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## (dis)Functions: Marxist Theories of Architecture and the Avant-garde

Michael Chapman

### Abstract

This paper investigates the relationship between architecture and theories of the avant-garde in the critical projects of the 1970s, with a focus on the theories of Peter Bürger and Manfredo Tafuri. Both Tafuri and Bürger were writing from within the context of a radicalized Marxism and were fuelled by an intellectual pessimism towards the totalizing systems of cultural production that questioned the role of resistance in aesthetics and the inability of the historical avant-gardes to engage within the political and economic fields of contemporary society. While there is a common ancestry to these two approaches, and mutual acceptance of the failure of the avant-garde project, the work of Tafuri has had an enduring influence on architectural history and theory, while Bürger's synchronous work has attracted only a modest amount of scholarly attention in architecture despite its ongoing legacy in art theory and, particularly, within an American context. This paper argues that Bürger's dialectical approach has a significance for architectural theory and presents a discursive position through which Marxism and architecture can be advanced. Through a detailed reading of these two approaches, the paper attempts to position architecture as a particular strategy of the avant-garde that overshadowed all fields of aesthetic production in the period.

### Key Words

architectural theory, art theory, avant-garde, Peter Bürger, Manfredo Tafuri

### 1. Introduction

While aesthetics was among his numerous concerns, Karl Marx left behind a limited framework from which a theory of art could be established. This is even more ill-defined in relationship to architecture.<sup>[1]</sup> As Lambert Zuidervaart wrote, "[I]t is problematic to speak of the Marxian model [since...] Marx and Engels never propounded a comprehensive philosophy of art and their scattered comments on art may imply more than one such model."<sup>[2]</sup> Most attempts to structure a philosophy of art based on the writings of Marx assume a distinction between base and superstructure. For the most part, this has been the structure that has dominated the integration of Marx's work in architectural theory, although this has been complicated by the diversity of avenues through which it has been pursued.<sup>[3]</sup> For a number of critics in art and architecture, the distinction between the base and superstructure is less significant than the methodological critique of ideology that, in art, is conditioned by the forces of production and reception. This distinction is a central theme in the theories of the avant-garde constructed by Peter Bürger and Manfredo Tafuri in the 1970s.

By drawing from the dialectical method implicit in the early criticism of Karl Marx, Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-*

*Garde* argued that the avant-garde is a collection of accumulated strategies that are assembled in protest against an entrenched model of cultural production. Bürger argued that previous Marxist attempts to theorize art within the context of bourgeois society, most notably those of Adorno, Lukacs and Benjamin, have failed to attribute sufficient weight to the *function* that art plays within this society and, as a result, they neglect its sociological contribution.<sup>[4]</sup> The preconception that art has no functional importance is, in Bürger's analysis, only countered in the work of Herbert Marcuse, who saw the function of art as an affirmation of the values intrinsic to the society in which it is produced. As a result, Bürger concluded that the theoretical incursions of both Benjamin and Adorno<sup>[5]</sup> remain at the level of a theory of modernism and are inadequate positions from which to develop a broader theory of avant-garde practice. The emphasis on function that underpins Bürger's approach has a natural relationship to architecture and, specifically, the modernist histories that are inseparable from it.

In contrast, the writings of the architectural historian Manfredo Tafuri, during the same period, state that it is architecture's inherent "functionality" that renders it impotent as a model of social or political resistance. If Bürger's work expressed a frustration with contemporary practices in the visual arts, then Tafuri set out to establish a more concrete understanding of architecture's relationship to avant-garde processes and the political implications embedded in them. For Tafuri, architecture was torn between the invention of "fantasy" unbuilt projects as a model of critique and the production of subversive labyrinthine environments that weave themselves clandestinely into the cycles of capitalism. Both were not only inherently opposed to function but also operated without a recognizable form or aesthetic "object." Tafuri's influential and nihilistic position was that the inherent "functionality" of architecture meant that it would always be governed by commercial and mainstream social forces. This made it ineffective as a medium through which opposition could be expressed in a material form. Like Bürger, Tafuri concluded that it is only through negation that architecture can participate in provocation or action.

Given this, the significance of these two independent theories of avant-garde practice in the 1970s is twofold. First, they extend the already developed social theories of Adorno, Lukacs, and Marcuse into a broader theory of artistic production that is applicable to architecture; and second, they inspired and virtually re-structured a generation of American criticism, predominantly from New York, through the emerging hegemonies of *October*, in art, and *Oppositions*, in architecture, respectively. Within this emerging field of criticism, architecture is increasingly implicated as a medium through which avant-garde practices were inadvertently explored.

That these two discourses dovetail so closely, both temporally and ideologically, enables a comparative and expanded model of avant-garde practice to be theorized in relationship to the disciplinary boundaries of architectural production, laden as it is with the pessimism and frustration that accompanied the derailed Marxist resurgence of the 1970s. While Tafuri and

Bürger exist in isolated “compartments”<sup>[6]</sup> in the various theories of postmodernism, the significance and synchronicity of their ideas warrant further and more prolonged scholarly attention. This paper will contextualize Bürger’s work in relationship to Tafuri and establish an alternative model through which architecture and the avant-garde can be theorized, with particular concern for the Marxist ancestry that underpins both positions.

## 2. Social forces in the 1970s

In the introduction to *Theory of the Avant-Garde* in 1974, Peter Bürger wrote:

[w]hether they want to or not, historians or interpreters hold a position in the social disputes of their time. The perspective from which they view their subject is determined by the position they occupy among the social forces of the epoch.<sup>[7]</sup>

Like many theorists of the Frankfurt school, Bürger’s theory is concerned with a much broader historical project that accepts modernism as paradigmatic and enabling but is pessimistic about the “cultural machinery” that produces it and undermines its social efficacy. A similar “historical” gravitas underpins Tafuri and has been critical to his legacy as both theorist and historian. The decade preceding the initial publication of both Bürger and Tafuri’s critique of the avant-garde was one of tumultuous social upheaval. Following his death in 1969, Theodor Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* was published in German in 1970, although its transition into English was delayed due to the complexity of the translation and the widely contested form of the book.<sup>[8]</sup> Following from his post-war essays, Adorno’s work provides an enduring Marxist critique of the culture industry and a nihilistic appraisal of culture’s failed opposition towards it. The publication of Adorno’s epic work fuelled an influx of research in the German language that further legitimized art as a valid forum for investigations in philosophy.

Postmodern architecture, which emerged in America primarily after the publication of Venturi’s *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1963) and the cumulative critiques of post-war modernism in classic texts, such as Jane Jacobs’s *Life and Death of Great American Cities* (1961), was also enhanced through its ready reception within a commercial marketplace.

Despite the fact that Venturi, Scott Brown, and Izenour’s 1972 work, *Learning from Las Vegas*, originally carried the subtitle, “The Great Proletarian Cultural Locomotive,”<sup>[9]</sup> architecture in this period gravitated towards “populism” rather than socialism and was concerned more with the visual preferences of the proletariat rather than their social emancipation.<sup>[10]</sup> Frederic Jameson extended this argument in his *Postmodernism or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*, where he drew Jencks and Venturi into a broader Marxist dialectic, with its antithesis in the “bleakest” and “implacably negative” critique of Tafuri. For Jameson, the appeal to populism in post-modern architecture was a reaction to the elitist but differentiating and innovative practices of high modernism, effectively rendering it indiscernible from the cultural industry of advanced capitalism.

Unlike the Marxist revisionism occurring in related disciplines, in architecture the period was characterized by a decidedly non-revolutionary structuralist reappraisal of the kitsch landscapes of corporate America. This primarily American phenomenon meekly interpreted the theoretical motives of critical theory in the 1960s into a literalist and historicist consumer pastiche that was readily applied to the surfaces of American capitalism throughout the 1980s. The Jencksian inspired "post-modernism,"<sup>[11]</sup> even more than conceptual art, was heavily criticized for its easy appropriation by market capitalism, despite its humanist allegiances as it became the signature style for corporate towers across the southern states of America.<sup>[12]</sup>

Echoing the broader cultural and intellectual shifts that were taking place, and not acknowledged in the restrictive narrowing of Jencks's post-modernism, the emergence of architectural theory as a multi-disciplinary critical practice is often located historically within this approximate period.<sup>[13]</sup> These were anchored by the coincidence of two quite unrelated trajectories: Baird's influential re-reading of Saussure and architecture (1969)<sup>[14]</sup> and Tafuri's polemical rereading of Marxism and the avant-garde in the same year.<sup>[15]</sup> Tafuri's radical Marxism was an assault on the mainstream ineffectiveness of contemporary architecture and led to a sustained period of theoretical activity that tore at the heart of the commercial foundations of architecture and the passive role of the historian in accommodating it.<sup>[16]</sup> The re-emergence of Marxism at this time was significant, not just in the context of Bürger and Tafuri's work, but also in society at large, providing a model for reworking historical frameworks that transformed the critical function of social history.<sup>[17]</sup>

### 3. Theory of the Avant-Garde

Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* was different from previous theories of modern art by its interpretation of the avant-garde as a historical phenomenon as opposed to an aesthetic one. Bürger argued that a process of institutionalizing art had occurred in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries and this had led to the gentrification of art and the isolation of its inherently bourgeois audience.<sup>[18]</sup> In this sense, he follows the earlier precedents of Adorno and Benjamin, who drew a distinction between "organic" and "nonorganic" artworks: the former being associated with the bourgeois structures intrinsic to the production of art and meaning and the latter with the category of avant-gardist works characterized by fragmentation and a collapse of the structures of holistic meaning.<sup>[19]</sup> Bürger maintained that the radical creative approaches of the first decades of the twentieth century were an attempt to both identify and dismantle this institutionalization of art, attacking the bourgeois gentrification of the art process and ultimately realigning creativity with the experience of modern life.

In short, the historical avant-garde attacked the *autonomy* of the art object and its institutionalization and conflated the categories of art and life. Bürger argued that the "neo-avant-garde" appropriated tactics of the historical avant-garde but in an emaciated form, no longer challenging the autonomy of art but actively reinforcing it in a depoliticized and opportunistic

way.<sup>[20]</sup> In this sense, the neo-avant-garde had adopted the techniques of the historical avant-garde but without the requisite critique of the institution of art and the social structures that created and fuelled it.

Drawing its methodological approach from the explorations of Marx and the associated reclamation projects of the Frankfurt school, Bürger's theory is situated outside of the discipline of art history and resides in the multidisciplinary terrain of critical theory.<sup>[21]</sup> Bürger was guarded in his writing about history and method in his theory of the avant-garde. He was wary of the critiques of objectivism common in the 1970s and the inherently postmodern project to emancipate history from the constraints of strictly linear and evolutionary narratives.<sup>[22]</sup>

Drawing from Gadamer, Bürger stressed the danger of completely historicizing aesthetic theory to the point where it is wholly contained within the period of study (the *zeitgeist*) and does not allow for subsequent developments of knowledge to impact on the chosen era. This leads to what Bürger called a "false objectivism,"<sup>[23]</sup> whereby an author is indifferent towards the specific perspective from which he or she writes.

The other extreme, against which Bürger also warned, is the formation of a palimpsest approach, drawn from the fragmentary accumulation of selected aspects of previous theories up until the present. While avoiding some of the dangers of objectivity, this is prone to becoming the construction of a "prehistory of the present" but in a selective and decontextualized manner.<sup>[24]</sup> For Bürger, the historicization of a contemporary aesthetic theory needs to pay special attention to the categories upon which this analysis rests and their specific historical relationship to both the present and the historical subject. In this way, a critical theory serves to illuminate the structures upon which knowledge is based and develops a relationship between the historical categories of knowledge and the critical perspective of the author. And so Bürger established his debt to Marx and, most importantly, the relationship between ideology and production, accepting ideology as *produced* by social structures rather than as a direct outcome of them.

Bürger's discussion of Marx takes as its example the interrogation of religion that Marx undertook in his *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right*, where he scrutinized Hegel's definition of truth as "the agreement of an object with our perception."<sup>[25]</sup> For Marx, criticism has a role in exposing the inherent contradictions in a social system, as well as the illusions that disguise its appearance. In this sense the relationship between an object and its perception is conditioned by ideology, and it is the role of criticism to reveal this relationship. In the case of religion, the mechanisms of ideology operate to erect an illusion of religion through objects at the same time as they construct a psychological consolation that, at a social level, prevents the forces of social change gaining any momentum.

Bürger's resituated theory of avant-garde practice begins with the historicization of the institution of art oriented around the phenomena of "aestheticism." That, for Bürger, methodologically resembles the category of "labor" in Marx's critique of capitalism. The phenomenon of the avant-garde

makes visible the historical categories that enable an unmasking of bourgeois aesthetics, constituting the effective origin of these new ideological tools. As Bürger illustrated, prior to the avant-garde, art was criticized within the framework of its medium, so that a comedy was assessed and evaluated against the entrenched categories and expectations of comedy.<sup>[26]</sup> In contrast, Bürger saw the avant-garde project as the rolling together of all of these independent historical "means" into a singular strategy so that the oppositions between them are assimilated.<sup>[27]</sup> For Bürger, the category of artistic means was indiscernible up to the historical avant-garde. It was so bound to the conditions of style that structured art that it was never exposed to a dialectical or oppositional critique of alternatives; the pervasive schema of bourgeois criticism ensured that none was available. With the evolution of the historical avant-garde, the aesthetic function of art was annihilated, resulting in the dissolution of the structures of style and the emergence of new categories through which "artistic means" had to be evaluated. For Bürger, it is

a distinguishing feature of the historical avant-garde movements that they did not develop a style. There is no such thing as a Dadaist or surrealist style. What did happen was that these movements liquidated the possibility of a period style when they raised to a principle the availability of the artistic means of past periods.

Not until there is universal availability does the category of artistic means become a general one.<sup>[28]</sup>

It is this aspect of Bürger's work that is of profound significance for architecture. Instead of marginalizing architecture from the historical avant-garde (the conventional perspective), it enables a correlation between the two, where architecture, like any other "artistic means," can be appropriated towards avant-gardist ends. It no longer needs to be contained at the margins of art practice but resides as a central concern of the historical avant-garde, and sits alongside photography, film, drawing, and collage as a tactic through which the "stylistic" categories of aesthetics are dismantled. Bürger's writing on means has some commonalities with Adorno's critique of functionalism,<sup>[29]</sup> where he argued that in architecture the absence of style was effectively a style itself. Adorno, who differentiated between purposeful and non-purposeful arts, argued that the lack of aesthetic content, for example, as pure functionalism, is a myth, since the expression of functionality is in itself a style.<sup>[30]</sup> For Adorno, architecture is heavily engaged in the cycles of aesthetics, especially in regard to the need for aesthetic renewal operating not as an alternative to the visual arts but in unison with them. Architecture's inherent functionality made it a radical and easily appropriated weapon in the armory of the avant-garde, capable of nurturing life and experience but at the same time recontextualizing the aesthetic qualities of the work of art and negating the categories attached to these.

While a large amount of critical attention has been devoted to the neo-avant-garde, the vast majority of Bürger's short work

is concerned with the machinations of the historical avant-garde and, more particularly, its evolution in opposition to bourgeois aestheticism. Bürger's argument is that the 1920s allowed the institution of art to be recognized for the first time, establishing the vantage point, through avant-garde practice, from which it also could be critiqued. The historical avant-garde revolutionized art practice but was unable to institute any substantial transformation of the political or economic structure of capitalism. For Bürger, the more contemporary avant-garde practices are limited by the formulation of this institution of art, which means they no longer operate in connection with society but within the dislocated and autonomous structure of this institution, embodying, in the process, a corrupt art economy.

However, as Buchloh has demonstrated, the nihilistic assumption that the commodification of art in the 1960s is chained to the absolute failure of the avant-garde, while dialectical in its basis, is flawed.<sup>[31]</sup> The avant-garde, constituting a disorganized and anachronistic array of widely disparate tactics, never intended, or was capable of, a permanent destruction of the institution of art. It was, as Bürger acknowledged, a phenomenon that merely *recognized* this "institution" for the first time and then radically attacked it.<sup>[32]</sup> However, the argument that the failure to destroy the "institution" in the 1920s meant the futility of opposition forever after is tenuous and, as Buchloh demonstrated, neglects the important skirmishes between art and its endemic institutional hegemony that have taken place since.<sup>[33]</sup> As Foster argued, these assaults can only be seen as an extension of avant-garde activities, even on the basis of Bürger's own strictly defined terms and categories.<sup>[34]</sup> The historical avant-garde is not a start and endpoint of opposition but merely a transformation of the contexts where this opposition is directed.

#### 4. Architecture and utopia

While Bürger's thesis set out to diagnose the failure of the avant-garde project, Tafuri's writing from the same period argued that it was architecture's immersion within capitalist systems that meant it would always fail as a model of social or political critique. First published in English in 1976, Tafuri's seminal criticism of the avant-garde project is delivered in *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*.<sup>[35]</sup> The timing of Tafuri's work is significant, coinciding roughly with Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and the broader cultural resurgence of Marxism that preoccupied multi-disciplinary explorations in a number of literary fields. Viewing architecture through the lens of ideological criticism,<sup>[36]</sup> Tafuri lamented the ineffective nature of ideology against the rationalizing forces of architectural production, presenting a fatalistic scenario for contemporary architecture that is characterized by the same negativity with which Bürger approached the study of contemporary art. For Tafuri, as the practice of architecture "deliberately flees confrontation."<sup>[37]</sup> Either through cooperation with rationalism or utopian escapism, architectural criticism assumes an elevated role in evaluating and opposing the effects of ideology, as well as articulating the inherent contradictions in the categories through which society is



represented.

Tafuri's argument reaches its crescendo in the closing passage of this work, which, tinged with anger and heartfelt despair, reads as a eulogy for architecture as it accepts the futility of its own position.<sup>[38]</sup> Having established the inevitable surrender of contemporary architecture to ideology, Tafuri argued that the discipline of architecture has "marked its own fate by making itself, within an autonomous political strategy, the bearer of ideals of rationalization by which the working class is affected only in the second instance."<sup>[39]</sup> For Tafuri, architectural practice was so heavily immersed in the forces of production that there were no avenues through which it would be able to affect or disrupt the means of production. It was, in its nature, an outcome of production rather than the means to oppose it. The nihilism of Tafuri is articulated in his tortured description of this hopeless fate:

[t]he historical inevitability of this phenomenon can be recognised. But having been so, it is no longer possible to hide the ultimate reality which renders uselessly painful the choices of architects desperately attached to disciplinary ideologies. "Uselessly painful" because it is useless to struggle for escape when completely enclosed and confined without an exit. Indeed, the crisis of modern architecture is not the result of "tiredness" or "dissipation." It is a crisis of the ideological function of architecture.<sup>[40]</sup>

For Tafuri, the implication is clear. Faced with no other avenues of practice and operating within a discipline slavishly and inevitably tied to the forces of production, architecture can no longer seek comfort in "purely architectural alternatives"<sup>[41]</sup> and needs to dismantle the ideological structures that are internal to it. Criticism has an important role to play on this front. As with Bürger, Tafuri's method echoes the early work of Marx, which sets out to dismantle the illusions pertaining to ideology and bring its operations "into the light." The closing paragraph echoes Marx's critique of religion, where dialectical criticism lays bare the inherent contradictions of ideology. Attempting to reconcile political praxis with architecture, Tafuri wrote:

[t]he systematic criticism of the ideologies accompanying the history of capitalist development is therefore but one chapter of such political action. Today, indeed, the principal task of ideological criticism is to do away with impotent and ineffectual myths, which so often serve as illusions that permit the survival of anachronistic "hopes in design."<sup>[42]</sup>

Tafuri's critique of the inherent futility of architectural practice is continued in later works with a specific emphasis on the avant-garde.<sup>[43]</sup> The twin operations of Tafuri's polemic are embodied in the rationalist pursuit of the object (the sphere) and the labyrinthine obsession of the avant-garde to undermine it. For Tafuri, both are ineffective practices for resisting the hegemony of capitalist production and an extension of the flawed logic of radicality that underpins the paper architecture of the 1970s. Despite his scepticism

towards these practices, it is important to illustrate that Dada, in particular, provided an important conduit in Tafuri's dialectic, embodying, in a number of passages, the "chaotic" avant-garde trajectory that opposed but synthesized with the rationalizing and homogenizing forces of modernism. For Tafuri, Dada represented the most destructive and "anarchic" of the avant-garde movements, but its tactics were ultimately assimilated by capitalism: firstly, as "a means of control for planning" and, more damagingly, as a precursor to its advances. In his dialectical theory, Tafuri argued:

Dada's ferocious decomposition of the linguistic material and its opposition to prefiguration [had resulted in] the sublimation of automatism and commercialisation of values [that] now spread through all levels of existence in the advance of capitalism [...]. Dada, by means of the absurd, demonstrated—without naming it—the necessity of a plan.[44]

Tafuri's criticism resembles that of Walter Benjamin, who saw the primary objective of avant-garde practice as a transformation in the conditions of production rather than merely an alteration of its aesthetic or spatial conditions through experimentation.[45] Tafuri's criticism of the avant-garde was directed primarily towards the Italian avant-garde of the 1960s and, particularly, the idealism of Archizoom and Superstudio.[46] While Tafuri employed a similar construct to Bürger, where strategies are charted across "historical" and "neo-"generations,[47] it is clear that Tafuri was cynical about the redeployment of avant-garde tactics in his time and, more specifically, under the guise of a political radicality. Having established the historical futility of the avant-garde project and its inability to disrupt the mechanisms of capitalism, Tafuri disparaged the watering down of these practices and their eclectic and stylistic redeployment in the contemporary avant-garde. Not only is this selective reclamation of the historical avant-garde opportunistic, it is also a desperate attempt to redeem the radical practices of art for architecture without a recognition of the ideological impediments that resist this. Tafuri wrote:

[i]t is no wonder, then, that the most strongly felt condition, today, belongs to those who realise that, in order to salvage specific values for architecture, the only course is to make use of "battle fragments", that is, to redeploy what has been discarded on the battlefield that has witnessed the defeat of the avant-garde. Thus the new "knights of purity" advance onto the scene of the present debate brandishing as banners the fragments of a utopia that they themselves cannot confront head on.[48]

As Tafuri correctly observed, the objects and fragments of the visual practice of the avant-garde were only a by-product of their experience and its reification through art. This aspect of avant-garde process was not preserved in the contemporary avant-garde. Tafuri rejected the objects of creative practice as the ineffective production of *representation* in the face of the overwhelming experience of modern life. As Tafuri concluded

in his co-authored work, *Modern Architecture*, "it was the city, from whose reality the avant-garde drew its very existence, which was the real proving ground for all its proposals."[\[49\]](#)

## 5. Conclusion

As well as a shared emphasis on experience, there are a number of overlapping themes in the writing of Tafuri and Bürger that are of significance for architectural criticism. Both draw from a Marxist historical-dialectical method,[\[50\]](#) positioning architecture or the work of art against the forces of economic production and ideology that produce it. Both authors saw contemporary avant-garde practice as fundamentally and naively flawed; in the former, restricted to the production of pictures and, in the latter, immersed within the institution of art that it seeks to dismantle. The important difference between the two positions is that Bürger endowed the historical avant-garde with positivistic values while for Tafuri, all avant-garde activity was fundamentally flawed, tied to a fascination with chaos and, using Picasso and Piranesi as the spectacular precedents, a doomed model of critical activity. Of equal importance, where Bürger preserved the distinction between avant-garde practice and modernism, Tafuri conflated the two. As David Cunningham has observed, in the theory of Tafuri

[a]ll possibility of an avant-garde was completely sublated within the modernist "ideology of the plan" and any attempt to re-activate it is at best a kind of futile nostalgia which fails to understand "historically the road travelled."[\[51\]](#)

Where Tafuri preferred to view these experiments as bound to the ultimately failed avant-garde project of the last two centuries, Bürger saw a dynamic and radical *effect* in the processes of the historical avant-garde that was only miscarried in its subsequent appropriation by the neo-avant-garde. As a result, Bürger's treatise is not a theory of art but a theory of avant-garde practice that ultimately is transferrable to the production of architecture. It is important to acknowledge the insight in Tafuri's writing that avant-garde practice has an inherent detachment from the real world of experience or action and, as a result, is limited and marginalized in its effects. Characteristic of Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde* is the sublation of art and life that, rather than displacing art into the realm of the "hypothetical," firmly entrenches the avant-garde within real world experience and institutional critique. While central to this thesis, the extent to which Bürger romanticizes and oversimplifies avant-garde practice in this way is a point of contention,[\[52\]](#) and Tafuri's scepticism towards the representational nature and intangible outcomes of these practices was well-founded. It is also apparent that the artistic practices that lie at the heart of Bürger's theory, such as collage, montage, and the readymade, are far more susceptible to Tafuri's critique of representation over experience than the architectural projects against which it was initially directed.

For Iain Boyd Whyte, once the provocations of the avant-garde are met with ambivalence rather than shock, the end of its influence is near.[\[53\]](#) The immersion of architecture and art as economic strategies, regardless of their oppositional

intentions, has radically transformed the critical theory of art and suggests that the potential of avant-gardism as a creative strategy has entered a new historical epoch. As Jameson has observed, "it is easier to imagine the end of the world than to imagine the end of capitalism."<sup>[54]</sup>

The radical transformations of the twentieth century are so substantial in nature and irrevocable in influence that they have consumed and appropriated the historical forces of opposition. The result is that new modes of engagement need to be established in both criticism and practice. The reality, as Tafuri illustrated, is that architectural practice, regardless of its aspirations, is so immersed in the forces of production and the systems of capitalism that it is only capable of subversive reform rather than meaningful or revolutionary change. Of equal significance is that architects have no control whatsoever over the forces of production that shape cities and control economies. The only avant-garde tactics available to architecture are through the independent forums of publication and, as a result, representation.

Clearly, certain practices are capable of greater subversion than others, and representation, for architecture, enables the greatest possible field of influence in the contemporary context. The positions of both Tafuri and Bürger represent the failures of the neo-avant-garde in absolutist terms and neglect the important media transformations that the formative practices of the neo-avant-garde in architecture have initiated, in addition to the role they may play in establishing models for future opposition or subterfuge. Through the disruption of "function" and the emergence of "dysfunction" as a spatial strategy aligned to contemporary reality, the critical legacy of both Tafuri and Bürger can be assimilated with the next stage of avant-garde provocation.

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## Endnotes

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<sup>[1]</sup> On this see Martin Jay, "'The Aesthetic Ideology' as Ideology"; or, "What Does It Mean to Aestheticize Politics?" *Cultural Critique* (1992), pp. 41-61.

<sup>[2]</sup> Lambert Zuidervaart, "The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger," *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, 48, 1 (Winter, 1990), 62.

<sup>[3]</sup> A taxonomy of the approaches to theorizing Marx and architecture is available in David Cunningham and Jon

Goodbun, "Marx, Architecture and Modernity," *Journal of Architecture*, 11, 2 (2006), 169-185.

[4] Buchloh sees this aspect of Bürger's argument as problematic, falsely assigning to the critic a scientific platform from which to extract scientific knowledge. See Benjamin Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," *Art in America* (November, 1984), p. 21.

[5] Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: Minnesota Press, 1984), p. 63.

[6] See, for example: Esra Ackan, "Manfredo Tafuri's Theory of the Architectural Avant-garde," *Journal of Architecture*, 7 (Summer 2002), 135-170.

[7] See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 6. In the same passage Bürger quotes Wilhelm Dilthey: "[the individual] who investigates history is the same that makes history" (p. 6).

[8] The first and highly controversial translation by Christian Lenhardt appeared in English in 1984 (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984). A more reliable translation by Robert Hullot-Kentor, appeared in 1997. See Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: The Minnesota University Press, 1997).

[9] See Denise Scott Brown, "Preface to the First Edition," in Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour, *Learning From Las Vegas: The Forgotten Symbolism of Architectural Form* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1977), p. xi. Jarringly, the opening page carries the subheading "Commercial Values and Commercial Methods" (p.3).

[10] See Frederic Jameson, *Postmodernism or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), pp. 60-63; see also: Hal Foster, "(Post) Modern Polemics," *Perspecta*, 21 (1984), 148.

[11] For a discussion of the distinction between postmodernism and Jencks's branded Post-Modernism see Scott Colman, "Post-Modernism and the Foreclosure of the Architectural Imaginary," in *Imagining: Proceedings of the 27th International SAHANZ Conference*, ed. Michael Chapman and Michael Ostwald (Newcastle: Society of Architectural Historians Australian and New Zealand, SAHANZ, 2010), p. 95.

[12] One such critique, in defence of modernism, is Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," trans. Seyla Ben-Habib, *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter, 1981), 3-14; Bürger, whose work is cited in the article, wrote a direct response to this article in the same issue. See Peter Bürger, "The Significance of the Avant-Garde for Contemporary Aesthetics: A Reply to Jürgen Habermas," trans. Andreas Huyssen and Jack Zipes, *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter, 1981), 19-22.

[13] This approximate date provides the starting point in K. Michael Hays' anthology; 1965 marks the origin in Kate

Nesbitt's collection. See: K. Michael Hays (ed), *Architecture Theory Since 1968* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1998); Kate Nesbitt (ed), *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture: An Anthology of Architectural Theory, 1965-1995* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1996).

[14] George Baird, "La Dimension Amoureuse in Architecture," in *Meaning in Architecture*, ed. Charles Jencks and George Baird (New York: George Braziller, 1969), pp. 36-55. First published in 1967.

[15] Manfredo Tafuri, "Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology," trans. Stephen Sartarelli in Hays, (ed), *Architectural Theory Since 1968*, pp. 6-35. This essay was later enlarged and incorporated as the first chapter in Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1976), pp. 1-40.

[16] For a more detailed investigation of Tafuri's influence, see Diane Y. Ghirardo, "Manfredo Tafuri and Architectural Theory in the U.S., 1970-2000," *Perspecta*, 33 (2002), 38-47.

[17] The resurgence of Marx in the intellectual culture of the 1960s is analyzed in the opening pages of: Hal Foster, "What's Neo About the Neo-Avant-Garde," *October*, 70, *The Duchamp Effect* (Autumn 1994), 5-7.

[18] This argument is detailed in the chapter on "The Problem of Autonomy in Bourgeois Society" in Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 35-54.

[19] Benjamin's understanding of the organic and non-organic work of art shifted over the course of his writing. Benjamin's writing on the non-organic work of art in *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (1924) provides a quite different definition from the one that is central to his essay, "Author as Producer" (1934). Bürger's failure to take into account the nuances of this category has been a source of criticism of his work. See, for instance, Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," p. 21.

[20] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, pp. 58-63; See also his later essay on "Everdayness, Allegory and the Avant-Garde: Some reflections on the work of Joseph Beuys," in Peter Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism* (University Park, Pennsylvania: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1992), pp. 147-162.

[21] For a taxonomy of the forms of criticism and their relationship to architecture, see Mary McLeod, "On Criticism," *Places*, 4, 1 (1987), 4-6.

[22] Bürger explored the broader issue of history in the context of postmodernism in the essays compiled as Bürger, *The Decline of Modernism*. On this subject, see also Andreas Huyssen, "Mapping the Postmodern," *New German Critique* (Autumn, 1984), 5-52.

[23] Bürger expands on his understanding of this in Bürger, "The Institution of 'Art' as a Category in the Sociology of Literature," *Cultural Critique*, 2 (Winter, 1985-1986), 5-33.

[24] Bürger is reproducing here the methodological system of

Marx, as well as a number of its key terms. The passage draws heavily from Marx's writing on history in Karl Marx, *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Martin Nicolaus (London: Penguin, 1973), pp. 105-107.

[25] Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Bürger is most concerned with the introduction where Marx develops a dialectical argument that religion contains both illusion and truth.

[26] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 17.

[27] *Ibid.*, p. 18. Italics in original.

[28] *Ibid.*, p. 17.

[29] Originally an address to the *German Werkbund* in 1965, Adorno's most concentrated meditation on architecture is translated as Theodor Adorno, "Functionalism Today," trans. Jane Newman and John Smith, *Oppositions*, 17 (Summer 1979), 30-41.

[30] Adorno, "Functionalism Today," p. 32.

[31] Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," p. 21.

[32] Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 19.

[33] Buchloh, "Theorizing the Avant-Garde," p. 21; see also Hal Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" p. 16.

[34] Foster, "What's Neo about the Neo-Avant-Garde?" p. 20. Foster offers an extension of Bürger's dialectic by conceptualizing the neo-avant-garde as an *extension* of the institution of art against which it operates in a "deconstructive" capacity.

[35] Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia: Design and Capitalist Development*, trans. Barbara Luigia La Penta (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976). This work was originally developed from an essay published in the Marxist journal *Contrapiano* in 1969. Tafuri discusses its evolution from the text in the preface (pp. vii-ix). Tafuri's critique of the avant-garde is considerably expanded (and in many ways revised) in Manfredo Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, trans. Giorgio Verrecchia (London: Granada, 1980); Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990).

[36] For a more extended account of the methodological approach adopted by Tafuri see Susan Carty Piedmont, "Operative Criticism," *JAE*, 40, 1 (Autumn, 1986), 8-13.

[37] Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. 170.

[38] These paragraphs are central to the reading of Tafuri in Ghirardo, "Manfredo Tafuri and Architectural Theory," pp. 38-47.

[39] Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. 181.

[40] *Op. cit.* Tafuri's pessimism extends to "the fall" of modern art where he writes, "No 'salvation' is any longer to be found within it: neither wandering restlessly in labyrinths of images so multivalent they end in muteness, not enclosed in the stubborn silence of geometry content with its own perfection." (p. 181).

[41] *Op. cit.*

[42] *Op. cit.*

[43] Leach warns against placing too much emphasis on the historical contextualization of Tafuri's work and the inherent romanticization of the 1960s protest movement, arguing that in the subsequent decade Tafuri developed a model of resistance through criticism that transcended the popular reception of his work and is "no less important for the imbalance in its up-take that we can now observe." See Andrew Leach, *Manfredo Tafuri: Choosing History* (Ghent: A & S Books, 2007).

[44] Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. 93.

[45] In his essay "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir" he draws particular attention to Benjamin's "Author as Producer," which, despite erroneously categorizing Dada montage as "revolutionary" is, for Tafuri, still "profoundly valid today." See the chapter "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir" in: Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, p. 288.

[46] Tafuri, *Theories and History of Architecture*, pp. 156-158.

[47] Tafuri had used the term "neo-avant-garde" (Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia*, p. 148, p. 161) as well as the more pejorative "disenchanted avant-garde" in his essay "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir", exactly contemporaneous with Bürger's work. See Manfredo Tafuri, "L' Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language," trans. Victor Caliandro, *Oppositions* 3 (May, 1974), 37-62.

[48] Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, p. 267; also published in Tafuri, "L'Architecture dans le Boudoir," pp. 37-62.

[49] Tafuri and Dal Co, *Modern Architecture/1*, 110. Goodbun developed this aspect in his search for an alternative "genealogy" of architectural history that draws from the understanding of the metropolis as a second nature that "can deal with both 'the revolt of objects' [...] and 'the revolt of the images' that dominates contemporary experience." See Jon Goodbun, "Brand New Tafuri: Some Timely Notes on the Imaging of Spatial Demands," *The Journal of Architecture*, 6 (Summer, 2001), 161.

[50] Despite his emphasis on the historical aspects of his work, Leach categorizes Tafuri as "fundamentally and orthodoxically Marxist." See Leach, *Manfredo Tafuri*, p. 140.

[51] David Cunningham, "Architecture, Utopia and the futures of the Avant-Garde," *The Journal of Architecture*, 6 (Summer 2001), 171.



[52] Amongst the critics of this aspect of Bürger's thesis, see Peter Osborne, "Non-Places and the Spaces of Art," *Journal of Architecture*, 6, 2 (2001), 183-94; see also David Cunningham, "A Time for Dissonance and Noise," *Angelaki: Journal of the Theoretical Humanities*, 8, 1 (April, 2003), 61-74.

[53] Iain Boyd White, "The End of an Avant-Garde: The Example of Expressionist Architecture," *Art History*, 3, 1 (March 1980), 109. George Baker makes a similar argument in regard to Dadaism. See George Baker, *Artwork Caught by the Tail: Francis Picabia and Dada in Paris* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2007), pp. 55-58.

[54] Jameson is writing in an explicitly architectural context. See Frederic Jameson, "Future City," *New Left Review*, 21 (May June 2003), 76.