

Part I

Politics and Culture

Adorno in Reverse: From Hollywood to Richard Wagner

Andreas Huysen

Ever since the failure of the 1848 revolution, the culture of modernity has been characterized by the contentious relationship between high art and mass culture. The conflict first emerged in its typical modern form in the Second Empire under Napoleon III and in Bismarck's new German Reich. More often than not it has appeared in the guise of an irreconcilable opposition. At the same time, however, there has been a succession of attempts launched from either side to bridge the gap or at least to appropriate elements of the other. From Courbet's appropriation of popular iconography to Brecht's immersion in the vernacular of popular culture, from Madison Avenue's conscious exploitation of avant-gardist pictorial strategies to postmodernism's uninhibited learning from Las Vegas there has been a plethora of strategic moves tending to destabilize the high/low opposition from within. Yet this opposition – usually described in terms of modernism vs. mass culture or avant-garde vs. culture industry – has proven to be amazingly resilient. Such resilience may lead one to conclude that perhaps neither of the two combatants can do without the other, that their much heralded mutual exclusiveness is really a sign of their secret interdependence. Seen in this light, mass culture indeed seems to be the repressed other of modernism, the family ghost rumbling in the cellar. Modernism, on the other hand, often chided by the left as the elitist, arrogant, and mystifying master-code of bourgeois culture while demonized by the right as the Agent Orange of natural social cohesion, is the straw man desperately needed by the system to provide an aura of popular legitimation for the blessings of the culture industry. Or, to

put it differently, as modernism hides its envy for the broad appeal of mass culture behind a screen of condescension and contempt, mass culture, saddled as it is with pangs of guilt, yearns for the dignity of serious culture which forever eludes it.

Of course, questions raised by this persistent complicity of modernism and mass culture cannot be solved by textual analysis alone or by recourse to categories such as taste or quality. A broader framework is needed. Social scientists in the Marx–Weber tradition such as Jürgen Habermas have argued that with the emergence of civil society the sphere of culture came uncoupled from the political and economic systems. Such a differentiation of spheres (*Ausdifferenzierung*) may have lost some of its explanatory power for contemporary developments, but it is certainly characteristic of an earlier stage of capitalist modernization. It was actually the historical prerequisite for the twin establishment of a sphere of high autonomous art and a sphere of mass culture, both considered to lie outside the economic and political spheres. The irony, of course, is that art's aspirations to autonomy, its uncoupling from church and state, became possible only when literature, painting and music were first organized according to the principles of a market economy. From its beginnings the autonomy of art has been related dialectically to the commodity form. The rapid growth of the reading public and the increasing capitalization of the book market in the later eighteenth century, the commercialization of music culture and the development of a modern art market mark the beginnings of the high/low dichotomy in its specifically modern form. This dichotomy then became politically charged in decisive ways when new class conflicts erupted in the mid-nineteenth century and the quickening pace of the industrial revolution required new cultural orientations for a mass populace. Habermas himself has analyzed this process in his *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* where he argues convincingly that the period of the Second Reich occupies a central place in the emergence of a modern mass culture and in the disintegration of an older bourgeois public sphere.¹ What Habermas has attempted to do, of course, is to insert a historical dimension into what Adorno and Horkheimer, some twenty years earlier, had postulated as the closed and seemingly timeless system of the culture industry. The force of Habermas' account was not lost on John Brenkman who, in an important article, fully agrees with Habermas' periodization: "This public sphere, like all the institutions and ideologies of the bourgeoisie in the nineteenth century, underwent extreme contortions as soon as its repressive functions showed through its initial transforming effects. The ethical-political principle of the public sphere – freedom of discussion, the sovereignty of the public will, etc. – proved to be a mask for its economic-political reality, namely, that the private interest of the capitalist class

determines all social and institutional authority.”² Indeed there can be little doubt that – just as the beginnings of modernism – the origins of modern mass culture date back to the decades around 1848, when, as Brenkman sums up, “The European bourgeoisie, still fighting to secure its triumph over aristocracy and monarchy, suddenly faced the counterrevolutionary task of suppressing the workers and preventing them from openly articulating *their* interests.”³

While the emphasis on revolution and counterrevolution in the mid-nineteenth century is important to a discussion of the origins of mass culture, it certainly does not tell the whole story. The salient fact is that with the universalization of commodity production mass culture begins to cut across classes in heretofore unknown ways. Many of its forms attract cross-class audiences, others remain class-bound. Traditional popular culture enters into a fierce struggle with commodified culture producing a variety of hybrid forms. Such resistances to the reign of the commodity were often recognized by the modernists who eagerly incorporated themes and forms of popular culture into the modernist vocabulary.⁴ When we locate the origins of modern mass culture in the mid-nineteenth century, the point is therefore not to claim that the culture of late capitalism “began” in 1848. But the *commodification of culture* did indeed emerge in the mid-nineteenth century as a powerful force, and we need to ask what its specific forms were at that time and how precisely they were related to the industrialization of the human body and to the commodification of labor power. A lot of recent work in social history, history of technology, urban history, and philosophy of time has converged on what Anthony Giddens calls the “commodification of time-space” during the formative decades of industrial capitalism.⁵ We only need to think of the well-documented changes in the perception and articulation of time and space brought about by railroad travelling,⁶ the expansion of the visual field by news photography, the restructuring of city space with the Haussmannization of Paris, and last but not least the increasing imposition of industrial time and space on the human body in schools, factories, and the family. We may take the periodic spectacles of the World Expositions, those major mass-cultural phenomena of the times, as well as the elaborate staging of the commodity in the first giant department stores as salient symptoms of a changing relationship between the human body and the object world that surrounds it and of which it is itself a major part. What, then, are the traces of this commodification of time and space, of objects and the human body, in the arts? Of course, Baudelaire’s poetry, Manet’s and Monet’s painting, Zola’s or Fontane’s novels, and Schnitzler’s plays, to name but a few examples, provide us with powerful visions of modern life, as it used to be called, and critics have focused on a number of social types symptomatic for the

age, such as the prostitute and the dandy, the *flâneur*, the bohemian, and the collector. But while the triumph of the modern in “high art” has been amply documented, we are only beginning to explore the place of mass culture vis-à-vis the modernization of the life-world in the nineteenth century.⁷

Clearly, Adorno and Horkheimer’s concept of the culture industry does not yield much with regard to specific historical and textual analyses of nineteenth-century mass culture. Politically, adherence today to the classical culture industry thesis can only lead to resignation or moralizing about universal manipulation and domination. Blaming the culture industry for capitalism’s longevity, however, is metaphysics, not politics. Theoretically, adherence to Adorno’s aesthetics may blind us to the ways in which contemporary art, since the demise of classical modernism and the historical avant-garde, represents a new conjuncture which can no longer be grasped in Adornean or other modernist categories. Just as we would want to avoid elevating Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* to the status of dogma, the last thing we want to start with is a simple projection of the culture industry theory back into the nineteenth century.

Yet, a discussion of Adorno in the context of the early stage of the mass culture/modernism dichotomy may still make sense for a number of simple reasons. First, Adorno is one of a very few critics guided by the conviction that a theory of modern culture must address both mass culture and high art. The same cannot be said for most literary and art criticism in this country. Nor can it be said of mass communication research which takes place totally apart from literary and art historical studies. Adorno actually undermines this very separation. The fact that he himself insists on fundamental separation between the culture industry and modernist art is to be understood not as a normative proposition but rather as a reflection of a series of historical experiences and theoretical assumptions which are open to debate.

Secondly, the theory of the culture industry has exerted a tremendous influence on mass culture research in Germany and, to a somewhat lesser extent, also in the United States.⁸ Recalling the ways in which Adorno theorized about modern mass culture may not be the worst place to start. After all, a critical, yet sympathetic discussion may be quite fruitful in countering two current trends: one toward a theoretically decapitated and mostly affirmative description of “popular” culture, the other toward a moralizing condemnation of imperial mind management by a media apparatus allegedly totally in the grip of capital and profit interests.

Any discussion of Adorno, however, will have to begin by pointing out the theoretical limitations inherent in his thought which, contrary to what one often hears, cannot be reduced simply to a notion of brainwashing or

manipulation. Adorno's blindnesses have to be interpreted as simultaneously theoretical and historical ones. Indeed, his theory may appear to us today as a ruin of history, mutilated and damaged by the very conditions of its articulation and genesis: defeat of the German working class, triumph and subsequent exile of modernism from central Europe, fascism, Stalinism, and the Cold War. I do not feel the need to either resurrect or bury Adorno, as the saying goes. Both gestures ultimately fail to place Adorno in the ever-shifting context of our attempts to understand the culture of modernity. Both attitudes tend to sap the energy from a body of texts which maintain their provocation for us precisely because they recede from a present which increasingly seems to indulge in a self-defeating narcissism of theory or in the hopeless return of jolly good old humanism.

I will begin, then, by briefly recapitulating some of the basic propositions of the culture industry concept and by pointing to some of the problems inherent in it. In a second section, I will show that Adorno can be read against the grain, that his theory is by no means as closed as it may appear at first sight. The task of this reading is precisely to open Adorno's account to its own hesitations and resistances and to allow it to function in slightly different frames. In the two final sections I will discuss how both Adorno's theory of modernism and the theory of the culture industry are shaped not only by fascism, exile, and Hollywood, but also quite significantly by cultural phenomena of the late nineteenth century, phenomena in which modernism and culture industry seem to converge in curious ways rather than being diametrically opposed to each other. Locating elements of the culture industry, with Adorno, in *l'art pour l'art*, Jugendstil, and Richard Wagner may serve two purposes. It may help sustain the claim that Adorno's view of the culture industry and modernism is not quite as binary and closed as it appears. And, on a much broader level, it may point us – in a reversal of Adorno's strategy – toward a desirable and overdue exploration of how modernism itself appropriates and transforms elements of popular culture, trying like Antaeus to gain strength and vitality from such contacts.⁹ . . .

Marginal Revisions: Reading Adorno against the Grain

No account of the culture industry theory can be considered adequate unless it also locates Adorno's hesitations, resistances, and displacements within the texts themselves. In a close reading of Adorno's "Transparencies on Film" Miriam Hansen has recently made a convincing case for reading Adorno against the grain.¹⁰ Such a reading can indeed show that Adorno himself frequently cast doubt in the positions taken in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. One of

the most salient examples, quoted by Hansen, can be found in the posthumously published draft “Schema der Massenkultur,” which was originally meant to be part of the culture industry chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. In capsule form Adorno and Horkheimer give the central thesis of the work: “Human beings, as they conform to the technological forces of production which are imposed on them in the name of progress, are transformed into objects which willingly allow themselves to be manipulated and thus fall behind the actual potential of these productive forces.”¹¹ But then, in a dialectical move, the authors place their hope in the very repetitiveness of reification: “Because human beings, as subjects, still constitute the limit of reification, mass culture has to renew its hold over them in an endless series of repetitions; the hopeless effort of repetition is the only trace of hope that the repetition may be futile, that human beings cannot be totally controlled.”¹² Examples such as this one could easily be multiplied. But while reading the classical texts on the culture industry against the grain may testify to Adorno’s insight into the potential limitations of his theory, I doubt whether such insights should compel us to fundamentally revise our interpretation of these texts. The difficulty may only have been displaced to another area. The same move in which the monolithic closure of the culture industry theory comes undone in the margins seems to reaffirm another closure at the level of the subject. In the quoted passage any potential resistance to the culture industry is ascribed to the subject, however contingent and hollowed out it may be, rather than, say, to intersubjectivity, social action, and the collective organization of cultural experience in what Negt and Kluge have called counter-public spheres (*Gegenöffentlichkeiten*). It is not enough to reproach Adorno for holding on to a monadic or “bourgeois” notion of the subject. Isolation and privatization of the subject are after all the very real effects of much of capitalist mass culture, and the resulting subjectivity is, in Adorno’s own terms, quite different from that of the ascendant earlier bourgeois class. The question rather has to be how Adorno defines that subjectivity which would elude manipulation and control.

Jochen Schulte-Sasse has recently argued that Adorno relies on an ahistorical hypostatization of the subject as a self-identical ego equipped with analytical power.¹³ If this reading is correct, the subject resisting reification through mass culture is none other than the critical theorist’s younger brother, less stable perhaps and less forceful in his resistance, but the hope for resistance would indeed have to place its trust in the residues of that ego-formation which the culture industry tends to destroy. But here, too, one can read Adorno against the grain and point to passages in his work in which the stable and armored ego is seen as the problem rather than the solution. In his critique of Kant’s subject of epistemology Adorno attacks the notion

of the self-identical subject as a historically produced construct bound up with social experiences of objectification and reification: "It is obvious that the hardness of the epistemological subject, the identity of self-consciousness mimics the unreflected experience of the consistent, identical object."¹⁴ Adorno's critique of the deeply problematic nature of such fortifications of the subject, which is reminiscent of the Jena romantics, is summed up poignantly when he writes: "The subject is all the more a subject the less it is so; and the more it imagines itself to *be* and to be an objective entity for itself, the less it is a subject."¹⁵

Similarly, in a critical discussion of Freud and the bourgeois privileging of genital sexuality, Adorno recognized the principle of ego-identity as socially constituted: "Not to be oneself is a piece of sexual utopia . . . negation of the ego principle. It shakes up that invariant of bourgeois society understood in its broadest sense: the demand of identity. First identity had to be constructed, ultimately it will have to be overcome (*aufzuheben*). That which is only identical with itself is without happiness."¹⁶ Such passages point to Adorno's fragile utopian vision of a reconciliation with nature which, as always in Adorno and Horkheimer, is understood as both outer and inner nature in a way that calls their very separation into question: "The dawning sense of freedom feeds upon the memory of the archaic impulse not yet steered by any solid I. The more the I curbs that impulse, the more chaotic and thus questionable will it find that prehistoric freedom. Without an anamnesis of the untamed impulse that precedes the ego – an impulse later banished to the zone of unfree bondage to nature – it would be impossible to derive the idea of freedom, although that idea in turn ends up in reinforcing the ego."¹⁷ As against the previous quote from *Eingriffe* where the *Aufhebung* of bourgeois ego-formation seemed to hold out a promise, here the dialectic ends in aporia. Surely, one problem is that Adorno, like Freud in *Civilization and Its Discontents*, metaphorically collapses the phylogenetic with the ontogenetic level. He permits his historical and philosophical speculations about the dialectic of self-preservation and enlightenment to get in the way of pursuing the question, in relation to mass culture, to what extent and for what purposes the products of the culture industry might precisely speak to and activate such pre-ego impulses in a non-regressive way. His focus on how the commodification of culture dissolves ego-formation and produces mere regression blinds him to that possibility. He founders on the aporia that in his philosophy of civilization these impulses preceding the ego simultaneously contain a sign of freedom and the hope for a reconciliation with nature on the one hand while on the other hand they represent the archaic domination of nature over man which had to be fought in the interest of self-preservation.

Any further discussion of such pre-ego impulses (e.g., partial instincts) in relation to mass culture would lead to the central question of identification, that ultimate bogeyman of Adorno's – and not only Adorno's – modernist aesthetic. Adorno never took that step. The suspension of critical distance which is at stake in any identification with the particular leads inexorably to a legitimation of the false totality. While Adorno recognized that there were limitations to the reification of human subjects through the culture industry which made resistance thinkable at the level of the subject, he never asked himself whether perhaps such limitations could be located in the mass cultural commodities themselves. Such limits do indeed become evident when one begins to analyze in detail the signifying strategies of specific cultural commodities and the mesh of gratification, displacement, and production of desires which are invariably put in play in their production and consumption. How precisely identification works in the reception of mass culture, what spaces it opens and what possibilities it closes off, how it can be differentiated according to gender, class, and race – these are questions to which the theory of the culture industry might have led had it not been conceived, in the spirit of the negative dialectic, as the threatening other of modernism. And yet, reading Adorno against the grain opens up precisely some of these spaces inside his texts where we might want to begin rewriting his account for a postmodern age.

Prehistory and Culture Industry

To write a prehistory of the modern was the stated goal of Benjamin's never completed arcades project on nineteenth-century Paris. The dispute between Benjamin and Adorno revolving around their different readings of cultural commodification and of the relationship between prehistory and modernity is well-documented and researched. Given Adorno's trenchant critique of Benjamin's 1935 exposé of the arcades project it is somewhat baffling to find that he never wrote about mass culture in the nineteenth century. Doing so would have allowed him to refute Benjamin on his own ground, but the closest he ever came to such an undertaking is probably the book on Wagner written in London and New York in 1937 and 1938. Instead he chose to battle Benjamin, especially the Benjamin of "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," in his analysis of the twentieth-century culture industry. Politically, this choice made perfect sense in the late 1930s and early 1940s, but the price he paid for it was great. Drawing on the experience of mass culture in fascism and developed consumer capitalism, the theory of the culture industry was itself affected by the reification it decried since it left

no room for historical development. Culture industry represented for Adorno the completed return to prehistory under the sign of the eternal recurrence of the same. While Adorno seemed to deny mass culture its own history, his critique of Benjamin's arcades exposé shows clearly that he saw the later nineteenth century as prefiguring that cultural commodification which reached its fully organized state in the culture industry of the twentieth century. If the late nineteenth century, then, already lives under the threat of cultural barbarism and regression, one might want to take Adorno another step further back. After all, throughout his work he interpreted the culture of modernity with its twin formation of modernism and culture industry as tied to high or monopoly capitalism which in turn is distinguished from the preceding phase of liberal capitalism. The decline of the culture of liberal capitalism, never very strong in Germany in the first place, was by and large complete with the foundation of the Second Reich, most certainly by the 1890s. The history of that crucial transition from the culture of liberal capitalism to that of monopoly capitalism never receives much explicit attention in Adorno's writing, certainly not as much as the artistic developments in the later nineteenth century which led to the emergence of Adorno's modernism. But even here Adorno writes about the major artists of the period only (the late Wagner, Hofmannsthal, George) while ignoring the popular literature of the times (Karl May, Ganghofer, Marlitt) as well as working-class culture. For naturalism he only reserves some flippant remarks, and the early developments of technological media such as photography and film are all but absent from his accounts of the late nineteenth century. Only with Wagner does Adorno reach back to that earlier stage; and it is no coincidence that Wagner is indeed the pivotal figure in Adorno's prehistory of the modern.

Another point needs to be raised pertaining to this curious absence of nineteenth-century mass culture in Adorno's writing. Already in the 1930s Adorno must have been aware of historical research on mass culture. He only had to look at the work of one of his fellow researchers at the Institute, Leo Löwenthal, who did much of his work on eighteenth- and nineteenth-century German culture, high and low, and who never tired of drawing the connections that existed between twentieth-century critiques of mass culture and earlier discussions of the problem in the work of Schiller and Goethe, Tocqueville, Marx, and Nietzsche, to name only the most salient figures. Again the question presses itself upon us: why does Adorno ignore the mass culture of the Second Reich? He could have made much of the observation that many of the late nineteenth-century popular classics were still common fare in the Third Reich. Interpreting such continuities could have contributed significantly to the understanding of the prehistory of fascist culture¹⁸ and the rise of authoritarianism, the process George Mosse has described as the

nationalization of the masses. But that was just not Adorno's primary interest. His first and foremost goal was to establish a theory of *die Kunst der Moderne*, not as a historian, but as a participant and critic reflecting upon a specific stage in the development of capitalist culture and privileging certain trends within that stage. Adorno's prime example for the emergence of a genuinely modernist art was the turn to atonality in the music of Arnold Schönberg rather than, as for Benjamin and many historians of modernism, the poetry of Baudelaire. For my argument here the difference in choice of examples is less important than the difference in treatment. Where Benjamin juxtaposes Baudelaire's poetry with the texture and experience of modern life, showing how modern life invades the poetic text, Adorno focuses more narrowly on the development of the musical material itself, which he nevertheless interprets as *fait social*, as an aesthetic texturing and constructing of the experience of modernity, however mediated and removed from *subjective* experience that construction may ultimately turn out to be. Given Adorno's belief that the late nineteenth-century commodification of culture prefigures that of the culture industry and sets the stage for the successful modernist resistance to commodification in the works of Schönberg, Kafka, and Kandinsky, it seems only logical that Adorno should attempt to locate the germs of the culture industry in the high art of the late nineteenth century which precedes modernism – in Wagner, Jugendstil, and *l'art pour l'art*. We are faced, then, with the paradox of having to read Adorno on the high art of the times if we want to find traces of the mass culture problematic in his writings on nineteenth-century culture. Here I anticipate the habitual battlecry of "elitism" which usually serves to end all discussion. Certainly, the bias is there in Adorno. But it is not as if the questions he raises had ever been convincingly answered. If modernism is a response to the long march of the commodity through culture, then the effects of cultural commodification and all it entails *also* need to be located *in* the development of the artistic material itself rather than only in the department store or in the dictates of fashion. Adorno may be wrong in his answers – and his rigorously atrophied account of modernism simply leaves too much out – but he is most certainly right in his questions. Which, again, is not to say that his questions are the only ones we should ask.

How, then, does Adorno deal with the late nineteenth century? On the face of it his history of modernism seems to coincide with that of Anglo-American criticism which sees modernism evolving continuously from the mid-nineteenth century to the 1950s, if not to the present. Despite occasional shifts in the evaluation of certain authors (e.g., George and Hofmannsthal) Adorno privileges a certain trend of modernist literature – to take but one medium – from Baudelaire and Flaubert via Mallarmé, Hof-

mannsthal, and George to Valéry and Proust, Kafka and Joyce, Celan and Beckett. The notion of a politically committed art and literature is anathema for Adorno as it is for the dominant account of modernism in Anglo-American criticism. Major movements of the historical avant-garde such as Italian futurism, Dada, Russian constructivism, and productivism, as well as surrealism, are blatantly absent from the canon, an absence which is highly significant and which bears directly on Adorno's account of the late nineteenth century.

A closer look at Adorno's aesthetic theory will indeed dispel the notion of unilinear evolutionary development of modernism since the mid-nineteenth century. It will show on the contrary that Adorno locates a major rupture in the development of modern art after the turn of the century, i.e., with the emergence of the historical avant-garde movements. Of course, Adorno has often been described as a theorist of the avant-garde, a use of terminology based on the problematic collapsing of the notion of the avant-garde with that of modernism. Since Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, however, it seems no longer permissible to use the terms interchangeably, even though Bürger himself, at least in his earlier work, still talks about Adorno as a theorist of the avant-garde.¹⁹ But if it is true, as Bürger argues, that the main goal of the historical avant-garde was the reintegration of art into life, a heroic attempt that failed, then Adorno is not a theorist of the avant-garde, but a theorist of modernism. More than that, he is a theorist of a construct "modernism" which has already digested the failure of the historical avant-garde. It has not gone unnoticed that Adorno frequently scorned avant-garde movements such as futurism, Dada, and surrealism, and that he acidly rejected the avant-garde's various attempts to reintegrate art and life as a dangerous regression from the aesthetic to the barbaric. This insight, however, has often prevented critics from appreciating the fact that Adorno's theory of modernism owes as much to the historical avant-garde's onslaught against notions of the work of art as organism *or* as artificial paradise as it owes to late nineteenth-century aestheticism and to the autonomy aesthetic. Only if one understands this double heritage will statements such as the following in the *Philosophy of Modern Music* be fully comprehensible: "Today the only works which really count are those which are no longer works at all."²⁰ As far as I can see, only Peter Bürger has located this historical core of Adorno's aesthetic theory when he wrote in a more recent essay:

Both the radical separation of art from life completed by aestheticism *and* the reintegration of art and life intended by the historical avant-garde movements are premises for a view which sees art in total opposition to any rationally organized life-praxis and which at the same time attributes to art a revolu-

tionary force challenging the basic organization of society. The hopes which the most radical members of the avantgarde movements, especially the dadaists and early surrealists, invested in this possibility of changing society through art, these hopes live on residually in Adorno's aesthetic theory, even though in a resigned and mutilated form. Art is that "other" which cannot be realized in the world.²¹

Adorno indeed holds in charged tension two diverging tendencies: on the one hand aestheticism's insistence on the autonomy of the artwork and its double-layered separateness from everyday life (separate *as* work of art *and* separate in its refusal of realistic representation) and, on the other, the avantgarde's radical break with precisely that tradition of art's autonomy. In doing so he delivers the work's autonomy to the social while preserving it at the same time: "Art's double character, its being autonomous and fait social, relentlessly pervades the zone of its autonomy."²² Simultaneously he radicalizes modernity's break with the past and with tradition in the spirit of avantgardism: "Contrary to past styles, it [the concept of modernity] does not negate earlier art forms; it negates tradition per se."²³ We need to remember here that the radical break with tradition, first articulated by artists such as Baudelaire and Manet, becomes dominant in German culture much later than in France: in Schönberg rather than Wagner, Kafka rather than George, i.e., after the turn of the century. From the perspective of German developments Baudelaire could then be seen as Adorno sees Poe in relation to Baudelaire: as a lighthouse of modernity.²⁴

Adorno's fundamental indebtedness to the project of the post-1900 historical avant-garde can be gleaned from the ways in which he discusses *l'art pour l'art*, Jugendstil, and the music of Richard Wagner. In each case, the emergence of "genuine" modernism is seen as resulting from a deterioration *within* forms of high art, a deterioration which bears witness to the increasing modification of culture.

Adorno's work bristles with critiques of aestheticism and the *l'art pour l'art* movements of the nineteenth century. In his essay "Standort des Erzählers im zeitgenössischen Roman" (1954) we read: "The products [of modernist art] art above the controversy between politically committed art and *l'art pour l'art*. They stand beyond the alternative which pits the philistinism of *Tendenzkunst* against the philistinism of art as pleasure."²⁵ In *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno relates *l'art pour l'art* polemically to political advertising: "Advertising becomes art and nothing else, just as Goebbels – with foresight – combines them: *l'art pour l'art*, advertising for its own sake, a pure representation of social power."²⁶ *L'art pour l'art*, advertising, and the fascist aestheticization of politics can only be thought together under the sign of that

false universal of modernity which is the commodity. In a more historical vein, to give a third example, Adorno writes in *Ästhetische Theorie*: “*L’art pour l’art*’s concept of beauty is strangely hollow, and yet it is obsessed with matter. It resembles an art nouveau event as revealed in Ibsen’s charms of hair entwined with vine leaves and of a beautiful death. Beauty seems paralyzed, incapable of determining itself which it could only do by relating to its ‘other.’ It is like a root in the air and becomes entangled with the destiny of the invented ornament.”²⁷ And somewhat later: “In their innermost constitution the products of *l’art pour l’art* stand condemned by their latent commodity form which makes them live on as Kitsch, subject to ridicule.”²⁸ Adorno’s critique here is actually reminiscent of Nietzsche’s, that most trenchant and yet dubious critic of mass culture in Imperial Germany, whose influence on Critical Theory has recently been the subject of much debate. But while Nietzsche criticizes *l’art pour l’art*, for instance, in *Beyond Good and Evil*, as a form of decadence and relates it metaphorically to the culture of deluded scientific objectivity and of positivism, Adorno succeeds in grounding the critique systematically with the help of Marx’s notion of the commodity form. It is this emphasis on the commodity form (to which Nietzsche was totally oblivious) which permits Critical Theory to articulate a consistent critique of the objectivistic social sciences and of a reified aestheticism. And it furthermore connects Adorno’s critique of *l’art pour l’art* with his discussion of Jugendstil, a style which in a certain sense aimed at reversing *l’art pour l’art*’s separation from life.

The Jugendstil of the turn of the century is indeed pivotal to Adorno’s historical account of the emergence of modernist art. Although he highly values certain individual works that were part of Jugendstil culture (e.g., works by the early Stefan George and the young Schönberg), he argues that the commodity character of art which had been an integral, though somewhat hidden part of all emancipated bourgeois art becomes external in Jugendstil, tumbling, as it were, out of the artworks for all to see. A longer quote from *Ästhetische Theorie* is appropriate here:

Jugendstil has contributed greatly to this development, with its ideology of sending art back into life as well as with the sensations created by Wilde, d’Annunzio, and Maeterlinck, all of them preludes to the culture industry. Increasing subjective differentiation and the heightened dissemination of the realm of aesthetic stimuli made these stimuli manipulable. They could now be produced for the cultural market. The tuning of art to the most fleeting individual reactions allied itself with art’s reification. Art’s increasing likeness to a subjectively perceived physical world made all art abandon its objectivity thus recommending it to the public. The slogan *l’art pour l’art* was but the veil of its opposite. This much is true about the hysterical attacks on decadence:

subjective differentiation reveals an element of ego weakness which corresponds to the spiritual make-up of the clients of the culture industry. The culture industry learned how to profit from it.²⁹

Three brief observations: Adorno's aversion against later avant-gardist attempts to reintegrate art and life may have been as strong as it was because he held those attempts, however one-sidedly, to be similar to that of *Jugendstil*. Secondly, the avant-garde's attempts to dissolve the boundaries between art and life – whether those of Dada and surrealism or those of Russian productivism and constructivism – had ended in failure by the 1930s, a fact which makes Adorno's skepticism toward sending art back into life quite understandable. In a sense never intended by the avant-garde, life had indeed become art – in the fascist aesthetization of politics as mass spectacle as well as in the fictionalizations of reality dictated by the socialist realism of Zhdanov and by the dream world of capitalist realism promoted by Hollywood. Most importantly, however, Adorno criticizes *Jugendstil* as a prelude to the culture industry because it was the first style of high art to fully reveal the commodification and reification of art in capitalist culture. And it would not be Adorno if this account of *Jugendstil* did not precisely thrive on the paradox that the culture industry's antecedents are traced to a style and an art which is highly individualistic and which was never meant for mass reproduction. *Jugendstil*, nevertheless, marks that moment of history in which the commodity form has pervaded high art to the extent that – as in Schopenhauer's famous example of the bird hypnotized by the snake – it throws itself blissfully into the abyss and is swallowed up. That stage, however, is the prerequisite for Adorno's negative aesthetic of modernism that first took shape in the work of Schönberg. Schönberg's turn to atonality is interpreted as the crucial strategy to evade commodification and reification while articulating it in its very technique of composition.

Richard Wagner: Phantasmagoria and Modern Myth

Schönberg's "precursor" in the medium of music of course is Richard Wagner. Adorno argues that the turn toward atonality, that supreme achievement of musical modernism, is already latent in certain composition techniques of Richard Wagner. Wagner's use of dissonance and chromatic movement, his multiple subversions of classical harmony, the emergence of tonal indeterminacy and his innovations in color and orchestration are seen as setting the stage for Schönberg and the Vienna School. And yet, Schönberg's relation to Wagner, which is central to Adorno's account of the birth

of modernism in the arts, is described as one of continuation *and* resistance, most succinctly perhaps in the “Selbstanzeige des Essaybuches ‘Versuch über Wagner’”: “All of modern music has developed in resistance to his [Wagner’s] predominance – and yet, all of its elements are latently present in him.”³⁰ The purpose of Adorno’s long essay on Wagner, written in 1937/8, was not to write music history or to glorify the modernist breakthrough. Its purpose was rather to analyze the social and cultural roots of German fascism in the nineteenth century. Given the pressures of the times – Hitler’s affiliation with Bayreuth and the incorporation of Wagner into the fascist culture machine – Wagner’s work turned out to be the logical place for such an investigation. We need to remember here that whenever Adorno says fascism, he is also saying culture industry. The book on Wagner can therefore be read not only as an account of the birth of fascism out of the spirit of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, but also as an account of the birth of the culture industry *in* the most ambitious high art of the nineteenth century. On the face of it such an account would seem patently absurd since it appears to ignore the existence of a well-developed industrial mass culture in Wagner’s own time. But then Adorno’s essay does not claim to give us a comprehensive historical description of the origins of mass culture as such, nor does he suggest that the place to develop a theory of the culture industry is high art alone. What he does suggest, however, is something largely lost in the dominant accounts of modernism which emphasize the triumphal march of abstraction and surface in painting, textual self-referentiality in literature, atonality in music, and irreconcilable hostility to mass culture and Kitsch in all forms of modernist art. Adorno suggests that the social processes that give shape to mass culture cannot be kept out of artworks of the highest ambition and that any analysis of modernist or, for that matter, premodernist art, will have to trace these processes in the trajectory of the aesthetic materials themselves. The ideology of the artwork’s autonomy is thus undermined by the claim that no work of art is ever untouched by the social. But Adorno makes the even stronger claim that in capitalist society high art is always already permeated by the textures of that mass culture from which it seeks autonomy. As a model analysis of the entanglements of high art with mass cultural commodification the Wagner essay is actually more stimulating than, say, the *Philosophy of Modern Music* which in many ways represents the negative version of modernist triumphalism. Preceding *Jugendstil* and *l’art pour l’art*, which are blamed for simply capitulating to the commodity, it is the body of Wagner’s *oeuvre*, towering as it does at the threshold of modernity, which becomes the privileged locus of that fierce struggle between tradition and modernity, autonomy and commodity, revolution and reaction, and, ultimately, myth and enlightenment.

As I cannot possibly do justice here to Adorno's various writings on Wagner, I will only outline those elements which connect Wagner's aesthetic innovations to features of the modern culture industry. The other half of Adorno's Wagner – Wagner as premodernist – will have to remain underexposed.

To begin with, Adorno concedes throughout his essay that in his time Wagner represented the most advanced stage in the development of music and opera. However, he consistently emphasizes both progressive *and* reactionary elements in Wagner's music, making the point that the one cannot be had without the other. He credits Wagner for heroically attempting to elude the market demands for "easy" opera and for trying to avoid its banality. But this flight, according to Adorno, leads Wagner even more deeply into the commodity. In his later essay "Wagner's Aktualität" (1965) Adorno finds a powerful image for this dilemma: "Everything in Wagner has its historical core. Like a spider his spirit sits in the gigantic web of nineteenth-century exchange relations."³¹ No matter how far Wagner would spin out his music, spider and web will always remain one. How, then, do these exchange relations manifest themselves in Wagner's music? How does the music get caught in the web of cultural commodification? After a discussion of Wagner as social character, which I will skip here, Adorno turns to an analysis of Wagner's role as composer-conductor. He argues that Wagner disguises the growing estrangement of the composer from the audience by conceiving his music "in terms of the gesture of striking a blow" and by incorporating the audience into the work through calculated "effects": "As the striker of blows . . . the composer-conductor gives the claims of the public a terrorist emphasis. Democratic considerateness towards the listener is transformed into connivance with the powers of discipline: in the name of the listener, anyone whose feelings accord with any measure other than the beat of the music is silenced."³² In this interpretation of Wagner's "gesture" Adorno shows how the audience becomes "the reified object of calculation by the artist."³³ And it is here that the parallels with the culture industry emerge. The composer-conductor's attempt to beat his audience into submission is structurally isomorphic to the way in which the culture industry treats the consumer. But the terms of the isomorphism are reversed. In Wagner's theater the composer-conductor is still visible and present as an individual – a residue of the liberal age, as it were – and the spectators are assembled as a public in the dark behind the conductor's baton. The industrial organization of culture, however, replaces the individual conductor with an invisible corporate management and it dissolves the public into the shapeless mass of isolated consumers. The culture industry thus reverses the relations typical of the liberal age by de-individualizing cultural production and privatizing reception. Given Adorno's description of Wagner's audience as the reified object of aesthetic calcula-

tions, it comes as no surprise that he would claim that Wagner's music is already predicated on that ego-weakness which would later become the operational basis of the culture industry: "The audience of these giant works lasting many hours is thought of as unable to concentrate – something not unconnected with the fatigue of the citizen in his leisure time. And while he allows himself to drift with the current, the music, acting as its own impresario, thunders at him in endless repetitions to hammer its message home."³⁴ Such endless repetitions manifest themselves most obviously in Wagner's leitmotiv technique which Adorno relates to Berlioz's *idée fixe* and to the Baudelairean spleen. Adorno interprets the leitmotiv's double character as allegory and advertising. As allegory the leitmotiv articulates a progressive critique of traditional totalizing musical forms and of the "symbolic" tradition of German idealism. At the same time, however, it functions like advertising in that it is designed to be easily remembered by the forgetful. This advertising aspect of the leitmotiv is not something projected back onto it from hindsight. Adorno already locates it in the reactions of Wagner's contemporaries who tended to make crude links between leitmotivs and the persons they characterized. The commercial decay of the leitmotiv, latent in Wagner, becomes full-blown in Hollywood film music "where the sole function of the leitmotiv is to announce heroes or situations so as to help the audience to orientate itself more easily."³⁵

Reification emerges as the conceptual core of Adorno's account. "Allegorical rigidity" has not only infected the motiv like a disease, it has infected Wagner's *oeuvre* as a whole – its music and its characters, its images and myths, and last but not least its institutionalization in Bayreuth as one of the major spectacles of the times. Adorno goes on to discuss reification, which can be regarded as the effect of commodification *in* the musical material, on the levels of melody, color, and orchestration. The overriding concern here is the question of what happens to musical time in Wagner's *oeuvre*. Adorno argues that time becomes abstract and as such defies musical and dramatic development on the level of melody as well as on that of character. The musical material is pulverized, characters are frozen and static. The construction of motiv as temporal sequence is replaced by impressionistic association: "For the composer the use of the beat is a fallacious method of mastering the empty time with which he begins, since the measure to which he subjects time does not derive from the musical content, but from the reified order of time itself."³⁶ The predominance of "sound" in Wagner also dissolves the temporal pressures of harmony. It spatializes musical time, depriving it, as it were, of its historical determinations.³⁷

These observations about the leitmotiv, the reified order of time, and the atomization of musical material lead Adorno to a central point where he affiliates Wagner's composition technique with the mode of production: "It

is difficult to avoid the parallel with the quantification of the industrial labor process, its fragmentation into the smallest possible units . . . Broken down into the smallest units, the totality is supposed to become controllable, and it must submit to the will of the subject who has liberated himself from all pre-existing forms."³⁸ The parallel with the culture industry becomes fully obvious when we read a little further on: "In Wagner's case what predominates is already the totalitarian and seigneurial aspect of atomization; that devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality, which excludes all authentic dialectical interaction."³⁹

What Adorno describes here, of course, is the reflection of the nineteenth-century industrialization of time and space in Wagner's *oeuvre*. The devaluation of the individual vis-à-vis the totality appears in Wagner's orchestration as the tendency to drown out the voice of the individual instrument in favor of a continuum of timbres and large-scale melodic complexes. The "progress" of such orchestration techniques is as suspect to Adorno as the progress of the industrial upsurge of the Bismarck era to which it is compared.

If reification of musical and dramatic time is one major element of Adorno's account, then subjectivistic association and ambiguity of musical meaning is the other side of the same coin. What is at stake here is that which Wagner's contemporaries described as nervousness and hypersensitivity, what Nietzsche called decadence, and what we might call Wagner's modernity. It is interesting to take notice of Adorno's scattered references to the relationship of Wagner's modernity to that of Baudelaire and Monet: "Like Baudelaire's, his reading of bourgeois high capitalism discerned an anti-bourgeois, heroic message in the destruction of *Biedermeier*."⁴⁰ In the essay "Wagner's Aktualität" the discussion of the composer's handling of color unmistakably conjures up the art of Monet: "Wagner's achievement of a differentiation of color by dissolution into minute detail is supplemented by his technique of combining the most minute elements constructively in such a way that something like integral color emerges."⁴¹ Yet Wagner only approaches that threshold which Baudelaire and Monet had already crossed: "No comparison of Wagner with the impressionists will be adequate unless it is remembered that the credo of universal symbolism to which all his technical achievements subscribe is that of Puvis de Chavannes and not Monet's."⁴² Therefore Adorno calls Wagner an "impressionist *malgré lui*" and relates his backwardness to the backwardness of economic and aesthetic developments in mid-nineteenth-century Germany. The key point that emerges from this comparison is the paradox that Wagner's anticipation of the culture industry is proportionate to his aesthetic backwardness in his own time. His music conjures up a distant future because it has not yet succeeded in shedding a past rendered obsolete by modern life. To put it differently, the modernity of

allegory and dissonance in Wagner's work is consistently compromised by that "universal symbolism" which simulates a false totality and forges an equally false monumentality, that of the *Gesamtkunstwerk*.

Wagner's affinity to the culture industry is worked out most explicitly by Adorno in the chapters on phantasmagoria, *Gesamtkunstwerk*, and myth. Adorno's characterization of Wagner's opera as phantasmagoria is an attempt to analyze what happens to aesthetic appearance (*ästhetischer Schein*) in the age of the commodity and as such it is the attempt to come to terms with the pressure commodity fetishism puts on works of art. As phantasmagorias Wagner's operas have veiled all traces of the labor that went into their production. Blocking out traces of production in the work of art is of course one of the major tenets of an earlier idealist aesthetic and as such nothing new in Wagner. But that is precisely the problem. As the commodity form begins to invade all aspects of modern life, all aesthetic appearance is in danger of being transformed into phantasmagoria, into the "illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal."⁴³ According to Adorno, Wagner yields to the pressures of the commodity form. With some minor changes, the following passage taken from the chapter on phantasmagoria could easily be imagined as part of the mass culture chapter in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*:

It [the illusion of the absolute reality of the unreal] sums up the unromantic side of the phantasmagoria: phantasmagoria as the point at which aesthetic appearance becomes a function of the character of the commodity. As a commodity it purveys illusions. The absolute reality of the unreal is nothing but the reality of a phenomenon that not only strives unceasingly to spirit away its own origins in human labor, but also, inseparably from this process and in thrall to exchange value, assiduously emphasizes its use value, stressing that this is its authentic reality, that it is "no imitation" – and all this in order to further the cause of exchange value. In Wagner's day the consumer goods on display turned their phenomenal side seductively towards the mass of consumers while diverting attention from their merely phenomenal character, from the fact that they were beyond reach. Similarly, in the phantasmagoria, Wagner's operas tend to become commodities. Their tableaux assume the character of wares on display (*Ausstellungscharakter*).⁴⁴

At this point myth enters the stage as the embodiment of illusion and as regression to prehistory: "Phantasmagoria comes into being when, under the constraints of its own limitations, modernity's latest products come close to the archaic. Every step forward is at the same time a step into the remote past. As bourgeois society advances it finds that it needs its own camouflage of illusion simply in order to subsist."⁴⁵ As phantasmagoria Wagner's opera reproduces the dream world of the commodity in the form of myth: "He

[Wagner] belongs to the first generation to realize that in a world that has been socialized through and through it is not possible for an individual to alter something that is determined over the heads of men. Nevertheless, it was not given to him to call the overarching totality by its real name. In consequence it is transformed for him into myth."⁴⁶ Myth becomes the problematic solution to Wagner's struggle against the genre music of the Biedermeier period, and his gods and heroes are to guarantee the success of his simultaneous flight from the banality of the commodity age. But as the present and the mythical merge in the *Gesamtkunstwerk*, Wagner's divine realm of ideas, gods, and heroes is nothing but a deluded transcription of the banal world of the present. In a number of scattered observations Adorno juxtaposes, in a quite Benjaminese way, moments of Wagner's *oeuvre* to the culture of everyday life in late nineteenth-century Germany. Thus the *Mastersingers* are said to conjure up – like the images on the box containing the famous *Nürnberger Lebkuchen* – the bliss of an unsullied, premodern German past, which later fed seamlessly into *völkisch* ideology. Elsa's relationship to Lohengrin ("My lord, never shall this question come from me") celebrates the subjugation of women in marriage. Wotan is interpreted as the phantasmagoria of the buried revolution, Siegfried as the "natural" rebel who accelerates rather than prevents the catastrophic destruction of civilization. The thunder motif from the *Ring* becomes the signal sounded by the horn of the Emperor's motor car. Adorno gets to the historical core of Wagner's modern mythology when he writes:

It is impossible to overlook the relationship between Wagnerian mythology and the iconic world of the Empire, with its eclectic architecture, fake Gothic castles, and the aggressive dream symbols of the New-German boom, ranging from the Bavarian castles of Ludwig to the Berlin restaurant that called itself "Rheingold". But the question of authenticity is as fruitless here as elsewhere. Just as the overwhelming power of high capitalism forms myths that tower above the collective conscious, in the same way the mythic region in which the modern consciousness seeks refuge bears the marks of that capitalism: what subjectively was the dream of dreams is objectively a nightmare.⁴⁷

Thus the drama of the future, as Wagner called his *Gesamtkunstwerk*, prefigures that nightmarish regression into an archaic past which completes its trajectory in fascism. The *Gesamtkunstwerk* is intended as a powerful protest against the fragmentation and atomization of art and life in capitalist society. But since it chooses the wrong means it can only end in failure: "Like Nietzsche and subsequently Art Nouveau, which he [Wagner] anticipates in many respects, he would like, single-handed, to will an aesthetic totality into being, casting a magic spell and with defiant unconcern about the absence of the social conditions necessary for its survival."⁴⁸ While the mythic dimension of

Wagner's opera conjures up fascism, its homogenization of music, word, and image is said to anticipate the essential features of Hollywood film: "Thus we see that the evolution of the opera, and in particular the emergence of the autonomous sovereignty of the artist, is intertwined with the origins of the culture industry. Nietzsche, in his youthful enthusiasm, failed to recognize the artwork of the future in which we witness the birth of film out of the spirit of music."⁴⁹ The totality of Wagner's music drama, however, is a false totality subject to disintegration from within: "Even in Wagner's lifetime, and in flagrant contradiction to his programme, star numbers like the Fire Music and Wotan's farewell, the Ride of the Valkyries, the Liebestod and the Good Friday music had been torn out of their context, rearranged and become popular. This fact is not irrelevant to the music dramas, which had cleverly calculated the place of these passages within the economy of the whole. The disintegration of the fragments sheds light on the fragmentariness of the whole."⁵⁰ The logic of this disintegration leads to Schönberg's modernism on the one hand and to the Best of Wagner album on the other. Where high art itself is sucked into the maelstrom of commodification, modernism is born as a reaction and a defense. The point is made bluntly in *Philosophy of Modern Music*: "The liberation of modern painting from representation (*Gegenständlichkeit*), which was to art the break that atonality was to music, was determined by the defensive against the mechanized art commodity – above all photography. Radical music, from its inception, reacted similarly to the commercial depravity of the traditional idiom. It formulated an antithesis against the extension of the culture industry into its own domain."⁵¹ While this statement seems quite schematic, especially in its mechanical derivation of abstraction in painting, it serves to remind us again that modernism itself is held hostage by the culture industry and that theories of modernism neglecting this conjuncture are seriously deficient. Adorno's bleak description of modern mass culture as dream turned nightmare has perhaps outlived its usefulness and can now take its place as a historically contingent and theoretically powerful reflection on fascism. What has not outlived its usefulness, however, is Adorno's suggestion that mass culture was not imposed on art only from the "outside," but that art was transformed into its opposite thanks precisely to its emancipation from traditional forms of bourgeois art. In the vortex of commodification there was never an outside. Wagner is the case in point.

Coda

Reading Adorno in reverse, from *Dialectic of Enlightenment* backward to the Wagner essay of 1937/8, from fascism and the capitalist culture industry back

to Imperial Germany, leads to the conclusion that the framework for his theory of the culture industry was already in place *before* his encounter with American mass culture in the United States. In the Wagner book the pivotal categories of fetishism and reification, ego weakness, regression, and myth are already fully developed, waiting, as it were, to be articulated in terms of the American culture industry. At the same time, reading Adorno's brilliant tour de force on Wagner – and a tour de force it is – produces a strange sense of *déjà vu* in which the temporal terms are once more displaced. It is as if accompanying Adorno on his travels into the nineteenth century we were simultaneously travelling into yet another time-space Adorno himself did not live to experience: that of the postmodern. Large segments of the book on Wagner could be read as a modernist polemic against postmodernism. It is indeed easy to imagine how Adorno would have panned those facile citations of the historical idiom in postmodern architecture and music, how he would have poured scorn over the decay of allegory into the “anything goes” of the art “scene,” how he would have resisted the new mythology of aesthetic experience, the cult of performance, of self-help, and of other forms of narcissistic indulgence. Adorno would not have hesitated one moment to see the disintegration of modernism as a return to its prehistory and to collapse the prehistory of the modern with its posthistory.

After all, the artwork is still in the grip of the commodity form, more so, if anything, than in the nineteenth century. The giant spider web of exchange relations Adorno spoke of has certainly expanded since that time. The late nineteenth century still had resistant popular cultures and it left more uncolonized spaces for possible evasions and challenges than today's thoroughly administered culture. If such a reading is by and large correct we will have to ask what the chances are for a genuine contemporary art after the demise of classical modernism. One conclusion would be to see the only possibility for contemporary art in a further elaboration of the modernist project. Possibly, Adorno would have advocated this route even though he was perfectly aware of the dangers of Alexandrian sterility, of a dogmatic ossification of modernism itself. Another conclusion, however, would be to try and relocate contemporary artistic production and practices in the interstices between modernism and mass culture. Commodification invaded Wagner's *oeuvre* without completely debilitating it. On the contrary, it actually gave rise to great works of art. But then one must be permitted to ask why it should not be possible today to produce ambitious and successful works of art which would draw both on the tradition of modernism and on mass culture, including various subcultures. Some of the most interesting art of our time seems to pursue precisely this project. Of course Adorno would argue that the conjuncture that produced Wagner's *oeuvre* is irretrievably past. True enough, but

I am not suggesting simply to revive Wagner's art as a model for the present. Where something like that is being done, e.g., in the films of Syberberg, the results are often less than convincing. The point is rather to take heart from Adorno's account of Wagner's contradictions and dilemmas and to abandon that set of purist stances which would either lock all art in the laboratory of ever more involuted modernist experimentation or reject, uncompromisingly, any attempt to create a contemporary art precisely out of the tensions between modernism and mass culture. Who, after all, would want to be the Lukács of the postmodern . . . ?

Postscript 2000

When this essay was written almost twenty years ago in the midst of a broad revival of interest in Frankfurt School theories of modern culture and society, Adorno's fate on the American intellectual scene was clouded whereas Benjamin's star was rising fast. Increasingly, Adorno served as a straw man in the high/low debate that then energized the emerging field of postmodern studies and their attacks on high modernism. Adorno's rigorous insistence on the autonomy of modernist art was mistakenly equated with a conservative defense of the high cultural canon. People would inveigh *ad nauseam* against Adorno's negative take on jazz and film, two phenomena that signified Americanness in need of defense from European attacks. Adorno served as a welcome target in this post-1960s counterattack on Eurocentric mandarin elitism and postmodern triumphalism. His detractors, rarely familiar with the complexities of his writings, many of which were not available in English or, if so, in exceedingly poor translations, could thus bask in the glow of breaking a lance for American popular culture and racial correctness, as if there had not been a comparable lack of understanding of jazz and mass media among American academic critics and much of the public in the US at the time when Adorno formulated these critiques in the 1940s.

My point in the essay was twofold. I tried to show that Adorno's critique of American mass culture was already prefigured in his work on Richard Wagner, an icon of international high culture, in work which actually preceded Adorno's exile in the US. At stake then and in the exile writings was a dialectic between high and low which the pop culture celebrations of our times mostly choose to ignore. Secondly, the essay was part of an attempt by *New German Critique*, most consistently argued in the brilliant work of Miriam Hansen, to read Adorno against the grain of his stark condemnations of the culture industry. There were indeed indications both in his later essays from the 1960s such as "The Culture Industry Reconsidered" (NGC 6) and

“Transparencies of Film” (NGC 24–25) as well as in originally unpublished sections of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, entitled “Schema der Massenkultur,” and in *Composition for the Films* (co-authored with Hanns Eisler) that lowered the polemic several notches and allowed for a more differentiated analysis of mass culture and its reception. At the same time, Adorno never relented in his overriding critique of the commodity and fetishization, tied as they were to his historical analysis of the shift from liberal to monopoly capitalism. Acknowledging such nuances of argument did not radically change the received overall reading of Adorno’s critique of the culture industry, but it permitted us to shift the ground from a moralizing leftist argument against elitism and Eurocentrism to a focus on structural categories such as commodification, fetishization, repetition, and ideology, which remain important for any post-Adornean critique of contemporary culture high or low.

Our attempt to complicate the US reception of Adorno, however, fell mostly on deaf ears. The stage was set for the arrival of cultural studies, and cultural studies began to read mass culture as the realm of transgression and subversion while at the same time losing all interest in high culture, traditional or modernist. The image of Adorno as high-cult elitist was so established that an attack on the German philosopher routinely accompanied celebrations of the radical aspirations of the new cultural studies approach. To be sure, this line was not argued by the Birmingham school of cultural studies itself, but by Birmingham’s disciples and progeny in the US. Adorno’s European high, already chided by some US critics in the 1950s, was yet once again knocked off its imaginary pedestal, and up went low with the establishment of cultural studies programs in this country. In the process, the old hierarchy was simply reversed. Forgotten was the fact that Adorno never thought about high art in terms of pedestals, which was always one of the first things he critiqued (cf. his radical critique of the role of Bach and baroque music in the German post-1945 restoration). Forgotten also was the fact that Adorno’s 1940s critique of American mass culture was shared by most of the left New York intellectuals at the time. Ignored finally was the fact that postmodernism in its most ambitious manifestations generated new and exciting hybrid forms that could no longer be captured by the old high/low binary model. The possibility Adorno’s work offered, namely to explore the dialectic between high and low in a new historical constellation, went by the wayside, and the old conservative binary model triumphed in its now populist version.

It is worth noting that this basic move of the cultstud left displayed a disturbing similarity to the attack of the canonstud right on another set of European interlopers in the American paradise – Nietzsche, Heidegger, Derrida. Except that the right, in its antimodernist zeal, of course defended

high canons and the classics, lamented the closing of the American mind, and demonized cultural studies together with poststructuralism, feminism, and postcolonialism. Where one cohort screamed “elitism,” the other attacked relativism, nihilism, and narcissism. Both views are the diametrically opposed after-effects of the 1960s; both are based on shoddy readings, and neither one seems very helpful at a time when the whole high/low dichotomy has itself become rather tired and historically obsolete.

There was thus an all but total failure to acknowledge that for Adorno the high/low binary of capitalist culture was never a strict hierarchical opposition, but rather something like a mirror relationship. The mirror of mass culture demonstrated how all culture under capitalism had become contaminated by structures of profit, power, and class. Surely Adorno’s project, ever more difficult to sustain over the decades, was to secure a realm of high modernist culture which to him provided the one and only form of resistance to an immutable status quo. In a famous formulation in a letter to Benjamin, he argued that both modernist art and mass culture bear the scars of capitalism, and that both are torn halves of an integral freedom to which, however, they do not add up. In *After the Great Divide*, I spoke of a compulsive *pas de deux* which still strikes me as a good metaphor for the high/low relationship in the age of modernism. How to think about the high/low dialectic in the age of the new media and the Internet would require fuller treatment which, however, could still draw substantially on Adorno’s thought precisely because it refuses to be locked into a reductive dichotomous pattern.

Indeed, there may now be a reversal in Adorno’s fate in this country. The 1990s have seen a plethora of new critical treatments of Adorno from a variety of different theoretical and disciplinary angles. More of his work, especially his literary and music criticism, has been translated into English, thus making a more complex understanding possible. His reputation will not match the cult image Benjamin has achieved in the US, but increasingly the two are being read together rather than played off against each other. The recent resurgence of interest in questions of aesthetics, literature, and media issues in the broadest sense make Adorno more pertinent than Habermas, whose work has always neglected these areas central to an earlier Critical Theory. In the realm of studies of mass culture, finally, it seems that an Adorno resurgence is called for at a time when the increasing vertical integration of the culture industry by megamergers and global expansion proceeds apace, and when the cultstard myth of the rebel consumer and her transgressions has run aground.

At a time when so many other positions on media culture fall on the side of either apocalypticism or triumphalism, Adorno’s work on high modernism

and on the mass culture of a different epoch still provides a good starting point for current discussions. Neither the American populist ethnography of cultural reception, nor sociologies of taste and distinction, whether of the American (Herbert Gans) or French (Pierre Bourdieu) brand, suffice to analyze the constellation of high art and popular culture and their various intersections after postmodernism. How a rigorously historicized Adorno might still strike sparks in literary, visual, and aesthetic analysis at a time when print is losing its power as a dominant medium, the nation state is waning as guarantor of traditional high culture, and globalization creates ever more diverse and hybrid cultural formations, remains a task to be further explored.

Notes

- 1 Jürgen Habermas, *Strukturwandel der Öffentlichkeit* (Neuwied/Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962). See also Habermas, "The Public Sphere," *New German Critique*, 3 (Fall, 1974), 49–55.
- 2 John Brenkman, "Mass Media: From Collective Experience to the Culture of Privatization," *Social Text*, 1 (Winter 1979), 101.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 For a recent discussion of the interface between modernism and popular culture in Germany see Peter Jelavich, "Popular Dimensions of Modernist Elite Culture: The Case of Theatre in Fin-de-Siècle Munich," in Dominick LaCapra and Steven L. Kaplan (eds.), *Modern European Intellectual History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1982), pp. 220–50.
- 5 Anthony Giddens, "Modernism and Postmodernism," *New German Critique*, 22 (Winter, 1981), 15. For a different approach to the problem of changes in perception in the 19th century see Anson G. Rabinbach, "The Body without Fatigue: A 19th-Century Utopia," in Seymour Drescher, David Sabeau, and Allan Sharlin (eds.), *Political Symbolism in Modern Europe* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Books, 1982), pp. 42–62.
- 6 Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Geschichte der Eisenbahnreise. Zur Industrialisierung von Raum und Zeit im 19. Jahrhundert* (Munich and Vienna: Hanser, 1977). Translated into English as *The Railway Journey* (New York: Urizen, 1979).
- 7 At the same time it should be noted that the major accounts of modernism in literature and art rarely if ever try to discuss the relationship of the modernist work of art to the social and cultural process of modernization at large.
- 8 I do not know of any specific study which traces the pervasive impact of the culture industry thesis on mass culture research in Germany. For the impact of Adorno and Horkheimer in the United States see Douglas Kellner, "Kulturindustrie und Massenkommunikation. Die kritische Theorie und ihre Folgen," in *Sozialforschung als Kritik*, ed. Wolfgang Bonss and Axel Honneth (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 482–515.

- 9 For an excellent discussion of the theoretical and historical issues involved in an analysis of the modernism/mass culture/popular culture nexus see Thomas Crow, "Modernism and Mass Culture in the Visual Arts," in S. Guilbaut and D. Solkin (eds.), *Modernism and Modernity* (Halifax, Nova Scotia: The Press of the Nova Scotia College of Art and Design, 1983).
- 10 Miriam Hansen, "Introduction to Adorno's 'Transparencies on Film,'" *New German Critique*, 24–25 (Fall/Winter 1981–2), 186–98.
- 11 Horkheimer and Adorno, "Das Schema der Massenkultur," in Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1981), p. 331.
- 12 Ibid.
- 13 Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Gebrauchswerte der Literatur," in Christa Bürger, Peter Bürger, and Jochen Schulte-Sasse (eds.), *Zur Dichotomisierung von hoher und niedriger Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1982), pp. 62–107.
- 14 Adorno, "Zu Subjekt und Objekt," in *Stichworte* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1969), p. 165.
- 15 Ibid. On Adorno's relationship to early German romanticism see Jochen Hörisch, "Herrscherwort, Geld und geltende Sätze: Adornos Aktualisierung der Frühromantik und ihre Affinität zur poststrukturalistischen Kritik des Subjekts," in B. Lindner and W. M. Lüdke, *Materialien zur ästhetischen Theorie Th. W. Adornos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1980), pp. 397–414.
- 16 Adorno, "Sexualtabus und Rechte heute," in *Eingriffe* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1963), p. 104f.
- 17 Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton (London: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 212f. (trans. modified).
- 18 See for instance Bertold Hinz, *Die Malerei im deutschen Faschismus* (Munich: Hanser, 1974).
- 19 Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- 20 Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music* (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), p. 30.
- 21 Peter Bürger, *Vermittlung-Rezeption-Funktion* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1979), p. 130f. Eugene Lunn, in his valuable study *Marxism and Modernism* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, and London: University of California, 1982), has emphasized Adorno's indebtedness to the "aesthetic of objectified expression" prevalent in Trakl, Heym, Barlach, Kafka, and Schönberg.
- 22 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970), p. 16.
- 23 Ibid., p. 38.
- 24 Ibid. – The problem here is a historical one, namely that of non-simultaneous developments in different countries and different art forms. Explaining such *Ungleichzeitigkeiten* is no easy task, but it certainly requires a theory of modernism able to relate artistic developments more cogently to social, political, and economic contexts than Adorno's (theoretically grounded) *Berührungsangst* would permit him to do. This is not to say that Adorno misunderstood the genuine modernity of Baudelaire or Manet. On the contrary, it is precisely in the way in which Adorno distinguishes Wagner from the early French modernists that we can glimpse his recognition of such *Ungleichzeitigkeiten*.

- 25 Adorno, *Noten zur Literature*, I (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1958), p. 72.
- 26 Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 163.
- 27 Adorno, *Ästhetische Theorie*, p. 352.
- 28 Ibid.
- 29 Ibid., p. 355.
- 30 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 13 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1971), p. 504. For a good discussion of Adorno's Schönberg interpretation see Lunn, *Marxism and Modernism*, pp. 256–66. The question of whether Adorno is right about Wagner from a musicological standpoint cannot be addressed here. For a musicological critique of Adorno's Wagner see Carl Dahlhaus, "Soziologische Dechiffrierung von Musik: Zu Theodor W. Adornos Wagner Kritik." *International Review of the Aesthetics and Sociology of Music*, 1:2 (1970), 137–46.
- 31 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1978), p. 562.
- 32 Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: New Left Books, 1981), p. 31 (trans. modified).
- 33 Ibid. Cf. also Michael Hays, "Theater and Mass Culture: The Case of the Director," *New German Critique*, 29 (Spring/Summer, 1983), 133–46.
- 34 Ibid., p. 32.
- 35 Ibid., p. 46.
- 36 Ibid., p. 33.
- 37 Adorno, *Gesammelte Schriften*, 13, p. 499.
- 38 Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p. 49.
- 39 Ibid., p. 50.
- 40 Ibid., p. 101.
- 41 Adorno, "Wagners Aktualität," in *Gesammelte Schriften*, 16, p. 555.
- 42 Adorno, *In Search of Wagner*, p. 50.
- 43 Ibid., p. 90.
- 44 Ibid.
- 45 Ibid., p. 95.
- 46 Ibid., p. 119.
- 47 Ibid., p. 123.
- 48 Ibid., p. 101.
- 49 Ibid., p. 107.
- 50 Ibid., p. 106.
- 51 Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, p. 5 (trans. modified).