

THEODOR
ADORNO

WALTER
BENJAMIN

ERNST
BLOCH

BERTOLT
BRECHT

GEORG
LUKÁCS

WITH AN AFTERWORD BY FREDRIC JAMESON

V **AESTHETICS
AND
POLITICS**

RADICAL
THINKERS

Ever since Baumgarten and Winckelmann, Germany has been the classical land of aesthetic thought in Europe. In the 20th century, Marxism itself has repeated the rule. No other country has produced a tradition of major aesthetic debate to compare with that which unfolded in German culture from the thirties to the fifties. The key texts of these great Marxist controversies over literature and art are now, for the first time anywhere outside Germany, assembled in a coherent order. They do not form a conventional collection of separate documents but a continuous debate between their *dramatis personae*. In exile before the war, Bloch and Lukács polemicized against each other over the nature of expressionism. Brecht attacked Lukács for literary formalism. Benjamin disputed over classical and modern works of art with Brecht. Adorno criticized Benjamin's hermeneutics, and challenged Brecht's poetics and Lukács's politics. The multilateral exchanges which resulted have a variety and eloquence without rival. Fredric Jameson, Professor of French at Yale University and author of *Marxism and Form* and *The Prison House of Language*, sums up their paradoxical lessons for art and criticism today, in an essay of theoretical conclusion. *Aesthetics and Politics* will provide a pole of reference and a source of illumination to students of literature throughout the English-speaking world.



Ernst Bloch
Georg Lukács
Bertolt Brecht
Walter Benjamin
Theodor Adorno

Verso

Aesthetics and Politics

Afterword by Fredric Jameson

Translation Editor: Ronald Taylor

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Walter Benjamin

Reply

Paris, 9 December 1938

Dear Teddie:

It will not have surprised you to notice that it took me some time to draft my reply to your letter of 10 November. Even though the long delay in your letter made me suspect what it would say, it still came as a jolt to me. Also, I wanted to await the arrival of the galleys which you had promised me, and they did not come until 6 December. The time thus gained gave me a chance to weigh your critique as prudently as I could. I am far from considering it unfruitful, let alone incomprehensible. I will try to react to it in basic terms.

I shall be guided by a sentence on the first page of your letter. You write: 'Panorama and traces, *flâneur* and arcades, modernism and the unchanging, without a theoretical interpretation – is this a "substance" which can patiently await interpretation?'. The understandable impatience with which you searched the manuscript for a definite *signalement* [characterization] has, in my opinion, led you astray in some important respects. In particular you were bound to arrive at what was to you a disappointing view of the third section, once it had escaped your attention that nowhere is modernism cited as the unchanging; actually, this important key concept is not used at all in the completed portion of my study.

Since the sentence quoted above offers, as it were, a compendium of your criticisms, I should like to go over it word by word. First you mention the panorama. In my text I refer to it in passing. In point of fact, in the context of Baudelaire's work the panoramic view is not appropriate. Since that passage is not destined to have correspondences in either the first or the third part, it would perhaps be best to omit it. The second item you mention is the 'trace'. In my covering letter I

wrote that the philosophical foundations of the book cannot be perceived from the vantage point of the second part. If a concept like the trace was to be given a convincing interpretation, it had to be introduced with complete naturalness at the empirical level. This could have been done still more convincingly. Actually, my first act after my return was to find a very important passage in Poe bearing on my construction of the detective story out of the obliteration or fixation of the traces of the individual in the big-city crowd. But the treatment of traces in the second part must remain on this level, precisely in order later to receive in the decisive contexts its sudden illumination. This illumination is intended. The concept of the trace finds its philosophical determination in opposition to the concept of aura.

The next item in the sentence which I shall examine is the *flâneur*. Even though I am well aware of the profound inner concern on which both your material and your personal objections are based, your erroneous estimate here makes me feel as if the ground were giving way under my feet. Thank God there is a branch that I can cling to which seems to be firm. It is your reference elsewhere to the fruitful tension between your theory about the consumption of exchange value and my theory about empathy with the soul of the commodity. I too believe that this is a theory in the strictest sense of the word, and my discussion of the *flâneur* culminates in it. This is the place, and to be sure the only one in this section, where the theory comes into its own in *unobstructed* form. It breaks like a single ray of light into an artificially darkened chamber. But this ray, broken down prismatically, suffices to give an idea of the nature of the light whose focus lies in the third part of the book. That is why this theory of the *flâneur*, the improvability of which at certain points I shall discuss below, is an adequate realization of the representation of the *flâneur* which I have had in mind for many years.

I go on to the next term, arcades. I feel so much the less inclined to say anything about it, as the bottomless bonhomie of its use cannot have escaped you. Why question this term? Unless I am very much mistaken, the arcade is really not destined to enter the context of the Baudelaire in any but this playful form. It occurs like the picture of a rocky spring on a drinking cup. That is why the invaluable passage from Jean Paul to which you referred me does not belong in the Baudelaire. Finally, in regard to modernism: as my text makes clear, this is Baudelaire's own term. The section with this title could not go beyond the limits imposed upon the word by Baudelaire's usage. But you will remember from San Remo that these limits are by no means definitive. The philosophical

reconnaissance of modernism is assigned to the third part, where it is initiated with the concept of *Art Nouveau* and concluded with the dialectics of the new and the unchanging.

Remembering our conversations in San Remo, I should like to proceed to the passage in your letter where you refer to them yourself. If I refused there, in the name of my own productive interests, to adopt an esoteric intellectual development for myself and, disregarding the interests of dialectical materialism, . . . to get down to business, this involved, in the final analysis, not . . . mere loyalty to dialectical materialism, but solidarity with the experiences which all of us have shared in the past 15 years. Here too, then, it is a matter of very personal productive interests of mine; I cannot deny that they may occasionally tend to do violence to my original interests. Between them lies an antagonism of which I would not even in my dreams wish to be relieved. The overcoming of this antagonism constitutes the problem of my study, and the problem is one of construction. I believe that speculation can start its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of putting on the waxen wings of the esoteric, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone. It is because of the needs of construction that the second part of my book consists primarily of philological material. What is involved there is less an 'ascetic discipline' than a methodological precaution. Incidentally, this philological part was the only one that could be completed independently – a circumstance which I had to bear in mind.

When you speak of a 'wide-eyed presentation of mere facts', you characterize the true philological attitude. This attitude was necessary not only for its results, but had to be built into the construction for its own sake. It is true that the indifference between magic and positivism, as you so aptly formulate it, should be liquidated. In other words, the philological interpretation of the author ought to be preserved and surpassed in the Hegelian manner by dialectical materialists. Philology is the examination of a text which proceeds by details and so magically fixates the reader on it. That which Faust took home in black and white,¹ and Grimm's devotion to little things, are closely related. They have in common that magical element whose exorcism is reserved for philosophy, here for the final part.

Astonishment, so you write in your *Kierkegaard*, indicates 'the pro-

¹ In the *Studierzimmer* scene of Goethe's *Faust*, Part I, the student says: 'Was man schwarz auf weiss besitzt, kann man getrost nach Hause tragen.' (What one possesses in black and white one can safely take home.)

foundest insight into the relationship between dialectics, myth, and image'. It might be tempting for me to invoke this passage. But instead I propose to emend it (as I am planning to do on another occasion with a subsequent definition of the dialectical image). I believe it should say that astonishment is an outstanding *object* of such an insight. The appearance of closed facticity which attaches to a philological investigation and places the investigator under its spell, fades to the extent that the object is construed in an historical perspective. The base lines of this construction converge in our own historical experience. Thus the object constitutes itself as a monad. In the monad everything that used to lie in mythical rigidity as a textual reference comes alive. Therefore it seems a misjudgment of the matter to me if you find in my study a 'direct inference from the wine duty to *L'Ame du Vin*'. Rather, the juncture was established legitimately in the philological context – just as it would have been done in the interpretation of a classical writer. It gives to the poem the specific gravity which it assumes when it is properly read – something that has so far not been practised widely in the case of Baudelaire. Only when this poem has thus come into its own can the work be touched, or perhaps even shaken, by interpretation. For the poem in question, an interpretation would focus not on matters of taxation but on the significance of intoxication for Baudelaire.

If you think of other writings of mine, you will find that a critique of the attitude of the philologist is an old concern of mine, and it is basically identical with my critique of myth. Yet in each case it is this critique that provokes the philological effort itself. To use the language of *Elective Affinities*, it presses for the exhibition of the material content in which the truth content can be historically revealed. I can understand that this aspect of the matter was less to the fore in your mind. But so, therefore, were a number of important interpretations. I am thinking not only of interpretations of poems – *A une passante* – or of prose pieces – *The Man of the Crowd* – but above all of the unlocking of the concept of modernity, which it was my particular concern to keep within philological bounds.

Let me note in passing that the Péguy quotation to which you object as an evocation of prehistory in the 19th century had its proper place in preparing the insight that the interpretation of Baudelaire should not be based on any chthonian elements. (In my draft of the *Arcades* project I had still attempted that sort of thing). For that reason I believe that neither the catacomb nor the cloaca belonged in this interpretation. On the other hand, Charpentier's opera is very promising; I will follow up

your suggestion when there is an opportunity. The figure of the rag-picker is infernal in origin. It will reappear in the third part, set off against the chthonian figure of Hugo's beggar.

...

Permit me to add some frank words. It would be rather prejudicial to the *Baudelaire* if no part of this study, the product of a creative tension not easily comparable with any of my earlier literary works, appeared in your periodical. For one thing, the printed form gives an author detachment from his work – something that is of incomparable value. Then, too, in such form the text could become the subject of discussion, and no matter how inadequate the people available to me here may be, such a discussion could compensate me somewhat for the isolation in which I am working. To my mind, the focal point of such a publication would be the theory of the *flâneur*, which I regard as an integral part of the Baudelaire study. I am certainly not speaking of an unaltered text. The critique of the concept of the masses, as the modern metropolis throws it into relief, should be given a more central position than it occupies in the present version. This critique, which I initiate in my passages on Hugo, should be elaborated by means of an interpretation of important literary documents. As a model I have in mind the section about the man in the crowd. The euphemistic interpretation of the masses – the physiognomic view of them – should be illustrated by an analysis of the E. T. A. Hoffmann story that is mentioned in my study. For Hugo a more detailed clarification needs to be developed. The decisive point is the theoretical progress registered in these successive views of the masses; the climax of it is indicated in the text, but this is not brought out sufficiently. Hugo rather than Baudelaire lies at its end. Hugo anticipated more than any other writer the present experiences of the masses. The demagogue in him is a component of his genius.

You see that certain points of your critique appear convincing to me. But I am afraid that an *outright* correction in the spirit indicated above would be very questionable. The missing theoretical transparency to which you rightly refer is by no means a *necessary* consequence of the philological procedure prevailing in this section. I am more inclined to see it as the result of the fact that this procedure has not been designated as such. This deficiency may be traced in part to the daring attempt to write the second part of the book before the first. Only in this way could the appearance have arisen that phantasmagoria are described rather than integrated into the construction. The above-mentioned emenda-

tions will benefit the second part only when it becomes firmly anchored in the overall context. Accordingly, my first step will be to re-examine the overall construction.

As regards the sadness I referred to above, there were, apart from my presentiment, sufficient reasons for it. For one thing, it is the situation of the Jews in Germany, from which none of us can disassociate himself. Added to this is the serious illness of my sister, who was found to be suffering from hereditary arteriosclerosis at the age of 37. She is almost immobile and thus also almost incapable of gainful employment. (At present she probably still has modest funds). The prognosis at her age is almost hopeless. Apart from all this, it is not always possible to live here without oppressive anxiety. It is understandable that I am making every effort to expedite my naturalization. Unfortunately the necessary steps cost not only a great deal of time but some money as well. Thus at present my horizon is somewhat blocked in this direction too.

The enclosed fragment of a letter to Max dated 17 November 1938, and the accompanying message from [Hans] Brill² concern a matter which may wreck my naturalization. You can thus appreciate its importance. May I ask you to take this matter in hand and request Max to give Brill permission immediately, preferably by telegram, to use the pseudonym Hans Fellner rather than my real name for my review in the next issue of your journal.

This brings me to your new work³ and thus the sunnier portion of this letter. The subject matter of your study concerns me in two respects, both of which you have indicated. First, in those parts which relate certain characteristics of the contemporary acoustic perception of jazz to the optical characteristics of film, which I have described. *Ex improviso* I cannot decide whether the different distribution of the areas of light and shadow in our respective essays is due to theoretical divergencies. Possibly it is only a case of apparent differences between our points of view; it may really be a matter of viewing different objects from apparently different but equally acceptable angles. For it is not to be assumed that acoustic and optic perceptions are equally capable of being revolutionized. This may explain the fact that the prospect of a variant hearing which concludes your essay is not quite clear to a person, like me, for whom Mahler is not a fully illuminated experience.

² Brill was the secretary of the Paris office of the Institute for Social Research.

³ Benjamin is referring to Adorno's essay 'Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens', published in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung* 7, 1938, and later included in his volume *Dissonanzen*, Göttingen 1963.

In my essay [‘The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction’] I tried to articulate positive moments as clearly as you managed to articulate negative ones. Consequently, I see strengths in your study at points where mine was weak. Your analysis of the psychological types produced by industry and your representation of their mode of production are most felicitous. If I had devoted more attention to this aspect of the matter, my study would have gained in historical plasticity. I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the cinema industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which generated reactions that were hard to control and hence politically dangerous. An analysis of the sound film would constitute a critique of contemporary art which would provide a dialectical mediation between your views and mine.

What I liked most about the conclusion of your essay is the reservation about the idea of progress which is indicated there. For the time being you motivate this reservation only casually and by reference to the history of the term. I should like to get at its roots and its origins. But I am well aware of the difficulties.

Finally I come to your question about the relationship between the views developed in your essay and those presented in my section on the *flâneur*. Empathy with the commodity presents itself to self-observation or inner experience as empathy with inorganic matter; next to Baudelaire, my chief witness here is Flaubert with his *Tentation [de Saint-Antoine]*. Basically, however, empathy with the commodity is probably empathy with exchange value itself. Actually, one could hardly imagine ‘consumption’ of exchange value as anything else but empathy with it. You write: ‘The consumer really worships the money which he has spent on a ticket for a Toscanini concert.’ Empathy with their exchange value turns even cannons into articles of consumption more pleasing than butter. If in popular parlance it is said of someone that ‘he is loaded; he has five million marks’, the ‘racial community’⁴ itself likewise feels that it is ‘loaded’ with a few billions; it empathizes with those billions. If I formulate it thus, I may get at the canon that underlies this mode of behaviour. I am thinking of that which underlies games of chance. A gambler directly empathizes with the sums which he bets against the bank or an opponent. Games of chance, in the form of stock-exchange speculation, paved the way for empathy with exchange value much as

⁴ ‘Racial community’ = *Volksgemeinschaft*, a specifically Nazi term to which Benjamin alludes here.

World Fairs did. (The latter were the training schools in which the masses, forced away from consumption, learned to empathize with exchange value.)

One particularly important question I should like to reserve for a subsequent letter, or possibly for a conversation. What is the meaning of the fact that music and lyric poetry become comic? I can hardly imagine that this is a completely negative phenomenon. Or do you see any positive elements in the 'decline of sacred reconciliation'? I confess that I do not quite follow this. Perhaps you will have an opportunity to return to this question.

In any case I ask you to let me hear from you soon. Please ask Felizitas to send me, when she gets a chance, the fairy tales of [Wilhelm] Hauff, which I treasure because of Sonderland's illustrations. I shall write to her in the near future, but I would also like to hear from her.

As ever, cordially yours,

Walter

Translated by Harry Zohn