser's aesthetics of negation: it questions the stability and continuity of our orienting constructions, and in particular the status of reality and history. For as Hayden White has argued, a defining aspect of modernism is the "apprehension that the meaning, form, or coherence of events, whether real or imaginary ones, is a function of their narrativisation".[18] This insight into the way that narrativisation crucially endows the work with a historical pattern and with ontological validity means that in modernism the notions of "character" and "event" are subjected to particular scrutiny. White argues that as a result the modernist text—and I would maintain that this applies above all to the modernist avant-garde—"resists the temptation to 'emplot' events and the 'actions' of the 'characters' so as to produce the meaning-effect derived by demonstrating how one's end may be contained in one's beginning" (p.24). Furthermore, White maintains that by refraining from traditional emplotment "modernism thereby effects what Fredric Jameson calls the 'de-realisation' of the event itself" (*Ibid.*). It brings about this "de-realisation," that is, the undermining of the reality-status of events and characters, by "consistently voiding the event of its traditional narrativistic function," which is the function of linking characters and their lives to those grand narratives and archetypes (such as fortune, destiny or divine intervention) usually deployed as a compensatory means of endowing a sense of pattern, continuity and "transhistorical significance" upon

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[18] Hayden White. "The Modernist Event," in *The Persistence of History: Cinema, Television, and the Modern Event,* Vivian Sobchack (ed.), New York: Routledge, 1996, p.26.

events (p. 24–25). In other words, rather than providing some form of emplotment to link events together and endow them with an overriding pattern, the more radical modernist text preserves the rawness of its images of modernity and portrays "the experience of time as a series of instants which either fail to take on the form of a story or fall apart into shards and fragments of existence" (p. 25). This "de-realises" events, but it also throws back upon its audience the task of organising the fragments into a meaningful order of its own making. And in creating a form of narrative discontinuity that resists closure and the resolution of meaning into a single, unified history, the result is that it opens up instead the possibility of multiple versions of "history".

Fredric Jameson's observation of modernism's occasional attraction to the consolations of myth and archetype (and presumably to the ordering functions offered by such all-embracing and transhistorical narratives) is evidence of the coexistence of a compensatory response to de-realisation within the more conservative areas of modernist practice.[19] But by contrast the avant-garde mode of modernism is characterised by its consistent undermining of any sense of intellectual mastery—of the kind advocated for example by Lukacs—in its representation of modernity. Citing Auerbach's *Mimesis* and his description of modernist literature, Hayden White extrapolates a number of textual features which fulfill this principle of the disavowal of mastery. These features include firstly, the predominant "tone of doubt and questioning" in the narrator's interpretation of events; secondly the disappearance of any external (or objective) viewpoint, and of the "writer as narrator of objective facts"; thirdly, as a consequence of the absence of objectivity, the mediation of events instead via the consciousness of characters (frequently underlined by the use of stream-of-consciousness and interior monologue in order to obscure even further the sense of an objective and known reality, as well as the distinction between objective and subjective, interior and exterior); and fourthly, the representation of time not as "successive episodes of a story" but as random and chance occasions.[20]

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[19] Fredric Jameson. *Sartre: The Origins of a Style*, New York: Columbia University Press, 1984, p. 210. Cited by Hayden White. "The Modernist Event", p. 32.

[20] Hayden White. "Auerbach's Literary History. Figural Causation and Modernist Historicism," *Figural Realism,* Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 2002, p. 100. White is citing Erich Auerbach. *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1953, pp. 534–38.

We can understand why the provocative and interrogative response of the modernist avant-garde can be seen as particularly pertinent in the face of the chaos of modernity. For rather than covering over the fragments and discontinuities of the world the modernist avant-garde disavows intellectual mastery of the kind that would emplot events in order to create the compensation of artificial closure. As in the case of the textual indeterminacy posited by Iser this strategy involves nothing less than a full-scale interrogation of our inherited conventions for producing meaning, of our orientation within the world via such fundamental categories as reality and history, and of our belief in the objectivity, stability and continuity of these "inhabited fictions." Hayden White sees this more radical mode of modernism as setting aside "the longstanding distinction between history and fiction […] in order to image a historical reality purged of the myths of such 'grand narratives' as fate, providence, Geist, progress".[21] And in as far as the emplotment of real-life events in historical narratives involves the danger of falsification by creating an artificial sense of order, resolution and "psychic mastery," the self-questioning forms of "anti-narration" associated with this more radical modernist mode by contrast offer "the only prospect for adequate representations of the kind of 'unnatural' events—including the Holocaust—that mark our era and distinguish it absolutely from all of the 'history' that has come before it".[22] It is for this reason that White views this de-realising, modernist mode as the only form adequate for representing the "modernist event". For since it explodes the storytelling conventions of coherence in character and event, it thereby resists the dangers of translating the unimaginable too easily into the kind of humanising or aestheticizing framework that will allow it to be prematurely "mastered" and so, simply filed away.

In closing I want to look beyond the modernist avant-garde and observe that many of the key features and critical forms we have observed there still persist within contemporary culture and postmodernism. The avant-garde endures in those contemporary works that continue to address the self-enclosed autonomy of art by developing new forms of criticality. In postmodernism these are often linked with strategies aimed at setting aside the distinction between history and fiction. For example, the so-called "historiographic metafiction" that Linda Hutcheon has investigated in novels such as Doctorow's *Ragtime* achieves this by taking real-life

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[21] Hayden White. *Figural Realism*, p. 100.
[22] Hayden White. "The Modernist Event," p. 32

figures and placing them inside fictional narratives.[23] There are further links here to the works of writers as different as Christa Wolf and W.G. Sebald which similarly set aside the distinctions between fiction and history in order to interrogate our reliance on inherited conventions of "realisation".

What is at stake here is a contemporary take on the demarginalisation of art, involving a confrontation between the literary and the historical, and with the effect of demonstrating the ongoing social relevance of art to life. Framed in terms of the criticality discussed above, it produces what I would consider the essential insight of postmodernism: the awareness that history is constructed by the same conventions of signification, language and narration as fiction. In each case we can see the clear trace of the avant-garde as the critical force which denies the sense of closure and totality associated with a unified sense of history, and which instead promotes those forms of heterogeneity, fragmentation and contradiction associated instead with multiple "histories". And in this form the spectre of the avant-garde continues to probe the social conventions behind the making of meaning, and to ask whose facts and whose history come to be represented.

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[23] Linda Hutcheon's discussion of demarginalisation has informed my arguments throughout. See "The Pastime of Past Time. Fiction, History, Historiographical Metafiction," in M. Hoffmann and P. Murphy (eds.), *Essentials of the Theory of Fiction*, London: Leicester UP, 1996, pp. 473–495.

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