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Georg Lukács
Bertolt Brecht
Walter Benjamin
Theodor Adorno

Aesthetics and Politics

YA 41013

Afterword by Fredric Jameson

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Verso

Translation Editor: Ronald Taylor

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 polation to extremes'. An explicit theory of perspective would be indicated on p. 176; I believe there was something on that in the original draft. The stereoscope, which was invented between 1810 and 1820, is relevant here. The fine dialectical conception of the Haussmann chapter could perhaps be brought out more precisely in your study than it is in the draft, where one has to interpret it first.

I must ask you once more to excuse the carping form of these comments; but I believe I owe you at least a few specific examples of my basic criticism.

In true friendship, Yours

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II.

London, 18 March 1936

Derr Herr Benjamin:

If today I prepare to convey to you some notes on your extraordinary study ['The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'], I certainly have no intention of offering you criticism or even an adequate response. The terrible pressure of work on me – the big book on logic,¹¹ the completion of my contribution to the monograph on Berg,¹² which is ready except for two analyses, and the study on jazz¹³ – makes any such endeavour hopeless. This is especially true of a work in the face of which I am very seriously aware of the inadequacy of written communication, for there is not a sentence which I would not wish to discuss with you in detail. I cling to the hope that this will be possible very soon, but on the other hand I do not want to wait so long before giving you some kind of response, however insufficient it may be.

Let me therefore confine myself to one main theme. My ardent interest and my complete approval attach to that aspect of your study which appears to me to carry out your original intention – the dialectical construction of the relationship between myth and history – within the intellectual field of the materialistic dialectic: namely, the dialectical self-dissolution of myth, which is here viewed as the disenchantment of art.

¹¹ This was the philosophical work, a critique of phenomenology, on which Adorno was engaged while at Oxford. It was eventually published in Stuttgart in 1956 as *Zur Metakritik der Erkenntnistheorie. Studien über Husserl und die phänomenologischen Antinomien*.

¹² Included in Willi Reich (ed), *Alban Berg, Vienna 1937*.

¹³ Published as 'Über Jazz' in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, 5, 1936, and later included in Adorno's volume *Moments Musicaux*, Frankfurt 1964. For Adorno's views on jazz, see also his essay 'Perennial Fashion – Jazz', *Prisms*, London 1967.

You know that the subject of the 'liquidation of art' has for many years underlain my aesthetic studies and that my emphatic espousal of the primacy of technology, especially in music, must be understood strictly in this sense and in that of your second technique. It does not surprise me if we find common ground here; it does not surprise me, because in your book on the Baroque you accomplished the differentiation of the allegory from the symbol (in the new terminology, the 'aural' symbol) and in your *Einbahnstrasse*¹⁴ you differentiated the work of art from magical documentation. It is a splendid confirmation – I hope it does not sound immodest if I say: for both of us – that in an essay on Schönberg which appeared in a *Festschrift* two years ago¹⁵ and with which you are not familiar, I proposed formulations about technology and dialectics as well as the alteration of relationships to technology, which are in perfect accord with your own.

It is this accord which for me constitutes the criterion for the differences that I must now state, with no other aim than to serve our 'general line', which is now so clearly discernible. In doing so, perhaps I can start out by following our old method of immanent criticism. In your earlier writings, of which your present essay is a continuation, you differentiated the idea of the work of art as a structure from the symbol of theology and from the taboo of magic. I now find it disquieting – and here I see a sublimated remnant of certain Brechtian motifs – that you now casually transfer the concept of magical aura to the 'autonomous work of art' and flatly assign to the latter a counter-revolutionary function. I need not assure you that I am fully aware of the magical element in the bourgeois work of art (particularly since I constantly attempted to expose the bourgeois philosophy of idealism, which is associated with the concept of aesthetic autonomy, as mythical in the fullest sense). However, it seems to me that the centre of the autonomous work of art does not itself belong on the side of myth – excuse my topic parlance – but is inherently dialectical; within itself it juxtaposes the magical and the mark of freedom. If I remember correctly, you once said something similar in connection with Mallarmé, and I cannot express to you my feeling about your entire essay more clearly than by telling you that I constantly found myself wishing for a study of Mallarmé as a counterpoint to your essay, a study which, in my estimation, you owe us as an important contribution to our knowledge. Dialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the

¹⁴ Benjamin's volume of aphorisms *Einbahnstrasse* was published in Berlin in 1928, and then later included in Adorno's collection *Imprimus*, Frankfurt 1968.

¹⁵ This essay, 'Der dialektische Komponist', was originally published in Vienna in 1934.

case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards an elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience – that precisely the uttermost consistency in the pursuit of the technical laws of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, brings it close to the state of freedom, of something that can be consciously produced and made. I know of no better materialistic programme than that statement by Mallarmé in which he defines works of literature as something not inspired but made out of words; and the greatest figures of reaction, such as Valéry and Borchardt (the latter with his essay about villas¹⁶ which, despite an unspeakable comment about workers, could be taken over in a materialistic sense in its entirety), have this explosive power in their innermost cells. If you defend the *kitsch* film against the 'quality' film, no one can be more in agreement with you than I am; but *l'art pour l'art* is just as much in need of a defence, and the united front which exists against it and which to my knowledge extends from Brecht to the Youth Movement, would be encouragement enough to undertake a rescue.

[In your essay on *The Electric Affinities*]¹⁷ you speak of play and appearance as the elements of art; but I do not see why play should be dialectical, and appearance – the appearance which you have managed to preserve in Ottilie who, together with Mignon and Helena,¹⁸ now does not come off so well – should not. And at this point, to be sure, the debate turns political quickly enough. For if you render rightly technicization and alienation dialectical, but not in equal measure the world of objectified subjectivity, the political effect is to credit the proletariat (as the cinema's subject) directly with an achievement which, according to Lenin, it can realize only through a theory introduced by intellectuals as dialectical subjects, who themselves belong to the sphere of works of art which you have consigned to Hell.

Understand me correctly. I would not want to claim the autonomy of the work of art as a prerogative, and I agree with you that the aural element of the work of art is declining – not only because of its technical reproducibility, incidentally, but above all because of the fulfilment of

¹⁶ Rudolf Borchardt (1877–1945) was a prominent litterateur in Germany, whose essay on Tuscan villas is included in the edited volume of his writings, *Prosa III*, Stuttgart 1960, pp. 38–70.

¹⁷ Benjamin's essay *Goethes Wahlverwandtschaften* was published in Hofmannsthal's journal *Neue Deutsche Beiträge* in 1924–5.

¹⁸ Characters in Goethe's *Elective Affinities*, *Wilhelm Meister's Apprenticeship*, and *Faust II*, respectively.

its own 'autonomous' formal laws (this is the subject of the theory of musical reproduction which Kolisch and I have been planning for years). But the autonomy of the work of art, and therefore its material form, is not identical with the magical element in it. The reification of a great work of art is not just loss, any more than the reification of the cinema is all loss. It would be bourgeois reaction to negate the reification of the cinema in the name of the ego, and it would border on anarchism to revoke the reification of a great work of art in the spirit of immediate use-values. '*Les extrêmes me touchent*' [Gidel], just as they touch you – but only if the dialectic of the lowest has the same value as the dialectic of the highest, rather than the latter simply decaying. Both bear the stigma of capitalism, both contain elements of change (but never, of course, the middle-term between Schönberg and the American film). Both are torn halves of an integral freedom, to which however they do not add up. It would be romantic to sacrifice one to the other, either as the bourgeois romanticism of the conservation of personality and all that stuff, or as the anarchistic romanticism of blind confidence in the spontaneous power of the proletariat in the historical process – a proletariat which is itself a product of bourgeois society.

To a certain extent I must accuse your essay of this second romanticism. You have swept art out of the corners of its taboos – but it is as though you feared a consequent inrush of barbarism (who could share your fear more than I?) and protected yourself by raising what you fear to a kind of inverse taboo. The laughter of the audience at a cinema – I discussed this with Max, and he has probably told you about it already – is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism. I very much doubt the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports; and despite its shock-like seduction I do not find your theory of distraction convincing – if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organized in such a way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction. On the other hand, certain concepts of capitalist practice, like that of the test, seem to me almost ontologically congealed and taboo-like in function – whereas if anything does have an aural character, it is surely the film which possesses it to an extreme and highly suspect degree. To select only one more small item: the idea that a reactionary is turned into a member of the avant-garde by expert knowledge of Chaplin's films strikes me as out-and-out romanticization. For I cannot count Kracauer's¹⁹

¹⁹ Siegfried Kracauer, long a friend of Adorno, was the author of *From Caligari to Hitler*, Princeton 1947, an attack on German expressionist cinema.

favourite director, even after *Modern Times*, as an avant-garde artist (the reason will be perfectly clear from my article on jazz), nor do I believe that any of the decent elements in this work will attract attention. One need only have heard the laughter of the audience at the film to know what is actually happening.

Your dig at Wertel gave me great pleasure. But if you take Mickey Mouse instead, things are far more complicated, and the serious question arises as to whether the reproduction of every person really constitutes that *a priori* of the film which you claim it to be, or whether instead this reproduction belongs precisely to that 'naïve realism' whose bourgeois nature we so thoroughly agreed upon in Paris. After all, it is hardly an accident if that modern art which you counterpose to technical art as aural, is of such inherently dubious quality as Vlaminck²⁰ and Rilke. The lower sphere, to be sure, can score an easy victory over this sort of art; but if instead there were the names of, let us say, Kafka and Schönberg, the problem would be posed very differently. Certainly Schönberg's music is *not* aural.

Accordingly, what I would postulate is *more* dialectics. On the one hand, dialectical penetration of the 'autonomous' work of art which is transcended by its own technology into a planned work; on the other, an even stronger dialecticization of utilitarian art in its negativity, which you certainly do not fail to note but which you designate by relatively abstract categories like 'film capital', without tracking it down to its ultimate lair as immanent irrationality. When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg two years ago, what impressed me most was how *little* montage and all the advanced techniques that you emphasize are actually used; rather, reality is everywhere *constructed* with an infantile mimetism and then 'photographed'. You underestimate the technicality of autonomous art and over-estimate that of dependent art; this, in plain terms, would be my main objection. But this objection could only be given effect as a dialectic between extremes which you tear apart. In my estimation, this would involve nothing less than the complete liquidation of the Brechtian motifs which have already undergone an extensive transformation in your study – above all, the liquidation of any appeal to the immediacy of interconnected aesthetic effects, however fashioned, and to the actual consciousness of actual workers who have absolutely no advantage over the bourgeois except their interest in the revolution, but otherwise bear all the marks of mutilation of the typical bourgeois

²⁰ Changed to Derain in the published version of Benjamin's essay.

character. This prescribes our function for us clearly enough – which I certainly do not mean in the sense of an activist conception of 'intellectuals'. But it cannot mean either that we may only escape the old taboos by entering into new ones – 'tests', so to speak. The goal of the revolution is the abolition of fear. Therefore we need have no fear of it, nor need we ontologize our fear. It is not bourgeois idealism if, in full knowledge and without mental prohibitions, we maintain our solidarity with the proletariat instead of making of our own necessity a virtue of the proletariat, as we are always tempted to do – the proletariat which itself experiences the same necessity and needs us for knowledge as much as we need the proletariat to make the revolution. I am convinced that the further development of the aesthetic debate which you have so magnificently inaugurated, depends essentially on a true accounting of the relationship of the intellectuals to the working-class.

Excuse the haste of these notes. All this could be seriously settled only on the basis of the details in which the Good Lord – possibly not magical after all – dwells.* Only the shortage of time leads me to use the large categories which you have taught me strictly to avoid. In order at least to indicate to you the concrete passages to which I refer, I have left my spontaneous pencilled annotations on the manuscript, though some of them may be too spontaneous to be communicated. I beg your indulgence for this as well as for the sketchy nature of my letter.

I am going to Germany on Sunday. It is possible that I shall be able to complete my jazz study there, something that I unfortunately did not have time to do in London. In that case I would send it to you without a covering letter and ask you to send it on to Max immediately after reading it (it probably will amount to no more than 25 printed pages). This is not certain, because I do not know whether I shall find the time or, especially, whether the nature of this study will permit me to send it from Germany without considerable danger. Max has probably told you that the idea of the clown is its focal point. I would be very pleased if it appeared together with your study. Its subject is a very modest one, but it probably converges with yours in its decisive points, and will attempt to express positively some of the things that I have formulated negatively today. It arrives at a complete verdict on jazz, in particular by revealing its 'progressive' elements (semblance of montage, collective work, primacy of reproduction over production) as façades of something that is in truth quite reactionary. I believe that I have succeeded in really

* A reference to the programmatic dictum of the art historian Aby Warburg: *Der liebe Gott steckt im Detail* (The Good Lord dwells in detail).

decoding jazz and defining its social function. Max was quite taken with my study, and I could well imagine that you will be, too. Indeed I feel that our theoretical disagreement is not really a discord between us but rather, that it is my task to hold your arm steady until the sun of Brecht has once more sunk into exotic waters. Please understand my criticisms only in this spirit.

I cannot conclude, however, without telling you that your few sentences about the disintegration of the proletariat as 'masses' through revolution²¹ are among the profoundest and most powerful statements of political theory that I have encountered since I read *State and Revolution*.

Your old friend,

Teddie Wiesengrund*

I should also like to express my special agreement with your theory of Dadaism. It fits into the essay as nicely as the 'bombast' and the 'horrors' fit into your Baroque book.

III.

New York, 10 November 1938

Dear Walter:

The tardiness of this letter levels a menacing charge against me and all of us. But perhaps this accusation already contains a grain of defence. For it is almost self-evident that a full month's delay in my response to your Baudelaire cannot be due to negligence.

The reasons are entirely objective in nature. They involve the attitude of all of us to the manuscript, and, considering my special interest in the question of the *Arcades* study, I can probably say without immodesty, my attitude in particular. I had been looking forward to the arrival of the Baudelaire with the greatest eagerness and literally devoured it. I am full of admiration for the fact that you were able to complete it by the appointed time, and it is this admiration which makes it particularly hard for me to speak of what has come between my passionate expectation and the text itself.

Your idea of providing in the *Baudelaire* a model for the *Arcades* study was something I took very seriously, and I approached the satanic scene much as Faust approached the phantasmagoria of the Brocken mountain

²¹ This passage does not appear in any of the published versions of Benjamin's essay. * Wiesengrund was Adorno's paternal name.

when he thought that many a riddle would now be solved. May I be excused for having had to give myself Mephistopheles' reply that many a riddle poses itself anew? Can you understand that reading your treatise, one of whose chapters is entitled *The Flâneur* and another *Modernism*, produced a certain disappointment in me?

The basic reason for this disappointment is that those parts of the study with which I am familiar do not constitute a model for the *Arcades* project so much as a prelude to it. Motifs are assembled but not elaborated. In your covering letter to Max [Horkheimer] you represented this as your express intention, and I am aware of the ascetic discipline which you impose on yourself to omit everywhere the conclusive theoretical answers to questions, and even make the questions themselves apparent only to initiates. But I wonder whether such an asceticism can be sustained in the face of such a subject and in a context which makes such powerful inner demands. As a faithful reader of your writings I know very well that in your work there is no lack of precedents for your procedure. I remember, for example, your essays on Proust and on Surrealism which appeared in *Die literarische Welt*. But can this method be applied to the complex of the *Arcades*? Panorama and 'traces', *flâneur* and arcades, modernism and the unchanging, *without* a theoretical interpretation – is this a 'material' which can patiently await interpretation without being consumed by its own aura? Rather, if the pragmatic content of these topics is isolated, does it not conspire in almost demonic fashion against the possibility of its own interpretation? In one of our unforgettable conversations in Königstein, you said that each idea in the *Arcades* had to be wrested away from a realm in which madness reigns. I wonder whether such ideas need to be as immured behind impenetrable layers of material as your ascetic discipline demands. In your present study the arcades are introduced with a reference to the narrowness of the pavements which impede the *flâneur* on the streets.²² This pragmatic introduction, it seems to me, prejudices the objectivity of phantasmagoria – something that I so stubbornly insisted upon even at the time of our Hornberg correspondence – as much as does the disposition of the first chapter to reduce phantasmagoria to types of behaviour of the literary *bohème*. You need not fear that I shall suggest that in your study phantasmagoria should survive unmediated or that the study itself should assume a phantasmagoric character. But the liquidation of phantasmagoria can only be accomplished with true

²² See Charles Baudelaire, p. 36.