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**LUKÁCS**

**WITH AN AFTERWORD BY FREDRIC JAMESON**

**V** **AESTHETICS  
AND  
POLITICS**

RADICAL'S  
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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# Fredric Jameson

## Reflections in Conclusion

It is not only political history which those who ignore are condemned to repeat. A host of recent 'post-Marxisms' document the truth of the assertion that attempts to 'go beyond' Marxism typically end by re-inventing older pre-Marxist positions (from the recurrent neo-Kantian revivals, to the most recent 'Nietzschean' returns through Hume and Hobbes all the way back to the Pre-Socratics). Even within Marxism itself, the terms of the problems, if not their solutions, are numbered in advance, and the older controversies – Marx versus Bakunin, Lenin versus Luxemburg, the national question, the agrarian question, the dictatorship of the proletariat – rise up to haunt those who thought we could now go on to something else and leave the past behind us.

Nowhere has this 'return of the repressed' been more dramatic than in the aesthetic conflict between 'Realism' and 'Modernism', whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today, even though we may feel that each position is in some sense right and yet that neither is any longer wholly acceptable. The dispute is itself older than Marxism, and in a longer perspective may be said to be a contemporary political replay of the 17th century *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*, in which, for the first time, aesthetics came face to face with the dilemmas of historicity.

Within the Marxism of this century, the precipitant of the controversy over Realism and Modernism was the living fact and persisting influence of Expressionism among the writers of the German Left in the 1920s and 30s. An implacable ideological denunciation by Lukács in 1934 set the stage for the series of interconnected debates and exchanges between Bloch, Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin and Adorno published in this volume. Much of the fascination of these jousts, indeed, comes from the internal dynamism by which all the logical possibilities are rapidly generated in turn, so that it quickly extends beyond the local phenomenon of Expres-

sionism, and even beyond the ideal type of realism itself, to draw within its scope the problems of popular art, naturalism, socialist realism, avant-gardism, media, and finally modernism – political and non-political – in general. Today, many of its fundamental themes and concerns have been transmitted by the Frankfurt School, and in particular by Marcuse, to the student and anti-war movements of the 1960s, while the revival of Brecht has ensured their propagation among political modernisms of the kind exemplified by the Tel Quel group.

The legacy of German Expressionism provided a more propitious framework for the development of a major debate within Marxism than its contemporary French counterpart, surrealism, was to do. For in the writings of the surrealists, and in particular of Breton, the problem of realism largely fails to arise – in the first instance owing to their initial repudiation of the novel as a form. While for their principal adversary, Jean-Paul Sartre – the only important writer of his generation not to have passed through surrealism's tutelage, and whose notion of 'commitment' (*engagement*) Adorno was later to take as the very prototype of a political aesthetic, the realism/modernism dilemma did not arise either, but for the opposite reason: because of Sartre's preliminary exclusion of poetry and the lyric from his account of the nature and function of literature in general (in *What is Literature?*). Thus in France, until that second wave of modernism (or post-modernism) represented by the *nouveau roman* and the *nouvelle vague*, Tel Quel and 'structuralism', the terrain for which realism and modernism were elsewhere so bitterly to contend – that of *narrative* – was effectively divided up between them in advance, as though in amicable separation. If the problem of narrative does not loom large in the texts collected here, that is in part because Lukács's principal exhibits were novels, while Brecht's main field of activity was the theatre. The increasing importance, in turn, of film in artistic production since the time of these debates (witness the frequent juxtapositions of Brecht and Godard) likewise suggests that structural differences in medium and in genre may play a larger part in compounding the dilemmas of the Realism/Modernism controversy than its earliest participants were willing to admit.

More than this, the history of aesthetics itself suggests that some of the more paradoxical turns in the Marxist debate within German culture spring from contradictions within the very concept of realism, an uneasily different quantity from such traditional aesthetic categories as comedy and tragedy, or lyric, epic and dramatic. The latter – whatever social functionality may be invoked for them in this or that philosophical



system – are purely aesthetic concepts, which may be analysed and evaluated without any reference outside the phenomenon of beauty or the activity of artistic play (traditionally the terms in which the ‘aesthetic’ has been isolated and constituted as a separate realm or function in its own right). The originality of the concept of realism, however, lies in its claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status. A new value, contemporaneous with the secularization of the world under capitalism, the ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience which yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis which had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgements and its constitution as sheer appearance. But it is extremely difficult to do justice to both of these properties of realism simultaneously. In practice, an over-emphasis on its cognitive function often leads to a naïve denial of the necessarily fictive character of artistic discourse, or even to iconoclastic calls for the ‘end of art’ in the name of political militancy. At the other pole of this conceptual tension, the emphasis of theorists like Gombrich or Barthes on the ‘techniques’ whereby an ‘illusion’ of reality or *‘effet de réel’* is achieved, tends surreptitiously to transform the ‘reality’ of realism into appearance, and to undermine that affirmation of its own truth – or referential – value, by which it differentiates itself from other types of literature. (Among the many secret dramas of Lukács’s later work is surely to be counted the adeptness with which he walks this particular tightrope, from which, even at his most ideological or ‘formalistic’, he never quite falls).

This is not to say that the concept of modernism, realism’s historical counterpart and its dialectical mirror-image, is not equally contradictory,<sup>1</sup> and in ways which it will be instructive to juxtapose to the contradictions of realism itself. For the moment, suffice it to observe that neither of these sets of contradictions can be fully understood, unless they are replaced within the broader context of the crisis of historicity itself, and numbered among the dilemmas a dialectical criticism faces when it tries to make ordinary language function simultaneously on two mutually exclusive registers: the absolute (in which case realism and modernism veer towards timeless abstractions like the lyric or the comic), and the relative (in which case they inexorably revert to the narrow confines of an antiquarian nomenclature, restricted to use for specific

<sup>1</sup> For a complementary analysis of the internal contradictions of the idea of modernism, see Paul de Man, ‘Literary History and Literary Modernity’, in *Blindness and Insight*, New York, 1971.

literary movements in the past). Language, however, does not submit peacefully to the attempt to use its terms dialectically – that is, as relative and sometimes even extinct concepts from an archaeological past, that nonetheless continue to transmit faint but absolute claims upon us.

Meanwhile, post-structuralism has added yet a different kind of parameter to the Realism/Modernism controversy, one which – like the question of narrative or the problems of historicity – was implicit in the original exchange but scarcely articulated or thematized as such. The assimilation of realism as a value to the old philosophical concept of mimesis by such writers as Foucault, Derrida, Lyotard or Deleuze, has reformulated the Realism/Modernism debate in terms of a Platonic attack on the ideological effects of representation. In this new (and old) philosophical polemic, the stakes of the original discussion find themselves unexpectedly elevated, and their issues – once largely political in focus – lent metaphysical (or anti-metaphysical) implications. Such philosophical artillery is, of course, intended to increase the defensiveness of the defenders of realism; yet my own feeling is that we will not fully be able to assess the consequences of the attack on representation, and of post-structuralism generally, until we are able to situate its own work within the field of the theory of ideology itself.

It is at any rate clear that the Realism/Modernism controversy loses its interest if one side is programmed to win in advance. The Brecht–Lukács debate alone is one of those rare confrontations in which both adversaries are of equal stature, both of incomparable significance for the development of contemporary Marxism, the one a major artist and probably the greatest literary figure to have been produced by the Communist movement, the other a central philosopher of the age and heir to the whole German philosophical tradition, with its unique emphasis on aesthetics as a discipline. It is true that in recent accounts of their opposition,<sup>2</sup> Brecht has tended to get the better of Lukács, the former's 'pelebian' style and Schweikian identifications proving currently more attractive than the 'mandarin' culture to which the latter appealed.<sup>3</sup> In these versions, Lukács is typically treated as a professor, a revisionist,

<sup>2</sup> See Werner Mittenzwei, 'Die Brecht-Lukács Debatte' *Das Argument* 46, (March 1968), Eugene Lunn, 'Marxism and Art in the Era of Stalin and Hitler: A Comparison of Brecht and Lukács', *New German Critique*, 3 (Fall, 1974), 12–44; and, for the somewhat earlier period of the review *Die Linkskurve* (1928–1932), Helga Gallas, *Marxistische Literaturtheorie-Kontroversen im Bund proletarisch-revolutionärer Schriftsteller*, Neuwied, 1971.

<sup>3</sup> See Lunn, *op. cit.*, pp. 16–18.

a Stalinist—or in general ‘in the same way as the brave Moses Mendelssohn in Lessing’s time treated Spinoza as a “dead dog”,’ as Marx described the standard view of Hegel current among his radical contemporaries.

To the degree to which Lukács single-handedly turned the Expressionism debate around into a discussion of Realism, and forced the defenders of the former to fight on his own ground and in his own terms, their annoyance with him was understandable (Brecht’s own animosity towards him comes through particularly vividly in these pages). On the other hand, such meddling interference was at one with everything that made Lukács a major figure in 20th century Marxism – in particular his lifelong insistence on the crucial significance of literature and culture in any revolutionary politics. His fundamental contribution here was the development of a theory of mediations that could reveal the political and ideological content of what had hitherto seemed purely formal aesthetic phenomena. One of the most famous instances was his ‘decoding’ of the static descriptions of naturalism in terms of reification.<sup>4</sup> Yet at the same time, it was precisely this line of research – itself an implicit critique and repudiation of traditional content analysis – which was responsible for Brecht’s characterization of Lukács’s method as *formalistic*: by which he meant the latter’s unwarranted confidence in the possibility of deducing political and ideological positions from a protocol of purely formal properties of a work of art. The reproach sprang from Brecht’s experience as a man of the theatre, in which he constructed an aesthetic of performance and a view of the work of art in situation that was in diametric contrast to the solitary reading and individualized bourgeois public of Lukács’s privileged object of study, the novel. Can Brecht then be enlisted in current campaigns against the very notion of mediation? It is probably best to take Brecht’s attack on Lukács’s formalism (along with the Brechtian watchword of *plumpes Denken*) at a somewhat less philosophical and more practical level, as a therapeutic warning against the permanent temptation of idealism present in any ideological analysis as such, the professional proclivity of intellectuals for methods that need no external verification. There would then be *two* idealisms: one the common-or-garden variety to be found in religion, metaphysics or literalism, the other a repressed and unconscious danger of idealism within Marxism itself, inherent in the very ideal of science itself in a world so deeply marked by the division of mental and manual

<sup>4</sup> See in particular ‘Narrate or Describe?’ in Georg Lukács, *Writer and Critic*, London 1970.

labour. To that danger the intellectual and the scientist can never sufficiently be alerted. At the same time, Lukács's work on mediation, rudimentary as at times it may have been, can on another reading be enlisted as a precursor of the most interesting work in the field of ideological analysis today – that which, assimilating the findings of psychoanalysis and of semiotics, seeks to construct a model of the text as a complex and symbolic ideological act. The reproach of 'formalism', whose relevance to Lukács's own practice is only too evident, may consequently have a wider extension to present-day research and speculation.

The charge of 'formalism' was only one item of Brecht's attack on Lukács's position; its corollary and obverse was indignation at the ideological judgements the latter used his method to substantiate. The primary exhibit at the time was Lukács's denunciation of alleged links between Expressionism and trends within Social-Democracy (in particular the USPD), not to speak of fascism, which launched the Realism debate in the German emigration and which Ernst Bloch's essay was designed to refute in some detail. Nothing has, of course, more effectively discredited Marxism than the practice of affixing instant class labels (generally 'petty bourgeois') to textual or intellectual objects; nor will the most hardened apologist for Lukács want to deny that of the many Lukács's conceivable, this particular one – epitomized in the shrill and outrageous postscript to *Die Zerstörung der Vernunft* – is the least worthy of rehabilitation. But abuse of class ascription should not lead to over-reaction and mere abandonment of it. In fact, ideological analysis is inconceivable without a conception of the 'ultimately determining instance' of social class. What is really wrong with Lukács's analyses is not too frequent and facile a reference to social class, but rather too incomplete and intermittent a sense of the relationship of class to ideology. A case in point is one of the more notorious of Lukács's basic concepts, that of 'decadence' – which he often associates with fascism, but even more persistently with modern art and literature in general. The concept of decadence is the equivalent in the aesthetic realm of that of 'false consciousness' in the domain of traditional ideological analysis. Both suffer from the same defect – the common presupposition that in the world of culture and society such a thing as pure error is possible. They imply, in other words, that works of art or systems of philosophy are conceivable which have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the 'serious' issues of the day, indeed distracting from them. In the iconography of the

political art of the 1920s and 30s, the 'index' of such culpable and vacuous decadence was the champagne glass and top hat of the idle rich, making the rounds of an eternal night-club circuit. Yet even Scott Fitzgerald and Drieu la Rochelle are more complicated than that, and from our present-day vantage point, disposing of the more complex instruments of psychoanalysis (in particular the concepts of repression and denial or *Verneinung*), even those who might wish to sustain Lukács's hostile verdict on modernism would necessarily insist on the existence of a repressed social content even in those modern works that seem most innocent of it. Modernism would then not so much be a way of avoiding social content – in any case an impossibility for beings like ourselves who are 'condemned' to history and to the implacable sociability of even the most apparently private of our experiences – as rather of managing and containing it, secluding it out of sight in the very form itself, by means of specific techniques of framing and displacement which can be identified with some precision. If so, Lukács's summary dismissal of 'decadent' works of art should yield to an interrogation of their buried social and political content.

The fundamental weakness in Lukács's view of the relationship of art and ideology surely finds its ultimate explanation in his politics. What is usually called his 'Stalinism', can on closer examination, be separated into two quite distinct problems. The charge that he was complicit with a bureaucratic apparatus and exercised a kind of literary terrorism (particularly against political modernists, for example, of the Proletkult variety), is belied by his resistance in the Moscow of the 30s and 40s to what was later to be known as Zhdanovism – that form of socialist realism which he disliked as much as Western modernism, but was obviously less free to attack openly. 'Naturalism' was his pejorative code-word for it at the time. Indeed, the structural and historical identification for which he argued between the symbolic techniques of modernism and the 'bad immediacy' of a photographic naturalism was one of his most profound dialectical insights. As for his continuing party membership, what he called his 'entry ticket to history', the tragic fate and wasted talents of so many oppositional Marxists of his generation, like Korsch or Reich, are powerful arguments for the relative rationality of Lukács's choice – one, of course, that he shared with Brecht. A more serious problem is posed by the 'popular frontism' of his aesthetic theory. That betokened a formal mean between a modernistic subjectivism and an overly objectivistic naturalism which, like most Aristotelian strategies of moderation, has never aroused much intellectual

excitement. Even Lukács's most devoted supporters failed to evince much enthusiasm for it. So far as the political alliance between revolutionary forces and the progressive sections of the bourgeoisie went, it was rather Stalin who belatedly authorized a version of the policy that Lukács had advocated in the 'Blum Theses' of 1928–29, which foresaw a first-stage, democratic revolution against the fascist dictatorship in Hungary, prior to any socialist revolution. Yet it is precisely that distinction, between an anti-fascist and an anti-capitalist strategy, that seems less easy to maintain today and less immediately attractive a political programme, over wide areas of a 'free world' in which military dictatorships and 'emergency regimes' are the order of the day – indeed multiplying precisely to the degree that genuine social revolution becomes a real possibility. From our present perspective, Nazism itself, with its charismatic leader and unique exploitation of a nascent communications technology in the widest sense of the term (including transportation and autobahns as well as radio and television), now seems to represent a transitional and special combination of historical circumstances not likely to recur as such; while routine torture and the institutionalization of counter-insurgency techniques have proved perfectly consistent with the kind of parliamentary democracy that used to be distinguished from fascism. Under the hegemony of the multinational corporations and their 'world system', the very possibility of a progressive bourgeois culture is problematic – a doubt that obviously strikes at the very foundation of Lukács's aesthetic.

Finally, the preoccupations of our own period have seemed to reveal in Lukács's work the shadow of a literary dictatorship somewhat different in kind from the attempts to prescribe a certain type of production which were denounced by Brecht. It is Lukács as a partisan, less of a specific artistic style than of a particular critical method, who is the focus of new polemics today – an atmosphere in which his work has found itself regarded by admirers and opponents alike as a monument to old-fashioned content-analysis. There is some irony in this transformation of the name of the author of *History and Class Consciousness* into a signal not unlike that emitted by the names of Belinsky and Chernyshevsky in an earlier period of Marxist aesthetics. Lukács's own critical practice is in fact very much genre-oriented, and committed to the mediation of the various forms of literary discourse, so that it is a mistake to enlist him in the cause of a naïve mimetic position that encourages us to discuss the events or characters of a novel, in the same way we would look at 'real' ones. On the other hand, insofar as his critical practice implies

the ultimate possibility of some full and non-problematical 'representation of reality', Lukácsian realism can be said to give aid and comfort to a documentary and sociological approach to literature which is correctly enough felt to be antagonistic to more recent methods of constructing the narrative text as a free-play of signifiers. Yet these apparently irreconcilable positions may prove to be two distinct and equally indispensable moments of the hermeneutic process itself – a first naïve 'belief' in the density or presence of novelistic representation, and a later 'bracketing' of that experience in which the necessary distance of all language from what it claims to represent – its substitutions and displacements – are explored. At any rate, it is clear that as long as Lukács is used as a rallying cry (or bogeyman) in this particular methodological conflict, there is not much likelihood of any measured assessment of his work as a whole.

Brecht, meanwhile, is certainly much more easily rewritten in terms of the concerns of the present, in which he seems to address us directly in an unmediated voice. His attack on Lukács's formalism is only one aspect of a much more complex and interesting stand on realism in general, to which it is surely no disservice to observe a few of the features which must seem dated to us today. In particular, Brecht's aesthetic, and his way of framing the problems of realism, are intimately bound up with a conception of science which it would be wrong to identify with the more scientific currents in contemporary Marxism (for example the work of Althusser or Colletti). For the latter, science is an epistemological concept and a form of abstract knowledge, and the pursuit of a Marxian 'science' is closely linked to recent developments in the historiography of science – the findings of scholars like Koyré, Bachelard and Kuhn. For Brecht, however, 'science' is far less a matter of knowledge and epistemology than it is of sheer experiment and of practical, well-nigh manual activity. His is more an ideal of popular mechanics, technology, the home chemical set and the tinkering of a Galileo, than one of 'epistemes' or 'paradigms' in scientific discourse. Brecht's particular vision of science was for him the means of annulling the separation between physical and mental activity and the fundamental division of labour (not least that between worker and intellectual) that resulted from it: it puts knowing the world back together with changing the world, and at the same time unites an ideal of praxis with a conception of production. The reunion of 'science' and practical, change-oriented activity – not without its influence on the Brecht-Benjamin analysis of the media, as we shall see in a moment – thus transforms the

process of 'knowing' the world into a source of delight or pleasure in its own right; and this is the fundamental step in the construction of a properly Brechtian aesthetics. For it restores to 'realistic' art that principle of play and genuine aesthetic gratification which the relatively more passive and cognitive aesthetic of Lukács had seemed to replace with the grim duty of a proper reflection of the world. The age-old dilemmas of a didactic theory of art (to teach *or* to please?) are thereby also overcome, and in a world where science is experiment and play, knowing and doing alike are forms of production, stimulating in their own right, a didactic art may now be imagined in which learning and pleasure are no longer separate from each other. In the Brechtian aesthetic, indeed, the idea of realism is not a purely artistic and formal category, but rather governs the relationship of the work of art to reality itself, characterizing a particular stance towards it. The spirit of realism designates an active, curious, experimental, subversive – in a word, *scientific* – attitude towards social institutions and the material world; and the 'realistic' work of art is therefore one which encourages and disseminates this attitude, yet not merely in a flat or mimetic way or along the lines of imitation alone. Indeed, the 'realistic' work of art is one in which 'realistic' and experimental attitudes are tried out, not only between its characters and their fictive realities, but also between the audience and the work itself, and – not least significant – between the writer and his own materials and techniques. The three-fold dimensions of such a practice of 'realism' clearly explode the purely representational categories of the traditional mimetic work.

What Brecht called science is thus in a larger sense a figure for non-alienated production in general. It is what Bloch would call a Utopian emblem of the reunified and satisfying praxis of a world that has left alienation and the division of labour behind it. The originality of the Brechtian vision may be judged by juxtaposing his figure of science with the more conventional image of art and the artist which, particularly in bourgeois literature, has traditionally had this Utopian function. At the same time, it must also be asked whether Brecht's vision of science is still available to us as a figure today, or whether it does not itself reflect a relatively primitive stage in what has now come to be known as the second industrial revolution. Seen in this perspective, the Brechtian delight in 'science' is rather of a piece with Lenin's definition of communism as 'the soviets plus electrification', or Diego Rivera's grandiose Rockefeller Centre mural (repainted for Bellas Artes) in which, at the intersection of microcosm and macrocosm, the massive hands of Soviet



New Man grasp and move the very levers of creation.

Together with his condemnation of Lukács's formalism and his conception of a union of science and aesthetics in the didactic work of art, there is yet a third strain in Brecht's thinking – in many ways the most influential – which deserves attention. This is, of course, his fundamental notion of *Verfremdung*. It is the so-called 'estrangement effect' which is most often invoked to sanction theories of political modernism today, such as that of the Tel Quel Group.<sup>5</sup> The practice of estrangement – staging phenomena in such a way that what had seemed natural and immutable in them is now tangibly revealed to be historical, and thus the object of revolutionary change – has long seemed to provide an outlet from the dead end of agitational didacticism in which so much of the political art of the past remains confined. At the same time it allows a triumphant reappropriation and a materialist regrouping of the dominant ideology of modernism (the Russian Formalist 'making strange', Pound's 'make it new', the emphasis of all of the historical varieties of modernism on the vocation of art to alter and renew perception as such) from the ends of a revolutionary politics. Today, traditional realism – the canon defended by Lukács, but also old-fashioned political art of the socialist realist type – is often assimilated to classical ideologies of representation and to the practice of 'closed form'; while even bourgeois modernism (Kristeva's models are Lautréamont and Mallarmé) is said to be revolutionary precisely to the degree to which it calls the older formal values and practices into question and produces itself as an open 'text'. Whatever objections may be made to this aesthetic of political modernism – and we will reserve a fundamental one for our discussion of similar views of Adorno – it would seem most difficult to associate Brecht with it. Not only was the author of 'On Abstract Painting'<sup>6</sup> as hostile to purely formal experimentation as was Lukács himself: that might be held to be a historical or generational accident, and simply to spell out the limits of Brecht's personal tastes. What is more serious is that his attack on the formalism of Lukács's literary

<sup>5</sup> For a persuasive yet self-critical statement of such a Brechtian modernism, see Colin McCabe, 'Realism and the Cinema: notes on some Brechtian theses', in *Screen*, XV, 2 (Summer, 1974), pp. 7–27.

<sup>6</sup> 'You say that you are communists, people intent on changing a world no longer fit for habitation . . . Yet were you in reality the cultural servants of the ruling classes, it would be cunning strategy on your part to make material things unrecognizable, since the struggle concerns things and it is in the world of things that your masters have the most to answer for.' 'Über gegenstandslose Malerei', in *Schriften zur Literatur und Kunst*, II, Frankfurt, 1967, pp. 68–69.

analyses remains binding on the quite different attempts of the political modernists to make ideological judgments (revolutionary/bourgeois) on the basis of the purely formal characteristics of closed or open forms, 'naturalness', effacement of the traces of production in the work, and so forth. For example, it is certainly the case that a belief in the natural is ideological and that much of bourgeois art has worked to perpetuate such a belief, not only in its content but through the experience of its forms as well. Yet in different historical circumstances the idea of nature was once a subversive concept with a genuinely revolutionary function, and only the analysis of the concrete historical and cultural conjuncture can tell us whether, in the post-natural world of late capitalism, the categories of nature may not have acquired such a critical charge again.

It is time, indeed, to make an assessment of those fundamental changes which have taken place in capitalism and its culture since the period in which Brecht and Lukács spelled out their options for a Marxist aesthetics and a Marxian conception of realism. What has already been said about the transitional character of Nazism – a development which has done much to date many of Lukács's basic positions – is not without its effect on those of Brecht as well. Here it is necessary to emphasize the inextricable relationship between Brecht's aesthetic and the analysis of the media and its revolutionary possibilities worked out jointly by him and Walter Benjamin, and most widely accessible in the latter's well-known essay on 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.<sup>7</sup> For Brecht and Benjamin had not yet begun to feel the full force and constriction of that stark alternative between a mass audience or media culture, and a minority 'elite' modernism, in which our thinking about aesthetics today is inevitably locked. Rather, they foresaw a revolutionary utilization of communications technology such that the most striking advances in artistic technique – effects such as those of 'montage', for instance, which today we tend to associate almost exclusively with modernism as such – could at once be harnessed to politicizing and didactic purposes. Brecht's conception of 'realism' is thus not complete without this perspective in which the artist is able to use the most complex, modern technology in addressing the widest

<sup>7</sup> See *Illuminations*, London, 1970, also 'The Author as Producer', in *Understanding Brecht*, London, 1973; and for further developments in a radical theory of the media, Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit*, Neuwied, 1962; Hans-Magnus Enzensberger, *The Consciousness Industry*, New York, 1974; and Oskar Negt and Alexander Kluge, *Öffentlichkeit und Erfahrung*, Frankfurt, 1973.

popular public. Yet if Nazism itself corresponds to an early and still relatively primitive stage in the emergence of the media, then so does Benjamin's cultural strategy for attacking it, and in particular his conception of an art that would be revolutionary precisely to the degree to which it was technically (and technologically) 'advanced'. In the increasingly 'total system' of the media societies today, we can unfortunately no longer share this optimism. Without it, however, the project of a specifically political modernism becomes indistinguishable from all the other kinds – modernism, among other things, being characterized by its consciousness of an absent public.

In other words the fundamental difference between our own situation and that of the thirties is the emergence in full-blown and definitive form of that ultimate transformation of late monopoly capitalism variously known as the *société de consommation* or as post-industrial society. This is the historical stage reflected by Adorno's two post-war essays, so different in emphasis from the pre-war materials in the present volume. It may appear easy enough in retrospect to identify his repudiation of both Lukács and Brecht, on the grounds of their political praxis, as a characteristic example of an anti-communism now outmoded with the Cold War itself. More relevant in the present context, however, is the Frankfurt School's premise of a 'total system', which expressed Adorno's and Horkheimer's sense of the increasingly closed organization of the world into a seamless web of media technology, multinational corporations, and international bureaucratic control.<sup>8</sup> Whatever the theoretical merits of the idea of the 'total system' – and it would seem to me that where it does not lead out of politics altogether, it encourages the revival of an anarchist opposition to Marxism itself, and can also be used as a justification for terrorism – we may at least agree with Adorno that in the cultural realm, the all-pervasiveness of the system, with its 'culture-' or (Enzensberger's variant) its 'consciousness-industry', makes for an unpropitious climate for any of the older, simpler forms of oppositional art, whether it be that proposed by Lukács, that produced by Brecht, or indeed those celebrated in their different ways by Benjamin and by Bloch. The system has a power to co-opt and to defuse even the most potentially dangerous forms of political art by transforming them into cultural commodities (witness, if further proof be needed, the grisly example of the burgeoning Brecht-Industrie itself!). On the other hand, it cannot be said that Adorno's rather astonishing 'resolution' of the

<sup>8</sup> The more recent French variant on this position – as for example in Jean Baudrillard – enlarges the model to include the 'socialist bloc' within this new dystopian entente.

problem – his proposal to see the classical stage of high modernism itself as the very prototype of the most ‘genuinely’ political art (‘this is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead’) and his suggestion that it is Beckett who is the most truly revolutionary artist of our time – is any more satisfactory. To be sure, some of Adorno’s most remarkable analyses – for instance, his discussion of Schoenberg and the twelve-tone system in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* – document his assertion that the greatest modern art, even the most apparently un- or anti-political, in reality holds up a mirror to the ‘total system’ of late capitalism. Yet in retrospect, this now seems a most unexpected revival of a Lukács-type ‘reflection theory’ of aesthetics, under the spell of a political and historical despair that plagues both houses and finds praxis henceforth unimaginable. What is ultimately fatal to this new and finally itself once more anti-political revival of the ideology of modernism is less the equivocal rhetoric of Adorno’s attack on Lukács or the partiality of his reading of Brecht,<sup>9</sup> than very precisely the fate of modernism in consumer society itself. For what was once an oppositional and anti-social phenomenon in the early years of the century, has today become the dominant style of commodity production and an indispensable component in the machinery of the latter’s ever more rapid and demanding reproduction of itself. That Schoenberg’s Hollywood pupils used their advanced techniques to write movie music, that the masterpieces of the most recent schools of American painting are now sought to embellish the splendid new structures of the great insurance companies and multinational banks (themselves the work of the most talented and ‘advanced’ modern architects), are but the external symptoms of a situation in which a once scandalous ‘perceptual art’ has found a social and economic function in supplying the styling changes necessary to the *société de consommation* of the present.

The final aspect of the contemporary situation relevant to our subject has to do with the changes that have taken place within socialism itself since the publication of the Expressionism debate in *Das Wort* some forty years ago. If the central problem of a political art under capitalism is that of co-optation, one of the crucial issues of culture in a socialist framework must surely remain that of what Ernst Bloch calls the *Erbe*:

<sup>9</sup> For a path-breaking Marxian corrective to Adorno’s reading of the *Caucasian Chalk Circle*, see Darko Suvin, ‘Brecht’s *Caucasian Chalk Circle* and Marxist Figuration: Open Dramaturgy as Open History’, in Norman Rudick, ed., *The Weapons of Criticism*, Palo Alto, California, 1976.

the question of the uses of the world's cultural past in what will increasingly be a single international culture of the future, and of the place and effects of diverse heritages in a society intent on building socialism. Bloch's formulation of the problem is obviously a strategic means of transforming Lukács's narrow polemics – which were limited to the realistic novelists of the European bourgeois tradition – and of enlarging the framework of the debate to include the immense variety of popular or peasant, pre-capitalist or 'primitive' arts. It should be understood in the context of his monumental attempt to reinvent the concept of Utopia for Marxism and to free it from the objections correctly made by Marx and Engels themselves to the 'utopian socialism' of Saint-Simon, Owen or Fourier. Bloch's Utopian principle aims at jarring socialist thought loose from its narrow self-definition in terms which essentially prolong the categories of capitalism itself, whether by negation or adoption (terms like industrialization, centralization, progress, technology, and even production itself, which tend to impose their own social limitations and options on those who work with them). Where Lukács's cultural thinking emphasizes the continuities between the bourgeois order and that which is to develop out of it, Bloch's priorities suggest the need to think the 'transition to socialism' in terms of radical difference, of a more absolute break with that particular past, perhaps of a renewal or recovery of the truth of more ancient social forms. The newer Marxist anthropology, indeed, reminds us – from within our 'total system' – of the absolute difference of older pre-capitalist and tribal societies; and at a historical moment in which such an interest in a much more remote past seems less likely to give rise to the sentimentalizing and populist myths which Marxism had to combat in the late nineteenth and early 20th centuries, the memory of pre-capitalist societies may now become a vital element of Bloch's Utopian principle and of the invention of the future. Politically, the classical Marxian notion of the necessity, during the transition to socialism, of a 'dictatorship of the proletariat' – that is, a withdrawal of effective power from those with a vested interest in the re-establishment of the old order – has surely not become outmoded. Yet it may emerge conceptually transformed when once we think of it together with the necessity for a cultural revolution that involves collective re-education of all the classes. This is the perspective in which Lukács's emphasis on the great bourgeois novelists seems most inadequate to the task, but it is one in which the anti-bourgeois thrust of the great modernisms also appears inappropriate. It is then that Bloch's meditation on the *Erbe*, on the repressed cultural difference of the past

and the Utopian principle of the invention of a radically different future, will for the first time come into its own, at a point when the conflict between Realism and Modernism recedes behind us.

But surely in the West, and perhaps elsewhere as well, that point is still beyond us. In our present cultural situation, if anything, both alternatives of realism and of modernism seem intolerable to us: realism because its forms revive older experiences of a kind of social life (the classical inner city, the traditional opposition city/country) which is no longer with us in the already decaying future of consumer society: modernism because its contradictions have proved in practice even more acute than those of realism. An aesthetic of novelty today – already enthroned as the dominant critical and formal ideology – must seek desperately to renew itself by ever more rapid rotations of its own axis: modernism seeking to become post-modernism without ceasing to be modern. Thus today we witness the spectacle of a predictable return, after abstraction has itself become a tired convention, to figurative art, but this time to a figurative art – so-called hyperrealism or photorealism – which turns out to be the representation, not of things themselves, but of the latter's photographs: a representational art which is really 'about' art itself! In literature, meanwhile, amidst a weariness with plotless or poetic fiction, a return to intrigue is achieved, not by the latter's rediscovery, but rather by pastiche of older narratives and depersonalized imitation of traditional voices, similar to Stravinsky's pastiche of the classics criticized by Adorno's *Philosophy of Music*.

In these circumstances, indeed, there is some question whether the ultimate renewal of modernism, the final dialectical subversion of the now automatized conventions of an aesthetics of perceptual revolution, might not simply be . . . realism itself! For when modernism and its accompanying techniques of 'estrangement' have become the dominant style whereby the consumer is reconciled with capitalism, the habit of fragmentation itself needs to be 'estranged' and corrected by a more totalizing way of viewing phenomena.<sup>10</sup> In an unexpected dénouement,

<sup>10</sup> See, for example, the instructive comments of Stanley Aronowitz on the cinema. 'Unlike the important efforts of Japanese and European film-makers to fix the camera directly on the action and permit the scene to work "itself" out, American films are characterized by rapid camera work and sharp editing whose effect is to segment the action into one- or two-minute time slots, paralleling the prevailing styles of television production. The American moviegoer, having become accustomed in TV watching to commercial breaks in the action of a dramatic presentation, is believed to have become incapable of sustaining longer and slower action. Therefore the prevailing modes of film production rely on conceptions of dramatic time inherited from the more crass forms of commercial culture.'

it may be Lukács – wrong as he might have been in the 1930s – who has some provisional last word for us today. Yet this particular Lukács, if he be imaginable, would be one for whom the concept of realism has been rewritten in terms of the categories of *History and Class Consciousness*, in particular those of reification and totality. Unlike the more familiar concept of alienation, a process that pertains to activity and in particular to work (dissociating the worker from his labour, his product, his fellow workers and ultimately from his very ‘species being’ itself), reification is a process that affects our cognitive relationship with the social totality. It is a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity. The reification of late capitalism – the transformation of human relations into an appearance of relationships between things – renders society opaque: it is the lived source of the mystifications on which ideology is based and by which domination and exploitation are legitimized. Since the fundamental structure of the social ‘totality’ is a set of class relationships – an antagonistic structure such that the various social classes define themselves in terms of that antagonism and by opposition with one another – reification necessarily obscures the class character of that structure, and is accompanied, not only by anomie, but also by that increasing confusion as to the nature and even the existence of social classes which can be abundantly observed in all the ‘advanced’ capitalist countries today. If the diagnosis is correct, the intensification of class consciousness will be less a matter of a populist or ouvrierist exaltation of a single class by itself, than of the forcible reopening of access to a sense of society as a totality, and of the reinvention of possibilities of cognition and perception that allow social phenomena once again to become transparent, as moments of the struggle *between* classes.

Under these circumstances, the function of a new realism would be clear; to resist the power of reification in consumer society and to reinvent that category of totality which, systematically undermined by existential fragmentation on all levels of life and social organization today, can alone project structural relations between classes as well as

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The film-maker who subordinates the action and the characters to this concept of dramatic time reveals a politics inside technique that is far more insidious than “reactionary” content. When viewed from this perspective, the film-maker such as Howard Hawks, who refuses to subordinate art to the requirements of segmented time, becomes more resistant to authoritarianism than the liberal or left-wing film-makers who are concerned with the humanitarian content of film but have capitulated to techniques that totally reduce the audience to spectators.’ *False Promises*, New York 1973, p. 116–17.

class struggles in other countries, in what has increasingly become a world system. Such a conception of realism would incorporate what was always most concrete in the dialectical counter-concept of modernism – its emphasis on violent renewal of perception in a world in which experience has solidified into a mass of habits and automatisms. Yet the habituation which it would be the function of the new aesthetic to disrupt would no longer be thematized in the conventional modernistic terms of desacralized or dehumanizing reason, of mass society and the industrial city or technology in general, but rather as a function of the commodity system and the reifying structure of late capitalism.

Other conceptions of realism, other kinds of political aesthetics, obviously remain conceivable. The Realism/Modernism debate teaches us the need to judge them in terms of the historical and social conjuncture in which they are called to function. To take an attitude of partisanship towards key struggles of the past does not mean either choosing sides, or seeking to harmonize irreconcilable differences. In such extinct yet still virulent intellectual conflicts, the fundamental contradiction is between history itself and the conceptual apparatus which, seeking to grasp its realities, only succeeds in reproducing their discord within itself in the form of an enigma for thought, an aporia. It is to this aporia that we must hold, which contains within its structure the crux of a history beyond which we have not yet passed. It cannot of course tell us what our conception of realism ought to be; yet its study makes it impossible to us not to feel the obligation to reinvent one.



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