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Avant-garde in the Rear-View Mirror: From Utopia under General Suspicion to a New Notion of the Utopian

On the Paradigm Shift of the Artistic Reception of the Avant-garde in Eastern Europe from 1980s to the Present

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(Hi)stories

Moscow 1971-72. Erik Bulatov's painting *Red Horizon* (1971, 140 x 180 cm) depicts a seaside landscape with sand dunes, blue ocean, swimmers, and a blue sky. Carefree, a group of three women and two men strides toward the horizon, which Bulatov has replaced with a flat suprematist form. On closer examination, this form turns out to be the ribbon of the Order of Lenin.

Moscow 1972. The first drawings in Ilya Kabakov's album *Sitting-in-the-Closet Primakov*¹ (1972) depict nothing more than black squares which fill the leaves of the series, leaving only a narrow margin on each side. These black "squares" are commented by various legends. During the 1970s and 1980s, Moscow conceptualists come to understand "Malevich's image-paradigm of the *Black Square* as an 'icon', taken *pars pro toto* for the avant-garde from the 1920s in its entirety", as Aage Hansen-Löve puts it.²

Zagreb 1984. Mladen Stilinović begins working on his series *The Exploitation of the Dead*. He continues this series up to 1990, combining quotes from suprematism, constructivism, socialist realist and abstract art.

Ljubljana 1985. The group Irwin begins the series *Was ist Kunst?*, in which they combine themes from socialist realism, agit-prop and contemporary Slovenian art from the 1960s with archetypal Laibach-motives, such as steel-worker, stag, antlers, axes, the image of a woman drinking coffee, cogwheels, and black Malevich-crosses. In order to construct the images themselves as well as their massive frames, Irwin utilizes unusual materials such as blood, black tar, animal hides, (lumps of) coal, wood, gold leaf and other metals.

Ljubljana 1986. On occasion of the stage-premiere of the scenic opera *Baptism under Triglav* by the theater Gledališče Sester Scipion Nasice (and with the cooperation of other members of the artists' collective Neue Slowenische Kunst/NSK, Laibach, Irwin and Novi kolektivizem) in the Cankarjev Dom in Ljubljana a group photo is made. It shows the NSK collective under a model of the *Monument for the 3rd International* by Vladimir Tatlin, created (though never realized) in 1921.

¹ The album *Vškafusidjaščij Primakov* is a part of Kabakov's album series *10 personazhei (10 Characters)*, made between 1972 and 1975.

² Hansen-Löve, Aage: Zur Poetik des Minimalismus in der russischen Dichtung des Absurden. In: Goller, Mirjam / Witte, Georg (eds.): *Minimalismus. Zwischen Leere und Exzess*. Wien, 2001. 133-186. Here: 142.

New York 1988. Ilya Kabakov's installation *The Man who Flew into Space* allows a brief glimpse into a devastated space, past a few boards, nailed together hastily. In the back of the room, one can see a makeshift catapult, which has obviously been constructed by the room's former inhabitant. It consists of rubber bands, steel springs and the seat of an old chair, with which the tenant catapulted himself into space one night, as Kabakov's commentary tells us.

Moscow 1992. In the year of the opening of the exhibition *The Great Utopia* in Amsterdam, Andrei Roiter shows his painting *Kandinsky* (1992), which depicts the avant-garde artist wearing a suit and a pair of glasses. Yet instead of being surrounded by the revolutionary objects of his own design, such as the small teacup decorated with abstract forms (1923), which was on display in *The Great Utopia*, Kandinsky is holding a "wretched box" (Tupitsyn), which he gazes at in revulsion.

Moscow 1992. This year marks the first materialization of the *NSK State in Time* (*NSK Država v času*) – a state without territory or nation. It was founded in the framework of the *NSK Embassy Moscow*, which was a part of the international Apt-Art program and was open to the public in a private apartment at Leninsky Prospekt 12, apt. 24. Michael Benson and the Irwin group initiate a joint action of Russian and ex-Yugoslavian artists and theorists: together, they unfurl a large (22 m x 22 m) square of black cloth on Red Square (*Black Square on Red Square*).

Vienna 1993. The Viennese publishing house Turia & Kant publishes a reprint of the book *Problems of Space Travel: The Rocket Motor* by the Slovenian engineer Herman Potočnik Noordung, which was in fact first published in Berlin in 1929, but soon faded into obscurity, due to Noordung's premature death in the same year. Dragan Živadinov, the director of the theater-section of NSK (which was renamed in honor of Noordung in 1990) was very active in stimulating this re-print.

Moscow 1995. Oleg Vasiliev's painting *Nostalgia* (1995, 123 x 81 cm) superimposes a large red square in perspective distortion over a schematic rendition of the facade of Moscow's White House, the seat of the Russian parliament, reconstructed after it burned during the coup attempt in 1993. The red square vacillates between Malevich's *Red Square* and a socialist banner. A man in black stands with his back to the spectator, gazing at the building. He has taken off his hat, as if he were entering a sacred place or chancing upon a "dead body."³

Budapest 1996. The group Irwin hold a solo-exhibition in Budapest's Museum Ludwig with the title *Interior of the Planit*. The cover-image of the catalogue is an Irwin group portrait by Andres Serrano. The image shows each of the five Irwin members with a small black square instead of a small square moustache over the upper lip (*Mystery of the Black Square*, 1995). Among other things, the catalogue documents a three-dimensional object that was made in 1995, which turns out to be a reproduction of the suprematist coffin designed by Nikolai Suetin⁴ for Kazimir Malevich's funeral in 1935.

³ Tupitsyn, Margarita: Beschädigte Utopie. In: Oroschakoff, H. (ed.): *Kräfte messen*. Ostfildern, 1995. 37-49. Here: 48.

⁴ Nikolai Suetin also designed Malevich's suprematist memorial in Nemchinovka. Cf. Stachelhaus, Heiner: *Kasimir Malewitsch. Ein tragischer Konflikt*. Düsseldorf, 1989. 290.

Amsterdam 1997. Alexander Brener sprays a green dollar sign onto Kazimir Malevich's *White Suprematism* (1922-1927) in Amsterdam's Stedelijk Museum. He is arrested. In February of 1997, an Amsterdam court sentences him to 10 months in jail. During the trial, Eda Čufer, Goran Đorđević and the members of the Irwin group write a long "letter of support." While they condemn the destruction of art, they also defend Brener's action as a consequent, consistent (and therefore justified) continuation of his work.

Kassel 1997. Installed in one of the documenta exhibition-halls, a "ground station" allows visitors of the documenta X to make telephone contact with the crew of the mobile research station *Makrolab*. The complete works of the Russian futurist Velimir Khlebnikov (including the text *The Radio of the Future*, 1921) can be read on a microfiche reader. The *Makrolab* is located 10 km outside of Kassel on the Lutterberg hill and serves to explore and map global satellite communication. Here, Marko Peljhan and Carsten Nicolai undertake a joint performance entitled *Wardenclyffe Situation No. 1*. The performance is dedicated to the Serbian-American inventor Nikola Tesla, whose inventions included the induction motor, the alternating current system, as well as a form of wireless communication. Around the turn of the century, Tesla also formulated a number of ideas that reappeared in the manifestos of the artistic avant-garde(s). Between 1901 and 1903, Tesla stimulated and headed the construction of the Wardenclyffe tower on Long Island, which he used to research worldwide wireless broadcasting and transatlantic energy transmission.

Moscow 1999. On the city's outskirts, members of the Noordung Cosmokinetic Cabinet conduct a test flight with over 20 parabolas of flight, designed to prepare them for their future mission in orbit. As one of the three main groups of Neue Slowenische Kunst (NSK), along with Laibach and Irwin, Noordung has been working on the realization of an artistic 50-year plan since 1995. The plan will be continued into 2045. The name of the cosmokinetic cabinet refers to the Slovene space travel pioneer Herman Potočnik Noordung, whose book *Das Problem der Befahrung des Weltraums – Der Raketen Motor [The Problem of Traveling through Space – The Rocket Engine]*⁵ offered one of the first depictions of a space station that rotated on its own axis. This idea later resurfaced in the writing of Wernher von Braun, in Arthur C. Clarke's novel *2001 – A Space Odyssey* as well as in Stanley Kubrick's film of the same title in 1968. The drama *Noordung 1995–2045* premiered in Ljubljana in 1995. It is to be repeated at 10-year intervals. Its last repetition is to take place in the *Observatory*, a space station in geostationary orbit 35,900 km over the surface of the Earth. The goal is to utilize the means of contemporary technology to create truly abstract (namely: zero-gravity) art, concluding the project of suprematism and its "non-objective art," begun in the early 20th century.

Moscow 1999. Oleg Kulik's installation *The Red Room* (1999) makes direct reference to Aleksandr Rodchenko's pavilion of the same name on the Paris Architectural Exhibition in 1924. Viktor Misiano identifies the human figure that waves a red flag and points toward the future as dogs masturbate against his legs, as "an allegory of a decayed social utopia."⁶ Misiano interprets the installation in its entirety as a "critical commentary on the rationalist utopia of the 20th century" (ibid.).

⁵ Hermann Noordung, *Das Problem der Befahrung des Weltraums*, Vienna 1993 [Berlin 1929].

⁶ Misiano, Viktor: Oleg Kulik. *The Red Room*, 1999. In: Badovinac, Zdenka / Weibel, Peter (eds.): *2000+ ArtEast Collection*. Wien/Bozen, 2001. 120.

Ljubljana 2003. Vadim Fiškin's project *Sun_Stop* represents an ironic reversal of the Futurist opera entitled *Victory over the Sun*. The project provides for the live-transmission of images of the sun from cameras positioned all around the globe's different time zones. The source of the live-image changes on the hour; its location is shown at the bottom of the screen. However, the position of the sun is always the same in the transmitted image. The piece's explicit goal is to "keep the sun at the same spot."⁷

As these examples show, contemporary art from Eastern Europe contains many noticeable references to the historical (Russian) avant-garde and the utopias that it formulated.⁸ In examining art in Eastern Europe under the aspect of this recursion, one is inevitably asking how late 20th century artists relate to the historical avant-garde from the early 20th century, how they revive or distance themselves from its ideas. In general, one could say that the artistic examination of the avant-garde in Eastern Europe never *only* concerns form – as it often does in Western Europe – but tackles the avant-garde's ethical and socio-political principles. West of the Iron Curtain, the artistic reception of the avant-garde appropriated its formal innovations but left out its ideological-revolutionary context, leading to a "fetishization of the abstract-formal experiment" (Schlegel), even if it declared the suprematist Kazimir Malevich as the "father of geometrical abstraction." Yet the relationship of East European artists to the avant-garde is drastically different. For an instance, they do not only see Kazimir Malevich as the founder of formal abstraction, but also the founder of a comprehensive, total and totalizing system of thought. Since the 1970s–1980s, Eastern European artists have generally tended toward more ambivalent assessments of the historical avant-garde in examining the consequences of the political engagement of avant-garde artists such as El Lissitzky, Alexander Rodchenko, or Gustav Klucis, only to name a few. In his postutopian *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988), Boris Groys formulates this critical relationship, speaking from the (insider's) point of view of Moscow Conceptualism.

However, during the 1990s, the paradigm of the artistic reception of the historical avant-garde undergoes a considerable shift. The reasons for this shift can be found in the changing relationship to the notion of utopias, both in its political and its artistic connotation. During the 1980s, artists in the Soviet Union as in Yugoslavia tend to be critical of the notion of utopia – and with it, the historical avant-garde – to the point of refusal, citing their tendencies to totalitarianism (*postutopianism* and *retro-avant-garde*). Yet this point of view changes fundamentally during the 1990s in a younger generation of artists (*neo-utopianism* and *retro-utopianism*). The paradigm shifts *away from utopia under general suspicion, toward a new perspective on the utopian*. Largely, this shift runs parallel to the political changes and upheavals from the 1980s to the 1990s. As openly repressive political systems became democracies, the more or less exclusive fixation on totalitarian tendencies already inscribed upon the avant-garde were lost. Instead, a pluralism of artistic attitudes toward the legacy of the

⁷ Vadim Fiškin, *Sun_Stop*, concept, 2003. E-mail from Vadim Fiškin to the author, 21. 1. 2003.

⁸ For more, see Inke Arns, *Objects in the mirror may be closer than they appear! Die Avantgarde im Rückspiegel. Zum Paradigmenwechsel der künstlerischen Avantgarderezeption in (Ex-)Jugoslawien und Russland von den 1980er Jahren bis in die Gegenwart*, (handed in as a dissertation at the Humboldt-Universität in Berlin in 2004; <http://edoc.hu-berlin.de/dissertationen/arns-inke-2004-02-20/PDF/Arns.pdf>) [the German version will be published by Revolver, Frankfurt am Main in 2005; the Slovene translation will be published by Maska, Ljubljana, in 2005].

historical avant-garde became thinkable. As opposed to Russian neo-utopianism (also known as Moscow actionism), retro-utopianism represents a genuinely new way of receiving the avant-garde and its utopias. While Russian neo-utopianism may make use of the directness and physical abruptness of avant-gardist (“utopian”) strategies (e.g. Anatoly Osmolovsky’s performance *NECEZIUDIK’s Travels to the Land of Brobdingnag* of 1993, in which the artist climbed onto the shoulder of the monument to Vladimir Mayakovsky in the center of Moscow), its relationship can be seen in continuity with Russian postutopianism of the 1980s. In contrast, retro-utopianism – largely to be found in former Yugoslavia – displays a marked interest in reactivating the medial and technological utopias of the historical (mainly Eastern European) avant-garde through *media-archeology*, thus using art to formulate something that scholarship has yet to discover, namely a media-archeology of Eastern Europe.

The reception of the historical avant-garde in contemporary art from Eastern Europe can be separated into three phases: the first of these can be dated from the 1950s to the 1970s and is characterized by the naive return to or resumption of the “good” or “positive” lines of a tradition that was interrupted by Stalinism. The second phase comes with the rise of post-structuralism and postmodernism in the 1980s and leads to the first significant paradigm shift in the reception of the avant-garde. The affirmative references to the avant-garde that dominated the first phase now become far more ambivalent, to the point of outright rejection. Finally, the third, “media-archeological” phase begins in the 1990s. This last shift in paradigm was set in motion by the deep-reaching changes brought on through the simultaneity and ubiquity of digital media. This third phase is characterized by the onset of “media-archeological” interest in the avant-garde’s technological conceptions. Metaphorically, one could term this movement as a development from *great utopia*⁹ via *damaged utopia*¹⁰ to *latent utopia*.¹¹

First Paradigm Shift: The Avant-gardes’ Aporas in Postutopianism and Retro-avant-garde (1980s)

Beginning during the early 1980s with the rise of postmodernism, the avant-garde’s reception turns away from the naive resumption of (interrupted) traditions and faces the historical avant-garde with a far more critical and ambivalent attitude: the (potentially) totalitarian dimensions of the avant-garde are seen with a great deal of mistrust. Take, for an example, the idea that socialist realism fulfills the ideals and utopias of the avant-garde. Most notably, this view was held among Moscow

⁹ Cf. the exhibition catalogue *De grote Utopie. De Russische Avantgarde 1915–1932*, Amsterdam 1992.

¹⁰ *Damaged Utopia / Beschädigte Utopie* was the title of the 1995 exhibition curated by Margarita Tupitsyn in Munich as part of the *Kräfte messen* project. Cf. Margarita Tupitsyn, *Beschädigte Utopie*, in: Haralampi Oroschakoff (ed.), *Kräfte messen*, Ostfildern 1995, pp. 37-49.

¹¹ I borrowed the expression “latent utopia” from the title of the exhibition *Latente Utopien. Experimente der Gegenwartsarchitektur*, which opened in October 2002 in Graz (steirischer herbst/Graz 2003 - Kulturhauptstadt Europas). 2002-2003 saw a number of events dealing with utopia, e.g. in August 2002 there was the symposium *Utopia* (Hans Ulrich Obrist) in Frankfurt am Main, the Karl Ernst Osthaus-Museum der Stadt Hagen staged the exhibition *Museutopia - Schritte in andere Welten* (June-October 2002), <<http://www.keom.de/museutopia/welcome.html>>, here cf. also the comprehensive bibliography on the topic of utopia, and *Utopia Station* (Molly Nesbitt, Hans Ulrich Obrist, Rirkrit Tiravanija) at the 50th Venice Biennale, 2003.

conceptualists, whose views Groys articulates in his book *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin* (1988). This paradigm shift is also reflected in central terms such as *postutopianism* (Boris Groys) and *retro-avant-garde* (Laibach, Irwin). Their development is an integral part of this phase and should be understood in critical disassociation to the Western version of postmodernism. Both terms denote artistic means that allot a central if not fundamental role to strategies of repetition or appropriation. However, retro-avant-garde and postutopianism do not engage in an eclectic quotation-game of endless intertextual references and self-referential chains of signification. They differ from this admittedly foreshortened version of postmodernity fundamentally in that they undertake explicit recursions to the avant-garde's utopianism and its historical traumata.

Both the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde (NSK, Mladen Stilinović, Malevich from Belgrade etc.) and Soviet postutopianism (Moscow conceptualism, sots-art etc.) engage in retrospective reflections of the utopian potentials of 20th century art. Both are formed by the desire to "reconstruct the traumata of 'the East'."¹² Nevertheless, the difference between the prefixes *post-* and *retro-* implies two differing receptions of the avant-garde: while postutopianism combines and generalizes the utopianism of both avant-garde and socialist realism, often blurring the boundary between the two, the 1980s also produce a "retrospective axis of the avant-garde, a retro-avant-garde that finds more productive ways of reworking the fields that the avant-garde rushed across without ever cultivating them properly."¹³

Second Paradigm-Shift: Neo- and Retro-utopianism (1990s)

The third and (for now) last phase of the avant-garde's reception begins more or less at the same time as the end of socialism in Eastern Europe around 1990. Many younger artists are no longer interested in examining the avant-garde's ambivalences, political entanglements, and (potentially) totalitarian tendencies (as "discursive archeology"). This can be said of postconceptualism in Moscow, centering around the groups ĖTI (Ekspropriatsiya Territorii Iskusstva) or NECEZIUDIK as well as the *Radek* magazine, and is also true for the retro-utopianism that developed in the wake of the (ex-)Yugoslav retro-avant-garde. However, there is a striking difference between neo- and retro-utopianism, as far as their relationship to the avant-garde utopia is concerned.

Russian neo-utopianism has the goal of overcoming the legacy of conceptualism with "new, direct engagement whose most significant aspect is a return to utopian thinking."¹⁴ Yet in attempting to reappropriate the utopian radicalism of the historical avant-garde in "neototalitarian" gestures, it depletes and negates the utopianism of the avant-garde through its postcatastrophic perspective (thus continuing the program of its anti-utopian conceptualist predecessors). In contrast, retro-utopianism dares to enter into a completely different, new relationship to utopia by displaying it in a kind of retrospective, media-archeological utopia-show.

¹² Boris Groys, *Gesamtkunstwerk Stalin. Die gespaltene Kultur in der Sowjetunion*, Munich 1988, p. 102.

¹³ Peter Weibel, Probleme der Neo-Moderne, in: Peter Weibel (ed.), *Identität : Differenz. Tribün Trigon 1940 - 1990. Eine Topographie der Moderne*, exhibition catalogue, Graz 1992, p. 14.

¹⁴ Wolfgang Weitlaner, *Wort Bild Kontext. Randbemerkungen zum Moskauer Post/Konzeptualismus*, dissertation, Salzburg 1999 [CD-ROM], p. 137.

The most prominent representatives of the retro-utopian perspective include the media-artists Vadim Fiškin and Marko Peljhan. As the theatrical division of the NSK (Neue Slowenische Kunst) group, the Noordung Cosmokinetic Cabinet represents a hybrid point of connection between the Yugoslav retro-avant-garde of the 1980s and the retro-utopianism of the 1990s. While the development of Noordung from 1980s to the 1990s embodies the paradigm-shift in the reception of the avant-garde, departing from a retro-avant-gardist position concerned with the ambivalences of the historical avant-garde to eventually reach an increasingly retro-utopian though still diffracted perspective. As representatives of a younger generation, Vadim Fiškin and Marko Peljhan focus exclusively on the unrealized (technical) utopias of the historical avant-garde, which can be considered as the flipside of the historical avant-garde's realized anticipations, if one follows Dieter Daniels.¹⁵

Retro-utopianism no longer primarily equates the utopianism of the avant-garde with totalitarian tendencies (as does Russian post- and neo-utopianism), but is reexamined with regard to its media-technological projections and designs, which were not only developed by individual avant-garde artists and theoreticians (Velimir Khlebnikov, Bertolt Brecht) but also by scientists and engineers during the early 20th century (Nikola Tesla, Herman Potočnik Noordung). Artistic projects of the time reveal an increasing "media-archeological" fascination for the avant-garde's early utopian fantasies of technology. This fascination, in turn, is symptomatic for a significant change in the relationship to utopia and utopian thinking on the whole: utopian thinking and the concrete utopias of the avant-garde(s) are no longer under suspicion of being totalitarian. Quite on the contrary, the avant-garde's utopias become media-historical points of fascination. A second, pragmatic step questions their significance to contemporary developments.

The retro-utopian interest in historical technological fantasies can certainly be explained by the general euphoric climate of the first half of the 1990s, which arose as the pace of technological development skyrocketed and new, digital media (most of all, the Internet) spread at breakneck speed. It often seemed as if the early 20th century's artistic and technical utopias of global networking were about to come true. At the same time, retro-utopian recursions and "moving into the deep-time of media-technological thought and operation"¹⁶ also often served as a *means of correcting* contemporary developments. In this sense, utopian thinking per se separates from its unambiguously negative, political-totalitarian aftertaste (understood as "utopianism") and takes on a new positive political connotation, keeping the aforementioned means of correction in mind. Thus, it is now understood as an emancipatory or visionary-spectral potentiality ("utopicity").

Ilya Kabakov's installation *The Man who Flew into Space* (1988), Viktor Pelevin's novel *Omon Ra* (1991) and the theater project *Ena Proti Ena* (Noordung 1995-2045) or *Noordung Gravitacija Nič* (1999) by the Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung all rework the myth of the cosmonaut (i.e. the myth of space travel). Kabakov and Pelevin can be read as examples of postutopian thinking, while Noordung can be understood as the phase of transition from a postutopian to a retro-utopian position.

¹⁵ Cf. Dieter Daniels, *Kunst als Sendung. Von der Telegrafie zum Internet*, Munich 2002.

¹⁶ Siegfried Zielinski, *Archäologie der Medien. Zur Tiefenzeit des technischen Hörens und Sehens*, Reinbek bei Hamburg 2002, p. 320.

The representatives of postutopianism present the topos of space-travel/cosmonaut-myth as a completely ruinous utopia. Kabakov's metaphorical flight into space stands for poetic flight, escape or disappearance from the gray, fear-ridden Soviet quotidian. Yet *The Man who Flew into Space* attempts to reach the radiant goal of socialism's strident cosmic utopia with a machine patched together from the components of impoverished socialist everyday life. Together with the devastation that he leaves behind, the makeshift quality of his equipment can be understood as a metaphor for utopia as a ruin, a metaphor so powerful that it is difficult to outdo.

Pelevin's *Erziehungsroman Omon Ra* is quite cruel in settling its scores with socialist realism and Soviet reality. Here, Soviet space travel turns out to be a simulation, makeshift and shoddy but deadly nonetheless. In the novel, socialist realism – whose norms the “great narrative” of Soviet space-travel also obeys – becomes a self-realizing machine, which inscribes its aesthetic-ideological norms into the bodies of underage minors. The mass-production of invalid heroes becomes the symbol for the postutopian perspective.

Both the Cosmokinetic Cabinet Noordung and its predecessor, the Cosmokinetic Theater Red Pilot, represent a hybrid link between a retro-avant-garde position predominantly oriented toward discourse archeology, and a retro-utopian position with media-archeological concerns. While the Cosmokinetic Theater Red Pilot largely works with the ambivalent figure of the hero as a meeting-point of avant-gardist and totalitarian aesthetics, focusing on possible points of connection in the discourses of avant-garde and totalitarianism, Noordung is not primarily interested in de-masking the socialist (and avant-gardist) utopia, nor is its chief concern really the deconstruction of the socialist notion of heroism or the myth of the cosmonaut. As a representative of retro-utopianism, Noordung insists upon the as-of-yet unredeemed elements of the cosmic utopian and returns to a point “before the catastrophe,” before the ruinous discursive interfolding of avant-garde and totalitarianism, in order to undertake its media-archeological explorations.

The following diagram visualizes the two big paradigm-shifts in the artistic reception of the avant-garde during the 1980s and 1990s, relating the respective principal tendencies to one another:

1980s	1990s
<p><i>Postutopianism</i> (SU) prospective ex post facto “postcatastrophic” “discourse archeology” I. Kabakov, V. Pelevin</p>	<p><i>Neo-utopianism</i> (RUS) prospective “postcatastrophic” “neoradical”, “neotalitarian” A. Osmolovsky, A. Brener, O. Kulik</p>
<p><i>Retro-avant-garde</i> (YU) prospective ex post facto “precastastrophic” “discourse archeology” Irwin/NSK, M. Stilinović, Malevič (Belgrade)</p>	<p><i>Retro-utopianism</i> (ex-YU) prospective ex post facto “precastastrophic” “media archeology” C. C. Noordung, M. Peljhan, V. Fiškin</p>

Interrelations of postutopianism and retro-avant-garde (1980s) and neo- and retro-utopianism (1990s)

This differentiation derives its meaning from the thematic orientation, direction of sight, and perspective of the respective -isms. The gaze of retro-utopian projects is *prospective ex post facto*. In contrast to the radical impulse of neo-utopianism, prospective in its exclusive orientation toward the future, they turn toward the past, retrieving often unrealized ideas, and then using these finds to extrapolate a possible future. The movement or the direction of sight of retro-utopianism follows a different vector than neo-utopianism: it does not move in a completely different direction, but takes a detour across the past to reach the future. Retro-utopianism repeats the past – the avant-garde’s utopian ideas, in this case – extracting and extrapolating their potential for the future and carries out exactly what Gilles Deleuze has called a “substantial” repetition in *Différence et répétition*.¹⁷

In retro-utopianism, this type of repetition effects a prospective memory (ex post facto) – “presently opening the past toward the future.”¹⁸ According to Deleuze, a “substantial” repetition realizes “still-due potential of the future tense” by updating an unrealized, underdeveloped intentionality founded in the past (e.g. the technological fantasies of the avant-garde).¹⁹

The vectorial specificity of the loop into the past and the extrapolation of the potential of the future tense connect the retro-utopianism of the 1990s with the postutopianism of Moscow conceptualism and the retro-avant-garde of the 1980s. All three are marked by paradoxical belatedness; their orientation is not simply retrospective but *belatedly prospective*, constructed in order to extrapolate their potential of the future tense, opening the past toward the future. However, while the postutopianism of the 1980s examined the *totalitarian* potential, founded (though never completely realized) in the avant-garde’s past, artists of the 1990s begin to read the avant-garde in view of its as-of-yet unrealized *technological* potential of the future. In doing so, their retro-utopian interest lies in the *archeology of media* rather than in politics or *the archeology of discourse*. In contrast to postutopianism, retro-utopianism does not stage utopia prospectively as a ruin, as, for an example, does Ilya Kabakov. Instead, its gaze is directed toward utopia from “before the catastrophe,” in full knowledge of its historical failure, but without imagining this failure immediately. This “pre-catastrophic” gaze of retro-utopianism is less interested in the avant-garde’s ambivalences, aporas, and points of connection to totalitarianism than in the utopian potential of the technological fantasies sketched out by the same avant-garde. This is exactly what sets it apart from postutopianism as well as the retro-avant-garde of the 1980s.

¹⁷ Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* [*Différence et répétition*. Paris, 1968], New York 1995.

¹⁸ Eckhard Lobsien, *Wörtlichkeit und Wiederholung. Phänomenologie poetischer Sprache*, Munich 1995, p. 19.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 189.