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AVANT-GARDE AND POPULAR FORMS BETWEEN MUSIC AND VISUAL MEDIA

TRANSHISTORICAL AND INTERMEDIAL INVESTIGATIONS

EDITED BY SIMONE DOTTO, FRANÇOIS MOUILLOT
AND MARIA TERESA SOLDANI

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**Avant-garde and Popular Forms Between Music and Visual Media.
Transhistorical and Intermedial Investigations**

Edited by

Simone Dotto, François Mouillot and Maria Teresa Soldani

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Avant into Pop, Pop into Avant: Interplays between Music and Visual Media¹

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Advancing through Time. Avant-garde and Mass Culture.

When considered separately from any reference to specific art work or movements, the notion of "avant-garde" calls for a trans-historical, or at least trans-temporal, perspective. Derived from the French warfare lexicon in use since the Middle Ages and originally indicating a contingent of forerunners leading a military formation, the word took a more figurative nuance as early as the mid-sixteenth century, when literary historian Etienne Pasquier described Renaissance poets as "the avant-garde" in "a war against ignorance".² Such a use of the term foreshadowed the romantic meaning it would eventually take up three centuries later among Saint Simon's disciples, for whom it outlined the role of the artists as forerunners, paving the way of the future society by promoting revolutionary changes.³ In transposing its military semantic field in which it functioned as a spatial concept to a temporal metaphor, the notion posits an understanding of time as a linear and evolutionary progress (an "unexorable march", so to speak) which has deep roots in modern thinking. On a broader level, the very idea of an avant-garde is in fact 'directly indebted to the broader consciousness of modernity – a sharp sense of militancy, praise of nonconformism, courageous precursory exploration, and, on a more general plane, confidence in the final victory of *time* and immanence over traditions'⁴ to the point where it can also be read as a dramatization and radicalization of modernity's main tenets. To simply state that an art-work is

¹ This introductory essay was conceived and developed by the three authors in close collaboration. However as regards the draft of the single sections, Simone Dotto wrote the first paragraph 'Advancing through Time. Avant-garde and Mass Culture', François Mouillot wrote the second paragraph 'Moving in Between. Intermedial Art and Networks', and Maria Teresa Soldani wrote the third paragraph 'At the Criss Cross between Music, Art and Visual Media'.

² Etienne Pasquier, *Oeuvres choisies*, ed. by Léon Feugère (Paris: Firmin Didot, 1849), vol. 2, p. 21 (our translation).

³ The first acknowledged use of the word in this sense is dated back to Olinde Rodrigues's 'L'artiste, le savant et l'industriel: Dialogue' in *Opinions littéraires, philosophiques et industrielles* (Paris: Galerie de Bossange Père, 1895).

⁴ Matias Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity: Modernism, Avant-garde, Decadence, Kitsch, Post-modernism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1987), p. 93.

“ahead of its time” already implies awareness of historicity, an unshakable faith in progress and ultimately, the very possibility to predict the course of action. As Hans Enzensberger noticed, according to this logic:

The arts are regarded not as historically unvarying activities of mankind or as an arsenal of timelessly extant ‘cultural goods’ but as continually advancing progress, as a work in progress, in which every single production participates [...]. The forward march of the arts through history is conceived of as a linear, perspicuous and surveyable movement in which everyone can himself determine his place at the forefront or with the hangers-on⁵

It is precisely this conception of time that underlies the controversial relationship with what we may broadly define as “the cultural values of mainstream society”. While acting in view of a popularization of their ground-breaking ideas which will eventually occur in the future, exponents of art and literary movements in the early twentieth century took the duty to fight against the *status quo* constituted both by the present they lived in and by past traditions. Avant-garde art-making is thus often conceived as socially/politically *oppositional* and *elitist* on an aesthetic level. This adversarial attitude mostly depended on the urge for a radical change in social life and took the bourgeois class and at the institutionalization of art as its main targets – an aim partially shared with concurrent political revolutionary movements. According to Peter Bürger, radicalness served as ‘the self-critique of art in a bourgeois society’, since ‘the unification of art and life intended by the avant-garde can only be achieved if it succeeds in liberating the aesthetic potentials from institutional constraints which blocks its social effectiveness’.⁶ What we have named “aesthetic elitism” is less a deliberate objective than a natural consequence of such a radical agenda: in spite of the fact that giving up the well-respected social status of the artist was one of the commitments imposed by the aforementioned unification of art and life, the concurrent rejection of any accepted convention or formal tradition was necessarily doomed to infringe on the expectations of the general public. Exploring a totally new creative and social horizon which could be properly appreciated only by the future audiences equated to throw down a challenge against not only the social and institutional powers but also the understanding of the ordinary receiver. However aesthetic elitism was also invested with an increasingly “political” meaning as soon as it was discursively put in opposition with mass culture. Art theoreticians and critics of the first half of the twentieth century championed different artistic expressions as the ideal counterpart of the industrialization of society and culture. To name but the most representative examples of this tendency, it suffices to recall Clement Greenberg’s praise of “absolute”, “pure” art in opposition to

⁵ Hans Enzensberger, *The Aporias of Avant-garde* (1964), trans. by John Simon in *Modern Occasions*, ed. by Philip Rahv (New York: Noonday Press, 1965), vol. 2, 74-100 (pp. 81-85).

⁶ Peter Bürger, ‘Avant-garde and Neo-Avant-garde: An Attempt to Answer Certain Critics of Theory of the Avant-garde’, *New Literary History*, XL, 4 (November 2010), 695-715 (p. 696).

mechanically produced “kitsch [...] destined for those who, insensible to the values of genuine culture, are hungry nevertheless for the diversion that only culture of some sort can provide”;⁷ in a similar fashion, Adorno conceived the non-reproducible and autonomous characters of avant-garde art as signals of criticism and resistance to the instrumental logics of the culture industry and its production of interchangeable commodities.⁸ However, as the critical reception of their works later clarified, both theorists used the word “avant-garde” as a synonym for “modernism”, a related but distinct trend which emphasized “purity” as the ultimate goal of differentiation between and specialization of artistic disciplines. This emphasis on aesthetic autonomy constituted the main difference between modernist painting and literature analysed by Adorno and Greenberg and the art movements now commonly referred to as “early avant-gardes”. According to Bürger, this is demonstrated by their ‘divergent attitudes towards the culture industry and popular literature.’ He further contends that: ‘Whereas modernism is anxious to preserve the aesthetic sphere and to reject popular literature as a whole, the avant-garde finds many starting points in it’.⁹ It took post-modernist critical revisionism to definitely dismantle the modernist misconception of aesthetic elitism and unearth the ‘hidden dialectics’ occurring between art movements and one of the constitutive feature of mass society: mass media. Rediscussing the ‘great divide’ between high and low culture in modernity, Andreas Huyssen saw the role of media technologies ‘a crucial, if not *the* crucial, role in the avant-garde’s attempt to overcome the art/life dichotomy and make art productive in the everyday life’.¹⁰ More recent scholarship in film and media studies has variously elaborated on this idea, addressing Dada’s and Futurism’s subversive aesthetics as “parasitic” attempts to irritate the emerging means of communications¹¹ or addressing the mutual dependence between European avant-garde film-makers on the one hand and film-industry on the other.¹² As in a self-fulfilling prophecy, a wider look on the entanglement of avant-garde with the structures of mass society and beyond their supposedly aesthetic self-sufficiency became only possible retrospectively, that is to say not only when they had already exhausted their historical function but also when their linear-progressive conception of time was itself historicized.

⁷ Clement Greenberg, ‘Avant-garde and Kitsch’ (1939) repr. in Id., *Art and Culture: Critical Essays* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1961), 3-33 (p. 16).

⁸ See, for instance, Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), trans. and ed. by R.H. Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2002), pp. 33-36.

⁹ Peter Bürger, ‘Adorno’s Anti-avantgardism’, *Telos*, 86 (December 1990), 49-60 (p. 53).

¹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide. Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1986), p. 9.

¹¹ Arndt Niebitsch, *Media Parasites in the Early Avant-garde. On the Abuse of Technology and Communication* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010).

¹² Malte Hagener, *Moving Forward, Looking Back. The European Avant-garde and the Invention of Film Culture, 1919-1939* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2007).

Moving in Between. Intermedial Art and Networks.

By the mid-twentieth century avant-garde had been pronounced dead several times in the wake of its sudden popularization in the American art circuits and museums and by the art criticism after the end of WWII. In one of the eulogies written for avant-garde in the 1960s, literary critic Irving Howe noted that ‘the middle class has discovered that the fiercest attacks upon its values can be transported into pleasing entertainments, and the avant-garde writer or artist must confront the one challenge for which he has not been prepared: the challenge of success’.¹³ Similar positions were later transported in the field of arts by Bürger who saw this success of the avant-garde aesthetics as a co-optation of its once disruptive techniques by its former enemy, the art institution.¹⁴

It is precisely against this institutionalization process that the other key notion outlined in the title of this special issue, “intermediality”, emerged and gained some theoretical consistency in the arts. Dating back to the scientific discourse of the eighteenth century, the term “intermedia” was re-signified by Dick Higgins in 1965 as what ‘falls between the media’, “an uncharted land that lies between collage, music and the theater. It is not governed by rules; each work determines its own medium and form according to its needs’.¹⁵ In Higgins’ own words, intermediality served as a way to ‘demystify [...] what was then known as “avant-garde: for specialists only”¹⁶ and, on a broader level to finally get rid of the compartmentalized approach inherited from the bourgeois ideology and a response to the problems of the then dawning “classless society”. While openly addressing the modernist notion of “medium-specificity” — which had been strongly advocated by Clement Greenberg among others¹⁷ — Higgins acknowledged the role of Futurists, Dadaists and Surrealists as ancestors of an aesthetics of contamination between different disciplines.

Although in this context the word “medium” indicates the material means for making art, the concept as a whole cannot be fully understood if not placed against the backdrop of mass communications. Higgins himself addressed this issue in his later writings, pondering how ‘due to the spread of mass literacy, to television and the transistor radio, our sensitivities have changed’¹⁸ and calling

¹³ Irving Howe, ‘The Culture of Modernism’, *Commentary*, XL, 5 (November 1967), [repr. as ‘Introduction’ in Id., *The Idea of the Modern in Literature and the Arts* (New York: Horizon Press, 1968)] p. 24.

¹⁴ Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-garde* (1974), trans. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989), pp. XLIX – LV.

¹⁵ Ivi, p. 53.

¹⁶ Dick Higgins, ‘Intermedia’ (1965-1980), repr. in *Leonardo*, XXXIV, 1, 2000, 49-54, (p. 50).

¹⁷ See Noël Carroll, ‘Medium Specificity Arguments and the Self-Consciously Invented Arts: Film, Video, and Photography’, in Id., *Theorizing the Moving Image* (Cambridge: University of Cambridge Press, 1996), 3-24.

¹⁸ Dick Higgins, ‘Statement on Intermedia’, *Dè-coll/age*, 6 (July 1967) repr. in *Theories and Documents of Contemporary Art. A Sourcebook of Artists’ Writings*, ed. by Kristine Stiles and Peter Selz (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 728-729 (p. 728).

for a use of intermedia as a new way of communicating capable to respond both to the social issues and the technological challenges of the time. The same ambivalence became even stronger as Gene Youngblood borrowed the term for his column on the *Los Angeles Free Press* in 1967 and later featured it in his major work *Expanded Cinema*: in his writings, the “intermedial” adjective applies both to a range of artistic practices and to a system of global communication. In a fashion reminiscent of Marshall McLuhan, Youngblood compares the contemporary artist to an ecologist within an “environment” much more influenced by the presence of technological media than by nature. Within this context, intermedia art is presented as a progressive counteraction to the pervasiveness of the intermedia networks and an invitation to re-invent mass cultural means for higher purposes.¹⁹ Whereas mass information and commercial entertainment are “redundant” (they give the audience what they already know) and “popular” by definition (as they speak a common, standardized language), what we call art must ‘go on from there’, providing ‘new instruments to think with and new areas to explore in our thinking’.²⁰ These instruments are supposed to be materially carved out of the already existing media: thanks to the artists, cinema, television and computers will be freed from their prescribed place within society, and their unexpressed creative potentials finally redeemed with the ultimate aim to create a new global consciousness.

Given how quickly and complexly the notion had developed across different fields of knowledge, it would be misleading to suggest that intermediality is the exclusive domain of the arts or a distinctive hallmark of those post-war art movements later formalized as “neo-avant-gardes”. Nevertheless, in Higgins’ and Youngblood’s theoretical accounts, the notion does meet some of the conceptual tensions which were already crucial in the early twentieth century avant-garde movements: a thrust to overcome the hierarchical separation between the different art sectors, the aim to crush the barriers between the aesthetic and the mundane, and an explicit will to ‘invent the future in the present’.²¹ In addition, intermediality also offers a new shade of meaning perhaps more closely tied to the specificity of the arts between the 1950s and the 1970s. The concept of intermedia is in fact more spatial than temporal, one that indicates the possibility of an “in-betweenness” or, in other words, the chance to look for a synesthetic and syncretic outcome by seamlessly *moving* from a discipline to another and, by extension, from the everyday routine of an highly technologized society to artistic creation and exhibition — the intermedia network has made us all artists by proxy.²² In this sense, intermedium theories show some conceptual continuity with the emphasis put on the concept of ‘flow’ by the Fluxus founders and, to

¹⁹ Gene Youngblood, *Expanded Cinema* (New York: P. Dutton & Co., 1970), p. 374.

²⁰ Ivi, p. 87.

²¹ Ivi, p. 69.

²² Ivi, p. 58.

a wider extent, with the extemporaneous character of their happening and the aleatory nature of John Cage's works: all of these manifestations, in fact, share an implicit understanding of what Leonard Meyers called the "anti-teleological"²³ drive of post-war experimentalism. To put it simply, Youngblood's idea of the artist as an ecologist in a networked environment diverges quite significantly from the metaphor of the military vanguard that is looking forward for new directions. In Youngblood's terms, artistic innovation may not necessarily have a destination to be reached. The chance for artistic and social innovation does not lie ahead of us, as in an unknown future, but is instead to be found in-between what is already existing, as a possibility which still has to be disclosed. Conceiving the arts no more as a 'continually advancing progress'²⁴ but rather as a 'dynamic steady-state'²⁵ which allows for the 'simultaneity of the radically disparate'²⁶ led intermedia artists and theoreticians in the second half of the twentieth century to a more open consideration of the pervasiveness of mass media in order to exploit their creative potentials and turning it against them.

At the Criss-cross between Music, Art and Visual Media.

If we were to follow one consistent line of thinking of post-modern criticism, it would be tempting to conclude our brief historical outline with a striking paradox: when all of the barriers and boundaries separating the aesthetic from the mundane and "high" from "low" culture finally collapsed, it was neither due to some subversive revolution nor to a sudden awakening of (artistic) consciousness. Instead, it was only thanks to the market's rapid taking over of art both in its institutional and disruptive forms. This seems to be implied in Huyssen's statements on the advent of late modernity as the 'dead-end of the avant-garde'²⁷ as well as in Fredric Jameson's oft-cited passage according to which 'aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally: the frantic economic urgency of producing fresh waves of ever more novel-seeming goods (from clothing to airplanes), at ever greater rates of turnover, now assigns an increasingly structural function and position to aesthetic innovation and experimentation'.²⁸

That art-making today is supported and conditioned in a quite different way than it was in the early-century bourgeois society is a sure fact. Nonetheless, conceiving mass media and culture in strictly economic/productive terms

²³ Leonard B. Meyer, *Music, the Arts and Ideas. Patterns and Predictions in Twentieth Century Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1967), p. 72.

²⁴ Enzensberger, *Aporias*, p. 81.

²⁵ Meyer, p. 96.

²⁶ Bürger, *Theory*, p. 63.

²⁷ Huyssen, pp. 160-178.

²⁸ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism: or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), p. 5.

fails to address several important social and cultural issues at stake. These issues become all the more apparent when analysed against the backdrop of the experimental art forms whose very existence is inherently tied to mass media technologies. In recent times, film scholars and historians have taken a more nuanced view on the relation between artistic avant-gardes and mass consumerism. On the one hand, as mentioned above, they critically re-assessed historical avant-garde film-makers' experimental aesthetics by considering the active role they also played in the field of advertising and sponsored films.²⁹ On the other hand, when looking at the current mass marketed situation, they do acknowledge the existence of an avant-gardist/experimental "persistence" in film-making by variously addressing it for its distinguishing aesthetic features,³⁰ as 'a cultural formation' whose members share a 'conscious association as group identification'³¹ or as 'a mesh of institutional frameworks and practices and [...] a set of exigencies or modes of production'.³² The boundaries become even more blurred when it comes to the medium of video: welcomed at first for its technological specificity (i.e. for allowing a synchronic recording and a synesthetic rendition of image and sound altogether)³³ it has been progressively considered less in an essentialist fashion and more in terms of contextual relationships. In other words, video cannot be fully understood if not at the intersection of a plurality of forms (from video-art to home video), cultural and social contexts (from the tv broadcast schedule to the art gallery) which can be considered separately but are never totally independent from each other.³⁴ The fluidity between those apparently autonomous realms comes to the fore while dealing with some peculiar cases, such as that of the music video: not only did several video artists and experimenters directed music videos to be broadcast on a regular schedule, but music video itself eventually became an institutionally acknowledged art-form outside the context of television. As Arnold et al. have suggested, 'taken together these tendencies constitute

²⁹ See Hagener, *Moving*; Michael Cowan, *Walter Ruttmann and the Cinema of Multiplicity: Avant-garde, Advertising, Modernity* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2014).

³⁰ According to Michael Pray, from the 1970s onwards avant-garde film-making witnessed "a shift from ascepticism to aestheticism. In an Oedipal reaction, the young film-makers what had been anathema to their elders: subject matter". *Avant-garde Film: Forms, Themes and Passions* (London and New York: Wallflowers, 2008), p. 108.

³¹ Joan Hawkins, 'Downtown Cinema Revisited' in *Downtown Film and Tv Culture 1977-2001*, ed. by Joan Hawkins (Chicago and London: Intellect, 2015) xi-xxx (p. xii). The term 'cultural formation' is quoted from Raymond Williams, *The Sociology of Culture* (New York: Schocken Books, 1982), p. 68.

³² Paul Arthur quoted in Malcom Turvey, Ken Jacobs et al., 'Obsolescence and the American Avant-garde Film', *October*, 100, 2002, 115-132 (p. 116).

³³ See Holly Rogers, 'The Unification of the Senses. Intermediality in Video-Art Music', *Journal of the Royal Music Association*, CXXXVI, 2, 2011, 399-428.

³⁴ Sean Cubitt, *Videography. Video Media as Art and Culture* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 1993), pp. xiv-xv.

part of a complex “video culture” [...] ranging from the most commercialized culture to avant-garde aesthetics’.³⁵

Either retracing the long-standing relationship between artistic and industrial discourses across the history of the moving image or undertaking an exhaustive analysis of the ambivalence of film, video and their successors as means of artistic expression and mass communication would be a task far beyond the scope of this special issue. Our intention here is rather to further complicate the matters at stake by looking at several media and artistic domains at once: by keeping in mind the shifting boundaries and relationships between the avant-garde and the popular in the area of (audio)visual media, we also intend to take in full account another set of tensions that underlies music as an art and an industry. Scholarship on popular music, in particular, will provide us with a parallel and equally viable entry point to question the understanding of mass-culture as a flat and one-dimensional concept in strict opposition with avant-garde art instances. As pioneers of the then-emerging academic field of popular music studies, Howard Horne and Simon Frith adopted a sociological angle to investigate in further detail how stances coming from the world of arts were gradually assimilated from the record industry. In *Art into Pop*, the authors proposed a double focus: on the one hand, they foregrounded the role played by Art Schools as a social subject crossing class and ideological divisions between high and low culture to educate ‘petit-bourgeois professionals who, as pop musicians, apply ‘high art’ skills and identities to a mass cultural form’³⁶. On the other hand, they acknowledge the importance of musicians as artists by putting them at the core of the pop production process, thus dismissing the ‘assumption that while high art meaning is derived from the artists themselves — from their intentions, experience and genius — mass cultural meaning lies in its function (to make money, to reproduce social order).’³⁷ Other than providing a methodological guidance for the study of popular music in general, Horne’s and Frith’s groundbreaking study contributed in establishing a canon of bands and performers between the 1960s and the 1970s which were later variously labelled as “art”, “avant” or “experimental rock”. More recent scholarship has followed *Art into Pop*’s lead by singling out significant periods, scenes and figures on both sides of the Atlantic. Doye Greene’s *Rock, Counterculture and Avant-garde* considered the Beatles, Frank Zappa’s Mothers of Invention and the Velvet Underground as case studies to investigate the period between 1966 and 1970 as years during which avant-garde art significantly interweaved with popular aesthetics and practices;³⁸ cultural

³⁵ Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney at al., ‘The Persistence of the Music Video Form from MTV to Twenty-First Century Social Media’, in *Music/Video: Histories, Aesthetics, Media*, ed. by Gina Arnold, Daniel Cookney at al. (New York, London: Bloomsbury, 2017), pp. 1-14 (p. 10).

³⁶ Simon Frith and Howard Horne, *Art into Pop* (London and New York: Methuen, 1987), p. 2.

³⁷ *Ibidem*.

³⁸ Doyle Green, *Rock, Counterculture and the Avant-Garde. How the Beatles, Frank Zappa and the Velvet Underground Defined an Era* (Jefferson: McFarland & Co, 2014)

theorist and music critic Simon Reynolds focused instead on some key-figures of the New York scene of the 1960s and 1970s such as Yoko Ono, Brian Eno and Arto Lindsay, presenting them as the first (non-)musicians to apply art-ideas not solely on the “packaging” of pop music but directly on its practices, thus transposing the aleatory compositional and performative techniques of post-war experimentalism in the context of popular culture and establishing a point of reference for the art school trained generations who would later give way to post-punk.³⁹ As an art college graduate himself and one of the most eminent exponents of the post-punk scene, David Byrne was at the core of philosopher Sytze Seenzstra’s *Song and Circumstances*, an extended essay devoted to dissect the composer/writer/director’s “intermedial” work as well as to shed light on his inspiration in conceptual arts.⁴⁰ Additionally, Benjamin Piekut’s book *Experimentalism Otherwise: The New York Avant-Garde and Its Limits* has traced the myriad ways in which an avant-garde musical network was shaped around 1964 in New York by various people, their encounters (i.e. Leonard Bernstein’s New York Philharmonic Orchestra’s encounter with John Cage’s composition *Atlas Eclipticalis*), specific events (i.e. Charlotte Moorman’s premiere of John Cage’s *26’ 1.1499” for a String Player* and further controversial performances of the piece), structures (i.e. Bill Dixon the Jazz Composers Guild) and the achievements, failures and conflicts they generated. Although he ultimately argues for the exclusion of specific popular music-oriented artists like James Osterberg (Iggy Pop) and the Stooges from the particular world of experimental/avant-garde music that he seeks to reconstruct, Piekut’s analysis points to the variety of ways in which these popular music artists were connected – notably through John Cale’s working history with La Monte Young and the ONCE Festival in Ann Arbor, Michigan – with avant-garde music practices and aesthetics of the time. Significantly, Piekut’s account ‘offers a way of understanding the complexities of attachment – how the Stooges can be both *associated* with a particular formation and *absent* from [the New York avant-garde music’s] canonical history’⁴¹.

These scholarly studies have in common a concern with musicians who were well aware of the aesthetics of the twentieth century avant-garde, either for having studied in art schools or for having personally taken part in art movements and collectives. After all, most of the musical figures and scenes analysed in these works occurred between the 1950s and the 1970s, at a time when the historical avant-gardes’ heritage became increasingly “popularized” and accepted by institutions and when the so called American neo-avant-gardes were about to emerge. In this

³⁹ Simon Reynolds, ‘Eno, Ono, Arto. Non-musicians and the Emergence of Concept-Rock’, in Id., *Totally Wired. Postpunk Interviews and Overviews*, (London: Faber and Faber, 2009), 367-380.

⁴⁰ Sytze Seenzstra, *Songs and Circumstances. The Work of David Byrne from Talking Heads to the Present*, (New York: Continuum International Publishing, 2010).

⁴¹ Benjamin Piekut, *Experimentalism otherwise. The New York Avant-Garde and its Limits*, (Berkeley, Los Angeles and London: University of California Press, 2011), p. 196.

context, the existence of a dialogue between art and popular culture was, if not self-evident, at least easily provable. Other authors had looked instead for a less explicit “avant-pop connection”, one grounded more on transhistorical linkages than on social-cultural proximities. American music critic Greil Marcus’ *Lipstick Traces* proposes an imaginative narrative of the cultural roots of English punk music, taking the Sex Pistols’ *Anarchy in the UK* as an entry point in the ‘secret history of the twentieth century’. Whenever taken seriously, the comparison of punk with the Dada movement or the Letterist International collective leads to ‘something that was less a matter of cultural genealogy, of tracing a line between pieces of a found story, than of making the story up. [...] a story seemingly endemic to the century, a story that repeatedly speaks and repeatedly loses its voice; it was, it seemed, a voice that only had to speak to lose itself’.⁴² Similarly, albeit through a less impressionistic approach than Marcus’s, philosopher Bernard Gendron took a wide look at the twentieth century as a whole in the attempt to ‘connect the dots’ and discern a ‘meaningful historical trajectory’ from the Montmartre’s cabarets in the late nineteenth century Paris to the New York new wave of the 1970s, including the post-WWI and post-WWII jazz scenes and the cultural accreditation of the Beatles. Observed through this *longue-durée* perspective between avant-garde and popular culture looks like an ongoing negotiation in which the former is interested in the entertainment industry’s economic capital, while the latter strives for emancipation from its “mass-marketed” condition and for subsequent cultural recognition.⁴³ By conceiving of the historical development of avant-garde and popular cultures as “parallel convergences”, these and other scholars assumed that breaking down the hierarchies between high and low culture was not exclusive of late modernity and, more importantly, that the disruptive practices and stances brought forward by some exponents of popular music could not be read so much as mere appropriations as they constituted (more or less aware) *applications* of avant-garde practices in a different context.⁴⁴

Being in some ways indebted to both of these lines of inquiry, this *Cinéma&Cie* special issue aims at pushing the discussion on the “avant-pop connection” further by embracing a wider angle of observation. Other than acknowledging the central position of (cultured and popular) music for its long-standing entanglement with both the art and mass cultural discourses, we saw no reason to impose further restrictions narrowing the focus on a specific time period or on a single artistic discipline. Instead, our call for transhistorical and intermedial investigations aims precisely at re-framing the general topic as a matter of contamination and

⁴² Greil Marcus, *Lipstick Traces. A Secret History of the Twentieth Century* (New York: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 13.

⁴³ Bernard Gendron, *Between Montmartre and the Mudd Club. Popular Music and the Avant-Garde* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002).

⁴⁴ See also Scott MacKenzie, ‘De Do Do Do, De Da Da Dadaism. Popular culture and the Avant-Garde’, in *The Routledge Companion to Global Popular Culture*, ed. by Toby Miller (New York: Routledge, 2015), 175-186.

continuities between apparently distinct moments and “sectors” of cultural history.

The following essays share what we may consider a global perspective on cultural history that represents the background to discuss all the operating terms (“avant-garde”, “popular”, “intermedial”, “transhistorical”). By stressing the concept of cultural history more than the specificity of film history, media history, and music history, the authors will provide some analytical and theoretical tools that go beyond the traditional scholarship on the topic that has been mainly centered on UK/US and Europe/USA contexts. Their aim is to suggest original concepts and methodologies to explore such intermedial *exempla* between avant and pop in transhistorical terms and not only in the postmodern one-way move from pop to avant.

Beckmann’s essay starts from a key reference to the avant-pop connection in the field of popular music studies,⁴⁵ as well as a paradigm of such a relation between music and visual media:⁴⁶ the U.S. punk scene and New York underground film culture at the beginning of the 1980s. Spampinato switches from punk and DIY films to post-punk and DIY videos, including between the two of them the national television: keeping in mind the international framework on the topic, he investigates it from the more peripheral angle of the Italian scene among the video self-production, the raise of the commercial TV, and the historic national broadcast. From video as television to video as game, Fullam offers a different reading of the avant-pop issue by adopting a strongly diachronical and transhistorical approach that inscribes Fred Turner’s concept of ‘democratic surround’, stated for the 1960s countercultural productions, in the contemporary ‘algorithmic culture’. From TV and videogame to video-art as an interdisciplinary experience, Lischi and Guerra present an in-depth investigation of the process of creating a media intercultural art-work, which is an ongoing art practice between the international history of the Western avant-garde and national heritage of music folklore in Azerbaijan. From contemporary video-art to experimental cinema, Nori still holds the reference to the popular as non-Western traditional music composition and consumption, analyzing the key role of it in the Indian broadcast mainstream media and clashing the notion of experimental and commercial in cinema. Lastly, Liu offers in return an interesting perspective on the supposedly oppositional stances of avant-rock music as well on its connections to the non-Western traditions, keeping the attention on the historical facts over the postmodern *pastiche*, completing the discourses on the English/American art-rock/post-punk.

The range of audiovisual productions explored in such essays is exemplar of different forms and media that have been analyzed in a national field or in a

⁴⁵ See Frith and Horne; Gendron; Reynolds, *Rip it Up and Start Again: Postpunk 1978-1984* (London: Faber & Faber, 2005).

⁴⁶ See Maria Teresa Soldani, ‘Within the Ruins of New York City: No Wave as a Paradigm of American Independent Cinema’, *Cinergie*, 13 (2018), 59-65.

inter-national panorama, with practices inspired by Dadaism and Fluxus: the independent Cinema of Transgression in New York, the experimental Indian cinema, the Italian post-punk as well as UK new wave videoclips, the intercultural video of Cahen and Guerra, and the global medial panorama of videogame. All these media interact with the chain of circulation of the cultural production: from the composition (*Imaginary Video Landscape*) and recording (Japan's *Tin Drum*) to the distribution (the DIY film festival in downtown New York; the Italian national broadcast and the TV-show *Mister Fantasy*; MTV as the main global/trans-cultural channel; the radio network in India). Moving across this wide range of subject matters, this issue also recollects vary methodologies: the theoretical essay (Fullam); the analytic study of a body of works clearly determined in time and space (Spampinato, Beckmann, Nori); the singular case study of an audiovisual production (Liu) and an art practice, investigated by a scholar with a practitioner (Lischi and Guerra).

The essays also exemplify different possible interplays between the concepts of “avant” and “popular” in music, without assuming any fixed observation-point, considering both the cases in which the latter takes in the practices and aesthetics previously experimented by the former, and vice versa. Whereas, as Fullam's essay demonstrates. the now historicized experience of the twentieth century avant-gardes can provide a “technological engine” or an aesthetic inspiration for popular audiovisual form to draw upon, popular music and culture can also be scrutinized for the “raw materials” it provided to avant-garde experimentalism. In this context, the popular components have been interpreted both in terms of “pop” (mass culture and consumption) and “traditional” (communities and folk heritage) culture, a pop-duality between videogame music and Japan's chart music on the one hand, as well as the traditional Mugam and Indian music on the other. The “avant move” is expressed by the underground US scene of 1980's bands such as the Butthole Surfers, composers such as John Zorn – informed by the practice of avant-garde musician such as John Cage and Pierre Schaeffer – and post-punk/new wave styles that move among UK, US, and Italy.

The medium itself becomes a critical methodological tool to analyze the interplay between avant and pop, between elite and mass culture: Beckmann suggests to adopt the concept of ‘messiness’ to explore the DIY productions made in downtown New York City during the 1980s analyzing the phenomenon by taking a festival as a medium conveying such intermedial and trans-historical stances; when dealing with the interplays between popular music and experimental film or with the ones among mass media, popular entertainment, and underground music, Spampinato and Nori respectively consider the radio and the TV medium as *tropes*. Nori and Liu also analyze the idea of an ‘Avant/Pop Otherness’ that goes in two seemingly “counter” moves (from Western pop music to Asian culture, from Asian popular music to Western classical music). Liu in particular proposes the concept of ‘Avant-Orientalism’ to generate critical discussion on the adoption of cultural stereotypes in avant-pop, discussing the cultural values and implications linked to the appropriation of perceived historical

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and folkloric elements of Chinese popular culture and their transposition into the realm of Western pop through the post/modernist practices.

In conclusion, even if contemporary global culture no longer allows for easy distinction between “high” and “low” or “back” and “forth”, the conception of time and (media) spaces implied by the notions of avant-garde and intermediality can still perform a heuristic function, serving as “cartesian axes” from our observation deck and preventing us from flattening our ideas of mass society or cultural history in general. Focusing on the interplays between the art-avant-gardist and the pop-cultural discourses equates to questioning the very possibility of a critical and adversarial stance *within* mass culture, exploring the strategies and tactics by which, on the one hand, avant-garde re-affirms its otherness from the mainstream in order to preserve a relatively independent position and, on the other hand, popular culture renews itself by incorporating and drawing upon experimental practices. “Avant” and “pop” may also become tools to analyze art/film/music practices in order to recollect again any historical meaning that has been largely neglected by the postmodernist theory, as Liu suggests. Beyond the study of styles and techniques implicated in these artworks, this special issue foregrounds the notions of “avant”, “pop”, and “intermedial” as a movable ‘axes’ rather than as fixed concepts. It is our hope that, with this conceptual orientation, the notion of the “trans-historical” can be used not only as a method, but also as a matrix for the study of recurring topics in media history and of concepts that might emerge as scholars move along these axes in their analyses of various avant, pop and intermedial phenomena.

