

A futuristic blue car is positioned on a glowing grid floor. A bright beam of light emanates from the car, illuminating the surrounding area. In the background, there are large, stylized letters and symbols, possibly representing a digital or virtual environment.

COUNTERPOINT

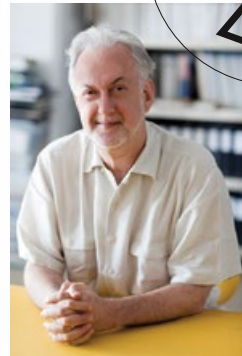
MICHAEL SORKIN

WHAT COMES AFTER THE AVANT-GARDE?



Still from *Tron*,
1982

Tron's light-cycle arena and sci-fi writer William Gibson's vision of 'cyberspace' were anticipated by Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* (1969) – all dystopic visions situated within relentless grids.



Architect, urbanist, writer and New York's *éminence grise* **Michael Sorkin** laments the lacuna of politic radical thought that he sees in the nostalgia for the 1960s and 1970s avant-garde, appropriated purely for its form-making, and warns that our historic navel-gazing will not solve anything.

'Avant-garde' is such a fossil. How is it relevant, except as fairly hip nostalgia, Photoshop sampler or pedigree by proxy and chops by association? The woolly bag of not-so-selective affinities rehearsed in this issue of Δ recalls a staple of Trump TV, that portrays as sour, comparisons by a cadre of 'presidential historians' (this seems to be an actual academic discipline) in which the exemplary qualities of some past prexy rebuke our current flamer-in-chief, held totally deficient in the integrity of Honest Abe or the command of command of FDR. These values do not actually matter to the Fake News discourse: fascination with the dear leader is total and his apparent control of the media seemingly complete; 24/7 of this a**hole befogs American culture, and whether the coverage is valanced left or right, we are all hypnotised.

I am not quite ready to argue that the Donald precisely occupies the position of an avant-garde artfully working to distinguish itself from the culture it seeks to bash and exceed, but if being 'avant' is measured in weirdness (there is no bypassing Mount Surrealism in this trek!), then maybe. Trump is just a few affective ticks (and tics) from whom – his co-generationalists Gilbert and George? Machine-tanned George Hamilton? Not really, but they are a succinct summa of key elements: personality, performance, peculiarity. The real art-Trumps are the likes of Jeff Koons, Damien Hirst and the 'ghost' of Jean-Michel Basquiat (ascended to the firmament of pure commodity), post-Andy swan dives into the murky waters of commerce and kitsch, the terrain of Trumpian branding, a lewd avant-garde, over the line but laughing all the way to the bank.

Can Anything Arty Ever Be Transgressive Again

But that is yesterday's spleen: marketised art annihilates the rest and nothing called art is dangerous for long. Insubordination and cock-snooting is another sure legacy of the Notorious A.G., but how to keep it up, how to actually sting? It is tough. The disarmament by globalisation of hip-hop (rapping in Mandarin or Urdu or Swedish) happened fast and furiously, gilding its initial critique with ornamental push-back: that 'gangsta' so upset parents, politicians and racists was as necessary to its ascent as the howls of the audience at the premiere of the *Rite of Spring*, 'public' outrage certifying their avant-juju cred. Who is outraged now? How transgressive can any formalism really be?

While membership of the avant-club is capacious (although surprisingly respectful of historical disciplinary categories), what is gathered in this Δ is all visual stuff: for us there is always a privileged relationship of sight and insight, and this retrospective sees almost entirely with its 'eyes'. This particular avant-garde is a branchless chain of filiation descending through a very specific, mainly European, clique of white guys, all self-identified as artists, skin still in the game: nobody just turns in their membership card and walks away. Their discordant, if

Demonstrators outside Trump Tower,
New York,
5 February 2019

In a world where public space is privatised and denuded, where politicians lie with fake news – why are architects not rallying against such notions, instead of conducting retrospective, formalist navel-gazing?





fundamentally harmless, acts of rupture try to overturn received practices by presenting themselves not simply as insubordinate, but as drastically *new*, and this pruned story is the default, rooted in Constructivism, Surrealism and their spawn, but without fessing up to any other affiliative origins (a Proun disrupts, an Impressionist merely paints) – as if *ex novo*. Practices and forms falling outside this skinny visual/ideological remit have no claims to the category.

What About the Others?

Art as critique is an inbred habit of modernity and a necessary, indeed central, component of the 'traditional' avant garde. But, in the official story told here, certain modes of reading are verboten, most prominently functionalism, taken for an operating manual rather than an aesthetic or a riposte. This is problematic for architecture, creating a constricted idea of utility and excluding big branches of a more expansive taxonomy. This issue does not, for example, want to touch an alternative avant-garde that includes Isambard Kingdom Brunel, the Bauhaus and Bucky. These are simply dumped in a materialist tip – teleologically inevitable, hence historical, hence historicised, hence irrelevant to breaking ranks. The preferred point of technological and formal origin for *our* avant-garde is Tatlin and Malevich and for ideological vibe (and, occasionally, a sense of humour), it is Man Ray or Marcel Duchamp, facilitating a quick leap to the post-Surrealism of the Situationists and to that over-reverenced *caffè klatch* of 'radical' Italians with their period rock-band brands, weirdly centre-stage in today's post-avant avant-garde.

But 'Super' or 'Zoom' never quite obscure the *guys* behind the curtain, claiming the conventional authority of originality and difference, but eventually selling out to the Man, their would-be world-warping polemics of resistance morphing into professorships

Michael Sorkin Studio,
Bonville Ecological Golf Resort, Coff's Harbour,
New South Wales,
Australia,
2014

Terreform operates in parallel with Michael Sorkin Studio, a 'commercial' design practice. The original idea was that the profits from the latter would subsidise the former. Terraform disrupts the status quo with its publishing and activities, working in a contemporary manner without reference to a retro avant-garde.

and the gridded laminate on designer coffee tables. One thing that is not avant about this bunch is their old-fashioned embrace of the figure of the protean artist super-hero who will change the world through beautiful acts of graphic terror. Paper tigers they may be, but they do encapsulate the core of how the avant-garde is vetted. First, by the clear immanence of subversively flavoured ideas (the world is all oppressive sameness, let us give people choices about how to live, geography is not destiny, we identify with the working class – it is all *in the picture*). Second by what is retrospectively clear as anticipation: in this case, Planet Digital (Superstudio predicts *Tron*). And finally, by that valiant disdain for the tectonics of actual inhabitation.

This favouring of the polemical over the aspirational (not that there is anything wrong with that) throws the weight of evaluation on the quality of desire rather than of effects. But the ideological vagueness – even slipperiness – makes it tough to locate either the frisson or the firmness of the connection. Why is Archigram's particular hyperbolic – or pastoral – overturning of spare, dead-end Modernism more avant-garde than Modernism's own overturning of its dark and stuffy predecessors? Because it is linguistically more up to date? Because it is so Woodstock-ishly sweet? Of course, desire must speak to be understood, but the format of comix (why

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is this the default?) does not tell us much except by too diffuse association. Who does not do comix? Who cares about comix? Who cares about another haunting artistic image of ubiquitous alienation?

Strange Bedfellows and Partying On

I am disquieted by this trip down memory lane not because it hurts to recall (or to party on), but because the operation is so *genetic* – a 23 and Me origin tale of a retrospectively inevitable chain of influences leading straight to our own deeply un-dangerous – if delightful, even probing – operations. To be sure, there are some charmingly odd cousins in the family and conversation at the dinner table can get wonky as Pop and Digital and Logistical operators duke it out: any avant-garde worth its salt must resist pitching too big a tent and, while bedfellows can be strange, the specific boundaries of any strangeness are dispositive. However, when unabashed interpretation (hermeneutics and erotics *can* fall in love) lapsed into Postmodern ‘appropriation’ – even recuperating pastiche historicism as a cudgel – politics became a joke. The resulting misalliance of André Breton and Robert Venturi is at once false and canny, a reciprocally self-justifying brief based not simply on their overturning ironies, but on their useful celebration of a formalism thought to be simultaneously dangerous and hermetic, on the violence of obscurity. The current generation must gestate some serious and shocking freaks. Where are they?

Given the Siamese twinning of theory and practice so urgent for contemporary (or any) avant-gardists, it is a tad odd that nobody seems to recall that this discussion happened decisively yonks ago – in the grand canon of Clement Greenberg, the Frankfurt School and friends – usefully problematising the shifting role of avant-garde practices in relation to ‘high’ and ‘mass’ culture

Terreform book covers

Radical design practice can take many forms, including the support of comrades in struggle. Terreform, a non-profit dedicated to urban research and advocacy founded by Michael Sorkin in 2005, provides a platform for preoccupations that include the greening of cities, the strengthening of social democracy, ethical technologies and equitable policy development.





Gilets jaunes,
Paris,
9 February 2019

The Yellow Jackets stand in opposition to diminished buying power and increased fiscal burden, and are a social rebellion against the reduction of the French welfare state, mainly from the rural right.

Michael Sorkin Studio,
A New Capital City,
Xiongan,
China 2017

An avant-garde can be personal, the radical precursor of a long trajectory, the ontogeny that structurally mimics the phylogeny of broader currents. Sorkin's city designs show a private evolution from wild abstraction to more worldly precision.

and especially their dissipating dance with the co-optations of kitsch, and its tacky, infra-dig celebration of the forbidden. Our originary avant-gardes were underpinned by the radical theorisations of Marx and Freud. What is immanent today? There were those Chomskyan and Derridean blips (and now a wee flurry of interest in speculative realism whose anti-anthropocentrism does potentially align with some ecological theory – another story), but most of the actual (if conceptual) architects still need to be Sancho Panza-ed into their constructs by a critical-theoretical cohort representing newish forms of architectural aspirations to the metaphysical. This collapsing of reading and designing certainly bulks up the pretence, but remains a parallel substantiation rather than a deployable methodological insight, a neo-Surrealist cookbook. For that nowadays, we look to the richer, more insistent complications of the virtual, which have so radically altered the practicalities of practice while further embedding it – per Hardt and Negri *et al* – in a system we cannot stand outside of.

The digital Janus – whether via parametrics or just Photoshop – surely has the capacity to automate Surrealism and to yield weird and exquisite objects. But the exquisite never really threatens and the connoisseurship of rupture is a fool's errand. While the plurality of avant-gardes is vital, I would like to plump for a version that confronts real enemies – WalMart, CCTV, Facebook, climate change, inequality, racism, mass migration, neoliberalism, neocolonialism, Hollywood, homelessness, fascism. Can we have an architectural avant-garde as forceful and visually riveting as the *gilets jaunes* (who remind us that avant-gardist politics swing both ways)? As a rock through the window of Fauchon? As Gazan kids dancing a defiant dabke in the sniper kill zone that surrounds the Strip? ▽

