

Jameson and Habermas

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Jameson and Habermas are two sides of the same bad coin. They are postmodern in their retreat from an aesthetic of modernism and in their throttling of the Other to make it speak with meaning. This retreat is a further regression to reified subjectivity. Jameson and Habermas are thus postmodern in their regression behind an aesthetics of modernism that at least acknowledged the nonsubjective. This is not to imply, however, that modernism is the final form of aesthetic production but only that an aesthetic theory that refuses any potential opposition to reigning social relations destroys what has been, at least since Kant, the peculiar character of aesthetic artifacts, experience and theory. The postmodern insistence on articulation is not to be castigated, rather only the satisfaction with an articulation that is but the echo of subjectivity. Jameson and Habermas are the unwitting theoretical sponsors of such satisfaction. They each propound an aesthetic theory that shrinks back from the dialectic in Adorno's conception of modern artworks (which reveals modernist works as both autonomous and social) and assumes a position from which a frightened subjectivity can once again assert that it is master — because everything turns out to be comprehensible, including aesthetic objects. But despite their social character, aesthetic objects retain their own autonomy and can never be subsumed by a logic of comprehension.

This is the fundamental insight of Kant's *Critique of Judgment* — subjectivity constitutes itself (and this is pleasurable) via an aesthetic judgment which cannot (yet does) subsume a particular under a universal concept. Aesthetic judgment is thus the originary transformation of reason into cunning. The impossibility of articulating the beautiful or the sublime is the subjective recognition of alterity at the heart of subjectivity itself. Both Jameson and Habermas subsume aesthetic experience under a valorized subjectivity, which thereby serves to efface the very possibility of opposition to reified subjectivity. They facilitate a return of a master subject — a subjectivity that doubles its mastery over the self and nature by extending its reifying way over that which opposes it — through an aesthetics of content. In their diligent pursuit of an aesthetics of meaningfulness that colonizes the space in which some sign of what might stand beyond subjectivity could appear, both critics function as the avant-garde of dominating subjectivity. An alternative aesthetics would cut against the grain of subjectivity — an aesthetics seeking to restore the primacy of the object within subjective production, not the primacy of a desiring subjectivity, whatever the content of its desire.

In *The Political Unconscious*, Jameson writes: "The assertion of a political unconscious proposes that we ... explore the multiple paths that lead to the unmasking of cultural artifacts as socially symbolic acts."¹ History, as both past experience and its representation, becomes a cultural artifact and exists within each artifact. The political unconscious is where history becomes narrative; it makes cultural artifacts and culture per se. The generation of the appearance of history by the political unconscious and History as a transcendent noumenon is described in Jameson's discussion of Althusser and Lacan: "History is not a text, not a narrative, master or otherwise, but that, as an absent cause, it is inaccessible to us except in textual form, and ... our approach to it and to the Real itself necessarily passes through its prior textualization, its narrativization in the political unconscious."² Since History and the Real cannot be approached, let alone apprehended, except in the narratives produced by the political unconscious, the focus

shifts to the symbolic act of narrative. Yet once narrative is treated as solely symbolic, i.e., as a carrier of meaning, there is no further impediment to disclosing its meaning.

Narratives are social mediations which, as such, are at least in principle accessible to the constituting subject. The problem of the status of meaning arises not just when the constituting subject is alienated — at which time meaning becomes no longer accessible because it seems to be other — but rather in the subjective supposition that some originary meaning within any and all aesthetic objects exhausts the content and form of those objects. This supposition is the "unconscious" recognition of the loss of meaning and a reactionary attempt to posit and entrench meaning. This supposition is thus the reflex of a self-preservation that regresses behind the concept of culture: "culture — as that which goes beyond the system of self-preservation of the species — involves an irrevocably critical impulse toward the status quo and all institutions thereof."³ The "critical impulse" directed against the social and subjective *status quo* is precisely what falls by the wayside in Jameson's ideal of the transparency of aesthetic production and objects. Adorno remarks on such an ideal: "the materialistic transparency of culture has not made it more honest, only more vulgar."⁴

Jameson tries to extend this tautology within meaning a step further: there should be no impediment to disclosing the meaning, the source of the production of meaning itself. He moves from the content of a particular narrative (meaning) to form (narrative) to content (meaning) of aesthetic form. It is this third and final move that is unwarranted by the nature of form and by the peculiar character of form in modernism. The social meaning of aesthetic form cannot be fully articulated — form itself cannot be exhausted by meaning. Adorno's premise of aesthetic form as both autonomous and a *fait social* is the specification of the nonsubjective and social aspects of those objects which Kant found underlying the possibility of aesthetic judgment. The autonomy of aesthetic form is what separates its products from every other form of social production. This autonomy is the recognition of Kant's insight that aesthetic objects resist and oppose the progress of subjectivity's instrumental rationality via concepts and meaning. Jameson forgets, despite his apparent recognition of the inarticulable nature of form as "unconscious," that form is necessarily opaque: it is the organization and positing of meaning, which nonetheless implicitly opposes it. Although History and the Real may be approached via narrative, they are not genuinely symbolic, since they cannot be apprehended in and of themselves. Instead of representing them, symbols are ciphers of their displacement. Although symbols stand in place of History and the Real, they do not stand *for* them: they point toward or away from them, not, as Jameson suggests, toward a precise referent.

What is specifically regressive for aesthetic theory in Jameson's program of a political unconscious, is that he proposes to supply the referent for that which Kant and Adorno theorized as exceeding subjectivity. By locating subjectivity as the ultimate referent and source of an affirmative meaning, Jameson seems to grant to subjectivity a lost and longed-for legitimacy. That this seeming restoration of the "meaning" of subjectivity (through Jameson's discovery of the "meaning" of its products) is but a further reification and defrauding of subjectivity is captured by Adorno: "The concept of meaning involves an objectivity beyond art 'making': as a made thing meaning is already fiction. Meaning duplicates the subject, however collective, and defrauds it of that which it appears to grant."⁵

Jameson's enterprise should be judged in terms of whether he respects the autonomy of cultural artifacts or, alternatively, imposes a direction on them from above. Unfortunately, Jameson has broken off the dialectic of cultural artifacts in the "ideology" of their form. Where is the Jameson who warned in 1969: "The mind tends inevitably towards illusions of its own autonomy, if only because it is impossible to be self-conscious all the time, if only because thought inevitably tends to forget itself and to sink itself in its object."⁶ Is not the political unconscious just such an example of thought having forgotten itself in an illusion of autonomy, the usurpation of an autonomy that once belonged precisely to those things that opposed the ubiquity of thought? The political unconscious is not just thought sunk into its object but, more dangerously, subjectivity sunk into itself. It should come as no surprise when, with subjectivity collapsed into itself, one or another impulse of subjectivity is judged genuine, for there is no longer the possibility of some sign which might point away from subjectivity. Jameson continued his warning: "Then there comes into being an illusion of transparency, in which the mind looks like the world, and we stare at concepts as though they were things," He has succumbed to precisely this illusion by transforming both cultural artifacts via the political unconscious into pure transparency. However, subjectivity has a history — it cannot be reduced to an essentialism which posits some Utopian desire as genuine so that in turn it can serve as the *a priori* source of all its artifacts and forms of production.

Jameson offers an analysis limited to the symbolic structure of aesthetic artifacts, which depends on a conflation of symbol and ideology that reduces the former to the latter. He reduces symbol to ideology by presuming Levi-Strauss as an anthropological authority to make judgments concerning aesthetic phenomena. This analysis, however, is founded on a category mistake: that aesthetic artifacts may have a symbolic component (or, following Jameson, be wholly symbolic) does not warrant the inference that any symbolic artifact is therefore aesthetic. Indeed, a minimal requirement for judging something aesthetic may just be that an artifact exist as something more than a symbol (the premise of Kant's third *Critique*). For Jameson, however, it is the symbolic character of any mode of production that qualifies it as both aesthetic and ideological.

Consider Jameson's conclusion following a discussion of Levi-Strauss' interpretation of face painting among the Caduveo Indians as the symbolic resolution of social contradictions: "We may suggest that, from this perspective, ideology is not something which informs or invests symbolic production; rather the aesthetic act is itself ideological, and the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right, with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions."⁷ A nagging question here is why Jameson chose Caduveo face painting as an example of aesthetic production. One is tempted to suppose that Caduveo face painting was a ripe candidate for aesthetic analysis because it is a kind of painting and, as everyone should know, painting is an aesthetic activity. And house painting? Perhaps house painters are, after all, agents "with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions." What if Caduveo face painting is more like house painting than fine arts painting; that is, what if it is not as symbolic as Jameson and Levi-Strauss assume? The referent of symbolic Caduveo face painting as a socially meaningful act is no more inaccessible to the Caduveo than is Levi-Strauss' interpretation. Although the referent

may not be transparent to the Caduveo, there is in principle nothing that bars them from it.

The analogy here for Jameson would be not just to our symbolic production but also, since they are one and the same for him, to aesthetic form — if we understand the social function of symbolic activity we have captured aesthetic form. But this collapse of aesthetic form into symbolic production is hardly justified by Jameson's use of the Caduveo example. He claims that "the aesthetic act is itself ideological" and that "aesthetic ... form is to be seen ... with the function of inventing imaginary or formal 'solutions' to unresolvable social contradictions." Yet it does not follow that this ideology or function is aesthetic. Can we not readily grant that the Caduveo activity is symbolic (and ideological), even that its symbolic character has the function of inventing solutions, without being compelled to add that this activity and this function is aesthetic?

Consider an example a little closer to home. Within an analysis of the social function of capital, one can readily admit that autoworkers in Detroit are engaged in two realms of symbolic production, i.e., the production of commodities and, when not selling their labor power, the use of "leisure time" as the symbolic production of a solution to their unresolvable social contradictions. Yet autoworkers are not evidently engaged in aesthetic production in either of these cases. Leisure time might be construed as having one of the features of the aesthetic: an imaginary solution to contradictory social relations. But leisure time does not stand opposed to the social relations it intends, imaginary or not, to resolve. The contemporary industrialization of leisure time and the ease of its susceptibility to colonization by industry reveals the character of leisure time as being no more nor less than that of the symbolic and ideological production that delivers commodities. Hence leisure time is not only populated by commodities but is itself one.

The genuine criterion for judging the aesthetic potential of leisure time in Detroit or of Caduveo face painting is whether the solution, imaginary or not, stands in opposition to unresolvable social relations. But this is precisely what Jameson's conception of aesthetic form as thoroughly ideological cannot allow. In effect he argues that symbolic production is ideological production and we should call them both aesthetic in order to disallow any possibility of some sort of production which might oppose the production of meaning and ideology. This leads to the heart of Jameson's use of "unconscious," and the profound contradiction within any attempt to locate aesthetic production there, if the unconscious is, as Freud asserted, incapable of any negation, it cannot be argued that solutions (which by definition stand opposed to the status quo) issue from it. The negativity (read: autonomy) of aesthetic form must have another source.

When Jameson writes that "the production of aesthetic or narrative form is to be seen as an ideological act in its own right," he presents the political unconscious as the basis of an ideology production that cannot help but taint all of its products, i.e., narratives, with ideology. Or, to put it more strongly, the political unconscious is the source of ideology. Insofar as all symbolic activity is founded within this unconscious, all meaningful activity is ideological, and aesthetic form constitutes the most ideological cultural artifact. At first glance, nothing would be lost by granting this, since it amounts to nothing more than the recognition of what Marcuse called the affirmative character of culture, except that Jameson insists it is form itself which constitutes the ideological

character of aesthetic artifacts. It is precisely this characterization of form that marks Jameson's break with Adorno's aesthetics and underpins his refusal to distinguish legitimate art (i.e., successful according to its own terms, living up to its own concept, aiding the nonidentical, etc.) from illegitimate art. If Jameson argued that it is the content of symbolic artifacts (i.e., meaning) that is necessarily ideological, he would be in agreement with Adorno's analysis of the illusory character of meaning.⁸ But his position here leaves unexplained the historical transformations not only of narrative but also within aesthetic form.

The ideological character of aesthetic form is easiest to discern, according to Jameson, in a particularly reified example such as the genre novel. "Genres are essentially literary institutions, or social contracts between a writer and a specific public, whose function is to specify the proper use of a particular cultural artifact."⁹ In the case of genre, it is not then the political unconscious which gives rise to the genre form, at least not in contemporary society. The genre novel is not subject to an unconscious form-giving mechanism but is instead the object of the most explicit social "contract." How then is this particular aesthetic form to be regarded? Since genre narratives are no longer products of unconscious political machinations, what becomes of genre form? To press further, since narrative is generated by the unconscious, can genre novels be construed as narratives at all?

The answers to these questions depend on a willingness to make distinctions between various kinds of aesthetic form. Jameson is unwilling to distinguish reified from nonreified aesthetic form. This is why he cannot substantively distinguish *modernism* from *mass culture*. One is tempted to speculate that the source of this unwillingness lies in a misplaced populism, a desire to legitimate what once was called folk culture by finding Utopian impulses within its contemporary, transformed products. But this is truly audacious. Can Jameson really suppose that the reading public, i.e., the marketplace, determines which genre novels it shall read? Is there a contract between the reading public and the publishers?

Adorno's essay, "Lyric Poetry and Society," deals with the same issue as Jameson's book, i.e., an understanding of the sociological content of aesthetic artifacts secured through an investigation of a single reified aesthetic form. Instead of the genre novel, Adorno examines lyric poetry, just as in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* he and Horkheimer examine the epic. In both cases, Adorno's analysis discloses a particular aesthetic form — not as a static, explicit contract, but as an embodiment of cultural contradictions and, more important, as containing within it the transition to a new aesthetic form and a new subjectivity. The *Odyssey* is at once a recapitulation of the birth of subjectivity through domination and a critique of bourgeois subjectivity, which presages the transition to the novel form. The artwork can achieve this transcendence only if its form is distinct from its ideological content.

For Jameson, ideology is simply concealment and delusion reified as form. He penetrates aesthetic form and posits there a legitimate Utopian impulse as its originating impetus. There are two objections to this penetration. The first is that the inaccessibility of the Real as agent of history, and History as thing-in-itself, proscribe any speculation of an originating cause that lies behind historical and aesthetic phenomena. The second and (for aesthetic theory) crucial objection is the destruction of aesthetic form as the place

where "those things (could) be heard which ideology conceals."¹⁰ Form, as pure ideology, is transparent; but it is this transparency which conceals the very things that form allows to be heard. It is not the sounds of subjectivity, no matter how Utopian or legitimate its impulses, which are to be heard in form, but precisely the opposite: the objective sounds of opposition to the contradictions subjectivity has imposed upon itself and nature. For Jameson, ideology is just the obfuscation of some contradiction and its imaginary solution, to which we have no other means of access.

The context of Jameson's account of ideology and form becomes apparent in a dispute with Northrop Frye's conception of the romance genre. Frye understands romance not as the substitution of an ideal for mundane reality, but as the transformation of ordinary reality. Jameson is committed to the conception of any aesthetic form, but especially genre, as wholly artificial. "Frye is therefore not wrong to evoke the intimate connection between romance as a mode and the 'natural' imagery of the earthly paradise or the waste land, of the power of bliss or the enchanted wood. What is misleading is the implication that this 'nature' is in any sense itself a 'natural' rather than a very peculiar and specialized social and historical phenomenon."¹¹ In other words, what Jameson cannot conceive is the possibility that aesthetic form is itself the constitution of a second nature, or at least a means for such a constitution. He cannot accede to the implication of Frye's statement that "the quest-romance is the search of the libido or desiring self for a fulfillment that will deliver it from the anxieties of reality but will still contain that reality."¹² Jameson cannot accept the possibility of a second nature, since it would mean that, within aesthetic artifacts and, by extension, within aesthetic form, the very reality they reject will be both contained and opposed. If aesthetic form were to contain some aspect of the reality it negates, it would no longer be mere artifice or wholly ideological. For Jameson, the unacceptable corollary of Frye's statement is the implication that ordinary life "must already have been conceived, not as some humdrum place of secular contingency and 'normal' existence, but rather as the end product of curse and enchantment, black magic, baleful spells, and primal desolation."¹³ Since Jameson posits normal existence as the given, he cannot help but see the dichotomy of good and evil inscribed in one fashion or another in romance as having no basis nor counterpart in experience.

The central fault of Jameson's book lies in his account of experience and the form of subjectivity. The positing of mundane experience as a given precludes his seeing what Adorno has described as the entwinement of myth and enlightenment. The misunderstanding of the form and history of experience leads him to assert that the twin poles of every aesthetic artifact, ideology and Utopia, are in fact simultaneous and profoundly interdependent. This might be put more strongly, even while staying wholly within Jameson's conception: ideology and Utopia are inseparable, interchangeable and indistinguishable components of every artwork. They are, in effect, one and the same. The solution to the problem lies in the *a poria* of art prescribed by the very polarity of Utopia and ideology: the Utopian can only be expressed within a form that is necessarily ideological, because all ideology contains a genuine Utopian impulse.

The coexistence within the artwork of a Utopian impulse and ideology is the solution Jameson offers to the traditional Marxist formulation of the problem of the identity of the artwork: "How is it possible for a cultural text which fulfills a demonstrably

ideological function, as a hegemonic work whose formal categories as well as its content secure the legitimation of this or that form of class domination — how is it possible for such a text to embody a properly Utopian impulse, or to resonate a universal value inconsistent with the narrower limits of class privilege which inform its more immediate ideological vocation?"¹⁴ In other words, the traditional formulation asks how it is possible for a text to be both Utopian and ideological. The traditional response solves this dilemma inadequately, by depending on the presupposition of liberalism that construes politics (i.e., the Utopian impulse) and ideology as secondary and artificial aspects of authentic and primary "private" life. The problem with this solution is that it relegates both politics and ideology to artificiality. Jameson reverses this schema by placing the artificial as primary and then asserting that this artificiality is somehow connected to the Real and History. He does so by first showing the ubiquity of ideology and Utopia: "All ideology in the strongest sense, including the most exclusive forms of ruling-class consciousness just as much as that of oppositional or oppressed classes — is in its very nature Utopian."¹⁵ He next argues for the authenticity of ideology, despite its basis in strategic domination: "Even hegemonic or ruling-class culture and ideology are Utopian, not in spite of their instrumental function to secure and perpetuate class privilege and power, but rather precisely because that function is also in and of itself the affirmation of collective solidarity."¹⁶ In other words, ideology is authentic because it is the expression of an authentic Utopian affirmation of collective solidarity (even though it requires some imagination to view class identity as the product of an impulse toward the collective, rather than the selective). Ideology is inauthentic, however, because it finds expression, takes form only through the political unconscious which transforms it into a symbol.

If all ideology contains a moment of Utopia, then there is nothing distinct about the artwork's Utopian ideology. The conclusion here is that the artwork is just another artifact of ideology or class consciousness. Although artworks, as Adorno has shown, have an ideological component, they cannot be reduced to ideology, even the proviso that their ideology is Utopian.

Jameson's only hesitation in collapsing the distinction between ideology and Utopia, and thus between class identity and collective solidarity (and, finally the distinction between aesthetic form and every other social artifact), is contained in his warning that the Utopian impulse is to be read "allegorically" and as a "figure" of a potential future, "concrete" and Utopian, collective. But to construe narrative and hence aesthetic form as exhausted by meaning (especially an originary, collective and Utopian one) is to treat all aesthetic artifacts as symptoms rather than critical diagnoses of, and potential interventions in, the status quo. If all cultural production becomes the symptomatic reproduction of the "progress" of civilization — founded on self-preservation and domination — the concept of culture loses its specificity as that which, minimally, holds in check the barbarism immanent in the movement of civilization. Thus it is no accident that Jameson affirms the "allegory" of a collective ideology at the heart of all social production and reproduction of the social. His affirmation is recognition of the loss of the critical function of culture in a false social totality. The purpose of the notion of a political unconscious is to place a socially-affirming motor at the source of the generation of all social and cultural production.

The immanent critique of the project of *The Political Unconscious* can be made by judging the social products and forms that issue from a collectivity-desiring subjectivity. The falsity of this desire is revealed in the necessity of Jameson's use of the term allegory: the "allegorical" character of all manifestations of subjective (especially genuine and Utopian) desire is the implicit recognition of a disjunction between desire and its products. That social and aesthetic forms are only a "figure" of the genuine collective desire of subjectivity implies a necessary mis-identity and hence falsehood within subjectivity itself. This mis-identity results not from the clash of something external to subjectivity (e.g., capital, exchange relations, a supposed economy of scarcity, etc.) and subjectivity's Utopian impulse, but proceeds rather from the immanent falsehood of a desiring subjectivity as originary source of all production.

The "autonomy" of the aesthetic as nonetheless a category of social and ideological production is the nagging reminder of an alterity within any desiring subjectivity, regardless how genuine, collective and Utopian. Kant's figure of the sublime, and that of natural beauty, is the cipher for what exceeds the grasp of subjectivity. Jameson's aesthetics of a political unconscious locates the subject as *the* source of that potentially exceeds it and thereby collapses all production and potential objectivity into the bad infinity of a self-affirming and regressive subjectivism. This effacement of the critical character of aesthetic objects, and thus the denial of the oppositional function of culture *per se*, is effected by Jameson through a recapitulation of the same move that Hegel makes in trying to overcome Kant's aesthetic theory. Hegel's dismissal of any notion of natural beauty is the model, within the history of aesthetic theory, for Jameson's dismissal of all aesthetic artifacts as the fallen expressions of an originary collective subjectivity.

Within two key elements of Adorno's aesthetic theory, Jameson has managed to collapse the dialectic of myth and enlightenment, and to reverse the position where genuine experience may take place. Myth and enlightenment are entwined, but they cannot be reduced to one another; their successive overcoming of each other in aesthetic artifacts is not a mere circularity — something *more* is produced. This does not mean, however, that this *more*, which aesthetic artifacts infer, can be expropriated from the aesthetic realm and placed within social relations or history, nor does it mean that the dialectic of myth and enlightenment outside the aesthetic produces progress. Finally, the *more* that issues from successful artworks does not have its source in subjectivity. The production of the *more* leads Adorno to write that art has an internal history and thus there may be progress in art even where there is none in social relations or anywhere else. Although Adorno would agree with Jameson as to an ideological component within all artworks, he would not locate that component within the form of the artwork but rather in the content which proclaims that it contains meaning. To Adorno it is precisely the form of the artwork which allows the possibility of transcending its ideological content.

Jameson's reduction of aesthetic experience to ideology is best revealed in his comments on the alleged failure of *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. He claims that the Utopian hermeneutic is "obscured by an embattled commitment to high culture; yet it has not sufficiently been noticed that it has been displaced to the succeeding chapter of that work ... in which ... antisemitism is shown to be profoundly Utopian in character, as a form of cultural envy which is at the same time a repressed recognition of the Utopian impulse."¹⁷ The two presuppositions which allow Jameson to reduce art to ideology are: 1) that a

Utopian impulse within any cultural artifact, aesthetic or not, is evidence of ideology; 2) that an artifact is ideological because it is false in the same way as any other artifact. Both these presuppositions rely on the initial equation of Utopia and ideology which depends, in turn, on a mistaken notion of ideology and the contradiction within Jameson's conception of form, hence the impossibility of locating the source of aesthetic form in an unconscious. Ideology is not just falsehood; it contains within itself the possibility of recovering something true. While Jameson allows for something recoverable in his concept of ideology, it is precisely that which is recoverable, the collective impulse, which is false. Social life will not be redeemed through a recovery of a form of social life still based on domination, even though that domination is made transparent by disclosing its impulse toward collectivity. Paradoxically enough, it is precisely Jameson's insertion of a political unconscious at the source of all ideology that serves to eviscerate just that form of subjectivity he wishes to preserve. As Adorno writes: "The more abundantly a universal is equipped with the insignia of the collective subject, the more tracelessly do the subjects disappear within it."¹⁸ Jameson's implicit recognition of the loss of cultural meaning is not only not compensated for by the reassertion of a subjective source of meaning, this very attempt at compensation serves to further ideologize and reify whatever traces of opposition remain within a subjectively constituted culture. The paradox of Kant's aesthetics — of a subjectivity which constitutes itself on the basis of that which it cannot attain — is not resolved by Jameson's assertion of a subjectivity that fills the lack upon which it constitutes itself. What needs to be recovered is not a pre-ideological social life but rather a subjectivity whose relation to nature is nondominating. Genuine social life depends not on a subject whose motives toward other subjects are transparent, i.e., nonideological and nonsymbolic, but on a subjectivity whose mimetic relation to nature is not dominated by fear, which is the more likely candidate for the source of ideology.

Jameson comes surprisingly close to realizing the centrality of fear in ideology-production when he writes that, "Colin Turnbull's description of pygmy society suggests that the culture of prepolitical society organizes itself around the external threat of the nonhuman or of nature, in the form of the rain forest, conceived as the overarching spirit of the world."¹⁹ This "prepolitical" social organization points not to a *political* unconscious as the origin of the desire for the collective, but instead to an unconscious that constitutes the desire for the social — as a mechanism of self-preservation — in opposition to the *fear* of an "external threat of the nonhuman or of nature." The political unconscious is the "civilized" heir of this fear. But what if the totality ("the overarching spirit of the world"), against which fear arises and around which "society organizes itself," is itself only a mechanism for legitimating a social totality whose own continuation depends, in turn, on the legitimacy of the fear that spawned and sustains it? The Political Unconscious is an attempt to provide a rational and enlightened account of the impulse toward the social — an account which thereby serves to legitimate it. The book is an object lesson in the dialectic of myth and enlightenment: in locating the source of the social within a genuine and Utopian subjective desire (founded in turn on a supposed legitimate fear of nature, that is, the nonhuman), it "enlightens" the myth of the social by entrenching and extending it. It is not a diagnosis but a symptom of the postmodern condition.

In "Modernity versus Postmodernity" Habermas tries to defend an enlightened project of modernity against the ravages of postmodernity.²⁰ Yet he cites Peter Burger and

Octavio Paz in asserting that the idea of a rebellious modernity has become obsolete. It is at this point in his reconstruction of the history of modernity that Habermas turns away from Adorno and toward the ends of his own project of communicative rationality. Here he shifts from an analysis of the artwork to an analysis of the intentions and historical and economic forces which gave rise to art's modernist form. His program for reviving the project of modernity is thus not something which arises from modern art but from the intentions of the Enlightenment toward the objectification of science, law, and morality. His criticism of modernity, in particular the modern in art, rests upon a concept of modernity as bearing only an abstract relation to history and tradition. Consider, instead, Adorno's concept of modernity as expressing an emphatic, albeit paradoxical, response to the weight of history and the normative function of tradition: "the concept of tradition, one could almost say of history, of historical change itself, of modernity, contradicts a world of industrial production which is constituted as essentially rational so that one cannot even really imagine that a modernity could exist at all, and this paradox, that after all something like modernity, which from its concept should be ahistorical, is historical."²¹ Habermas aligns himself comfortably on the side of unparadoxical static history by renouncing precisely what is at stake in modernity. Modernity is thus an aberration, and the only question to ask is how we might best overcome it.

The Enlightenment project failed because, along with the increasing autonomy of these separate rationalized spheres of life the promised end of this project, which the Enlightenment thinkers intended, the "enrichment of everyday life" and the "rational organization of everyday social life"²² have not been attained. It is precisely the lack of success in this area that leads a postmodern mind to destroy the "culture of expertise": a culture composed of separate autonomous spheres, guided by experts, that was to bear fruit for all humanity. For Habermas, this failure can be reversed only if the autonomy of these spheres, and of art in particular, can be held in check and made answerable to subjectivity.

He attributes the failure of the surrealist revolt against autonomous art to two fatal mistakes. "First, when the containers of an autonomously developed cultural sphere are shattered, the contents get dispersed. Nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow."²³ What is striking here is not Habermas' criticism of the surrealist project, but rather the terms of his formulation. Artworks are the containers of an autonomy bestowed by some heteronomous agency. Their autonomy is not, strictly speaking, of their own making. This presupposition fits neatly with Habermas' further criticism: "Their second mistake has more important consequences. In everyday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another. Communication processes need a cultural tradition covering all spheres ... The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction."²⁴

What Habermas calls the second mistake betrays his extreme commitment to the project of Enlightenment, because he ultimately denies the legitimacy of autonomous art for any rationally organized society. Autonomous art turns out to be an aberration. Thus when he turns to the question of alternatives, his answers are already limited to a position that asks only what can be learned from the mistakes of autonomous art. Further, to construe art as a kind of communicative process is to deny from the start its nagging

autonomy. But is Habermas' program so very different from what he takes to be that of the surrealists'?²⁵ Is not his intention also the destruction of the claim to, and presence of autonomous art? What distinguishes his program from his interpretation of the surrealists' program is that he would negate autonomous art not through an explosion of the irrational, which, as he points out, nonetheless gives autonomous art its due, but rather in an even greater domination by a rationalist subjectivity than the surrealists hoped. If art is to have any role in social organization it must give up its autonomy and allow itself to be controlled by subjectivity. This program implies a didactics hardly distinguishable from social realism. Habermas betrays his misreading of Adorno when he, in reference to Brecht and Benjamin, writes that artworks "which lost their aura, could yet be received in illuminating ways."²⁶ While he claims to defend the project of modernity, precisely because it is as yet unfulfilled, such a fulfillment would amount to a celebration of a logocentric subjectivity. The ideal of a communicatively rational *culture* thereby becomes the programmatic regression of the critical function of autonomous art to a pre-historical communication based on exchange: "Just as culture sprang up in the marketplace, in the traffic of trade, in communication and negotiation, as something distinct from the immediate struggle for individual self-preservation ... so culture, considered 'socially necessary' ... is in the end reduced to that as which it began, to mere communication."²⁷

Habermas' elliptical critique of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* finds its substantiation in "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-Reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*." He avoids Adorno's writings on aesthetics and sociology and turns instead to the root of his disagreement — the conception of rationality. He describes what he takes to be the second central thesis of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* in the following terms: "Reason itself destroys the humanity which it had made possible in the first place — this far-reaching thesis is substantiated in the first excursus, as we have seen, with the argument that the process of enlightenment is from the very beginning dependent on an impulse of self-preservation which mutilates reason because it can only make use of it in the form of purposive-rational domination of nature and instinct, i.e., in the form of instrumental reason. This does not yet prove, however, that reason remains subject to the dictates of purposive-rationality even in its *most recent manifestations*, i.e., in modern science, in the universalist conceptions of justice and morality, and in autonomous art."²⁸ as Habermas wants to rehabilitate reason and the path he chooses for this rehabilitation is that of rationality not yet become, or rather freed from instrumentality. Presumably, Horkheimer and Adorno failed to accord to noninstrumental rationality what Habermas calls its dignity: "If one reduces the critique of instrumental reason to this core (i.e., a self-preservation gone wild and reason assimilated to sheer power) it becomes clear why *Dialectic of Enlightenment* flattens out the view of modernity in such an astonishing manner. The dignity specific to cultural modernity consists in what Max Weber has called the stubborn differentiation of value-spheres. In fact, *Dialectic of Enlightenment* does not do justice to the elements of reason in cultural modernity which are contained in . . . bourgeois ideals: ... I mean the productivity and the liberating force of an aesthetic experience with a subjectivity set free from the imperatives of purposive activity ... aesthetic experiences do have *somewhat* of an illuminating effect or at least provide an instructive contrast."²⁹

The question as to the dignity accorded to each of the differentiated cultural spheres, art in particular, provides an important arena in which Habermas' concept of rationality can be fruitfully contrasted with Adorno's. Dignity is best understood here as the recognition and self-consciousness of the autonomous character of art. It is thus the affirmation of rationality within an autonomous cultural sphere. But the sphere of art confronts a particular problem when it confronts its own dignity, due to the dynamic and historical nature of the concept of an, and it leads Adorno to write that "today our relation to that erstwhile dignity of art ... has become ambivalent."³⁰ Artworks of the past were dignified and displayed a corresponding gravity. But today they can no longer express their gravity through dignity because of the discredit dignity suffered at the hands of, for example, the Wagnerian art religion. "Modern art, on the contrary, that conducted itself with the same level of dignity (as earlier artworks) would be hopelessly ideological."³¹

In Habermas' treatment, bourgeois ideals may have faltered in their elevation of the autonomous character of art beyond the reach of everyday discourse, but the dignity that adheres to the rational element remains untainted. For Adorno, it is precisely dignity — as the vehicle not only of the legitimate autonomous character of art but also of the illegitimate elevation of subjectivity — that carries the guilt of a repressive subjectivity's deformation of nature. "This is the insight that dignity contains the form of its decadence within itself."³² Even Schiller recognized the victorious morality-of-the-weaker character of dignity: "True dignity wishes only to rule, not to conceal nature; in false dignity, on the contrary, nature rules the more powerfully within because it is controlled outwardly."³³ Habermas' call for the recognition of the dignity of cultural modernity represents an effort to conceal the paradoxical nature of modernity and the nature of those modernist artworks that oppose subjectivity and its obsolete dignity. Nature, in the guise of subjectivity, rules the more powerfully within, because it asserts that it controls the outward appearance (i.e., the meaning and form) of that very art which denies the dignity of subjectivity. But this very meaningfulness, which Habermas must have from artworks if they are to "illuminate" life and serve as guides for practical organization, maintains the artwork at the level of illusion (*Schein*) and prohibits it from halting the further collapse of history into nature. The expression that issues from and as aesthetic form does not take place through meaning. Habermas' aesthetic attempt to appropriate expression for the practical organization of life should be seen as an attempt by a scientific reason to dominate nature.

The extent to which Habermas denigrates aesthetic autonomy and equates subjectivity with nonautonomous art is nowhere more evident than in the statement that "the discussion from Kant to Adorno concerning natural and artistic beauty could provide grounds for the thesis that the *expressive attitude* to external nature opens up a domain of experience that can be exploited for *artistic production*."³⁴ For Adorno, the move from natural to artistic beauty cannot be interpreted as the move from nature to subjectivity, just as for Kant the premise of a judgment of natural beauty is that nature be considered an artifact — a made thing. Natural beauty is itself only possible with a high degree of subjective transformation. For Adorno artistic production, even in its most complete form in early 20th century constructivist works, does not at all represent a movement away from natural beauty. Instead, it is premised upon it. The question is

rather to what degree can an, especially autonomous art, survive within subjective artistic production, Hence the validity of Burger's criticism that Habermas' notion that the differentiation of cultural spheres, i.e., the autonomy of art, moral and legal practices, cannot claim these spheres are autonomous to the same degree or in the same fashion.

Ultimately, Habermas fails to confront the special character of art's autonomy. Following Adorno, this autonomy derives from its refusal to have a function, which cannot be said of the other "autonomous" spheres. Art develops its own concept in a more rigorous and profoundly autonomous fashion. Specifically, art's autonomy arises not just as the product of an increasing social rationalization but rather also as a critical response to it. The autonomy of art is a recapitulation and parody of a social fragmentation that presents itself as a rational progress. Habermas' criticism of art's autonomy is more properly directed against those contradictory social relations that occasioned its development. A more fruitful analysis would be one that examined art's autonomy as a critical reflection of a false social totality rather than one that misguidedly attempts to reintegrate it for the sake of the continued existence of that totality. Adorno's work suggests that the locale for such an analysis would be *within* aesthetic form itself, rather than an attempted expropriation of that locale.

With the bankruptcy of philosophical idealism, Habermas opts for, and indeed cannot avoid the recognition of the legitimacy of plurality. In early 20th century artistic modernism, this plurality was resisted by the constructivist turn that presented artworks as the sole refuge for subjectivity. This refuge character was necessitated by the collapse of subjective idealism. Art thus became the refuge for philosophy. In this sense, it is correct to see *Aesthetic Theory* as a defense of modernism, so long as it is simultaneously recognized as a defense of subjectivity and philosophy. Adorno's hibernation should be understood as a mimetic response to the hibernation of philosophy in art. That philosophy is not forsaken is nowhere more apparent than in Adorno's insistence on the truth content of art and the necessity of philosophy for the completion of art.

Habermas at once embraces and discards the rationality of modern art. He recognizes its rationality only if it is intermingled with and tested by "empirical theories of competence." This underscores his reliance on a fundamentally 19th century conception of the form of artworks, especially the sort of narrative coherence antithetical to the fragmentary form of modernist works. He desires, as can be seen in his quarrel with Lyotard, a narrative legitimated by interaction with other narratives and, most importantly, one that does not seek to go beyond itself into meta-narrative. Something of a meta-narrative does emerge, however, in the form and presuppositions of communicative rationality. It is not the product of a unitary and autonomous narrative but the form of narrative in general. It is thus method that generates an object and its legitimacy. This reversal of Adorno's use of method fails to heed his warnings against the inherent positivism of methodology.

Habermas' extreme dislike of postmodernism and his charge that it is neoconservative are the result of postmodernism having taken pluralism to a logical extreme. Postmodernism is a completed pluralism in that it forsakes any and all claims to rationality and responsibility. All historical styles, along with all imagery, are reduced to the level of exchange-value. Yet Habermas too contributes to the erosion of the truth content of the work of art: "As the philosophical discussion of 'artistic truth' reveals,

works of art raise claims with regard to their unity (harmony: *Stimmigkeit*), their authenticity, and the success of their expressions by which they can be measured and in terms of which they may fail. For that reason I believe that a pragmatic logic of argumentation is the most appropriate guiding thread through which the 'aesthetic-practical' type of rationality can be differentiated over and against other types of rationality."³⁵ Here Habermas shifts the truth content away from the artwork and toward propositional logic. That a philosophical discussion can raise the question regarding the truth content of an artwork does not mean that the claims made by an artwork can be adjudicated by that same discussion. If the claims made by an artwork are claims that cannot be made in any other sphere, how can it be appropriate to suppose that it is a sphere other than that of art in which these claims might be judged?

Habermas' answer to this question requires a substantially altered conception of subjectivity in aesthetic experience. This he finds in his reading of the history of the status of subjectivity in the era beginning with romanticism and culminating with surrealism: "What is reflected in these interpretations and declarations is a transformation of form of aesthetic experience, induced by the avant-garde itself, in the direction of the decentering and unbounding of subjectivity. At the same time, this decentering indicates an increased sensitivity to what remains unassimilated in the interpretative achievements of pragmatic, epistemic, and moral mastery of the demands and challenges of everyday situations."³⁶ Subjectivity is decentered and unbounded while "at the same time" it becomes increasingly sensitive. Subjectivity, in a state of shock induced by the artwork, nonetheless remains in suspension until the shudder subsides, and then proceeds to assimilate that which the shock registered as unassimilable. This description of aesthetic experience and its aftermath fits all too neatly into the very dialectic of enlightenment that the artwork, as the sole refuge, resists. It reduces aesthetic experience to mythic sacrifice. Subjectivity negates itself through the artwork only in order to reconquer itself. Aesthetic experience is thus the vehicle par excellence for the domination of nature and self that mythic sacrifice, best exemplified by Odysseus, carries out, aesthetic artifacts lose their autonomy and become the strategic means of instrumental rationality.

If the core of Adorno's aesthetics is the conception of art as the social antithesis of society, then it becomes clear the extent to which Habermas evades it. If art only affects subjectivity by nudging it off its central position and loosening its bonds, how can art's shock effect be explained? For Habermas, art does not explode subjectivity but politely offers a course in manners. This conception reduces art and aesthetic form to nothing more than a kind of *Bildungsroman*.

1. Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1981), p. 20.

2. *Ibid.* p. 35.

3. Theodor W. Adorno, "Culture and Administration," *Telos* 37 (Fall 1978), pp. 99-100.
4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Prisms*, trans. by Samuel and Shierry Weber (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), p. 34.
5. Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. by E. B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1979). p. 376 (translation amended).
6. Fredric Jameson, "Introduction to T. W. Adorno," *Salmagundi* 10-11 (1969-70), p. 142.
7. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, *op.cil.*, p. 79.
8. See Thomas Huhn, "Adorno's Aesthetics of Illusion," *Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, Vol XLIV, No. 2 (Winter 1985).
9. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, *oj. cit.*, p. 106.
10. Theodor W. Adorno, "Lyric Poetry and Society," *Telos* 20 (Summer 1974), p. 58.
11. Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
12. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 110. Jameson's italics.
13. *Ibid.*, pp. 110-11.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 289.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 291.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 288.
18. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, *op. cit.*, p. 338, translation amended.
19. Jameson, "Conclusion" to *The Political Unconscious*, *op. cit.*, p. 290.
20. Jurgen Habermas. "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *New German Critique* 22 (Winter 1981).
21. Theodor W. Adorno, unpublished lecture delivered January 4, 1968.
22. Habermas, "Modernity versus Postmodernity," *op. tit.*, p. 9.

23. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
24. *Ibid.*, pp. 10-11.
25. For a short but critical evaluation of Habermas' judgment of the "failure" of surrealism and of his confusion of surrealism and dadaism, see Michael Lowy, *et al.*, "Hermetic Bird: Surrealists' Answer Jurgen Habermas," *Praxis International*, Vol. 6, No. 4 (January 1987), pp. 503-05.
26. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
27. Adorno, *Prisms*, *op. tit.*, p. 25.
28. Jurgen Habermas, "The Entwinement of Myth and Enlightenment: Re-reading *Dialectic of Enlightenment*," *New German Critique* 26 (Spring/Summer 1982), p. 17.
29. *Ibid.*, p. 18.
30. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, trans, by C. Lenhardt (Boston: Routledge & Regan Paul, 1984), p. 57.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 58, translation amended.
32. Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans, by Knut Tamowski and Frederic Will (Evanston: Northwestern Univ. Press, 1973), p. 165.
33. Quoted in *Ibid.*, p. 165.
34. Jurgen Habermas, "A Reply to my Critics," in John B. Thompson and David Held, eds., *Habermas: Critical Debates* (London: McMillan, 1982), p. 249.
35. Jurgen Habermas, "Questions and Counterquestions," in Richard J. Bernstein, ed., *Habermas and Modernity* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1985), p. 200.
36. *Ibid.*, p. 201.