

## **T***hose Twenties*

*For Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler*

Slogans make themselves suspect not just because they serve to degrade thoughts into mere game-playing chips; they are also the index of their own untruth. What the public, and particularly the revivalist vogue, nowadays thinks belonged to the nineteen-twenties was in fact already fading at that time, by 1924 at the latest. The heroic age of the new art was actually around 1910: synthetic cubism, early German expressionism, the free atonalism of Schönberg and his school. Adolf Frisé has noted this fact in a recent radio interview with Lotte Lenya.<sup>1</sup> I can clearly remember that after an IGM festival in Frankfurt in 1927 I published an article entitled "The Stabilized Music."<sup>2</sup> It was not, as is usually assumed, the pressure exerted by the National Socialist terror that brought regression, neutralization, and a funereal silence to the arts, for these phenomena had already taken shape in the Weimar Republic, and in liberal continental European society generally. The dictatorships did not swoop down upon this society from outside in the way Cortez invaded Mexico; rather they were engendered by the social dynamic following the First World War, and they cast their shadows before them.

This is immediately evident in the products of mass culture manipulated by a highly centralized economic power. One has only to listen to the record albums that are now being revived as the hits, songs, and chansons from the twenties to be astonished at how little has changed in this whole sphere. As with fashion, the packaging changes; but the thing

itself, a conventional language composed of signals to suit the conditioned reflexes of consumers, essentially remained the same, as jazz, for instance, was a perennial fashion.<sup>3</sup> While it seems that such past fashions have a naive and awkward aspect in comparison with the current trend—that they are what the *slang*\* of American light music calls *corny*\*—this is due less to the substance of what is disseminated than to the time factor *in abstracto*, at most to the progressive perfecting of the machinery and of social-psychological control. The quality of being not yet quite so smart, which provokes smiles from the same type of people who in those days acclaimed Mistinguett and Marlene, is of the same nature as the idealizing nostalgia that clings to those same products today. The period's comparative backwardness in the techniques of consumer culture is misinterpreted as though to mean it was closer to the origins, whereas in truth it was just as much organized to grab customers as it is in 1960. In fact, it is a paradox that anything at all changes within the sphere of a culture rationalized to suit industrial ideals; the principle of *ratio* itself, to the extent that it calculates cultural effects economically, remains the eternal invariant. That is why it is somewhat shocking whenever anything from the sector of the culture industry becomes old-fashioned. The shock value of this paradox was already exploited by the surrealists in the twenties when they confronted the world of 1880; in England at that time a book like *Our Fathers* by Allan Bott had caused a similar effect.<sup>4</sup> Today the shock effect is produced by the twenties, similar to the effect the world of images of the 1880s produced around 1920. But the repetition deadens the shock effect. The defamiliarization<sup>5</sup> of the twenties is the ghost of a ghost.

In the German-speaking world the *imago* of the twenties is probably not so strongly marked by the intellectual movements of the period. Expressionism and the new music at the time probably found far less resonance than do the radical aesthetic tendencies of today. It was rather an imagistic world of erotic fantasy, and was nourished by theatrical works that at the time stood for the spirit of the age and that today still easily pass for the same, even though their composition does not have anything especially avant-garde about it. The *Songs* that Brecht and Weill composed together, *The Threepenny Opera* and *Mahagonny*, and Ernst Krenek's *Jonny* are representative of this sphere.<sup>6</sup> The subsequent discontent with civilization's progressive desexualizing of the world, which at the same time paradoxically keeps pace with the lifting of taboos, transfers onto the twenties romantic desires for sexual anarchy, the *red light district*\* and the *wide open city*\*. There is something immeasurably mendacious in all this. The enthusiasm for barroom Jennys goes together with the persecution of prostitutes, who catch it from society's crystal-

clear order when no more suitable targets are at hand. If life in the twenties had really been so nice, then it would be enough to leave the floozies in peace and stop trying to clean up the streets. Instead, antiseptically erotic films are made about the *naughty twenties*<sup>\*</sup>, or better still, about the Toulouse-Lautrec of our grandparents' time. And yet even back then those girls weren't doing it for free. The wretched commercialized sex industry of the Kurfürstendamm, as portrayed by George Grosz and transfixed by the words of Karl Kraus, was no closer to utopia than is the sterilized atmosphere of today.

Nevertheless, the idea that the twenties were a world where, as Brecht puts it in *Mahagonny*, "everything may be permitted,"<sup>7</sup> that is, a utopia, also has its truth. At that time, as again shortly after 1945, there seemed to be a real possibility of a politically liberated society. But it only seemed so: already in the twenties, as a consequence of the events of 1919, the decision had fallen against that political potential that, had things gone otherwise, with great probability would have influenced developments in Russia and prevented Stalinism. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that this twofold aspect—on the one hand, a world that could have taken a turn for the better and, on the other, the extinguishing of that hope by the establishment of powers that later revealed themselves fully in fascism—also expressed itself in an ambivalence in art, which in fact is quite specific to the twenties and has nothing to do with the vague and self-contradictory idea of the modern classics. Precisely those operatic works that earned fame and scandal then seem now, in their ambiguous stance toward anarchy, as though their main function was to furnish National Socialism with the slogans it later used to justify its cultural terrorism, as though that assiduously exaggerated disorder was already lusting for the order Hitler subsequently imposed across Europe. This is not something for the twenties to boast of. The catastrophe that followed the period was engendered by its own societal conflicts, even in what is customarily called the cultural sphere.

The extent to which the nostalgia for the twenties in fact clings to something intellectual, and not merely to a *fata morgana* of a period supposed to be at once both *avant-garde* and not yet enwrapped in the cellophane of modernity, is decided less by the level and quality of what was produced at the time than by the true or putative intellectual posture itself. Preconsciously one senses how much the revived culture is being absorbed by the ideology it had never ceased to be. Since one does not dare to acknowledge this, one projects an ideal image<sup>8</sup> of a past condition in which spirit supposedly had not yet been forced to admit its incongruity with the forces of reality. In comparison to what has happened since then, spirit altogether takes on an aspect of triviality. It feels culpa-

ble because it could not prevent the horror; but its own tenderness and fragility in turn presuppose a reality that could have escaped barbarism. The *imago* of the time immediately preceding the catastrophe is invested with everything spirit nowadays is felt to be denied. The absence of intellectual movements that can intervene today—even the existentialism of the first years after the war was nothing more than a resuscitative renaissance—awakens even in the most naive people the sentiment of sterility. It contributes to the legend of the twenties as the time when the very domain of spirit tottered, while still maintaining its earlier relevance to people's lives. The fact that after 1918 cubism lost its appeal is certainly a symptom that can be diagnosed only postmortem. Kahnweiler reports: "Picasso me dit encore bien souvent à l'heure actuelle que toute ce qui a été fait dans les années de 1907 à 1914 n'a pu être fait que par un travail d'équipe. D'être isolé, seul, cela a dû l'inquiéter énormément et c'est alors qu'il y a eu ce changement."<sup>a</sup> The isolation that destroyed the continuity of the painter's work and brought him, and not only him, to start revising, was hardly the fate of a contingent biography. That isolation reflects the loss of the collective energies that had produced the great innovations in European art. The shift in the relationship between the individual spirit and society extended even into the secret-most impulses of those for whom any adaptation to the demands of society was anathema. There was no lack here of what the naive faith in culture calls creative gifts. The very idea of intellectual production had been poisoned. Its self-confidence, the certainty that it is making history, is undermined. This accords with the fact that, precisely to the extent that it is assimilated, intellectual production no longer has any actual effect. Even its most extravagant expressions are no longer safe from being integrated into industrialized culture. Because the world spirit no longer coincides with spirit, the latter's last days shine resplendently as though they had been the golden age that in fact they never were. What remains is more an echo of fascist authority than anything itself living: the cultural respect for received values, even if they are merely touted as being important. Better would be a consciousness that realized its own diminished potential: Beckett has it. It would no longer be a culture of renewed deception, but instead one

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<sup>a</sup> Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler, *Mes galeries et mes peintres: Entretiens avec Francis Crémieux* (Paris: Gallimard, 1961), 73. [Translator's note: English translation of the passage Adorno quotes in the original: "Picasso still tells me quite often today that everything that was done in the years from 1907 to 1917 [sic] could only have been done through teamwork. Being isolated, being alone, must have upset him enormously, and it was then that there was this change" (Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler with Francis Crémieux, *My Galleries and Painters*, trans. Helen Weaver [New York: Viking Press, 1971], 54).]

that would express in its structure what denigrates spirit to the level of such deception. The only means by which culture can cure its curse of futility is by submitting that curse to interrogation.

The uncertain relationship between the present day and the twenties is conditioned by a historical discontinuity. Whereas the fascist decade in all its essential aspects was established in the epoch immediately preceding it, with roots deep within expressionism—one of whose spokesmen, Hanns Johst, rose to become a Nazi celebrity, and incidentally was already being parodied in the twenties by Brecht, who had good instincts<sup>9</sup>—the popular Nazi phrase “clean break”<sup>10</sup> sadly turned out to be right. The tradition, including the tradition of anti-traditionalism, was broken off, and half-forgotten tasks remain. And whatever now is artistically engaged with that epoch not only eclectically reaches back to a creative productivity that has died in the meantime, but at the same time also obeys an obligation not to forget those things that remain unfinished. It is necessary to pursue to its own logical consequences what was buried in the explosion of 1933, which itself in an entirely different sense was a consequence of that epoch.

It is quite clear how contemporary art, in view of its own problematic, should behave in regard to the avant-gardism of the past, and the artists of importance know this well. Anti-conventionalism remains indispensable; forms return only within the interior of works, not as something imposed upon them heteronomously. Such works must consciously measure themselves against the historical situation of their material: they must neither abandon themselves blindly and fetishistically to the material nor mold it from outside with subjective intentions. Only what is free from cowardice and ego-weakness and advances without protection, refusing everything indicated in the German language of the post-Hitler epoch by that loathsome expression “guiding image,”<sup>11</sup> has a chance of creating something that is not superfluous. Every consideration of possible effects, even under the pretext of social function or regard for the so-called human being, is untenable, but then so is the high-handed imperiousness of both the subject and its expression from the heroic days of modern art. It is no longer possible to evade the aspect of paradox in all art itself: this paradox, and not any existential philosopheme, is what the label “absurd” means. In every one of its elements contemporary artistic production must bear in mind the crisis of meaning: the meaning subjectively given a work of art as well as the meaningful conception of the world. Otherwise artistic creativity sells its services to legitimation. The only legitimately meaningful artworks today are those opposing the concept of meaning with the utmost recalcitrance.

The impulses must be recovered that in the vaunted twenties were

already threatening to petrify or dissipate. From the distance of the present one may observe how many artists whose aura is identified with that of the twenties had in fact already passed their peak in that decade, in any case toward the end of it; Kandinsky, surely Picasso, Schönberg, even Klee. Just as it is beyond question that Schönberg's twelve-tone technique developed completely logically from his own earlier achievement, from the emancipation from tonal language as well as the radicalization of motive-thematic work, so it is equally certain that some of the best was lost in the transition to systematic principles. Despite the material having been revolutionized, the musical language aligned itself with that of the tradition more than in Schönberg's best works before the First World War; the unfettered spontaneity and independence of the compositional subject was restrained by a need for order that revealed itself to be problematical, because the order it produced was born of that need, not of the matter itself. The appearance of stagnation in the music of the last decades, the often and somewhat maliciously observed risk of the avant-garde's becoming a second orthodoxy, is largely the legacy of this need for order. The musical task bequeathed to us from the twenties seems to be precisely the revision of that need for order: the pursuit of a *musique informelle*.<sup>12</sup> This idea of order passed down from the twenties can only be warmed over, not taken up productively. It was nothing other than the abstract negation of the supposed state of chaos that was feared far too much for it to have actually existed.

What requires reflection is both the necessity of pursuing without compromise the process that was suspended internally and externally and the limits of a possible resumption. It is perfectly self-evident that after thirty or forty years, after the absolute break, one cannot simply pick up where things were left off. The significant works of that epoch owed much of their power to the productive tension with a heterogeneous element: the tradition against which they rebelled. This was still a force confronting them, and it was precisely the most productive artists who had a great deal of that tradition within them. Much of the constraint that inspired those works was lost when the friction with this tradition disappeared. Freedom is complete, but threatens to become free-wheeling without its dialectical counterpart, whereas that counterpart cannot be maintained simply by an act of the will. Contemporary art must become conscious not only of its technical problems, but also of the conditions of its own existence, so that it does not become a mere rehash of the twenties, does not degrade into precisely what it refused to be: cultural property. Art's social arena is no longer an advanced or perhaps even decayed liberalism, but rather a fully manipulated, calculated, and integrated society, the "administered world." Whatever protest is made

against this in terms of artistic form—and it is no longer possible to conceive of an artistic form that is not a protest—itself becomes integrated into the universal planning it is attacking and bears the marks of this contradiction. Since their material has been emancipated and processed in every dimension nowadays, artworks evolve purely from their own formal laws, without any heterogeneous element, and so they tend to become all too shiny, tidy, and innocuous. In this sense, wallpaper swatches are the writing on the wall. It is precisely the discomfort caused by this that draws attention back to the twenties but without this nostalgic yearning being satisfied. Anybody who is sensitive to such things need only examine the titles of the innumerable books, paintings, and compositions of the past few years to have the sobering feeling of the secondhand. It is so unbearable because every work created nowadays makes its entrance—whether intentionally or not—as though it owed its existence to itself alone. The desire that proved fatal, namely, the absence of a work's necessity to exist, gives way to the abstract consciousness of up-to-dateness. This ultimately reflects the absence of any political relevance. When it is completely transposed into the aesthetic domain, the concept of radicalness becomes an ideological distraction, a consolation for the real powerlessness of political subjects.

However, there is no more compelling evidence of the contemporary cultural aporia than the fact that the critique of this ideological aspect of a sanitized, pure aesthetic progress itself immediately becomes ideology again. In the entire Eastern bloc such a critique serves simply to make the conformity total by stifling the last unruly stirrings that have taken refuge in art. This surely means nothing less than that the foundation of art itself has been shaken, that an unrefracted relation to the aesthetic realm is no longer possible. The concept of a cultural resurrection after Auschwitz is illusory and absurd, and every work created since then has to pay the bitter price for this. However, because the world has survived its own downfall, it nonetheless needs art to write its unconscious history. The authentic artists of the present are those in whose works the uttermost horror still quivers.

despite themselves, are really the greenhouses for this sort of stunting of spiritual instincts" (Friedrich Nietzsche, *Twilight of the Idols, or How to Philosophize with the Hammer*, trans. Richard Polt [Indianapolis: Hackett, 1997], 45).

4. Adorno's verb here, *gleichschalten*, belonged to the Nazi vocabulary and meant forcing institutions to toe the party line after 1933.

5. First published version of this article has instead of "the same" (*das Gleiche*), "Being" (*das Sein*).

### *Those Twenties*

1. Adolf Frisé (born 1910), German writer, editor of Robert Musil's *Collected Works*, and director of the cultural program of the regional radio studio Hessischer Rundfunk 1956–1975. Lotte Lenya (1898–1981), Austrian actress and singer, wife of Kurt Weill, famous as interpreter of the Brecht/Weill plays (*Mahagonny*, *Threepenny Opera*, *Seven Deadly Sins*, etc.), emigrated in 1933 and came to the USA in 1935.

The radio discussion was between Frisé, Lenya, and Adorno, part of the "evening studio" program of Hessischer Rundfunk, and was broadcast on July 26, 1960. The Hessischer Rundfunk's catalog gives the following summary of the dialogue: "An attempt to illuminate anew the reality of the twenties against the background of the experiences of a contemporary witness. To start off the discussion Adorno formulates the idea of imagelessness, the lack of traditional 'images' in America, from which result worlds of synthetic images, for instance, that of the wild West and the image of the 'golden twenties.' Addressing the question of the fascination of the twenties, the attempt is made to separate the real characteristics of this period from the aspects of a synthetically produced imagistic world of the 'golden twenties.' Arguing for a relativistic interpretation, Adorno speaks of aesthetic and thematic 'archetypes,' which were laid out in the twenties and only today are becoming productive for art. As an example he notes Stockhausen's collective compositional technique as a continuation of Brecht's collective work."

2. IGNM = Internationale Gesellschaft für neue Musik (International Society of New Music). *In nuce* Adorno's argument in his article is that the new music, for all its apparently radical innovations, occurs within the established order of society: "The music has *stabilized*, and has submitted to the requirements of the likewise freshly stabilized society; to be sure, the music has caught up to the development of society and has liberated itself from the petit bourgeois privacy of the nineteenth century as well as from the undynamic rigidity of its musical system; the stabilized music of today relates to the stable music of the nineteenth century no differently than the most progressive theory of marginal utility relates to classical economic theory. However, within the frame of such change everything has remained as it was" (Adorno, "Die stabilisierte Musik," in *GS 18, Musikalische Schriften* 5:721–728, here p. 725). According to the editorial afterword, this article was written in 1928 but never published. Cf. also "Das Altern der neuen Musik" in *Dissonanzen*, in *GS 14*:143–168; English: "The Aging of the New Music," *Telos* 28 (Summer 1976): 113–124.

3. Allusion to Adorno's essay "Zeitlose Mode: Zum Jazz" in *GS 10.1*:123–137. English: "Perennial Fashion: Jazz," in *Prisms*, trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1981), 119–132.

4. Allan Bott, *Our Fathers (1870–1900): Manners and Customs of the Ancient Victorians: A Survey in Pictures and Text of their History, Morals, Wars, Sports, Inventions, and Politics* (London: Heinemann, 1931; reprint, New York: Blom, 1972).

5. “Alienation” [*Verfremdung*] in the sense of Brecht’s alienation effect: a familiar object, practice, etc. is “defamiliarized” by detaching it from its everyday context or by breaking the conventions through which it is unrefractedly experienced.

6. *Die Dreigroschenoper* (1928) by Bertolt Brecht, music by Kurt Weill; *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* (1929) by Brecht and Weill; Ernst Krenek, *Jonny spielt auf* (1926), opus 45, piano and vocal score. English: *Johnny Strikes up the Band: An Opera in Two Parts*, book and music by Ernst Krenek, English version by Frederick H. Martens (New York: Bullman, 1928).

7. Cf. the refrain “*alles dürfen darf*” from the men’s chorus in act 2, scene 13 of the opera *Aufstieg und Fall der Stadt Mahagonny* in Bertolt Brecht, *Werke*, ed. Werner Hecht, Jan Kopf, Werner Mittenzwei, Klaus-Detlef Müller, vol. 2, *Stücke 2* (Berlin/Weimar: Aufbau Verlag, and Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1988), 362; English: Bertolt Brecht, *The Rise and Fall of the City of Mahagonny*, trans. W. H. Auden and Chester Kallman (Boston: Godine, 1976), 68:

One means to eat all you are able;  
Two, to change your loves about;  
Three means the ring and gaming table;  
Four, to drink until you pass out.  
Moreover, better get it clear  
That Don’ts are not permitted here.  
Moreover, better get it clear  
That Don’ts are not permitted here!

8. *Wunschbild*, “ideal-image,” “image of desire,” a *terminus technicus* in Freud denoting the ideal image of a love-object as constructed by the libido. Cf. *Die Traumdeutung* (1900); English: *The Interpretations of Dreams*, vols. 4 and 5 of *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, trans. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press, 1975).

9. According to Brecht, his early drama *Baal* (1918) was an “antithesis” or “materialistic” “counter-design” to the drama *Der Einsame: Ein Menschenuntergang* (1917) by Johst, an idealistic expressionist dramatization of the life of the poet Hans Christian Grabbe (1801–1836). Brecht said he wanted to “undermine the weak successful drama [ . . . ] with a ridiculous treatment of genius and the amoral,” *Schriften zum Theater* 15 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp 1963), 69.

After being attacked by Nazi ideologues for his early expressionist plays, Hanns Johst (1890–1978) began writing in praise of Hitler and the National Socialist cause. His play *Schlageter* (1933), glorifying the early Nazi martyr, was performed regularly in the theaters of the Third Reich. In 1933 Johst was named producer of the Prussian State Theater and made president of the Academy of German Literature; in 1934 he was appointed to the Prussian State Council, and in 1935 he became president of the Reich Theater Chamber. He called for a “reawakening of confidence” as the condition for a new *völkisch* theater under National Socialism and is said to have

boasted that whenever someone mentioned the word *culture* to him, he was inclined to reach for his revolver.

10. The German *Umbruch* means literally the breaking up, plowing up of soil for aeration and replanting and figuratively a radical change or shake-up.

11. Adorno articulates his abhorrence at the idea of a "guiding image" (*Leitbild*) in the text that opens his essay collection *Ohne Leitbild* (1967, 1968), now in GS 10.1.

12. To designate a third entity between serial and post-serial music Adorno "coined the term *musique informelle* as a small token of gratitude towards the nation for whom the tradition of the avant-garde is synonymous with the courage to produce manifestos." Although he dialectically explicates the notion of informal or asexual music through recourse to specific works, Adorno broaches an initial description:

What is meant is a type of music which has discarded all forms which are external or abstract or which confront it in an inflexible way. At the same time, although such music should be completely free of anything irreducibly alien to itself or superimposed on it, it should nevertheless constitute itself in an objectively compelling way, in the musical substance itself, and not in terms of external laws. Moreover, wherever this can be achieved without running the risk of a new form of oppression, such an emancipation should also strive to do away with the system of musical co-ordinates which have crystallized out in the innermost recesses of the musical substance itself.

He adds that, as "an image of freedom," such music, "had been a real possibility once before, around 1910. The date is not irrelevant, since it provides a demarcation line dividing the age from the vastly overrated twenties." Adorno, "Vers une musique informelle," originally in *Quasi una fantasia* (1963), now in GS 16: 493–540; English: *Quasi una fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992): 269–322 (cited: pp. 272–73).

### *Prologue to Television*

1. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, *Maximen und Reflexionen*, 902, vol. 12 of *Goethe's Werke*, ed. Erich Trunz (Munich: Beck, 1973), 497.

2. First published version: "The more seamless the imagistic world, the more fragile it becomes at the same time."

3. First published version interjects here: "one hit song was called 'Especially For You'\* . . . ."

4. First published version is slightly different: "The reading of a number of admittedly better than average television drama scripts . . . ."

5. Georg Legman, *Love and Death: A Study in Censorship* (New York: Hacker Art Books, 1963). An extremely witty study of the negation of sex and the institutionalization of violence in American life, as reflected in murder mysteries, comic books, films, etc., and the patent absurdity of censoring sex while promoting violence. He also offers trenchant social-psychological interpretations of the figure of the "bitch-heroine" and innumerable high (Hemingway) and low (*Gone with the Wind*) manifestations of misogyny and gynophobia. "My dear fellow, it is not easy to take the adolescent's mind off sex. It takes death, death, death, and more death. For adults, more still" (93). "Violence and death have saved us from sex" (94).