Consciousness-Raising or Redemptive Criticism — The Contemporaneity of Walter Benjamin*

by Jürgen Habermas

Even in a trivial sense Benjamin has contemporary relevance: opinions come into conflict today whenever his name comes up. Yet the eruptive impact Benjamin’s writings have had in the Federal Republic of Germany during the short time since their publication¹ has resulted in battle lines being drawn which were already prefigured in Benjamin’s biography. In the course of Benjamin’s life the constellation made up by Gershom Scholem, Theodor W. Adorno and Bertolt Brecht was decisive — so too was his youthful dependence on the school reformer Gustav Wyneken, and later, his relationship with the surrealists. Today, his closest friend and mentor Scholem assumes the role of unpolemical, preeminent, and completely uncompromising advocate of that dimension in Benjamin partial to the traditions of Jewish mysticism.² Adorno — Benjamin’s heir, critical partner, and forerunner all in one — not only introduced the first wave of posthumous Benjamin reception, but left an indelible stamp on it.³ Since the

¹“Bewusstmachende oder rettende Kritik — Die Aktualität Walter Benjamins,” in Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins (Frankfurt am Main, 1972), pp. 175-223; reprinted in Kultur und Kritik (Frankfurt am Main, 1973), pp. 302-344. Published by permission of Suhrkamp Verlag and Jürgen Habermas.


death of Peter Szondi (who undoubtedly would have stood here today in my place), Adorno’s position has been maintained primarily by Benjamin’s editors, Tiedemann and Schweppenhäuser. Brecht must have functioned as a sort of reality principle for Benjamin, for it was under his influence that Benjamin was led to break with the esoteric element of his style and his thought. Following Brecht’s lead, Marxist theorist of art such as Hildegard Brenner, Helmut Lethen and Michael Scharang are today able to shift Benjamin’s late work decisively into the perspective of class struggle. Gustav Wyneken was at first a model for Benjamin’s activity in the “Free School Community” (Freie Schulgemeinde) — and though even while still a student Benjamin repudiated Wyneken as his model (Br., 120), Wyneken’s figure signals certain ties and impulses that persisted in Benjamin. This neo-conservative Benjamin has more recently found an intelligent and undaunted apologist in Hannah Arendt, who would like to safeguard Benjamin, the impressionable, vulnerable aesthete, collector and hommes de lettres, against the ideological claims of his Marxist and Zionist friends. And finally, Benjamin’s close relationship to surrealism has once again come to light with the second wave of Benjamin reception, a reception whose impetus stems from the student revolts; this relationship has been documented in the works of Bohrer and Bürger among others.

In the no man’s land between these fronts has arisen a body of Benjamin criticism that treats its material in scholarly fashion, and respectfully gives notice to the imprudent that this is no longer unfamiliar terrain. If this academic treatment of the matter offers a possible corrective to the dispute between the various parties that has very nearly splintered Benjamin’s image, it certainly provides no alternative. Nor are the competing interpretations merely tacked on. I doubt if it was only a predilection for the


5Cf. the Benjamin issue of the journal Text und Kritik (30-31, 1971) and especially the essays by B. Lindner, P. Krumme, L. Wiesenthal, and an annotated bibliography (pp. 85 ff.) with references to dissertations on Benjamin in progress.
mysterious, as Adorno records, that led Benjamin to keep his friends apart from each other: only as some sort of surrealistic scene could one imagine seeing Scholem, Adorno and Brecht gathered together for a peaceful symposium around a table, under which Breton and Aragon are squatting, while Wyneken stands at the door — gathered in order let us say to discuss the *Spirit of Utopia* (*Geist der Utopie*) or indeed the *Spirit as Adversary of the Soul* (*Geist als Widersacher der Seele*). Benjamin's intellectual existence has taken on so much of a surreal quality that one should not confront it with unreasonable demands of consistency and continuity. Benjamin combined diverging motifs, yet without actually unifying them. And if they were unified, then it would have to be in as many individual unities as there are elements in which the interested gaze of succeeding generations of interpreters attempts to pierce the crust and penetrate to regions where there are veins of live ore. Benjamin belongs to those authors who cannot be summarized and whose work is disposed to a history of disparate effects. We encounter these authors only with the sudden flash of contemporary immediacy in which a thought takes power and holds sway for an historical instant. Benjamin was accustomed to explicate contemporaneity (*Aktualität*) in terms of the Talmudic legend in which, "angels — innumerable host of new ones at every moment — (are) created in order to, once they have sung their hymn in God's presence, cease and disappear into the void" (G.S. II, 246).

I would like to take as my point of departure a sentence Benjamin directed at one time against the methods of cultural history: "Cultural history, to be sure, increases the weight of the treasure which accumulates on the back of humanity. Yet cultural history does not provide the strength to shake off this burden in order to be able to take control of it" (Fuchs, 36). It is precisely here that Benjamin sees the task of criticism. It is not from a historicist standpoint of accumulated culture goods that Benjamin views the documents of culture, which are at the same time those of barbarism, but rather from a critical standpoint of the disintegration of culture "into goods which," as Benjamin adamantly expresses it, can become "objects of possession for mankind" (ibid., 35). Benjamin does not, however, speak of a "dialektical overcoming (*Aufhebung*) of culture."

I

Herbert Marcuse, on the other hand, does speak of an overcoming of culture in his 1937 essay on "The Affirmative Character of Culture."* With

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* [Translators' Note] Geist der Utopie appeared in 1918 and was written by Ernst Bloch, who was already a good friend of both Benjamin's and Scholem's at that time and who was introduced to Adorno by Benjamin ten years later in Berlin; cf. Man on His Own (N.Y., 1972). Geist als Widersacher der Seele appeared in 1929 and was written by the German cultural philosopher Ludwig Klages; Benjamin, although aware of Klages' anti-semitism and "common cause with fascism," maintained an avid interest in Klages' work on language, myth, graphology from the time of their personal acquaintance during Benjamin's student days until the end of his life.

respect to classical bourgeois art he criticizes the two-fold character of a world of beautiful appearance (schöner Schein) that establishes itself as autonomous, i.e., beyond bourgeois competition and social labor. This autonomy is illusory (scheinhaft), in that only in the realm of fiction does art allow the fulfillment of an individual claim to happiness, whereas it veils the complete absence of happiness in day-to-day reality. There is at the same time an element of truth in the autonomy of art, since the ideal of the beautiful gives expression to the longing for a happier life, for the humanity, friendliness and solidarity withheld in every existence, and thereby transcends the status quo: “Affirmative culture was the historical form in which were preserved those human wants which surpassed the material reproduction of existence. To that extent, what is true of the form of social reality to which it belonged holds for it as well: right is on its side. Certainly, it exonerated ‘external conditions’ from responsibility for the ‘vocation of the human being,’ thus stabilizing their injustice. But is also held up to them as a task the image of a better order” (op. cit., 120). Marcuse confronts this art by enforcing the claim implicit in the critique of ideology: the truth articulated in bourgeois ideals, but reserved for the sphere of beautiful appearance, must be taken literally. This means that art as a sphere severed from reality must be overcome dialectically.

Whereas beautiful appearance is the medium in which civil society at least expresses its own ideals, while at the same time veiling their suspension, the critique of art as ideology leads to the demand for the dialectical abolition (Aufhebung) of autonomous art, a demand to re-integrate culture per se into the material process of life. Revolutionizing the relations of life in civil society means the dialectical abolition of culture: “To the extent that culture has transmuted fulfillable, but factually unfulfilled, longings and instincts, it will lose its object . . . Beauty will find a new embodiment when it no longer is represented as real illusion but, instead, expresses reality and joy in reality” (ibid., 130 f.).

Face to face with the fascist mass art of the period, Marcuse could not ignore the possibility of a false abolition of culture. He counterposed to this another instance of politicized art, one which thirty years later seemed, for a moment, to assume concrete form in the flower-strewn barricades of the Paris students. In his Essay on Liberation, Marcuse interpreted the surrealist praxis of the youth revolt as the dialectical overcoming of culture through which art passed over into life.¹⁰

A year before Marcuse’s essay on the affirmative character of culture, Benjamin’s article The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproductibility had appeared in the same journal, the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung

(I., 217-251). * It almost seems as if Marcuse only recast Benjamin’s more subtle observations into the language of the critique of ideology. The theme is once again the dialectical abolition (Aufhebung) of autonomous art. The secular cult of beauty was to develop only with the Renaissance and prevailed for three centuries (ibid., 224). As art becomes separated from its basis in cult, the appearance of its autonomy disappears (ibid., 226). Benjamin lends support to his thesis, “that art has left the realm of the ‘beautiful appearance’,” by pointing to the change in the status of the work of art and the change in the mode of its reception (ibid., 230).

The destruction of aura brings with it a shift in the innermost structure of the work of art; the sphere once removed from and set up in opposition to the material process of life now disintegrates. The work of art withdraws its ambivalent claim to imperious authenticity and inviolability. It relinquishes to the viewer its historical testimony as well as its cultic offering. Benjamin had noted already in 1927: “What we used to call art, only starts two meters away” (G.S. II, 622). The trivialized work of art wins exhibition value at the price of its cult value.11

Corresponding to the changed structure of the work of art, there is a change in the perception and reception of art. When art is autonomous, it is oriented to individual enjoyment; after the loss of its aura, it is oriented to mass reception. Benjamin contrasts contemplation, characteristic of the viewer as an isolated individual, with distraction, which marks a collective sensitized to external stimuli: “In the degeneration of the bourgeoisie, meditation became a school for asocial behavior; it was countered by diversion as a variety of the play of social behavior” (ibid., 238). Moreover, Benjamin sees in this collective reception an enjoyment of art which is both instructive and critical.

I believe I can distill the concept of a mode of reception from these not always consistent statements, a concept which Benjamin elicited from the reactions of a film audience that was relaxed yet possessed of its presence of mind: “Let us compare the screen on which a film unfolds with the canvas of a painting. The painting invites the viewer to contemplation; before it the viewer can abandon him/herself to his/her own flow of associations. Before the movie frame he/she cannot do so . . . In fact, when a person views these constantly changing (film) images his/her stream of associations is immediately

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* [Translators’ Note] The titles of this work and the one by Adorno mentioned below have been taken from the English summaries that accompanied their original publication in the Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung. The title given Benjamin’s essay in Illuminations is translated from the French version in which the essay first appeared. The text of this English translation, however, corresponds to the German version referred to by Habermas and differs substantially from the French.

11 “Certain images of the Madonna remain covered nearly all year round; certain sculptures on medieval cathedrals are not visible to the viewer on ground level. With the emancipation of the various art practices from ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products” (I., 225).
disrupted. This constitutes the shock effect of the film, which like all shock effects needs to be parried by a heightened presence of mind. Because of its technical structure, the film has liberated the physical shock effect from the moral cushioning in which Dadaism had, as it were, held it” (ibid., 238). In this discontinuous series of shocks, the work of art divested of its aura releases experiences which formerly had been locked up in its esoteric style. The assimilation of these shocks requires presence of mind. Here Benjamin observes the exoteric dissolution of the cultic spell imposed upon the isolated viewer by the affirmative character of bourgeois culture.

There is a change in the function of art the moment the work of art is emancipated “from its parasitic dependence on ritual.” Benjamin conceives this as a politicization of art: “Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice — politics (ibid., 224). In the face of fascist mass art, which claims to be a political one, Benjamin, like Marcuse, certainly sees the danger of a false abolition (Aufhebung) of art. The propaganda art of the Nazis accomplishes, it is true, the liquidation of art as an autonomous realm, but beneath the veil of politicization all it really does is serve to aestheticize naked political force (Gewalt). It replaces the destroyed cult value of bourgeois art with one that is manipulatively manufactured. The cultic spell is broken only to be synthetically renewed: mass reception become mass suggestion.  

It seems that Benjamin’s theory of art develops a concept of culture based on the critique of ideology that Marcuse will take up a year later. Nevertheless, the parallels are deceptive. I see four essential differences.

(a) Marcuse proceeds by way of the critique of ideology, in order to raise to consciousness the contradiction between ideal and reality hidden in the exemplary products of bourgeois art. Yet this critique amounts to a dialectical abolition of autonomous art only in the realm of thought. Benjamin, on the other hand, does not make critical demands on a culture which remains substantially unshaken. He describes rather the actual process of the disintegration of that aura upon which bourgeois art had based the appearance of its autonomy. He proceeds descriptively. He observes a change in the function of art that Marcuse anticipates only for the moment at which the relations of life are revolutionized.

(b) Thus it is striking that Marcuse, like idealist aesthetics in general, limits himself to those periods which bourgeois consciousness itself acknowledges as classical. His orientation depends on a concept of aesthetic beauty in which essence appears symbolically. Classical works of art, especially the novel and bourgeois tragic drama (bürgerliches Trauerspiel) in literature,
become suitable objects for a critique of ideology precisely because of their affirmative character, just like rational natural law in the realm of political philosophy. Benjamin’s interest, however, concerns non-affirmative forms of art; while investigating the baroque Trauerspiel, he found a counter-concept to the individual totality of the transfiguring artwork in the allegorical. Allegory expresses an experience of negativity — an experience of suffering, suppression, the unreconciled and the unfortunate — and hence militates against a symbolic art which is disposed positively, promising under false pretenses and projecting in advance happiness, freedom, reconciliation and fulfillment. Whereas the critique of ideology is necessary to decipher and surmount symbolic art, allegory is critique itself — or rather it refers to critique: “What has survived is the extraordinary detail of the allegorical references: an object of knowledge whose haunt lies amidst the consciously constructed ruins. Criticism is the mortification of the works. This is cultivated by the essence of such production more readily than by any other” (O., 182).

(c) In this context it is important to note further that Marcuse omits a consideration of the transformations of bourgeois art by the avant-garde, which evade the direct grasp of a critique of ideology, whereas Benjamin demonstrates the process of autonomous art’s dialectical abolition in the history of modernity. Benjamin, who regards the appearance of the urban masses as a “matrix from which all traditional behavior toward works of art emerges rejuvenated” (I., 239), discovers a point of contact with this phenomenon precisely in those works which seem to hermetically seal themselves off from it: “The masses have become so much a part of Baudelaire that one searches in vain for a description of them in his works” (ibid., 167). Benjamin pursues the traces of modernity because they lead to the point where “the realm of poetry is exploded from within” (R., 178). Insight into the necessity of dialectically overcoming autonomous art arises from the reconstruction of what the avant-garde reveals about bourgeois art by transforming it.

(d) Finally, the decisive difference between Marcuse and Benjamin lies in the fact that Benjamin conceives the demise of autonomous art as the result of a revolution in reproduction technics. Benjamin delineates the respective functions of painting and photography in an exemplary way. By means of this comparison he shows the consequences of the new techniques

\[13^\text{...Whereas in the symbol destruction is idealized and the transfigured face of nature is fleetingly revealed in the light of redemption, in allegory the observer is confronted with the facies hippocrática of history as a petrified, primordial landscape . . . This is the heart of the allegorical way of seeing, of the baroque, secular explanation of history as the Passion of the world; its importance resides solely in the stations of its declines” (O., 166).}

\[14^\text{...Therefore Benjamin opposes a superficial understanding of l’art pour l’art: “This is the moment to embark on a work that would illuminate as has no other the crisis of the arts that we are witnessing: a history of esoteric poetry . . . On its last page one would have to find the x-ray image of surrealism” (R. 184).}
which gained ground in the 19th century and which, vis à vis the traditional reproduction processes operative in casting, printing, woodcutting, engraving and lithography, represent a new stage of development, a stage which is analogous to that ushered in by the invention of the printing press. Benjamin could observe in his own day a development in records, film and radio that has continued with the electronic media at an accelerated pace. The techniques and technologies of reproduction have a radical effect on the inner structure of works of art. The work forfeits its spatial and temporal individuality on the one hand, but gains a documentary authenticity on the other. The fleeting and repeatable form of temporal structure replaces the unique and enduring form of temporal structure typical of the autonomous work and thereby destroys the aura, "the unique appearance of a distance" sharpens a "sense for sameness in the world" (I., 222 f.). Things stripped of their aura draw nearer to the masses because the object is more precisely and realistically represented by the technical medium which intervenes between it and the selective sensory organs. The authenticity of the material indeed calls for a constructive employment of the means of realistic representation, hence, montage and literary interpretation (captions in photography).  

II

As these distinctions show, Benjamin does not allow himself to be guided by a concept of art based on the critique of ideology. He means something else by the demise of autonomous art than does Marcuse with his demand for the dialectical abolition of culture. Marcuse confronts ideal and reality and raises to consciousness the unconscious content of bourgeois art which both legitimates and unintentionally denounces bourgeois reality; Benjamin’s analysis on the other hand dispenses with the form of selfreflection. Marcuse, by undermining objective illusions analytically, would like to prepare for a change in the material conditions of life thus unveiled: he would like to usher in the dialectical abolition of the culture in which these relations are stabilized. Benjamin however cannot view his task as an attack on an art already approaching its end. His critique of art approaches its objects in conservative fashion, whether dealing with the Baroque Trauerspiel, Goethe’s Elective Affinities, Baudelaire’s Fleur du Mal, or the Soviet film of the early twenties. It aims, it is true, at “the mortification of the works” (O., 182), but critique commits such destruction only in order to transpose what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful into that of the truth — and thereby to rescue and redeem it.

13Here, too, Benjamin sees Dadaism as a forerunner of the technical arts, although employing other means: “The revolutionary strength of Dadaism lay in testing art for its authenticity. You made still-lifes out of tickets, spools of cotton, cigarette butts, and mixed them with pictorial elements. You put a frame round the whole thing. And in this way you showed the public: look, your picture frame explodes time; the smallest authentic fragment of everyday life says more than painting. Just as a murderer’s bloody fingerprint on a page says more than the book’s text. Much of this revolutionary content has rescued and redeemed itself by passing into photomontage” (R., 229).
Benjamin’s peculiar conception of history explains the impulse to rescue and redeem. A mystical causality reigns in history in such a manner that there exists “a secret agreement between past generations and ours . . . Like every generation that precedes us, we have been endowed with a weak messianic power, a power on which the past has a claim” (Theses on the Philosophy of History, in I., 254). This claim can only be fulfilled by the incessantly renewed exertion of the critical faculties enabling the historical gaze to strain toward a past in need of redemption. This effort is conservative in an eminent sense, “for every image of the past that is not recognized by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear irretrievably” (ibid., 255). If the claim is not fulfilled, then danger threatens “both the content of tradition and its receivers” (ibid.).

For Benjamin, the continuum of history consists in the permanence of the unbearable; progress is the eternal return of the catastrophe: “The concept of progress should be founded in the idea of catastrophe,” Benjamin notes in a draft of his Baudelaire work, “the fact that ‘everything just goes on’ is the catastrophe” (G.S. I, 583). Therefore redemption must hold on to “the small skip or crack in the continuous catastrophe.” The idea of a present in which time draws to a stop and comes to a standstill numbers among Benjamin’s oldest insights. In the “Theses on the Philosophy of History,” written shortly before his death, stands the central tenet: “History is the object of a construction whose site forms not homogeneous, empty time, but time filled by the ‘presence of the now’ (Jetztzeit, nunc stans). Thus to Robespierre ancient Rome was a past charged with the time of the now which he blasted out of the continuum of history” (I., 261). One of his earliest essays, “The Life of Students,” begins in a similar sense: “There is a conception of history which, in its faith in the endlessness of time, distinguishes only between the differences in tempo of human beings and epochs rolling with more or less speed toward the future along the track of progress. The following considerations, on the other hand are concerned with a specific state of affairs in which history rests as if collected in a focal point, as it always has in the utopian images projected by thinkers. The elements of the ultimate state of affairs are not manifest as formless


17The redemptive power of retrospective critique must not, of course, be confused with the empathy and identification with the past which historicism adopted from Romanticism: “With Romanticism begins the hunt for false wealth, for the annexation of every past. This was not achieved through the progressive emancipation of humanity, a way in which it could look its own history in the eye with increasing presence of mind and always get new tips from it, but rather through the imitation of all the works it managed to dig up out of peoples and world epochs that had died out” (G.S. II, 581). This reference is, on the other hand, not a recommendation for a hermeneutic interpretation of history as a continuum of historical effects nor a recommendation for the reconstruction of history as a formative process (Bildungsprozess) for the species. Such is precluded by his deeply antievolutionary conception of history.
tendencies of progress, but rather are embedded in every present as the most endangered, discredited and ridiculed creations and thoughts17 (G.S. II, 75).

To be sure, there has been a shift in the interpretation of a redemptive and rescuing intervention into a past since the doctrine of ideas presented in the book on the Baroque Trauerspiel. Earlier, the retrospectively directed gaze was to gather up and enclose the rescued phenomenon into the world of ideas after it had escaped the process of becoming and disappearance. With its entrance into the sphere of the eternal, the original occurrence divests itself of its past and subsequent history, which has become virtual, like natural-historical vestments (O., 45-7). This constellation of natural history and eternity yields later to that of history and Jetztzeit: the messianic cessation of events replaces origin.18 The enemy, however, who endangers the dead as much as the living when redemptive criticism fails to appear and forgetfulness spreads, remains the same: namely the dominance of mythical fate. Myth marks a debased human species, hopelessly deprived of the good and just life for which it was determined — banished to a cursed cycle of merely reproducing itself and surviving.19 Mythical fate can be brought to a standstill for only an ephemeral moment. The fragments of experience which are wrested from fate in such moments, from the continuum of empty time for the contemporary immediacy of the Jetztzeit, form the content of endangered tradition, to which the history of art belongs as well. Tiedemann quotes the passage from the “Paris Arcades” project: “There is a place in every true work of art where, like the breeze of an approaching dawn, a certain cool refreshes whomever removes himself there. It follows from this that art, which was often viewed as refractory to any relation to progress, can serve its genuine determination. Progress is not at home in the continuity, but rather in the interferences of the course of time: where something truly new makes itself felt for the first time with all the sobriety of dawn” (Tiedemann, Studien, pp. 103 f.).

The pre-history of modernity planned by Benjamin, though completed only in fragments, is also relevant in this context. Baudelaire becomes something of central importance to Benjamin because his poetry brings to light “the new in the repeatedly same, and the repeatedly same in the new” (G.S. I. 673).

In the accelerating process of antiquation, which understands and misunderstands itself as progress, Benjamin's critique discovers a coincidence with what has existed from time immemorial. This critique identifies the mythical compulsion to repeat that infiltrates capitalism, despite the modernization of the patterns of existence impelled by the forces of production — the repeatedly same in the new. But in doing so, this criticism

19 In this sense, enlightened sciences such as systems theory and behaviorist psychology conceive of human beings as "mythical" beings.
aims at the redemption of a past charged with "Jetztzeit," and that distinguishes it from the critique of ideology. It ascertains the moments in which the artistic sensibility puts a stop to fate draped as progress and encodes the utopian experience in a dialectical image — the new in the repeatedly same. The transformation of modernity into prehistory has a double meaning in Benjamin. Both the myth itself and the substance of the images, which alone can be broken out of myth, are prehistoric. These images must be critically renewed in another, almost awaited present and rendered to "readability" (Lesbarkeit) in order that they might be preserved as tradition for true progress. Benjamin’s anti-evolutionary conception of history, in which Jetztzeit and the continuum of natural history stand opposed, does not remain completely blind to progress made in the emancipation of humanity. But Benjamin’s anti-evolutionary conception takes a gravely pessimistic view of the changes for the selective breakthroughs, which undermine the repeatedly same, to unite into a tradition and not fall prey to being forgotten.

At the same time, Benjamin without a doubt discerns a continuity which as linear progress breaks through the cycle of natural history, but nonetheless endangers thereby the content of tradition. It is the continuity of disenchantment (Entzauberung), whose final stage Benjamin diagnoses as the loss of aura: "In prehistoric times, because of the absolute emphasis on its cult value, the work of art was, first and foremost, an instrument of magic. Only later did it come to be recognized as a work of art. In the same way today, because of the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a structure with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of, the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental" (I., 225). Benjamin does not explain this process by which art develops away from ritual; one should probably understand it as a part of the world-historical rationalization process — Max Weber also uses the term disenchantment for this process: the surging development of the forces of production revolutionizes the mode of production and causes a rationalization process in social patterns of existence. Autonomous art establishes itself only to the extent that the arts are freed from the context of ritual use. This occurs only when, in the emergence of civil society, the economic and political systems are unleashed from the cultural system and the traditional images of the world are undermined by the ideology that attaches to the economic base — the ideology of just exchange.21

20"And indeed, this attainment of ‘readability’ is a well-determined critical point within them (the dialectical images). Every present is determined through those images synchronic with it: every now is the now of well-determined recognizability. In the now, truth is charged with time to the point of exploding” (cited from Tiedemann, Studien, p. 310).

21"Autonomy" here designates the independence of works of art vis à vis claims laid to them for their employment in contexts external to art; the autonomy of artistic production could already start developing earlier, namely within patron forms of alimentation.
It is to its commodity character that art owes its liberation in the first place; it was a liberation for the private enjoyment of the bourgeois reading and theater, exhibition and concert public that came into being in the 17th and 18th centuries. The continuation of this same process, to which art owes its autonomy, also leads to the liquidation of art. Already in the 19th century it becomes noticeable that the public composed of bourgeois private persons gives way to urban collectives of the working population. For this reason, Benjamin concentrates on Paris as the urban center par excellence and on the phenomena of mass art, for — as Benjamin concludes his passage on the process by which art develops away from ritual — “this much is certain: today, photography and the film provide the most suitable means to recognize this” (ibid.)

III

On no other point did Adorno oppose Benjamin so vigorously. Adorno considers the mass art emerging with the new techniques and technologies of reproduction as a degeneration of art. The market, which made the autonomy of bourgeois art possible in the first place, permits the emergence of a culture industry that penetrates into the pores of the work of art itself, and together with the commodity character of the work of art, forces the viewer into the attitudinal patterns of a consumer. Adorno developed this critique for the first time in 1939, with jazz as an example, in his essay “The Fetish Character in Music and the Retrogression of Listening” (Über den Fetischcharakter in der Musik und die Regression des Hörens, in AGS 14, pp. 14-50). In Adorno’s posthumous Aesthetic Theory, the critique, which had been applied to many different objects in the meantime, is generalized and summarized under the title “The Degeneration of Art Deprived of its Character as Art” (Entkunstung der Kunst): “There is nothing left of the art work’s autonomy except for its character as a commodity fetish, and the customers of culture are roused to indignation that someone might consider it something more than that . . . The work of art is disqualified as a tabula rasa for subjective projections. The poles of its depravity and deprivation are its character as thing among things and its character as a vehicle for the psychology of the viewer. What reified art works no longer say, the viewer substitutes with that standardized echo of himself/herself which he/she hears in them. The culture industry sets this mechanism in motion and exploits it” (AGS 7, p. 33).

The concrete historical experience which is bound up in this critique of the culture industry is a disappointment not so much with the history of decay in art, religion, and philosophy as with the historical parodies of their transcendence. The constellation of bourgeois culture in the classical age of its development was characterized by, if an oversimplification may be

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permitted, the dissolution of traditional images of the world: First, by the retreat of religion into the regions of private belief; further, by the alliance of an empiricist and rationalist philosophy with a new physics; and finally, by an art which became autonomous and has taken up positions on behalf of the victims of bourgeois rationalization. Art is the refuge for a satisfaction, even if only virtual, of those wants that have become, as it were, illegal in the material process of life in bourgeois society. I refer here to the need for a mimetic relation with nature, external nature as well as that of one’s body; the need for solidarity in living with others, indeed for the happiness of a communicative experience, exempt from imperatives of purposive-rationality (Zweckrationalität) and giving scope to imagination as well as spontaneity. This constellation of bourgeois culture was by no means stable. Like liberalism itself, it lasted, so to speak, only for a moment and then fell prey to the dialectic of the enlightenment (or rather to capitalism as its ineluctable vehicle).

Art’s loss of aura had already been announced by Hegel in his lectures on aesthetics.\(^{23}\) In conceiving art and religion to be limited forms of absolute knowledge penetrated by philosophy, he sets in motion a dialectic of “Aufhebung” (sublation) which soon transcends the boundaries of Hegelian logic. Hegel’s students would consummate this dialectic in a secular critique — first of religion and then of philosophy — only in order to ultimately bring the abolition (Aufhebung) of philosophy and its realization to issue in the transcendence (Aufhebung) of political power: this marks the hour of birth of the Marxian critique of ideology. What was still veiled in Hegel’s construction is now thrown into relief: the special status of art amidst the forms of the absolute spirit. Art maintains a special status to the extent that, unlike subjective religion and scientistic philosophy, it does not take on tasks in the economic and political systems. Rather, it rounds up residual needs that can find no satisfaction within the “system of needs,” precisely within civil society. Thus the sphere of art remained exempt from the critique of ideology — until our century. When at last it too fell prey to the critique of ideology, the ironic abolition (Aufhebung) of religion and philosophy was already in sight.

Today, even religion is no longer a private matter; but in the atheism of the masses, the utopian contents of tradition are lost as well. Philosophy has been divested of its metaphysical claim; but in the ruling scientism, the constructions before which a wretched reality had to justify itself, have

\(^{23}\)“Art in its beginnings still leaves over something mysterious, a secret foreboding and a longing . . . But if the perfect content has been perfectly revealed in artistic shapes, then the more far-seeing spirit rejects this objective manifestation and turns back into its inner self. This is the case in our own time. We may well hope that art will always rise higher and come to perfection, but the form of art has ceased to be the supreme need of the spirit. No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the Father, Christ, and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed: it is no help; we bow the knee no longer” (Aesthetics, Lectures on Fine Art, G.W.F. Hegel, [Oxford, 1975], vol. I, p. 103).
decayed as well. Meanwhile, even an “Aufhebung” of science is at hand. It is true that its appearance of autonomy is destroyed, but not so much for the sake of guiding the system of science by means of discourse as of functionalizing it for fortuitous (naturwüchsige) interests. Adorno’s critique of a false abolition of art should likewise be seen in this context. True, this “Aufhebung” destroys art’s aura, but when it eliminates the organization of domination in the work of art, it simultaneously liquidates the work of art’s claim to truth.

Disillusionment at the false abolition of something, be it religion, philosophy or art, can induce a reaction in someone that results in vacillation, if not hesitation, where he prefers to mistrust altogether the process by which absolute spirit become practical, rather than to give his consent to its liquidation. To this is attached an option for the esoteric rescue and redemption of the moments of truth. This distinguishes Adorno from Benjamin, who insists that the true moments of tradition are redeemed for the messianic future either exoterically or not at all. Adorno (atheistic like Benjamin — although not in the same way) opposes the false abolition of religion with a restoration of utopian contents that constitute a ferment for uncompromising critical thought, though this specifically avoids taking the form of a universalized secular illumination. Adorno (antipositivistic like Benjamin) opposes the false abolition of philosophy with a restoration of critique’s transcendent impetus. This critique is in a certain sense autarkic, though it specifically avoids penetrating into the positive sciences and thus becoming universal in the form of scientific self-reflection. Adorno opposes the false abolition of art with the hermetic modernity of Kafka and Schönberg, though specifically avoiding mass art, which makes auratically encapsulized experiences public. After having read the manuscript of the Work of Art essay, Adorno objected in a letter, dated 18 March 1936, “that the center of the autonomous work of art does not itself belong on the side of myth . . . Dialectical though your essay may be, it is not so in the case of the autonomous work of art itself; it disregards the elementary experience which becomes more evident to me every day in my own musical experience — that precisely the utmost consistency in the technological law of autonomous art changes this art and instead of rendering it into a taboo or fetish, approximates it to the state of freedom, of something that can consciously be produced and made” (NLR, 65). After the aura disintegrates, only the formalistic work of art, inaccessible to the masses, can withstand the forces assimilating it to the market-determined wants and attitudes of the consumer.

Adorno pursues a strategy of hibernation, whose obvious weakness lies in its defensive character. Interestingly enough, Adorno’s thesis can be proven with examples from literature and music, only as long as they remain

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24 This thesis is represented by J. Behrmann, G. Böhme, W. van den Daele, W. Krohn, Alternativen in der Wissenschaft (manuscript).
dependent on reproduction technics that prescribe isolated reading and contemplative listening, i.e., a mode of reception that leads down the royal road to bourgeois individuation. A noticeable development of arts with a collective mode of reception, however, such as architecture, theater and painting, as well as utilitarian popular literature (*Gebrauchsliteratur*) and music with their dependence on the electronic media, points beyond mere culture industry and does not *a fortiori* refute Benjamin’s hope for a universalized secular illumination.

Admittedly, art’s development away from ritual retains a double meaning for Benjamin as well. It is as if Benjamin feared an elimination of myth without an ensuing liberation; as if myth would have to finally admit defeat, and yet still be able to refrain from transposing its contents into a tradition, so that it might triumph even in defeat. Now that myth has donned the vestments of progress, images which tradition alone can recover from the inner core of myth threaten to come to naught and be lost to redemptive criticism forever. The myth whose haunt is in modernity expresses itself in positivism’s belief in progress; it is the enemy against whom Benjamin set the whole pathos of redemption. Far from being a guarantor of liberation, the development away from ritual ominously forebodes a specific loss in experience.

IV

Benjamin’s attitude towards the loss of aura was always ambivalent.\(^\text{25}\) Since the historical experience of a past *Jetztzeit* needs to be recharged, and because this experience is locked within the aura of a work of art, the undialectical disintegration of the aura would mean the loss of this experience. Already at the time when Benjamin, as a student, still believed he could sketch the “Program of Coming Philosophy,” the concept of an unmitigated experience stood at the center of his considerations. At that time Benjamin directed his polemic against an “experience reduced as it were to degree zero, to the minimum of significance,” i.e., against the experience of physical objects underlying the paradigmatic orientation of Kant’s attempt to analyze the conditions of possible experience (G.S. II, 159). In opposition to this Benjamin defends the more complex types of experience common to primitive peoples and madmen, seers and artists. He still had hopes of recovering from metaphysics a systematic continuum of experience. Later he imputed this task to the critique of art; *this critique* should transpose the beautiful into the medium of truth, wherein “truth is not an unveiling, which annihilates the mystery, but a revelation and a manifestation that does it justice” (O., 31) The concept of aura ultimately takes the place of beautiful appearance as the necessary veil. By disintegrating, aura reveals the mystery of the complex experience: “Experience of the aura thus rests on the

\(^{25}\) “For the last time the aura emanates from the early photographs in the fleeting expression of a human face. This is what constitutes their melancholy, incomparable beauty” (I., 226).
transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and the human being. The person we look at, or who feels he/she is being looked at, looks at us in turn. To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the capacity to look at us in return” (I., 188).

The appearance (Erscheinung) of the aura can occur only in the intersubjective relation of the ego to its counterpart, the alter ego. Whenever nature is thus “invested” so that it looks at us in return, the object is transformed into a counterpart. Universal animism of nature is the sign of magical images of the world; here there is as yet no split between the sphere of the objectivated form, which we control manipulatively, and the intersubjective realm, in which we communicatively encounter one another. Instead, the world is organized according to analogies and parallelism; totemistic classifications provide an example of this. Synesthetic associations are the subjective remainder of the perception of such correspondences.246

From the appearance of the aura Benjamin develops the emphatic concept of an experience which needs to be critically preserved and made relevant if the messianic promise of happiness is ever to be fulfilled; in other instances, however, he treats the loss of aura affirmatively. This double meaning also expresses itself in Benjamin’s emphasis on precisely those achievements of autonomous art that likewise distinguish the art work that has developed away from ritual. Surrealist art, whose representatives once again adopted Baudelaire’s concept of correspondances, is exemplary here. Art which has fully divested itself of cultic elements strives toward the same thing as autonomous art, to experience objects in the net of rediscovered correspondences as a counterpart that brings happiness: “The correspondances constitute the court of judgement before which the object of art is found to be one that forms a faithfully reproduced image — which, to be sure, makes it entirely problematic. If one attempted to reproduce even this aporia in the matrial of language, one would define beauty as the object of experience in the state of resemblance” (I., 199, n. 13). The ambiguity can be solved only if we separate the cultic moments in the concept of an appearance of aura from the universal moments. Along with the dialectical abolition of autonomous art and the decay of the aura, disappear the esoteric access to the art work and its cultic distance from the viewer. So too does the contemplation that marks the isolated enjoyment of art. The experience released from the ruptured shell of the aura was, however,

246“The essential thing is that the correspondances capture a concept of experience which includes cultic elements. Only by appropriating these elements was Baudelaire able to fathom the full meaning of the breakdown which he, a modern man, was witnessing. Only in this way was he able to recognize in it the challenge meant for him alone, a challenge which he incorporated in the Fleurs du mal” (I., p. 181). “Baudelaire describes eyes of which one is inclined to say that they have lost their ability to look” (ibid., 189).
already contained in the experience of the aura itself as the transformation of the object into a counterpart. Thereby a whole field of surprising correspondences between animate and inanimate nature is opened up, wherein even *things* encounter us in the structures of frail intersubjectivity. Although the grasp that stretches toward the essence appearing in such structures is no distance away, this essence evades any immediate contact; the closeness of the other refracted in the distance is the mark of possible fulfillment and mutual happiness.\(^{27}\) Benjamin’s intention has its goal in a state of affairs in which the esoteric experience of happiness has become public and universal; for only in a context of communication into which nature has been included in a mutual way — as if once again stood up straight — can subjects return one another’s gaze.

The development of art away from ritual involves the risk that the art work will surrender the substance of experience along with its aura and be merely banal; only the disintegration of the aura, on the other hand, offers a chance to universalize and stabilize the experience of happiness. Happiness which has become exoteric dispenses with the veil which surrounded it and the aura in which it was refracted. This shows a certain affinity with the experiences of the mystic: When in a state of deep emotion, the mystic is more interested in the proximity and palpable presence of God than in God Himself. Only, the mystic shuts his eyes in his solitude; his experience is as esoteric as its tradition. It is just this moment that separates the religious experience of happiness from the one with which Benjamin’s redemptive criticism is concerned. Therefore Benjamin calls this illumination, explicated in terms of the impact of surrealist art, *secular*; these works are no longer art in the autonomous sense, but rather manifestation, slogan, document, bluff and counterfeit. Such works make us conscious that, “we penetrate the mystery only to the degree that we recognize it in the everyday work, by virtue of a dialectical optic that knows the everyday as impenetrable, the impenetrable as everyday” (R., 190). This experience is secular because it is esoteric.\(^{28}\)

No interpretation can dismiss Benjamin’s break with the esoteric, though Scholem’s persistent contribution to the contention for his friend’s soul is a fascinating example of this attempt.\(^{29}\) In the face of approaching fascism, Benjamin’s political views compelled him to break with the Esoteric of the True for which the young Benjamin had reserved the

\(^{27}\) On Adorno’s speculations about reconciliation with nature, especially those presented in *Minima Moralia* (London, 1974), cf. my two essays in: Philosophisch-politische Profile (Frankfurt am Main, 1971), pp. 176-199.

\(^{28}\) This is also the reason why Benjamin does not accept private intoxication of the hashish user as a model for this experience: “The reader, the thinker, the loiterer, the *flâneur*, are types of illumination just as much as the opium eater, the dreamer, the ecstatic. And are more secular ones” (R., 190).

\(^{29}\) “Walter Benjamin and His Angel,” in *On Jews and Judaism in Crisis*, pp. 198-236.
dogmatic concept Doctrine.  

Benjamin wrote once to Adorno, “that speculation can start its necessarily bold flight with some prospect of success only if, instead of putting on the waxen wings of the esoteric, it seeks its source of strength in construction alone” (NLR, 76). Benjamin directs his attack against the esoteric of fulfillment and happiness just as decisively. He insists (and this sounds like a repudiation of Scholem) upon “the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination . . . It resides in a secular illumination, a materialist, anthropological inspiration,” to which intoxication in solitude might possibly give an introductory lesson (R., 179).

If we look back at Benjamin’s thesis on the dialectical abolition of art from this vantage point, we can see why it cannot be a thesis based on the critique of ideology: Benjamin’s theory of art is a theory of experience (but not the experience of reflection). In the forms of secular illumination, the experience of the aura burst the auratic shell and became exoteric. This experience is not due to an analysis that brings to light something repressed or that releases something suppressed. Unlike the way reflection would be capable of this, experience is acquired through the recovery of a semantics dislodged bit by bit from the core of myth. This semantics is both messianically preserved in and released from the works of great art, i.e., for the use of emancipation. What remains inexplicable in this conception is surely the peculiar tide which has to be stemmed by redemptive criticism. Without redemptive critique’s permanent effort, or so goes Benjamin’s notion, the testimony of selective points of liberation from myth transmitted by tradition and the semantic contents wrested from it would have to fall into the void; the substance of tradition would fall prey to a forgetfulness and leave no trace. Why? Apparently Benjamin was of the opinion that meaning was not a possession which could be augmented and that experiences of an undisturbed intercourse with nature, with others, and with one’s own self could not be arbitrarily created. More than likely Benjamin was thinking of the semantic potential from which human beings draw and with which they invest the world with meaning, permitting it to be experienced. This semantic potential is deposited in myth to begin with and must be released from it — but it cannot be expanded, just continually transformed. Benjamin fears that during these transformations the semantic energies might escape and become lost to humanity. Benjamin’s philosophy of language, in which the theory of experience is grounded, provides some clues to this perspective of progressive decay.

30. And thus one may put into words the demand posed to coming philosophy: To fashion, based on the Kantian system, a cognitive concept that corresponds to a concept of experience for which cognition is Doctrine” (G.S. II, 168).

31. One could prove that the theory of experience represents the by no means secret center of all Benjamin’s conceptions.” P. Krumme, “Zur Konzeption der dialektischen Bilder,” in: Text und Kritik, p. 80, n. 5.

32. Already in the “Program of Coming Philosophy” there is a reference to this: “A concept of philosophy obtained from reflexion on the linguistic essence of cognition will provide a
V

Benjamin adhered to a mimetic theory of language throughout his lifetime. Even in his later works he returns to the onomatopoeic character of individual words, indeed of language altogether. It was unthinkable to him that the word’s relationship to a thing could be incidental. Benjamin conceives words as names. By giving things names, however, the human being can hit or miss their essence: naming is a kind of translation of the nameless into the name, a translation of the language of nature, which is more incomplete, into the language of human beings. What Benjamin considered characteristic of human language was neither its syntactic organization (which did not interest him) nor its representational function (which he considered subordinate to its expressive function.) It is not the specifically human attributes of language that interest Benjamin but the function that serves as a link to animal languages: the expressive function. Language, or so he believes, is merely a form of the animal instinct manifest in expressive gestures. Benjamin combines these in turn with the mimetic capacity (Vermögen) to perceive and reproduce similarities. Dance is an example of this, for expression and mimesis merge here. He cites a remark of Mallarme’s: “The dancer is not a woman, but a metaphor which can give expression to some elemental aspect of our existential form: sword, cup, flower, etc.” (G.S. II, 478). The original mimesis is the reproduction of correspondences in an image: “As is known, the sphere of life that formerly seemed to be governed by the law of similarity was comprehensive; it ruled both microcosm and macrocosm. But these natural correspondences acquire their real importance only if we recognize that they serve without exception to stimulate and awaken the mimetic capacity in the human being that responds to them” (R., 333). What finds expression in linguistic physiognomy, indeed in expressive gestures in general, is not simply a subjective condition, but the as yet uninterrupted connection of the human organism with surrounding nature which finds expression through this condition: expressive movements are systematically linked with the redeeming qualities of the environment.

As odd as this mimetic theory of language sounds, Benjamin is right in correspondingly...
assuming that the oldest semantic stratum is that of expression. The expressive wealth of primate language has been thoroughly researched, and "insofar as language is articulated emotional expression, there exists no fundamental difference in the vocal expressive capacity of non-human primate families."34

One could speculate that a semantic store of original, subhuman forms of communication has found a place in human language and represents a potential that cannot be augmented. With the meanings that comprise this potential, human beings interpret the world in terms of their own needs and create thereby a net of correspondences. Be this as it may, Benjamin reckons with the species having been endowed with such a mimetic capacity at the threshold of its humanization, that is, before it enters the process of self-creation. It is part of Benjamin's fundamental (non-Marxist) convictions that meaning cannot be produced like value, by labor, but that perhaps, dependent on the production process, it can be transformed.35 The historically changing interpretation of needs draws from a potential with which the species must economize, for though this potential may be transformed, it cannot be enriched: "It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects [which, one could add, preserved something of the qualities of the redeemer, compelling and pregnant] remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift of producing similarities — for example, in dances, whose oldest function this was — and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed with historical development. The direction of this change seems to be determined by the increasing decay of the mimetic capacity" (R., 333 f.). This model has an ambivalent significance.

Benjamin sees in the mimetic capacity not just the source of that wealth of meaning poured out of language over the world — a world not humanized but for this process — by needs set free in the socio-cultural patterns of existence. He sees also in the gift of perceiving similarities the rudiments of the once powerful compulsion to become similar, i.e., to be forced into adaptation — the legacy, in other words, of the animal. To this extent, the mimetic capacity is the mark of an original dependency on the forces of nature: this expresses itself in magical practices, lives on in the primal fears


35The thesis, "that meaning, significance, etc. can be created — qua Marxism — only through the world-historical labor process of the human species — in which it produces itself — was never adopted by Benjamin" B. Lindner, op. cit., p. 55.
of animistic images of the world, remains preserved in myth. The determining fate of the human species, then, is the liquidation of that dependency without letting the powers of mimesis and the streams of semantic energies run dry; for in that case the poetic faculty to interpret the world in terms of human needs would falter. This is the secular content of the messianic promise. Benjamin conceived the history of art, from the cultic to the postauratic work of art, as a history of attempts to reproduce an image of these non-sensuous similarities or correspondences, yet simultaneously to break the spell which was once upon this mimesis. Divine was how Benjamin described these attempts, since they break myth while nevertheless preserving and liberating its wealth.

If we follow Benjamin to this point, the question arises: what is the source of those divine powers which at the same time preserve and liberate? Even criticism, upon whose conservative-revolutionary power Benjamin relies, must orient itself towards past “Jetztzeiten” retrospectively. It lights upon constructions in which the contents retrieved from myth are sedimented, that is, the documents of past acts of liberation. Who produces these documents, who are their authors? Benjamin obviously had no desire to rely, in the idealist manner, on the irreducible illumination of great authors, namely, a source which is in no way secular. Nonetheless, it seems to me he was certainly close enough to the idealist answer to this question, for a theory of experience grounded in a mimetic theory of language permits no other. Benjamin’s political views, however, stood opposed to this. Benjamin, who discovered in Bachofen the world of archetypes, who knew Scheler, studied and esteemed Klages, corresponded with Carl Schmitt — this Benjamin, as a Jewish intellectual in the Berlin of the twenties, still could not ignore where his enemies (and ours) stood. Conscious of this, he was compelled toward a materialistic answer.

That is the background for Benjamin’s reception of historical materialism. Indeed, he had to bring this together with the messianic interpretation of history he developed on the model of redemptive criticism. This domesticated historical materialism was supposed to provide an answer for the open question concerning the subject of the history of art and culture, an answer which was to be materialist and yet compatible with Benjamin’s own theory of experience. To believe this had been successfully accomplished, was an error on Benjamin’s part — and the wish of his Marxist friends.

The concept of culture offered by the critique of ideology has the advantage that cultural tradition is established methodologically as part of social evolution and becomes accessible thus to materialist interpretation. Benjamin has fallen behind this concept. A critique that appropriates the history of art with a view to redeeming messianic instants and preserving an endangered semantic potential can but comprehend itself as identification and repetition of emphatic experiences and utopian contents — and not as reflection in a formative process. Benjamin conceived the philosophy
of history too as a theory of experience.\textsuperscript{36} Within this framework, however, a materialist interpretation of the history of art, which, for political reasons, Benjamin does want to relinquish, is not immediately possible. Consequently he attempts to integrate this doctrine with the basic assumptions of historical materialism. He expresses his intentions in the first of his “Theses on the Philosophy of History”: the hunchback dwarf Theology should enlist the services of the puppet Historical Materialism. This attempt must fail, because the materialist theory of social development cannot be simply fitted into the anarchistic conception of \textit{Jetzzeit} which intermittently come crashing through fate as if from above. An anti-evolutionary conception of history cannot be tacked onto historical materialism as if it were a monk’s cowl — tacked onto a historical materialism, which takes account of progress not only in the dimension of the forces of production, but in that of domination too. My thesis is that Benjamin did not realize his intention to bring together enlightenment and mysticism, because the theologian in him could not accept the idea of making his messianic theory of experience serviceable to historical materialism. This much, I believe, must be conceded to Scholem.

I would like to go into two of the awkward aspects: the curious adaptation of the Marxian critique of ideology and the idea of a politicized art.

VI

In 1935, Benjamin prepared a memorandum (\textit{exposé}) at the request of the Institute for Social Research in which he introduces for the first time some motifs of his “Paris Arcades” project (“Paris, the Capital of the Nineteenth Century”). Looking back over the long period of its genesis in a letter to Adorno, Benjamin speaks of a metamorphic process, “that consolidated the whole mass of thoughts originally motivated by metaphysics into a crystallized state, in which the world of dialectical images is secured against objections provoked by metaphysics” (Br., 664). He refers here to “the incursion of the new sociological perspectives which provide a more secure frame for the tensile span of interpretation” (Ibid., 665). Adorno’s response to this \textit{exposé} and his critique of the first Baudelaire study, which three years later Benjamin submitted to the \textit{Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung}, reflect very accurately, I believe, the way Benjamin assimilates Marxian categories for his own purposes. In this regard, what Adorno misunderstands is as important as what he understands.\textsuperscript{37} Adorno’s

\textsuperscript{36}The 14th thesis on the philosophy of history, as elsewhere, attests to this; the experiential substance of the French Revolution was rather more interesting to Benjamin than the objective changes it led to: “The French Revolution understood itself as Rome returned. It cited ancient Rome precisely the way fashion cites a style of the past.”

\textsuperscript{37}I refer here to the letters from Adorno to Benjamin of 2 August 1935 and 10 November 1938, as well as Benjamin’s answer (NLR, 55-80). As to this complex of ideas, cf. also: J. Taubes, “\textit{Kultur und Ideologie},” in \textit{Spätkapitalismus oder Industriegesellschaft}? (Stuttgart,
impression of the "Paris Arcades" project is that Benjamin does violence to himself trying to pay tribute to Marxism in a manner which benefited neither Marxism nor Benjamin himself. He criticizes a procedure that gives "conspicuous individual features from the realm of the superstructure a 'materialist' turn by relating them without mediation and perhaps even causally to corresponding features of the base" (NLR, 71). He refers in particular to the merely metaphoric use of the category of commodity fetishism; Benjamin had declared in a letter to Scholem that this category stood at the center of his new project just as the concept of the Trauerspiel had formed the core of his book on the Baroque. Adorno pierces through the apparently materialist tendency of relating the "contents of Baudelaire's work immediately to adjacent features in the social history of his time, and, as much as possible, to those of an economic kind" (ibid., 70). In doing so, Benjamin makes the impression of a swimmer "who, covered with goose pimples, plunges into cold water" (ibid.). This acute judgement, which does not lose any of its aptness even if one takes Adorno's rivalry with Brecht into account, contrasts peculiarly with the poor judgement he shows in insisting that his friend make good the "omitted theory" and "lacking interpretation" so that the dialectical mediation between cultural qualities and the whole social process would become more visible. Adorno never perceptibly hesitated to attribute to Benjamin precisely the ideologiekritische intention which his own work followed — and erred in doing so.

This is shown in an exemplary way by the objections which were supposed to move Benjamin to revise the concept of the dialectical image, so central to the theory of experience, and thus achieve "a clarification of the theory itself" (ibid., 54). Adorno does not see how legitimate it is to wish to carry out the plan for a prehistory of modernity, hoping to decipher a mutilated semantics threatened by forgetfulness with hermeneutic means, i.e., through the interpretation of dialectical images. For Benjamin, image-fantasies (Bildphantasien) of the primal past break loose under the impact of the new, which is permeated by the continuity of the perpetually same; these fantasies "intermingle with the new to give birth to utopias" (R., 148). In his exposé Benjamin speaks of the collective unconscious as a depository for experiences. Adorno justifiably disapproves of this terminology. Yet he incorrectly maintains that the disenchantment of the dialectical image would of necessity lead back to purely mythical thought. Because the archaic in modernity — which Adorno sees more readily as being Hell than the Golden Age — contains precisely the potentials of experience that point ahead to the utopian state of liberated society. A model for this is the recourse to Roman antiquity during the French Revolution. Here Benjamin employs a compar-

ison with the realization of dream elements in waking, an idea developed into technique by surrealism, and which Benjamin, misleadingly enough, calls a textbook case of dialectical thought. Adorno takes this too literally. To transpose the dialectical image into consciousness as a dream appears to him a piece of pure subjectivism. Adorno points out to Benjamin that the fetish character of the commodity is not a fact of consciousness; rather it is dialectical in the eminent sense that it produces consciousness, or in other words, archaic images in the alienated individuals of civil society. But Benjamin has no need to conform to this basic claim of the critique of ideology; Benjamin does not wish to get at the objectivity of a realization process which lies behind the formations of consciousness and through which the commodity fetish gains power over the consciousness of individuals. Benjamin wants and in fact needs only to investigate “the way the fetish character is perceived by the collective unconscious,” because the dialectical images are phenomena of consciousness, and are not merely transposed into consciousness, as Adorno maintains.

Of course, Benjamin also deluded himself about the difference between his method and that of a Marxian critique of ideology. In the posthumous manuscripts for the “Arcades” project he says at one point: “The question is namely: if the base determines the superstructure to some extent in the material of thought and experience, and if this determination nevertheless is not one of simple mirroring, how is it then — totally apart from the question of its cause of origin[!] — to be characterized? As its expression (Ausdruck). The superstructure is the expression of the base. The economic conditions under which a society exists come to expression in the superstructure” (cited in Tiedemann, op. cit., 106. Emphasis mine). Expression is a category of Benjamin’s theory of experience; it refers to the nonsensuous correspondences between animate and inanimate nature on which the physiognomic gaze of the artist as well as that of the child rests. Expression is a semantic category for Benjamin, and is closer to what Kassner or even Klages intended than to the base-superstructure theorem. The same misunderstanding emerges in his relation to the critique of ideology as practiced by Adorno, when Benjamin remarks about chapters of Adorno’s later book on Wagner: “One tendency of this work interested me in particular: to situate the physiognomic directly, almost without psychological mediation, in the social realm” (Br., 741). Indeed, Benjamin did not have psychology in mind, but neither did he intend a critique of necessarily false consciousness. His critique concerned the collective image-fantasies settled among the characters of expression in daily existence as well as in literature and art; these images arise from the secret communication between the oldest potential of signification of human needs and the conditions of existence created by capitalism.

In the correspondence about the “Arcades” project, Adorno invokes the goal “for the sake of which you sacrifice theology” (NLR, 54). Benjamin made this sacrifice, it is true, by accepting from then on mystical illumination
only as secular, i.e., universalizable, exoteric experience. Yet Adorno, who compared to Benjamin was certainly the better Marxist, did not see that his friend was never prepared to completely surrender the theological heritage: that his mimetic theory of language, his messianic theory of history, and his conservative-revolutionary understanding of critique were permanently immunized against the objections of historical materialism — insofar as this puppet could not simply be taken on under the direction of his own ideas. This emerges also where Benjamin professed to be a committed communist: in his approval of the instrumental politicization of art. I understand this approval, which becomes clearest in his lecture on the “Author as Producer” (R., 220-238), as a dilemma resulting from the fact that an immanent relation to political praxis cannot be obtained at all from redeeming critique, as it can from a consciousness-raising one.

When it exposes the particular interest of those who rule within what appears the universal interest, the critique of ideology is a political force. To the extent that it unsettles the normative structures which keep the consciousness of the suppressed imprisoned, and terminates in political action, the critique of ideology strives toward the release of the structural force (Gewalt) that has been allowed to enter into institutions. It is directed at the participatory abolition of the force thus set free. Structural force can also be reactively or preventatively released from above. Then it takes on the form of the fascist partial mobilization of masses, who do not abolish the force set free, but diffusely “act it out.”

I have shown that there is no place in this frame of reference, the critique of ideology, for the type of critique developed by Benjamin. A critique which prepares itself for a leap into past Jetztzeiten so that it might rescue and redeem semantic potentials has a very mediated relation to political praxis. Benjamin was not sufficiently clear on this point.

In the early essay “Critique of Violence (Gewalt),” he distinguishes between lawmaking and law-preserving violence: the latter is the legitimate force practiced by the organs of the state, whereas the former is the structural force set free in war and civil war and latent in all institutions. Lawmaking violence does not have an instrumental character like the law-preserving; rather it “manifests” itself. Indeed, the structural force embodied in interpretations and institutions manifests itself in the sphere which Benjamin, like Hegel, reserved for fate: in the fates of war and the family. Of course, changes in this sphere of natural history do not change anything:

38 In this context Benjamin criticizes parliamentarism in a way that has found the admiration of Carl Schmitt: “They (the parliaments) offer the familiar, woeful spectacle because they have not remained conscious of the revolutionary forces to which they owe their existence. Accordingly, in Germany in particular, the last manifestation of such forces bore no fruit for parliaments. They lack the sense that a lawmaking violence is represented by themselves; no wonder that they cannot achieve decrees worthy of this violence, but cultivate in compromise a supposedly nonviolent manner of dealing with political affairs” (R., 288).
“A gaze directed only at what is close at hand can at most perceive a dialectical rising and falling in the lawmaking and law-preserving formations of violence . . . This lasts until either new forces or those suppressed earlier triumph over the hitherto lawmaking violence and thus found a new law, destined in its turn to decay” (R., 300). Once again, we encounter Benjamin’s conception of fate, which alleges a natural-historical continuum of the perpetually same and rules out cumulative changes in the structures of domination.

This is where redemptive critique is set into motion. And there Benjamin forms the concept of revolutionary violence according to this configuration: It is as if the act of interpretation, which extracts the selective breach in the natural-historical continuum from the past art work and makes this relevant for the present, is invested with the insignia of praxis. This, then, is the “pure” violence or “divine” force which strives toward “the breaking of the cycle maintained by mythical forms of law” (ibid.). Benjamin conceptualizes “pure” violence within the framework of his theory of experience and therefore he must divest it of the attributes of goal-oriented (purposive-rational, zweckrational) action; revolutionary violence, like mythical violence, manifests itself — it is “the highest manifestation of unalloyed violence by the human being” (ibid.). It follows logically that Benjamin should refer to Sorel’s myth of a general strike and to an anarchistic praxis which is distinguished by its banning of the instrumental character of action from the realm of political praxis and its negation of purposive rationality in favor of a “politics of pure means”: “the violence (of such a praxis) may be assessed no more from its effects than from its goals, but only from the law of its means” (R., 292).

That was in 1920. Nine years later, Benjamin wrote his famous essay on the surrealist movement; during the period between these two dates, Baudelaire’s idea of an intimate union of dream and deed had gained prominence in this movement. In the surrealist provocation, that which Benjamin could see a confirmation of his art theory in surrealism, yet surrealist nonsense-acts, art was transferred into expressive action and the split between poetic and political action was dialectically abolished. Thus Benjamin could see a confirmation of his art theory in surrealism. Yet Benjamin was an ambivalent observer of the illustrations of pure violence given by surrealism. Politics as representation or even poetic politics — when Benjamin saw these realizations he could no longer close his eyes to the differences of principle between political action and manifestation: “this would mean the subordination of the methodical and disciplinary preparation for revolution entirely to a praxis oscillating between training and celebrating its imminent onset” (R., 189). Prompted by the contact with Brecht, Benjamin therefore dissociated himself from his earlier anarchistic inclinations and saw the relation of art and political praxis above all in the organizing and propagandistic realization of art for the class struggle. The resolute politicization of art is a concept that Benjamin found ready at hand.
He may have had good reasons for seizing upon this concept — it did not, however, have a systematic connection to his own theory of art and history. By accepting it without reservation, Benjamin implicitly admits that an immanent relation to political praxis cannot be obtained from his theory of experience. The experience of the shock is not an action, and secular illumination is not a revolutionary deed.\(^\text{39}\)

Benjamin’s intent was to “enlist the services” of historical materialism for his theory of experience; yet this had to lead to an identification of intoxication and politics which Benjamin could not have wanted. The liberation of the semantic potentials from cultural tradition, so that they may not become lost for the messianic experience is not the same thing as the liberation of the semantic potentials from cultural tradition, so that they may poraneity does not lie in a theology of the revolution.\(^\text{40}\)

Rather, his contemporaneity unfolds before us if we attempt vice-versa to “enlist the services” of Benjamin’s theory of experience for historical materialism.

VII

A dialectical theory of progress, such as historical materialism claims to be, is on its guard: what presents itself as progress can soon show itself to be the perpetuation of what was presumably overcome. Thus more and more theorems of the counter-enlightenment have been incorporated into the dialectic of the enlightenment, more and more elements from the critique of progress have been assimilated by the theory of progress: all in order to formulate an idea of progress that is subtle and resilient enough not to let itself be blinded by the mere appearance (Schein) of emancipation. One thing, of course, it must oppose: namely, the thesis that enlightenment itself mystifies.\(^\text{41}\)

In the concept of exploitation that determined Marx’s critique, poverty and domination were still one. The development of capitalism has in the meantime taught us to distinguish between hunger and oppression. The privations that can be countered by an improvement in the standard of living are different from those which can be remedied by a growth in freedom, and not in social wealth. In Natural Law and Human Dignity, Bloch introduced these distinctions into the concept of progress, ones made necessary by the success of the productive forces developed under capitalism.\(^\text{42}\)


\(^\text{41}\)In this perspective, critical theory is seen as “modern sophism”: for example by R. Bubner, “Was ist Kritische Theorie?” in \textit{Hermeneutik und Ideologiedruck} (Frankfurt am Main, 1971).

\(^\text{42}\)E. Bloch, \textit{Naturrecht und menschliche Würde} (Frankfurt am Main, 1961): “Social utopia aims at human happiness; natural law aims at human dignity. Social utopia painted a prophetic picture of relations without weary and burdened people; natural law conceived relations without the humiliated and denigrated” (p. 13). Cf. also my references in \textit{Philosophisch-politische Profile}, pp. 216 ff.
societies there exists the possibility that repressions can become reconciled with a high standard of living, i.e., that demands directed at the economic system may be fulfilled without necessarily realizing genuinely political demands. The more this possibility becomes noticeable, the more the accent shifts here from the elimination of hunger to emancipation.

In the tradition that traces back to Marx, Benjamin was one of the first to throw into relief a further aspect of the concepts of exploitation and progress: along with hunger and oppression he emphasized failure, along with living standard and freedom — happiness. Benjamin saw the experience of happiness, which he called secular illumination, as being bound to the redemption of tradition. We need those rescued semantic potentials if we are to interpret the world in terms of our own needs, and only if the source of these potentials does not run dry can the claim to happiness be fulfilled. Cultural goods are the spoils which those who rule carry along in triumphal procession; therefore, the process of tradition must be wrenched from myth. Now it is true that the liberation of culture is not possible without overcoming the repression anchored in institutions. Yet, for a moment, one is beset by suspicion: wouldn’t it be just as possible to have an emancipation without happiness and fulfillment as it is to have a relatively high standard of living without the abolition (Aufhebung) of repression? This question, posed at the threshold of posthistoire, when symbolic structures are spent and threadbare, divested of their imperative function — this is not a safe question, but it is not a totally idle one either.

Benjamin would not have posed such a question. He insisted on both the most spiritual and the most sensuous happiness as a mass experience. Yes, he was almost terrorized by the prospect of a possibly definitive loss of this experience because, his gaze fixed on the messianic, he observed how progress was successively cheated out of its fulfillment by progress itself. Therefore a critique of the Kautskian interpretation of progress forms the political content of the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Even if one does not contend that progress within each of the three dimensions discussed above (increase in the standard of living, expansion of freedom, and furthering of happiness) cannot really represent any progress, as long as living standard, freedom and happiness have not become universal, one could still make an argument for a hierarchy of these three dimensions: that economic well-being without freedom is not economic well-being, and that freedom without happiness is not freedom. Benjamin was deeply imbued with this idea: we cannot even be sure about partial steps in progress before the Last Judgement. Of course, Benjamin wove this emphatic insight into his conception of fate, according to which historical change does not effect any changes, even if they are reflected in orders of happiness: “The order of the secular should be erected on the idea of happiness” (R., 312). In this totalizing perspective, the cumulative development of the forces of production and the directed change in the structures of interaction become wound back to an indifferenitated reproduction of the perpetually same.
Before Benjamin's manichaean gaze, which is capable of perceiving progress in the solar prominences of happiness alone, history spreads out like the rotation of a dead star upon which every once in a while lightning flashes down. This compels him to interpret the economic and political systems in concepts that would actually be apt only for the cultural process. Evolutions go under without a trace in the ubiquity of the plexus of guilt; these evolutions, however, for all their questionable shortcomings, occur not only in the dimension of the productive forces and of social wealth, but even in that dimension where in view of massive repression, distinctions are very difficult to make: I mean progress, certainly precarious and permanently threatened by relapses, in the products of legality, if not in the structures of morality altogether. By remembering in melancholy what was unsuccessful and invoking moments of happiness that are in the process of being obliterated, the historical sense for secular progress threatens to become stunted. Perhaps this progress generates its regressions, but of course that is where political action begins.

Benjamin's critique of empty progress is directed at a joyless reformism, whose faculties have been blunted to the difference between the improved reproduction of life and a fulfilled life, or perhaps we should say, a life that is not a failure. This critique becomes acute only if it succeeds in making that difference visible in the improvements of life that are not contemptible. These improvements do not produce any new memories, but they dissolve old and fatal ones. It must be conceded that the step by step negation of poverty and even oppression has the peculiar result that it leaves no trace: it alleviates without fulfilling, for only alleviation that is remembered could be a preparation for fulfillment. In the face of this circumstance, there are in the meanwhile two overworked positions. The counter-enlightenment, supported by pessimistic anthropology, allegedly knows that the utopian images of fulfillment are functional fictions for the life of a finite creature, who will never be able to transcend mere existence and attain a good life. The dialectical theory of progress on the other hand, is self-assured about the prognosis that successful emancipation also means fulfillment. If it were not the cowl but rather the core of historical materialism, Benjamin's theory of experience could confront the first position with well-founded hope — the other, with prophylactic doubt.

We are talking only about doubt, the doubt suggested by Benjamin's semantic materialism: can we afford to preclude the possibility of a meaningless emancipation? In complex societies, emancipation means a participatory remodelling of administrative decision-making structures. Could an emancipated humanity one day confront itself in the expanded scope of discursive will-formation and nevertheless still be deprived of the terms in which it is able to interpret life as good life? A culture which, for thousands of years, was exploited for the purpose of legitimating domination would take its revenge, just at the moment when age-old repressions could be overcome: not only would it be free of violence, it would no longer
have any content. Without the store of those semantic energies with which Benjamin’s redemptive criticism was concerned, there would necessarily be a stagnation of the structures of practical discourse that had finally prevailed.

Benjamin all but wrests away from the counter-enlightenment the indictment of empty reflection, and appropriates it for a theory of progress. Whoever seeks Benjamin’s contemporary relevance in this would certainly expose himself to the objection that in the face of an unshaken political reality, emancipatory efforts should not be rashly saddled with additional burdens, be they ever so sublime — “first things first”. I believe of course that a differentiated concept of progress furnishes a perspective that does not simply inhibit courage, but rather ensures that political action can hit its mark with greater accuracy. For under historical circumstances which prohibit the thought of revolution and give grounds for expecting a long sustained process of upheaval, the conception of revolution as the process leading to the formation of a new subjectivity must also be transformed. Benjamin’s conservative-revolutionary hermeneutics, which deciphers the history of culture with a view to rescuing and redeeming it for the overthrow, may provide a path in this direction.

A theory of linguistic communication that wants to reclaim Benjamin’s insights for a materialist theory of social evolution would have to consider together two Benjaminian propositions. I am thinking of the assertion: “that there is a sphere of human agreement that is non-violent to the extent that it is wholly inaccessible to violence: the true sphere of ‘mutual understanding,’ language” (R., 289). And I am thinking of the warning that belongs here: “Pessimism all along the line. Absolutely . . . but above all, mistrust, mistrust and again mistrust in all mutual understanding reached between classes, nations, individuals. And unlimited trust only in I.G. Farben and the peaceful perfection of the Luftwaffe” (R., 191).

Translated by Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner