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## Brecht and Theory

»Ich denke oft an ein Tribunal, vor dem ich vernommen werden würde. ›Wie ist das? Ist es Ihnen eigentlich ernst?‹ Ich müßte dann anerkennen: ganz ernst ist es mir nicht. Ich denke ja auch zu viel an Artistisches, an das, was dem Theater zugute kommt, als daß es mir ganz ernst sein könnte. Aber wenn ich diese wichtige Frage verneint habe, so werde ich eine noch wichtigere Behauptung anschließen: daß mein Verhalten nämlich *erlaubt* ist.«

[“I often think of a tribunal before which I am being questioned. ‘What was that? Do you really mean that seriously?’ I would then have to admit: Not quite seriously. After all I think too much about artistic matters, about what would go well on the stage, to be quite serious; but when I have answered this important question in the negative, I will add a still more important affirmation: that my conduct is *legitimate*.”]

—Walter Benjamin, *Versuche über Brecht (Reflections)*

This 1934 remark, in which Brecht describes his attitude toward theatre and politics to Walter Benjamin, reveals how and why Brecht felt close to Benjamin as a critic. Among the German-speaking theorists, Benjamin was personally and theoretically the closest to Brecht. They had been friends since 1929, and Benjamin witnessed Brecht’s most innovative work periods, ranging from his early plays to the teaching plays and Brecht’s encounter with Marxism. Here, Brecht reveals to Benjamin his awareness of an issue that has continually occupied Brechtian criticism to the present: Brecht’s hypocrisy regarding political principles and personal

morals. Most recently, it has been John Fuegi who voiced his disappointment with Brecht the exploitative socialist.<sup>1</sup> On the opposite side is Fredric Jameson, who celebrates Brecht as a poet reminiscent of the young Goethe.<sup>2</sup> Jameson discerns a transfer from intellectual into collective activity that I will locate in the space between the critical and the hypocritical. It is the Brecht between Marx and Nietzsche, between theatre and theory, between principle and betrayal whose work remains so intriguing in a postcommunist world.

The Brechtian split between the critical and the hypocritical also polarized the reception of Brecht's work by his contemporaries. While Benjamin used this split to read Brecht's work in its relationship to the brutality of German culture, other critical theorists, namely Theodor W. Adorno and Georg Lukács, considered Brecht's attitude inexcusable. Adorno and Lukács, themselves two polarizing figures in the German culture wars, were united only in their rejection of Brecht—of his ideological commitment (Adorno) and of his flippancy (Lukács). Nevertheless, a comparative reading of all four authors shows that, despite their differences, they share an initial critique of bourgeois culture: it suffers from “wrong projection” or, as Adorno calls it, “gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang” (social context of blindness). Through a reading of their understandings of natural history and mimesis, a surprisingly broad kinship between Brecht and Adorno reveals itself in their shared opposition to “wrong projection.” This kinship may help explain why Benjamin could feel close to both of them.

This kinship would have surprised Brecht and Adorno themselves because the original conflict between them was real, and they nurtured it. For Adorno, Brecht was the ideological artist who pursued political change through a commitment to popular culture that disqualified him from producing “autonomous art”—the art of true recognition.<sup>3</sup> For Brecht, Adorno was one of the so-called “Murxisten” of the Frankfurt Tui, who were engaged in narcissistic intellectual reflection unrelated to the social change they claimed to seek.<sup>4</sup> These accusations may (or may not) have had substance when they were made, but the course of German history since that time has turned them into interesting historical artifacts rather than significant ideological differences. German history after 1945 ironically reversed these positions by granting Brecht the “durchschlagende Wirkungslosigkeit eines Klassikers” (thoroughgoing ineffectiveness of a classic author) (Max Frisch), while members of the Frankfurt School found themselves equated with the “Rote Armee Fraktion” (Red Army Faction) (a CDU politician), the

terrorist organization that was supported by the German Democratic Republic, Brecht's final home.

This renders especially ironic Adorno's rejection of Brecht for his political commitment to Marxism. As Adorno puts it, "Sein didaktischer Gestus jedoch ist intolerant gegen die Mehrdeutigkeit, an der Denken sich entzündet: er ist autoritär" (His didactic style [*gestus*], however, is intolerant of the ambiguity in which thought originates: It is authoritarian).<sup>5</sup> He attacks Brecht for his "pedagogical" approach to theatre, for his outspoken Marxism, and for his commitment to social change—three elements that disqualify Brecht's theatre as autonomous art.<sup>6</sup> In autonomous art, reality can be mediated only indirectly because it is "in sich vielfältig zur Realität vermittelt" (mediated with reality in many ways).<sup>7</sup> Adorno's criticism of Brecht's "commitment" was a response to Brecht's attack on autonomous art, which "wiederhole einfach, was eine Sache ohnehin sei" (simply reiterates what something is).<sup>8</sup> In preferring Beckett for the way his negativity goes to the core of art and life, Adorno portrays Brecht's work as enmeshed in superficial communication. In Adorno's aesthetics, what necessitates "zu jener Änderung der Verhaltensweise, welche die engagierten Werke bloß verlangen" (the change in attitude that committed works only demand) rests upon the acceptance of the incomprehensible.<sup>9</sup> This renders unacceptable Brecht's concept of a pedagogical theatre because the performative acts of explaining and demanding disqualify the plays by requiring only that the audience comprehend the idea being communicated. Adorno uses the term *unterjochen* (to subjugate) to point to the repression of historical guilt in Brecht's work, something that Beckett's plays unfold. Once disqualified as inartistic, Brecht's work has nothing to offer "was nicht unabhängig von seinen Stücken, und bündiger in der Theorie, erkannt worden oder den auf ihn geeichten Zuschauern vertraut gewesen wäre" (that could not have been understood apart from his didactic plays, indeed, that could not have been understood more concisely through theory, or that was not already well known to his audience).<sup>10</sup> For Adorno, *Lehre* (teaching) falls short in comparison with theory because it entails a commitment to obeying the rules of communication—meaning domination—and is thus unavoidably propagandistic. Committed art responds directly to reality, and through this positive commitment, it takes part in the dynamics of domination, thus losing its autonomy.

In reducing Brecht's theatre to a representation of ideology, Adorno not only ignores the form and structure of Brecht's texts, he also overlooks the fact that a dramatic text must eventually meet performance in

unpredictable ways. Brecht, who always writes with the theatre in mind, is always aware of the stage's subversive force and of the idiosyncratic nature of education and entertainment; indeed, he makes it the motivating force of his plays. Through idiosyncrasy and plagiarism, Brecht demonstrates that humane ideals are intertwined with egoistic and evil motivations. His theatre thus unveils the dynamic to which Adorno accused him of succumbing.

The aesthetic principle through which Brecht achieves this effect is, surprisingly enough, mimesis. Brecht reappropriates mimesis (which is considered a traditional Aristotelian dramatic principle) as an innovative approach to history. Imitation, then, is not employed as a principle of representation, but as a social and physical exchange that produces history as genealogy. At this point, Brecht's theatrical practice intersects with Adorno's aesthetics and Benjamin's concept of history because all three use mimesis as a key concept. For Adorno, mimesis is the way the subject encounters the object; for Benjamin, mimesis combines historical experience and revolutionary activity. In Brecht's early plays and poetry, mimesis comes alive as the primary force of seduction in the midst of politics. When Heiner Müller insists that "was mich an Brecht interessiert ist das Böse" (what interests me about Brecht is the evil),<sup>11</sup> he points to what has kept Brechtian theatre alive up to the present: the tension between principle and its violations. This constitutes the most challenging aspect of Brecht's work today, and it is the aspect that, from the perspective of the early twenty-first century, is in surprising harmony with Adorno's aesthetic theory.

## REALISM AND REVERSED PERCEPTION

. . . under the rule, discover the abuse; under the maxim, discover the concatenation; under Nature, discover History.

—Roland Barthes, "Brecht and Discourse"

The bitterly opposed factions within German critical theory that rallied during the first half of the twentieth century around one or another of the major Weimar cultural Marxists—Brecht, Benjamin, Adorno, and Lukács—began their critique of capitalism with the same insight: they all insisted upon the illusory nature of unmediated experience in a capitalist society. Adorno's critique of modern subjectivity finds different echoes in both Benjamin and Brecht and even, to some extent, in Lukács.

Adorno's reflections on "gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang" (social context of blindness) through which the subject constitutes its own identity, extend to the illusory projections through which we experience the object world and apply meaning to history. This critique of enlightened subjectivity is also present in Benjamin's critique of historicism, in Lukács's critique of the "unmittelbares Erlebnis" (immediate experience), and in Brecht's theatrical techniques that seek above all to defy the processes of identification upon which bourgeois drama is founded. Beginning, as they began, with a common critique of subjectivity, we can trace their different departures into Lukács's advocacy of realism, Adorno's commitment to the avant-garde, Benjamin's understanding of mimesis, and Brecht's use of natural history. In this way we can recapture some of the fundamental insights that they shared without glossing over their differences.

These departures occur most prominently in the *Realismusdebatte* (realism debate), which began as an argument over Expressionism's impact on fascism but grew into a broader debate on realism in the wake of Lukács's "Es geht um den Realismus" (Realism in the Balance).<sup>12</sup> This essay opened a discussion not only on realism as an art form, but also on the relationship between art and political resistance. The debate began between Brecht and Lukács in 1937, and it was later joined by Adorno when he critiqued Lukács's defense of socialist realism. When Lukács declares realist art, especially the realist novel, to be the aesthetic norm and avant-garde art to be decadent, he places the climax of German literary history in the nineteenth century. In contrast, both Adorno and Brecht opt for historical rather than timeless aesthetic norms and see realism as appropriate for the nineteenth century in the same way that the avant-garde is the proper aesthetic norm for the twentieth century. Neither accepts Lukács's claim that the realist novel, which offers a utopian *Vorbild* (model) for a communist society that has not yet been realized, reached its climax in the past. Nor do they accept that Lukács creates a "realistic" form of idealism which Adorno calls "Realismus aus Realitätsverlust" (realism on the basis of a loss of reality).<sup>13</sup>

Because the poles of the realism debate are realism versus Expressionism in art and socialism versus fascism in politics, the argument between Brecht and Lukács, and later Adorno and Lukács, was mainly about perception. All three agree that the perception of capitalism and the nature of perception in a capitalist society are fundamentally distorted, and each follows Marx in this diagnosis. Lukács writes:

Und jeder Marxist weiß, daß die grundlegenden ökonomischen Kategorien des Kapitalismus sich in den Köpfen der Menschen *unmittelbar stets verkehrt widerspiegeln*. Das heißt in unserem Fall so viel, daß die in der Unmittelbarkeit des kapitalistischen Lebens befangenen Menschen zur Zeit des sogenannten normalen Funktionierens des Kapitalismus (Etappe der verselbständigten Momente) eine Einheit erleben und denken, zur Zeit der Krise (Herstellung der Einheit der verselbständigten Momente) jedoch die Zerissenheit als Erlebnis ansehen.

[Every Marxist knows that the basic economic categories of capitalism are always reflected in the minds of men, directly, but always back to front. Applied to our present argument this means that in periods when capitalism functions in a so-called normal manner, and its various processes appear autonomous, people living within capitalist society think and experience it as unitary, whereas in periods of crisis, when the autonomous elements are drawn together into unity, they experience it as disintegration.]<sup>14</sup>

Brecht and Adorno concur with Lukács's suspicion that unmediated *Erlebnis* (experience) is the reversed perception of capitalism's economic categories. According to Lukács, conventional perception registers unity where economic elements disperse and crisis where these elements unite. Adorno and Brecht privilege crisis as a signifier for the systematic workings of politics, economics, and culture. What Lukács calls unmediated experience in the reversed perception of capitalism is, for Adorno, part of the "gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang" (social context of blindness), and both are comparable to Brecht's complex notion of bourgeois identification, which he seeks to destroy in his epic theatre. The different theorists do, however, attack the problem in different ways. Adorno inserts "vielfältige Vermittlungen" (multiple mediations) between subject and object; Brecht seeks to present the conventional as strange (estrangement); Lukács argues for a "vermittelte Unmittelbarkeit" (mediated immediacy) that consists of revealing both the hidden connections of society and the abstractions required to perceive them.<sup>15</sup> This, as Terry Eagleton points out, "reproduces some of the key structures of bourgeois political power."<sup>16</sup>

The key structures of bourgeois power lie, to a great extent, in the connection that historian Reinhart Koselleck, though far-removed from the social and political intentions of early twentieth-century Marxism, sees between the temporality of the Enlightenment and the formation of the modern subject in the eighteenth-century project of the philosophy of history. Koselleck shows how the project of the Enlightenment depends

on a time structure determined by the privileging of *Erwartung* (expectation) over *Erfahrung* (experience). *Erfahrung* (experience) exists as recollections of the past, *Erwartung* (expectation) as projections into the future. In the process of modernity, according to Koselleck, experience and expectation lose their balance, and expectation becomes the motivating force for human action as well as the primary shaper of memory and experience. Expectation, which Koselleck defines as the future's present, casts history as the future's past.<sup>17</sup>

By privileging expectation over experience, subject formation encompasses the Enlightenment's enormous educational project, and the subject constitutes itself through the "Opfer des Augenblicks an die Zukunft" (sacrifice of the present moment to the future).<sup>18</sup> The subjectivist orientation to the future injects an ethical component called *Fortschritt* (progress) into human behavior through time. History can, as Koselleck points out, "als ein Prozeß andauernder und zunehmender Vervollkommnung begriffen werden, der, trotz aller Rückfälle und Umwege, schließlich von den Menschen selber zu planen und zu vollstrecken sei" (be regarded as a long-term process of growing fulfillment which, despite setbacks and deviations, was ultimately planned and carried out by men themselves).<sup>19</sup> The modern subject, then, determines her or his destination, and it is communism as destination that Lukács identifies as the way out of reversed perception.

While Lukács and Koselleck locate the process of subject formation through expectation in the eighteenth century, Adorno and Horkheimer locate the same dynamic in prehistoric times. Lukács locates reversed perception only in the macroeconomic structures of capitalism and not, like Brecht and Adorno, in the unconscious structures of subjectivity as well. Lukács constantly searches for representations of *Bewußtsein* (consciousness) for the real societal counterforces that are finally transformable into political action. Realism, then, depends on "gedankliche Erhebung" (higher intellectual vantage point) over the chaos of reality, and achieving this is, in Lukács's argument, the task of the writer.<sup>20</sup> Chaos becomes order as part of a historical teleology, and realism, as the right consciousness, anticipates and helps shape this emerging order.

For Adorno, the subject is both timeless and historical. It is timeless because, as he and Horkheimer argue in *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*), the modern subject is both creator and product of the Enlightenment's philosophy of history, a genealogy that secures a subject's understanding of itself and the world. This is, however, a flawed genealogy because Enlightenment thought has failed to become

the liberating and humanizing force that it proclaimed itself to be. Instead, it has become another tool for acquiring power and domination because “instrumental reason,” the key to “enlightened” thought, blocks critical reflection. Instrumental reason plays the same role in Enlightenment thought that myth played in pre-Enlightenment thought, thus constituting what the authors call the *Urgeschichte* (metahistory) of the subject and illustrating the way that the Enlightenment made instrumental reason the driving force in human history. From this perspective, Horkheimer and Adorno equate myth with Enlightenment in their book’s famous central thesis, arguing that the Enlightenment and myth are mutually constitutive through instrumental reason with the dominating subject as reason’s timeless agent.<sup>21</sup>

Nonetheless, they show that the subject is historical because it cannot control the history that it generates. For Adorno and Horkheimer, this process represents the genealogy of the bourgeois individual in which the Enlightenment “Zusammenhang, Sinn, Leben ganz in die Subjektivität zurück[nimmt], die sich in solcher Zurücknahme eigentlich erst konstituiert” (relocates context, meaning, and life entirely within a subjectivity which is actually constituted only by this relocation).<sup>22</sup> Through internalization and identification, the subject attempts to form a coherent self for whom life and meaning merge as elements of identity:

Das Subjekt schafft die Welt außer ihm noch einmal aus den Spuren, die sie in seinen Sinnen zurückläßt: die Einheit des Dinges in seinen mannigfaltigen Eigenschaften und Zuständen; und es konstituiert damit rückwirkend das Ich, indem es nicht bloß den äußeren sondern auch den von diesen allmählich sich sondernden inneren Eindrücken synthetische Einheit zu verleihen lernt. Das identische Ich ist das späteste konstante Projektionsprodukt.

[From the traces the thing leaves behind in its senses the subject recreates the world outside it: the unity of the thing in its manifold properties and states; and in so doing, in learning how to impart a synthetic unity not only to the outward impressions but to the inward ones which gradually separate themselves from them, it retroactively constitutes the self. The identical ego is the most recent constant product of projection.]<sup>23</sup>

Projection and internalization create the self and its understanding of all aspects of the outside or material world. The subject forms a coherent image of the world by processing and ordering unending sensory traces of perception, building unity from the chaotic welter of physical reality. The subject engages in this continuous process of synthesis, internalizing out-

side impressions in order to build the self retrospectively. Subject formation enters the temporal realm when the subject learns to establish what Adorno calls “synthetische Einheit” (synthetic unity) as identity. Subjectivity is built by the self in the process of categorizing the object world, a process through which the object world is subsumed into the newly constructed subjectivity. The self imprisons itself in a “gesellschaftlicher Verblendungszusammenhang” (social context of blindness); this constitutes Enlightenment thought’s repetitive turn into delusion. The Enlightenment as the builder of modern subjectivity, then, constitutes a history of reversed perception in which the object becomes the subject, history becomes nature, the past becomes the future, and, finally, Enlightenment falls back into myth.<sup>24</sup>

According to Adorno and Horkheimer, Enlightenment thought contains a temporal structure that is organized around the “already” of myth as a prehistorical force and the “falling behind” of the Enlightenment as a historical failure. As Fredric Jameson shows, this time structure assumes an “always-already” that locates prehistory in any present moment of the modern world.<sup>25</sup> “Always-already” accounts for the timelessness of Enlightenment. *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*), then, claims that myth motivates the history of the Enlightenment, a history that appears in microcosm in the formation of the modern subject, which propels Enlightenment thought. Adorno considers the Enlightenment to be the history of self-formation by the modern subject—in his sense of metahistory (*Urgeschichte*)—because the Enlightenment provides the rational confirmation of the mythical formation of the self. As a teleological construction, history provides meaning by revealing the path to enlightened subjectivity, and the subject’s history is its identity. The Enlightenment’s history is thus the *Urgeschichte* (metahistory) of the subject; history internalized constitutes the subject.

Reversed perception affects macrohistory (the history of events) and microhistory (the genealogy of the subject) equally, and herein lies the agreement between Adorno and Brecht, both of whom have abandoned the revolutionary optimism that drives Lukács’s aesthetics. Adorno is more critical than Brecht of the ahistoricity of Lukács’s notion of consciousness. While historical conditions change, the individual, according to Lukács, remains constant, and it is the task of the realist writer to identify what remains constant through historical change. The split between Lukács on the one side and Adorno and Brecht on the other is organized along the lines of aesthetics and history and of production and perception. According to Lukács, realism is the conscious representation

of reality and individuality. In contrast, Adorno and Brecht see a fundamental difference between intention and effect, an approach that makes criticism an essential element of modern art. For Adorno, art is created consciously as well as unconsciously, and the contradictions of the production process are inherent in the artwork, whether intended or not.

Reality is thus always the producer of art through countless mediations, and the task of the critic is to trace and decipher these mediations. According to Adorno, when the autonomous artwork becomes a "Schauplatz erscheinender Objektivitäten" (arena in which objective entities manifest themselves),<sup>26</sup> the occurrence of these objectivities is an unpredictable result of the gulf separating production and perception. "Die Lage wird dadurch so kompliziert, daß weniger denn je eine einfache ›Widergabe der Realität‹ etwas über die Realität aussagt. . . . Die eigentliche Realität ist in die Funktionale gerutscht. Die Verdinglichung der menschlichen Beziehungen, also etwa die Fabrik, gibt die letzteren nicht mehr heraus" ("The situation becomes so complicated because a simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about reality. . . . True reality has slipped over into functional reality. The reification of human relations, that is, the factory, no longer delivers human relations to us").<sup>27</sup> Brecht is concerned with realism as a means of production rather than with realism as an art form, and the theatre is the site of production. "Theater is not theory, after all, but something that actually happens."<sup>28</sup> Accepting an artistic production as formalistic reality is Brecht's starting point for theatrical recognition. Realism-as-formalism is a tool for examining social causality in a reified condition of human relationships.

Adorno and Brecht agree that to make a representation of reality speak about reality is impossible because representation reifies human relationships. Reification affects subjectivity at its core, which makes the consciousness that Lukács advocates suspect. In this situation, formalism can provide access to reality. Brecht writes: "Realistisches Schreiben ist keine Formsache. Alles Formale, was uns hindert, der sozialen Kausalität auf den Grund zu kommen, muß weg; alles Formale, was uns verhilft, der sozialen Kausalität auf den Grund zu kommen, muß her" (Realistic writing is no matter of form. Everything formal that hinders us in getting to the bottom of social causality must be gotten rid of; everything formal that helps us in getting to the bottom of social causality must be taken up).<sup>29</sup> Reversed perception, then, requires reversed production, so that even for Brecht, who could not be more opposed to Adorno's concept of autonomous art, the moment of production in a theatrical setting might be the only reality one can count on.

## ART AS THE SPEAKER OF HISTORY

Despite their somewhat antagonistic intentions, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno form a network of authors that provides an extraordinary approach to history and modernism. In this network, Benjamin is the key mediator between Brecht's concept of forgetting and Adorno's constructions of remembrance. Adorno's aesthetic theory is a meditation on history and memory in the wake of Auschwitz; Brecht's theatrical concept of *Verfremdung* (estrangement) rests on the retrospective presentation of evanescent events; and Benjamin's practice of interpretation is designed to reveal the historicity of the artifacts with which it is concerned rather than revealing history itself.<sup>30</sup> Numerous differences notwithstanding, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno all share a retrospective approach to reality. Rejecting any "realist" approach, they examine reality through a critical gesture that emerges from the tension between past and present.

What unites all three is a shared suspicion of the Enlightenment's philosophy of history, especially of its belief in progress. Marxism shares this belief through its concept of the inevitability of revolution. This rational telos affects the formation of the modern subject in that history becomes a pedagogical project in which the subject matures with historical progress.<sup>31</sup> By defining human virtue in terms of historical progress, an "enlightened" philosophy of history writes its own history:

Indem Geschichtsphilosophie die humanen Ideen als wirkende Mächte in die Geschichte selbst verlegte und diese mit deren Triumph endigen ließ, wurden sie der Arglosigkeit beraubt, die zu ihrem Inhalt gehört. . . . So aber wird nicht bloß Geschichte unmittelbar in ihr Gegenteil verkehrt, sondern die Idee selbst, welche die Notwendigkeit, den logischen Gang des Geschehens brechen sollte, entstellt. Die Gefahr des Seitensprungs wird abgewandt. Die als Macht verkannte Ohnmacht wird durch solche Erhöhung noch einmal verleugnet, gleichsam der Erinnerung entzogen.

[By attributing humane ideas as active powers to history, and presenting them as history's culmination, the philosophy of history stripped them of the naivety inherent in their content. . . . But not only is history thereby turned into its direct opposite, but the idea, which was supposed to break the necessity, the logical course of events, is itself distorted. The danger of the "freak event" is averted. Impotence mistaken for power is denied a second time by such elevation, as if erased from memory.]<sup>32</sup>

Adorno insists that the Enlightenment writes history by viewing its own teleological projections through a retrospective lens. By transforming “virtuous” ideas into irresistible historical forces, the past is made to appear backward and the future progressive. For Adorno, this entails a denial of history’s contingency because any true genealogy of the present will fall victim to the privileging of expectation over the experience of the past. The Enlightenment’s philosophy of history rests upon amnesia—an amnesia that Adorno thought equally implicated in the project of a progressive subjectivity and in the catastrophes of twentieth-century German history.

The split between Lukács on the one side, and Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno on the other takes place along the lines of the philosophy of history. Lukács considers reversed perception to be a constitutive part of capitalism but remains committed to a teleological philosophy of history whose Marxist concept of revolution is rooted in Christianity. In contrast, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno, in different ways and to different degrees, consult history to reflect on the present. The *memoire involuntaire* (involuntary memory) that has become famous as the nucleus of Benjamin’s approach to mass culture and revolution also plays a fundamental role in Adorno’s approaches to art and history. While Brecht does not follow Benjamin in taking his cues from either Proust or Baudelaire, his dynamic of remembering and forgetting involves something similar to Benjamin’s notion of “chock” (shock) as the moment when one awakes to an unexpected reality.

According to Adorno’s understanding of *memoire involuntaire* (involuntary memory), the subject can perceive true history, the history of the object, only in “bewußtlose Geschichtsschreibung” (unconscious writing of history). Adorno’s model for this is found in Proust, and this *Bewußtlosigkeit* (unconsciousness) ties art to reality: “Proust, bei dem genaueste ›realistische‹ Beobachtung mit dem ästhetischen Formgesetz unwillkürlicher Erinnerung so innig sich verbindet, bietet das eindringlichste Beispiel der Einheit pragmatischer Treue und—nach Lukács’schen Kategorien—unrealistischer Verfahrensweise” (“Proust, in whose work the most precise ‘realistic’ observation is so intimately connected with the formal aesthetic law of involuntary memory, provides the most striking example of the unity of pragmatic fidelity and—in terms of Lukács’ categories—unrealistic method”).<sup>33</sup> Involuntary memory as a form of remembrance occurs independently of subjective intention, which makes it a truer approach to reality than immediate observation. This, of course, brings to mind Freud’s insistence that repressed memories are truer than

conscious ones. Adorno bases his concept of experience (*Erfahrung*) on *memoire involontaire* (involuntary memory) despite the fact that Proust applies the term only to memories of things that the subject never experienced. Both represent memory as the construction of something new that remains beyond the subject's control.

Adorno roots involuntary memory as "bewußtlose Geschichtsschreibung" (unconscious writing of history) in the autonomous work of art, a work of art free from the intention of the artist and the recipient. The finished artwork differs from that intended by the artist because "intention" is pure thought, whereas art is thought materialized through labor and matter. In addition, autonomous works of art embody the contradiction between genealogy and appearance. Through the production process, the material can emancipate itself from subjective intention, thus rendering the completed work of art unpredictable and freeing it from the intention of the subject who produced it. Art highlights the separation between subject and object and challenges the subject's need for identification. By resisting identification, autonomous art challenges both subjective meaning and objective rationality because art stands neither for itself nor for something else. It disrupts the *Verblendungszusammenhang* (context of blindness) and opens the possibility both for experience and for historical cognition based on remembering. Experience requires a distinction between the "identical self" and the subject: "Die subjektive Erfahrung wider das Ich ist ein Moment der objektiven Wahrheit von Kunst" (The subjective experience [*Erfahrung*] directed against the I is an element of the objective truth of art).<sup>34</sup> This distinction allows the subject to experience its own negativity, and through this true experience, the subject perceives itself as "objektiv vermittelt" (objectively mediated). This then allows the subject to recognize that the wholeness of the self can only be achieved by dominating the object:

Ergriffen wird das Ich von dem unmetaphorischen, den ästhetischen Schein zerbrechenden Bewußtsein: das es nicht das letzte, selber scheinhaft sei. Das verwandelt die Kunst dem Subjekt in das, was sie an sich ist, den geschichtlichen Sprecher unterdrückter Natur, kritisch am Ende gegen das Ichprinzip, den inwendigen Agenten von Unterdrückung.

[The I is seized by the unmetaphorical, semblance-shattering consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance. For the subject, this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principle of the I, that internal agent of repression.]<sup>35</sup>

*Bewußtsein* (consciousness) is the awareness of object-related subjectivity, an awareness that invalidates the false image of the *Ich* (I) and permits the subject to perceive the artwork as the historical representation of nature. By communicating history, autonomous art allows nature to occur. Note that the destruction of the self is tied to the subject's experience of art's language, which works as the "geschichtlicher Sprecher unterdrückter Natur" (historical voice of repressed nature). Through the destruction of the self, the subject can perceive language as historical and thus recognize that history refers to *das Lebendige* (the living; that which is alive).

Understanding the connection between *das Lebendige* (the living; that which is alive) and history requires criticism that permits the unfolding of the artwork's essential center, the truth content (*Wahrheitsgehalt*), and links it to historical cognition. "Die geschichtliche Entfaltung der Werke durch Kritik und die philosophische ihres Wahrheitsgehalts stehen in Wechselwirkung" (The historical development of works through critique and the philosophical development of their truth content have a reciprocal relation).<sup>36</sup> Here Adorno reveals the connections between his aesthetics and his concept of history by implicating history in one of the most abstract concepts of his aesthetics—the *Wahrheitsgehalt* (truth content). Truth content cannot be determined; instead, it provides a point of reference and a locus for reflection. Reflection upon the truth content links art to philosophy and to what Adorno calls *begreifen*—an untranslatable verb whose meanings range from intellectual understanding or comprehension to more physical grasping, touching, and feeling—thus presupposing critique, the task that links art to history. While reflection preserves the unknowable, labor constructs the historical inversion.<sup>37</sup>

According to Brecht the main task of his theatre is to construct historical inversion that produces *begreifen* (to grasp; to comprehend), a concept closely related to Adorno's vision of comprehension through labor. For Brecht, *begreifen* (to grasp; to comprehend) becomes possible through *eingreifen*, which encompasses several English verbs such as the physical "to interfere" and the social "to engage." Brecht writes, "Wir können den andern nur begreifen, wenn wir in ihn eingreifen können. Auch uns selbst können wir nur begreifen, indem wir in uns eingreifen" (24:182) (We can only grasp others when we are able to engage in them. We can also only grasp ourselves while we engage in ourselves).<sup>38</sup> The result is not consistency, but rupture, a rupture that allows the emergence of unpredictable history in place of the Enlightenment's coherent historical narratives. Brecht inserts the pain of the past into the staging of the present in order to signify the way that historical trauma constitutes reality. For Brecht,

experience is the awareness of violent rupture that destroys the consistency of the historical narrative.

According to Adorno, productive aesthetic theory must follow the rules of the work of art—rules that necessarily remain implicit—because the work of art stands against historical narrative as “ihrer selbst unbewußte Geschichtsschreibung” (self-unconscious historiography of their epoch).<sup>39</sup> Aesthetics must construct a historical experience out of art. Here, the presence of the subject is essential because “Kunstwerke lassen desto wahrhaftiger sich erfahren, je mehr ihre geschichtliche Substanz die des Erfahrenden ist” (Artworks may be all the more truly experienced the more their historical substance is that of the one who experiences it).<sup>40</sup> For Adorno, history is a substantive reality in the present that needs to be mediated through the subject’s experience of the past. The artwork, as “sedimentierte Geschichte” (sedimented history), produces historical snapshots for the subject; Adorno’s critical work seeks to do the same by combining contradictory elements such as intellect and material. Works of art are material producers of historical images, and images are not merely self-existent facts; they must be manufactured by men. The subject, according to Adorno, can only perceive history through images that come from the subject’s history: “Auf jeder ästhetischen Stufe erneuert sich der Antagonismus zwischen der Unwirklichkeit der *imago* und der Wirklichkeit des erscheinenden geschichtlichen Gehalts” (At every aesthetic level the antagonism between the unreality of the *imago* and the reality of the appearing historical content is renewed).<sup>41</sup> The contradiction between image and reality secures the artwork’s autonomy; thus, the historical narrative that emerges from the perception of art, while derivative of the subject, is out of its final control.

In *Negative Dialektik (Negative Dialectics)*, Adorno insists that the images produced by art must be translated. Negative dialectics provide a reading that reveals “jedes Bild als Schrift” (every image as writing). Thus, as Rolf Tiedemann points out, Adorno’s *Bilder* (images) are not *Abbildungen* (facsimiles). Instead, the work of art functions as a kaleidoscope that produces ever-new constellations that break the domination of the subject: “Das Schriftähnliche solcher Konstellation ist der Umschlag des subjektiv Gedachten und Zusammengebrachten in Objektivität vermöge der Sprache” (What resembles writing in such constellations is the conversion into objectivity, by way of language, of what has been subjectively thought and assembled).<sup>42</sup> Language, as constellation, can condense into a monad that allows the object to emerge. The object needs to open itself

to “einer monadologischen Insistenz” (a monadological insistence),<sup>43</sup> and it is because of its monadological insistence that the object reveals history in general. The monad reveals the object’s nonidentity, and history expresses itself through this negative revelation: “Solche immanente Allgemeinheit des Einzelnen aber ist objektiv als sedimentierte Geschichte. . . . Der Konstellation gewahr werden, in der die Sache steht, heißt soviel wie diejenige entziffern, die es als Gewordenes in sich trägt” (But such an immanent generality of something individual is objective as sedimented history. . . . Becoming aware of the constellation in which a thing stands is tantamount to deciphering the constellation which, having come to be, it bears within it).<sup>44</sup> The critical unfolding of language as constellation recognizes both the object and its history, a suppressed history that emerges for a moment through the subject’s mediation. The subject’s intention is to reflect on the object, but the object actually reflects upon the subject. The self becomes subject by thinking itself object, and the subject based on the object is the product of abstraction and alienation. As a result, the object’s specific history reveals the history of the subject.

The history of the subject via the history of the object takes more concrete shape in poetry, where language can reach society:

Die spezifische Paradoxie des lyrischen Gebildes, die in Objektivität umschlagende Subjektivität, ist gebunden an jenen Vorrang der Sprachgestalt in der Lyrik, von dem der Primat der Sprache in der Dichtung überhaupt, bis zur Form von Prosa her stammt. Denn die Sprache ist selber ein Doppeltes. Sie bildet durch ihre Konfigurationen den subjektiven Regungen gänzlich sich ein; ja wenig fehlt, und man könnte denken, sie zeitigte sie überhaupt erst. . . . Die Selbstvergessenheit des Subjekts, das der Sprache als einem Objektiven sich anheimgibt, und die Unmittelbarkeit und Unwillkürlichkeit seines Ausdrucks sind dasselbe: so vermittelt die Sprache Lyrik und Gesellschaft im Innersten.

[The paradox specific to the lyric work, a subjectivity that turns into objectivity, is tied to the priority of linguistic form in the lyric; it is that priority from which the primacy of language in literature in general (even in prose forms) is derived. For language is itself something double. Through its configurations it assimilates itself completely into subjective impulses; one would almost think it had produced them. . . . The unself-consciousness of the subject submitting itself to language as to something objective, and the immediacy and spontaneity of that subject’s expression are one and the same: thus language mediates lyric poetry and society in their innermost core.]<sup>45</sup>

For Adorno, poetry as autonomous art, with its reduced referentiality, brings literature as close as it can go to language as matter, as script, and thus to social relevance. Adorno and Brecht both see language as the essential mediator between poetry, society, and history. Brecht, like Adorno, develops concepts of microhistory through poetic inquiry, and he inserts history in his plays through his concept of *gestus*, a concept he explains most clearly in his essay “Über reimlose Lyrik mit unregelmäßigen Rhythmen” (On Rhymeless Verse with Irregular Rhythms):

Es handelte sich, wie man aus den Texten sehen kann, nicht nur um ein »Gegen-den-Strom-Schwimmen« in formaler Hinsicht, einen Protest gegen die Glätte und Harmonie des konventionellen Verses, sondern immer doch schon um den Versuch, die Vorgänge zwischen den Menschen als widerspruchsvolle, kampfdurchtobte, gewalttätige zu zeigen. (22.1:359)

[It was, as one can see from the texts, not only a matter of a “swimming-against-the-current” in a formal sense, a protest against the smoothness and harmony of conventional verse, but always-already of the attempt to show the affairs between men as full of contradictions, conflict-ravaged, violent.]

Brecht may have developed the concept of “gestisches Sprechen” (gestic speaking) primarily for his poetry, but he did so while constantly thinking about theatre. Accordingly, he describes his concept of *gestus* as “die Sprache sollte ganz dem Gestus der sprechenden Person folgen” (22.1:359) (the language should entirely follow the *gestus* of the person speaking). Brecht’s struggle with the historical material for his play *Leben Eduards des Zweiten von England* (*The Life of Edward the Second of England*) led him to develop a language that signifies the complexities and contradictions inherent in historical events. “Gestisches sprechen” (gestic speaking) poses difficulties for reading and writing because it moves them into the realm of labor. Brecht, moving his discussion back and forth between Marlowe and Shakespeare, gives an example:

Statt zu schreiben:

Seit sie da Trommeln rührten überm Sumpf  
Und um mich Roß und Katapult versank  
Ist mir verrückt mein Kopf. . . .

schrrieb ich:

Seit diese Trommeln waren, der Sumpf, ersäufend  
Katapult und Pferde, ist wohl verrückt  
Meiner Mutter Sohn Kopf. Keuch nicht! (22.1:358–59)

[Instead of writing:

Since they there beat drums over the swamp  
 And around me sank steed and catapult  
 My head is mad to me. . . .

I wrote:

Since there were drums, the swamp, drowning  
 Catapult and horses, is probably deranged  
 My mother's son's head. Don't gasp!]

Note that the rewrite eliminates the grammatical "I" and breaks with the past tense. It also adds another historical dimension—that of the mother—and complicates the meaning of "verrückt" (deranged) by including the possibility of physical displacement. Finally, Brecht adds an imperative that transforms the stanza from monologue into dialogue. To the macrohistorical presentation of Edward's life, Brecht adds an array of microhistories that become significant in the moment of performance.

Adorno's surprisingly similar concept of natural history takes shape in his essay on Hölderlin entitled "Parataxis" in which he analyzes a process that he calls "parataktische Zerrüttung" (paratactical disorder) in terms that resemble the Brechtian *gestus*. "Parataktische Zerrüttung" (paratactical disorder) rests upon a notion of *Fügsamkeit* (obedience, submission, docility); as in all autonomous poetry, the subject follows the language: "Losgelassen, freigesetzt, erscheint sie nach dem Maß subjektiver Intention parataktisch zerrüttet" (Set free, language appears paratactically disordered when judged in terms of subjective intention).<sup>46</sup> The destruction of the hypotactical, and thus hierarchical, order of a sentence in order to equate all syntactical elements is familiar from Brecht's concept of "gestische Sprache" (gestic language). The "parataktische Zerrüttung" (paratactical disorder) happens despite the subject's intention to establish coherent meaning. In Hölderlin, language-as-object creates the subject—"Das Subjekt wird es erst durch Sprache" (The subject becomes a subject only through language)<sup>47</sup>—a subject mediated through language-as-object rather than through individual-as-agent.

The destruction of traditional notions of subjectivity and history is essential to Hölderlin's work, but it is the way in which one can trace the formation and destruction of the traditionally unified subject through Hölderlin's stanzas that makes his poetry unique for Adorno: "Hölderlin hat die Ideale, die man ihn lehrte, . . . zur Maxime verinnerlicht. Danach mußte er erfahren, daß die Welt anders ist als die Normen, die sie ihm einpflanzte" (Hölderlin believed in the ideals he was taught; . . . internal-

ized them as maxims. Later he was forced to learn that the world is different from the norms that had been implanted in him).<sup>48</sup> The historical experience that one witnesses in Hölderlin's poetry is the experience of difference between the interiority of the subject and the "reality" of the outside world. Parataxis, as Adorno observes, creates "Korrespondenzen" (correspondences) rather than consistency and allows one "Zeiten durcheinander zu schütteln, Entlegenes und Unverbundenes zu verbinden" (to mix eras together, to connect things that are remote and unconnected).<sup>49</sup> Hölderlin's experience builds along *Fügsamkeit* (obedience; submission; docility) toward pedagogy, at first constituting a virtuous *Innerlichkeit* (inwardness) that faces destruction through his *Fügsamkeit* (obedience; submission; docility) toward language. His poetry thus consists of one of the great contradictions of modern subjectivity: the denial of genealogy for the sake of a consistent pedagogical project of self-formation. Hölderlin presents this process in reverse: the virtue of pedagogy is disguised as violence in the reality of the world.

*Fügsamkeit* (obedience; submission; docility) and confrontation also create the dialectic in Brecht's theatre. In contrast to Adorno, however, Brecht draws these insights from the culture of mass society that Adorno seeks to overcome. Brecht's starting point for theatrical dialectics is the "Zertrümmerung der Person" (shattering of the person), which he considers the historical destruction of bourgeois subjectivity "aus ihrer Ausdehnung in ihre kleinste Größe, . . . und eigentliche Unentbehrlichkeit im Ganzen" (21:320) (from its enlargement to its smallest size, . . . and actual expendability within the whole). The effect, for Brecht, is liberating because it denies the subject its fictional control of history, a denial he seeks to replicate in his concept of epic theatre: "*Die epische Form*, als den Vorgängen folgend und sich den Kurven der Realität anpassend, die solche Kurven »macht«, indem sie sie *mitmacht*" (21:320) (*The epic form*, in following the events and adapting itself to the curves of reality, "makes" such curves by *participating in* them). Brecht's theatre articulates the moment in which the subject experiences *Fügsamkeit* (obedience; submission; docility) and confrontation, a moment marked by violence. Brecht's concept of *gestus* seeks to articulate this moment that, as he explains, "ist wohl verrückt / meiner Mutter Sohn Kopf" (22.1:359) (is probably deranged / My mother's son's head). The moment we cease to be in agreement with ourselves, we become able to agree with the historical reality around us. For Brecht, *Einverständnis* (consent) is the entrance into the multiple facets of any historical reality, an entrance available only through a commitment to intersubjective activity. This can only occur

through language in which the *Ich* (I) emerges as an answer because it is always-already someone else. The *Ich* (I) as someone else derives from *gestus* as Brecht's technique of signification. On Brecht's stage this allows the actor citing her or his role to stress the arbitrariness of this signification while simultaneously emphasizing the physical reality of the body on stage. Brecht uses repetition to signify *Vergänglichkeit* (transitoriness), but signification is always a negative form of representation. By rejecting representation, Brechtian *gestus* signifies what it is not.

The history that Brecht's theatre presents is thus unpredictable. Brecht's technique of insertion blocks the construction of a historical narrative, opting instead to signify the negative side of dramatic representation, and in this way Brecht fulfills Adorno's demand for the construction of historical experience. Adorno's "Was aber wäre Kunst als Geschichtsschreibung, wenn sie das Gedächtnis des akkumulierten Leidens abschüttelte" (But then what would art be, as the writing of history, if it shook off the memory of accumulated suffering) is answered by Brecht with the destruction of memory in order to unfold the historical event.<sup>50</sup> Brecht's theatre lives within the confrontation between the theoretical model and the theatrical play; he does not attempt to translate one into the other. Adorno's mediating subject differs from Brecht's subject-in-performance, but it is precisely this difference that enables Brecht's theatre to open the stage for the aesthetic, social, and historical truth content so essential to Adorno's philosophy and to do so for a much broader range of people than Adorno could ever speak to.

## NATURAL HISTORY

Adorno, Benjamin, and Brecht are most closely linked in their pursuit of new ways to comprehend industrialized mass society, a pursuit that led each to develop a new concept of natural history. This is not surprising if one considers the importance natural history had gained in the arts and social sciences during the late nineteenth century through the emergence of Social Darwinism and naturalism. Brecht's *Hauspostille* (*Manual of Piety; Devotional for the Home*) and his early plays, Benjamin's *Ursprung des deutschen Trauerspiels* (*Origin of German Tragic Drama*) and his Baudelaire essays, and Adorno's 1932 essay "Die Idee der Naturgeschichte" (The Idea of Natural History) and his and Max Horkheimer's 1947 book *Dialektik der Aufklärung* (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*) all seek to defy naturalistic and Darwinian approaches to moder-