

The (True) Death of the Avant-Garde

Rachel Schreiber

Maryland Institute College of Art, Baltimore, Maryland, USA

Abstract

The goal of this paper is twofold. First, it asks, can digital media be avant-garde (or neo, or post-avant-garde)? Second, it asks, why do we, practitioners, theorists and critics not only of new media but of all art practices, continue to value and aspire to be deserving of the title avant-garde?

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Recent discourse often positions new media as hailing a time of a new avant-garde. Within traditional art history and criticism, a range of theoretical positions has been elaborated for many years on the death of the avant-garde, the possibility of a new avant-garde, or potential delineations for a neo- or post-avant-garde. Writers such as Peter Bürger, Renato Poggioli, Hal Foster, and Clement Greenberg¹ have theorized the history and practice of the avant-garde. One of the most important essays decrying the end of the avant-garde is Rosalind Krauss's piece, "The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths."² Many, many other articles, books and works can be found, both within art history and literary criticism, which pursue these topics. Regardless of the source, the debates have been in place for a long time, yet in discussions about digital media arts, the term continues to be recycled and valorized. The goal of this paper is twofold. First it asks, can digital media be avant-garde (or neo, or post-avant-garde)? Second, it asks what I believe to be a far more interesting question: why do we, practitioners, theorists and critics not only of digital media but of all art practices, continue to value and aspire to being deserving of the title avant-garde?³

In order to ask the first question, about the relationship of digital media arts to the avant-garde, both terms ("digital media arts" and "avant-garde") must be defined. Digital media is a term that is becoming increasingly obsolete, as computers become more and more a part of everyday life. As artists in a range of disciplines use computers at some point in their process or production, which media will be deemed "digital"? The term "new media" certainly is not better, because the whole notion of "newness" has been historically problematized, and this will largely be the issue at stake in this paper.⁴ However, while the name may be a matter of dispute, and while it might be increasingly obsolete to even discuss digital media, at this point in time there certainly is a medium here to be discussed. I define a medium as a set of practices around which a discursive body of knowledge has been produced. These practices are manifest through some form of material support. In the case of digital media arts, they are germane to one or more of the following conditions: their very inception relies on processed data of some sort, their exhibition relies on a data processing system (or systems), their production occurs within a networked environment, or their distribution is dependent on the network. *What all of these conditions have in common is that*

the work is in some way reducible to the binary code that forms it as information. Therefore, in some sense, the material support in the case of these works is not material, but immaterial. It is precisely because the code itself is immaterial—both infinitely reproducible, as well as consistent across all of its material forms (whether it is still imagery, text, sound or video, it is always ones and zeros)—that it can be transmitted or displayed in the digital environment and so open up possibilities for its dissemination that have not been previously available.

Having attempted to define digital media, I turn to the more formidable task of defining "avant-garde." On first glance, this may seem obvious and simple. After all, "avant-garde" is in the dictionary, defined roughly as: a group active in the invention and application of new techniques in a given field, especially in the arts. However, to unpack both this simple definition, as well as the myriad applications of this term relative to artistic production, is to uncover a complex idiom that is not often agreed upon. This may seem a straight issue of semantics, how the term is used and whether it is applicable today may only be a matter of naming. Post-this and neo-that are now tossed around easily, without serious consideration for what such titles infer. I will argue that, more than just semantics, the very ideas behind the original, historic avant-garde obviate the use of the term in any ongoing fashion—post, neo, or otherwise.

The phrase derives from the military model of a "forward guard" which would move ahead of the troops in order to ascertain a situation, or to test the waters. This phrase was picked up on by Clement Greenberg, and already in his choice we see evidence of a teleological epistemology that pertains to modernism. This way of thinking promotes the idea of art as a series of works whose main purpose is to challenge those that preceded it, advancing in the name of progress towards some unnamable goal. Additionally, it is possible to locate within this definition a metaphor of the arts as outside of culture, as operating in relation to culture and daily life as an army with a mission, a battle to be waged, rather than as a part of culture, from within culture. This was certainly the case for the historic avant-garde, which in effect did achieve a kind of coup. These artists knowingly sought a forum for their work outside of the academy and outside of official culture. These breaks were indeed radical in relation to prior practice, owing to the fact that they paved the way for a politically engaged approach to art which was to reappear much later. This methodology formed the beginnings of Modernism, but Modernism would later shift towards an idea of the art object as autonomous, which ultimately became the notion of "art for art's sake."

This shift is evident in Greenberg's opposition of the avant-garde to kitsch, which he elaborates in "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939), and Judith Russi Kirschner shows the ways in which late Greenbergian ideas incorporate and undermine his own earlier ideas of the role of art in culture. For Kirschner, there are two Greenbergs:

the early pre-50s leftist intellectual committed to negation as a way out of capitalist domination and the late fifties Greenberg whose ideas of negation, transformed into reductivist modernism, become the foundation for a hegemony of the autonomous—which in turn was politicized because of its apolitical nature.⁵

Hal Foster, on the other hand, views the avant-garde as operating on a continuum not only throughout the history of modernism, but into postmodernism in the form of a neo-avant-garde. In his essay, “What’s Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?”, he begins with an operational account of *neos* and *posts*:

How to tell the difference between a return of an archaic form of art that bolsters conservative tendencies in the present and a return to a lost model of art made in order to displace customary ways of working? Or, in the register of history, how to tell the difference between a revisionist account written in support of the cultural status quo and a genealogical account that seeks to challenge it?⁶

Foster goes on in his essay to discuss the ways in which certain postmodern artists do indeed constitute a neo-avant-garde. He argues that many of the strategies employed by artists such as Hans Haacke, Daniel Buren, Silvia Kolbowski and Louise Lawler rely on avant-garde ideas. While I agree wholly that these artists share some of the ideals of the historical avant-garde, I believe it is precisely because of this commonality that they cannot be defined as a neo-avant-garde (this will be discussed at length later in this paper).

I define the Avant-garde as an historical movement with specific aims, a beginning and an endpoint in time, and a set of conditions *that are no longer available for artistic production at this time*. Further, I will argue that this is not simply a matter of naming; that the very qualifications for the status of avant-garde works are, as stated previously, no longer possible. Now, even to define the beginning and end of this historically located movement, or to gather up its aims under one definition, is not easy and can certainly be challenged. For the purposes of this essay, and in a desire not to attempt to re-invent the wheel (nor to get bogged down in the history of the avant-garde, that goal not being the aim of this paper), I rely on Peter Bürger’s definition, with modifications owing to Rosalind Krauss and Hal Foster. For Bürger, an avant-garde work would exhibit some of the following tendencies: newness, chance, allegory, or montage. Key to all avant-garde works was their attempt to integrate art with daily life. I will add to that, the work must attempt to create a rupture, or radical break, from practices that came before it; and, the work must perform some aspect of (what we now call) institutional critique.

In the period between the two World Wars, the art world as an institution was coming clearly into view, and therefore became available as an object of critique. Simultaneously, artists sought a means through their production to engage in a political discussion around the burgeoning forces of communism and fascism. Walter Benjamin summarized this desire well in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” an essay quoted more often now than when it was originally written in 1936.⁷ Benjamin put forward the idea that, in making war beautiful, fascism seeks to aestheticize politics, and that communism responds by politicizing aesthetics. This response to fascism was daring and revolutionary at that time. The historical Avant-garde functioned in a time when innovation, shock and extreme

gestures were valued in artistic production above all else as a means to present a challenge to the status quo. At that time, the most extreme gesture possible was to include everyday life into works of art and to engage politics within the aesthetic context.

Krauss, in her essay “The Originality of the Avant-Garde...,” writes of the opposition between the two terms, originality and repetition. While originality has been, in her opinion, a myth upon which modernist practice is founded, the postmodern is founded on repetition, evidenced in the name itself. As she describes in relation to Sherrie Levine’s work, which photographically re-presents well-known art historical images,

Because of the critical attack it launches on the tradition that precedes it, we might want to see the move made in Levine’s work as yet another step in the forward march of the avant-garde. But this would be mistaken. In deconstructing the sister notions of origin and originality, postmodernism establishes a schism between itself and the conceptual domain of the avant-garde, looking back at it from across a gulf that in turn establishes a historical divide. The historical period that the avant-garde shared with modernism is over.⁸

Postmodernism is founded on a sense of repetition, derived in part from the condition of “looking back.” Digital media are inherently repetitive, and therefore exist entirely within the realm of postmodernism and after and therefore are neither avant-garde nor neo-avant-garde.

Based on the structural dichotomy that Krauss establishes between originality and repetition, it is repetition which is fundamental to the material sense of digital works, just as Krauss finds ultimately that repetition was fundamental to those historical works which claimed originality. Central to Krauss’ argument is her example of the grid. For Krauss, the grid seems to be a clean surface, a cleared out playing field, and yet, “The absolute stasis of the grid, its lack of hierarchy, of center, of inflection, emphasizes not only its anti-referential character but—more importantly—its hostility to narrative.”⁹ Lack of hierarchy and nonlinearity are qualities most often touted as providing utopian possibilities within the networked environment for radically new forms of production. Yet, as Krauss shows, those qualities are drawn precisely from the inherent repetition that makes up the grid. So too, the matrix of on/off, pixel-by-pixel, translation into ASCII which makes up the digital work is based, at its most fundamental level, on repetition.

The notion of an inherently reproducible work dates, of course, to Benjamin’s aforementioned essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction.” For Benjamin, copies have always existed in artistic practice. Students studied by producing replicas of famous artworks, and processes of mechanical reproduction date back to the Greeks’ use of founding and stamping from casts. Krauss also begins with sculpture. In her case she writes of Rodin, and shows how even in his oeuvre, each of his works was not a unique piece but part of a play of casts, repeated figures, and commissioned rights to reproducibility that would outlive him well into the Twentieth Century. The apotheosis of these qualities came much later, though, in the form of the photograph, which could infinitely reproduce an image. This invention challenged artistic production’s obsession with authenticity, and thus for Benjamin provided the first real opportunity for art to free itself from its residual location as ritual or cult

object, allowing it to move on to the business of everyday life, that is, politics.

Digital media takes all of these ideas a step further. While the photograph seems to offer a completely reproducible image, there remains the problem of the negative, which is, in and of itself, a kind of original (though in some sense, the negative is already a copy of the positive it re-presents). This remaining artifact is finally, completely undone by the digital work. For truly the first time, no copy can ever be considered more authentic than another. (Yet, the cult of originality persists, as evidenced by bodies of digital prints which are numbered in editions, as if they have the lithographic quality of degradation from beginning to end of run.) So, just as Krauss claimed that the “grid is extremely difficult to use in the service of invention,”¹⁰ the matrix that is the basis for all digital works is impervious to claims of invention as well. While I can claim that certain *aspects* of reproducibility are *particular* to digital media, this does not at all imply that these media are themselves new. This does not render these media uninteresting, nor does it deny their potential to further advance the goals of many practitioners. It means, rather, that what is most interesting about them is not what makes them unique, but the conditions that arise as a result of their particularities.

We are no longer in an historical time in which it is possible to pursue the qualities of newness that the Avant-garde sought (but, as Krauss goes to great effort to point out, those projects were never as new or original as they claimed to be). At this point in time, any strategies we employ that are antecedent to these old practices must acknowledge them as their legacy. As Foster states, artists of our time are now aware of the aims of the avant-garde to the extent that work which continues with its aims—i.e. an engagement with political discourse, a challenge to the autonomy of the art object, etc.—is referencing this historical work, and is therefore repetitive:

...Most of these recoveries were self-aware: often trained in academic programs, many artists in the late 1950s and early 1960s studied prewar avant-gardes with a theoretical rigor new to this generation; and some began to practice as critics in ways quite distinct from modernist-oracular precedents... In the United States this historical awareness was further complicated by the reception of the avant-garde through the very institution that it often attacked.¹¹

Many digital artists work in ways which attempt to challenge the established art world, using tools and means which are new to artistic production. This does not make the work avant-garde, for it is always done with an awareness of its earlier models. Claims to avant-garde status are made on behalf of a range of practices within what we might call digital or new media. One example is that of the works being done by the open source communities, which in very interesting and deft ways challenge notions of authorship (and in turn originality). The open source community seeks to write software, and produce artworks from this software (or software as artworks), such that the source code behind the work is available to all for appropriation, modification, or alteration. Through this work, one of the great ideals of poststructuralism is explored: that of the death of the author. Both Michel Foucault and Roland Barthes explored this idea (Foucault in his essay “What is an Author?” and Barthes in his essay “The Death of the Author”), which posits a shift in the production of meaning from being located in the voice of the

author, to being in the act of reception. As Barthes states, the death of the author brings about the birth of the reader.¹² Once the production of meaning is opened up as a play produced by the audience which receives the work, authenticity is further disarmed. Thus, an undermining of authorship proffers yet another blow to claims of originality.

In the case of digital works, this sense of undermining, as well as any kinds of institutional critique, are always produced from within the institutions and corporations that they critique, both in their inception and their distribution. This undermining must take place from within, that is, one might produce a work for the web that is critical of Microsoft, but if the work is intended for wide distribution, it will most likely be seen via a Microsoft operating system, and quite possibly within the Microsoft browser. The network itself, upon which the work relies, was itself initially developed by the military-industrial complex. Even to turn on a piece of hardware or to boot software means that one is relying on products which are profit-motivated and implicated in late multi-national capitalism. The option of distribution through the art world offers no way out either. While one claim of the avant-garde was to make a space for the production of works outside of such institutions as the museum or the academy, over time the art world valorized and heroicized this very work, to the point where museums now actively seek what they deem to be “the next avant-garde.” *As soon as the institution seeks the next avant-garde work, avant-gardeness is, de facto, no longer possible.*

Works which attempt to challenge the academy, or critique the institution, always struggles with the issue of institutionalization. What if we are at a point where we can accept that, and still find a way to make work that is critical of these establishments, but from within them? Again, I am not trying to claim that these works cannot be successful, or that production has lost its capacity for real social critique or an ability to actively engage political issues. Instead I am asking, if we accept that we will be working from within these institutions, and cease to try and make claims for the newness or originality of our production, might we not be more productive? Open source works can still have efficacy as critiques of corporations, even if we experience them from within Netscape or Internet Explorer. And while the museum might be embracing, and therefore institutionalizing, other digital works, their political and/or anti-art world institution messages are still available to their audiences.

Where does this leave us? Not nearly in the quandary one might think, if one were to delete the phrase avant-garde from all discussions of digital media. In fact, I believe that digital media works become more interesting when we stop trying to fit them into the mold of the avant-garde, and see them rather as extensions of the aims of a range of preceding and contemporaneous art movements, as broadly inclusive as conceptual art, dada, Surrealism, institutional critique, feminist practice, and more. As Kirschner states:

In the opened discourse, the fluid undecidability of poststructuralism and postmodernism, one does not require an avant-garde, when all-inclusiveness is heralded and confiscation, lack of originality touted, the avant-garde becomes a quaint anachronism.¹³

The continued valorization of originality as a term, even in the face of understanding that it is not so separate from repetition as we would have believed, grows out of our continued anxiety about the copy. Contemporary media critics have come to terms with, and indeed finally embraced,

ideas dating back to Benjamin about the role of art in culture. Yet, the essay is often misread, such that Benjamin is presumed to bemoan the art object's loss of aura in the face of mechanical reproduction. To the contrary, for Benjamin, this loss opens up exciting possibilities for the copy. He sees the applications of repetition, and the decline of the pursuit of newness as the ultimate goal of a work of art, as creating new ways for art to engage with its audience. Yet, the idea of originality persists. When a digital media artist or critic claims that a work is avant-garde, that discourse is denying the work the very factors that make it, not unique, but locatable within its own discourse. Krauss asks, "What would it look like not to repress the concept of the copy? What would it look like to produce a work that acted out the discourse of reproductions without originals?"¹⁴

I believe that much of the work being produced today within digital media has come closer than ever before to achieving these aims and exemplifying these ideas. Despite much theorizing which continues to make claims for the originality, newness, or avant-garde status of these works, the work often belies this theorizing and operates as it is, from within the culture of the copy. Hopefully, from within this discourse that understands the potential that reproducibility can offer, we can finally put to bed the quest for originality and announce, yet again but irrevocably, the true death of the avant-garde.

Reference

- [1] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984); Renato Poggioli, *The Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Gerald Fitzgerald (Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1968); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch," in *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961).
- [2] Rosalind Krauss, *The Originality of the Avant-Garde and Other Modernist Myths* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1985).
- [3] Many thanks to my colleague Dr. T. J. Demos for his insightful comments on this paper and assistance in understanding the various theories of the avant-garde.
- [4] My preference is the term "digital media arts," because it connotes a relationship to the field of media studies while indicating the use of binary code. However, as none of these terms feels precise, I use all names interchangeably in order to express this ambivalence.
- [5] Judith Russi Kirschner, "The Possibility of an Avant-Garde," *Formations* vol 2.2 (Fall 1985), p. 84.
- [6] Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?," *October* 70 (Fall 1994), p. 5.
- [7] Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," *Illuminations*, Ed. and Introduction by Hannah Arendt (New York: Harcourt, Brace & World, 1968).
- [8] Krauss, p. 170.
- [9] Krauss, p. 158.
- [10] Krauss, p. 160.
- [11] Foster, p. 10.
- [12] Michel Foucault, "What is an Author?," *The Foucault Reader*, ed. Paul Rabinow (New York: Penguin Books, 1984); and Roland Barthes, "The Death of the Author," *Image, Music, Text* (Noonday Press, 1978).
- [13] Kirschner, p. 88.
- [14] Krauss, p. 168.