

UNTIMELY FORMS: AESTHETIC AUTONOMY AND THE LITERARY WORLD-SYSTEM

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INTRODUCTION

The Persistence of Autonomy

In an era that will be defined by a global pandemic, systemic racism, economic collapse, ecological catastrophe, culture wars and the ongoing resurgence of far-right politics, what could be more untimely than the idea of aesthetic autonomy? The signature modernist claim that the true artwork is (or ought to be) autonomous - an end in itself rather than a means to an end; an autotelic form rather than a representation - has in some ways never looked so dated. “Here form is content, content is form.... His writing is not about something; it is that something itself”, writes a young Samuel Beckett of James Joyce’s “Work in Progress”, succinctly articulating what is frequently seen as the would-be autonomous artwork’s defining aspiration.¹ If the “omniscient” narratives of Victorian realism seek to hold up a mirror to the world, the story goes, the autonomous artwork turns away from the world and asserts its anti-referential formal closure. Abjuring political responsibility, instrumentality, utility, didacticism, subject matter, plot, authorial expression, external ideas, paraphrasable meanings, narrative conventions and the desires of the reader, the autonomous artwork instead devotes itself hermetically to the problem of its own medium-specific formal possibilities and limits.²

¹ Samuel Beckett, “Dante... Bruno. Vico... Joyce” (1929), in *Disjecta* (1983), p. 27. Joyce’s “Work in Progress” would eventually be published as *Finnegan’s Wake* (1939).

² For a helpful overview of ideas of artistic autonomy within literary culture, see Gene Bell-Villada, *Art for Art’s Sake and Literary Life* (1996). For overviews of the concept of autonomy within continental philosophy and literary theory, see J. M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation From Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1992), Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984), Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) and Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004).

“Modernist autonomy-claims” such as Beckett’s not only affirm the unbridgeable “ontological gap” between the world and the text, but elevate the incapacity of the literary text to refer to anything outside of its own aesthetic form into a vocation and a *raison d’être*.³ Echoing formalist mantras from Archibald McLeish’s “a poem should not mean but be” to Marshall McLuhan’s “the medium is the message” to Jacques Derrida’s «*Il n’y a pas de hors-texte*», Beckett’s much-quoted assessment of Joyce articulates what became arguably the normative criterion of literary value during a twentieth century in which modernist autonomy was, for a time, the official currency of “literary capital”.⁴ In Pierre Bourdieu’s influential analysis, the modern literary field is constituted by a structural divide between a low-status “field of mass production” associated with realism, and a high-status “field of restricted production” associated with modernism. This systemic opposition manifests itself through the polarized aesthetic values of a popular realism, characterized by representation and the more or less skillful use of narrative conventions (plot, character, setting, perspective), and an elite modernism characterized by the assertion of formal autonomy, a corresponding hostility toward representation, and the overt violation or defamiliarizing of narrative conventions. If modernism privileges autonomy, difficulty, hermetic self-containment, formal rupture, revolution and singularity, popular realist forms are characterized by the modulated repetition and variation of codes, conventions and formulae within a delimited range of potential permutations. Modernism, in other words, holds

³ The phrase “modernist autonomy-claims” is used by Andrew Goldstone in *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013), and in Charles Altieri, “Why Modernist Claims for Autonomy Matter” (2009); the phrase “ontological gap” is used by René Wellek in “The Crisis of Comparative Literature” (1958), p. 170.

⁴ In the work of Pierre Bourdieu, “literary capital” designates the particular form of prestige operative within the literary field, which Bourdieu associates with modernism and the assertion of aesthetic autonomy. See Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) and “The Forms of Capital”, in John Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education* (1986), pp. 241–58. Bourdieu’s concept of “literary capital” is central to Pascale Casanova’s arguments concerning literary autonomy in *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), which I discuss in detail below (“Autonomy and ‘World Literature’”, pp. 43-51).

true to the values of literature “as such”, or literature as an autonomous artform; realism, by contrast, is the house style of the capitalist “culture industry”.⁵

This hierarchy of value for Bourdieu is a materialization of the *ressentiment* (“the sentiment of the person who transforms a sociologically mutilated being... into a model of human excellence”) of the modernist, who converts his dominated position within the market into “cultural capital” by sublimating it into a self-justification and *raison d’être*: the modernist ideology of aesthetic autonomy, or *l’art pour l’art*.⁶ Mainstream Anglo-American literary theory from T.S. Eliot to Paul de Man can likewise be said to transmute its affirmation and philosophical elaboration of such strategies into critical capital. Literary theory from formalism and New Criticism to the Frankfurt School and deconstruction can be construed as a series of variations on the theme of the literary text’s extra-referential autonomy, and thus as “the continuation of modernism by other means”.⁷ A late twentieth-century Anglo-American literary academy that was for a time dominated by the twin lineages of French (from Ferdinand de Saussure to Jacques Derrida) and German (from Immanuel Kant to Theodor W. Adorno) critical theory thus had an inbuilt allegiance to a largely white, male-dominated European modernism, along with a corresponding and well-documented set of blindspots and limitations: an overriding concern with questions of form and structure at the expense of either historical context or representational content; a general disinterest in or obliviousness to the cultural productions of the former colonial world; and an overt hostility both to realism and to the popular and commercial forms that, for complex yet historically legible reasons, have often been more available avenues for the cultural expressions and experiences of women, people of color, queer

⁵ See Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art* (1992); Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry”, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1947).

⁶ Bourdieu and Wacquant, *An Invitation to Reflexive Sociology* (1992), p. 212.

⁷ Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (2004), p. 64.

and gender non-conforming people. The exalted critical status granted to works that pursue the autonomous values of literature “as such” as defined by modernism thus tends to redouble the pre-existing social privilege of their producers. Literary autonomy in such an analysis functions as both a signifier and a *producer* of social “distinction”, sublimating class interest into the self-congratulatory rhetoric of aesthetic disinterest by which the elite differentiates itself from its perceived inferiors.⁸

If the idea of formal and aesthetic autonomy is in one account a weapon in the services of cultural conservatism, it also has a counter-history as a weapon in the fight *against* cultural conservatism, from the Frankfurt School to *Tel Quel*, deconstruction, feminism and postcolonialism, through to contemporary queer, black and performance studies. For Theodor W. Adorno and Herbert Marcuse the formal autonomy of the modernist artwork represents a bastion of resistance against the instrumental rationality of a capitalist system that reduces everything to exchange value.⁹ For Georg Lukács, by contrast, it is the realist novel’s preservation of an ancient tradition of “epic” narration oriented toward collectivity, historical objectivity and narrative totality that resists the logic of capital. Realism preserves the pre-existing autonomy of art, paradoxically, by refusing modernist autonomy, which for Lukács reduces art to the status of a harmless commodity, mere *l’art pour l’art*, or the symptomatic expression of decontextualized, alienated subjectivity.¹⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, meanwhile, theorizes the formally de-totalizing

⁸ Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1984). Perhaps the best condensed summary of Bourdieu’s account of the genesis and structure of the literary field is “The Market of Symbolic Goods” (1971), in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993) pp. 112-144. For his fullest account, see *The Rules of Art* (1992). For his most detailed work on the “sociology of taste” and the relation of art to social stratification, see *Distinction*.

⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970); Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* (1977).

¹⁰ See Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963). As Gillian Rose argues, whereas for Lukács “The capitalist mode of production destroys the previous autonomy of culture by turning cultural products into commodities and splitting up the work process”, for Adorno “Pre-capitalist culture is not contrasted with capitalist in terms of the destruction of autonomous culture, instead the ‘autonomy’ of cultural forms is only achieved under capitalism. When works of art are exchanged as commodities, they

“dialogism” of the novel in both its modernist and realist iterations as a locus of resistance to totalizing “monologic” authoritarianism.¹¹ And various claims for a radical politics of “textual subversion”, or of “literariness” per se, are a mainstay of French high theory, from Roland Barthes, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida to Gilles Deleuze, Felix Guattari and Jean-François Lyotard.

More recently, the tradition of “feminist aesthetics” has centered on the co-articulation of a “sexual/textual politics” derived from Lacan-inspired thinkers such as Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, who theorize the revolutionary force of experimental writing as a means of rupturing the patriarchal symbolic order.¹² Queer theory has mobilized a structurally comparable argument about the radical constitutive outsideness of queerness in relation to a heteronormative symbolic order founded on an assumptive “reproductive futurism”, alongside a Frankfurt School-inspired claim about the utopian force of queer performativity.¹³ Critics such as Homi Bhabha, Bill Ashcroft and Elleke Boehmer have identified acts of radical anti- and postcolonial resistance within literary texts and reading practices that subvert or deconstruct colonial structures of signification,¹⁴ while more recent work has speculated on a specifically

become detached from the context of social use and ritual and thus become ‘autonomous’”. Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), pp. 149-150. This distinction will be important for the argument that follows.

¹¹ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1982).

¹² See Rita Felski, *Beyond Feminist Aesthetics* (1989), Toril Moi, *Sexual/Textual Politics* (1985), Ewa Plonowska Ziarek, *Feminist Aesthetics and the Politics of Modernism* (2012), Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetics Language* (1974), Luce Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974), Hélène Cixous, “The Laugh of the Medusa” (1976).

¹³ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004); José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity* (2009).

¹⁴ See, for example, Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1994); Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989), Elleke Boehmer, “Imperialism and Textuality”, in *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature*, pp. 13-57. As Eli Park Sorensen puts it, “At times, postcolonial studies created the impression that colonialism and its legacies could be countered effectively solely by means of textual strategies of dismantling, subverting, disconnecting and deconstructing.” Sorensen, “Postcolonial Literary History and the Concealed Totality of Life” (2014), p. 237.

“postcolonial aesthetic”.¹⁵ Ato Quayson imports a structurally similar “autonomy-claim via textual subversion” argument into disability studies with his concept of “aesthetic nervousness”.¹⁶ And aesthetic autonomy-claims in a variety of forms are currently enjoying a resurgence in black studies, in the work of scholars such as Rizvana Bradley, Philip Brian Harper, Fred Moten, Kevin Quashie and Paul C. Taylor.¹⁷

If a rapid-fire genealogy of literary autonomy-claims can be made to connect everyone from Harold Bloom to Fred Moten, this is not to suggest that they are all making the same kind of autonomy-claim, or for the same reason. Nonetheless, the fact that autonomy-claims appear in such a range of contexts and serve such diverse agendas is in part a reflection of the fact that the contemporary political left and right, at least as those configurations manifest themselves in the Western academy, share many of the same philosophical and conceptual roots.¹⁸ For Jurgen Habermas, the autonomy of the artwork is a signature claim - or, a symptomatic recourse - of what he calls the “philosophical discourse of modernity”.¹⁹ Theorists from Adorno, Max Horkheimer and Herbert Marcuse to Martin Heidegger, Georges Bataille, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida privilege the autonomous artwork (however variously construed) as the solution to, or the expression of, a basic “performative contradiction” inherent within the modern philosophical critique of reason. For these thinkers, the erstwhile emancipatory promise of

¹⁵ Elleke Boehmer, “A Postcolonial Aesthetic: Repeating Upon the Present” (2015); Bill Ashcroft, “Towards a Postcolonial Aesthetics” (2015); Simon During, “The Postcolonial Aesthetic” (2014). For other prominent work on the formal specificity of postcolonial literature, see Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence* (2003); Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities* (2015) (chapter six, pp. 142-177); Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2010).

¹⁶ Ato Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007).

¹⁷ See Rizvanah Bradley, *Anteesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (2023), Harper, *Abstractionist Aesthetics* (2015), Moten, *In the Break* (2003), Quashie, *Black Aliveness* (2021), Taylor, *Black is Beautiful* (2016), Kelly, “Black Aesthetics and Relative Autonomy” (2019).

¹⁸ One could cite any number of examples here, but perhaps one will illustrate the point: Henry Louis Gates Jr. argues, in *Tradition and the Black Atlantic* (2010), that the “father of anti-colonialism” is none other than the father of British conservatism, Edmund Burke (p. 12).

¹⁹ Jurgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985).

Enlightenment reason has either been debased into “instrumental rationality”, or exposed as a mere subterfuge for power. Yet,

The totalizing critique of reason gets caught in a performative contradiction since subject-centered reason can be convicted of being authoritarian in nature only by having recourse to its own tools. The tools of thought, which miss ‘the dimension of nonidentity’ and are imbued with ‘the metaphysics of presence’ are nevertheless the only available means for uncovering their own insufficiency. (185)

The artwork is the privileged ground for the expression of this aporia. Once the “tools” of philosophy become both the means and the object of their own critique, the ironic self-reflexivity of literary language and the non-propositional communication of aesthetic form become vehicles for the kind of aporetic thought required of (but less readily available to) philosophy. Hence for Adorno, as Habermas puts it, “The promise for which the surviving philosophical tradition is no longer a match has withdrawn into the mirror-writing of the esoteric work of art” (186). As Gerhard Richter has argued, the literary or “chiastic” prose of thinkers such as Adorno, Heidegger and Derrida reflects their aspiration toward a “non-propositional truth-content” that is more fully realized in the formal autonomy of the work of art.²⁰ “Aesthetics”, as Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*, “is not applied philosophy but philosophical in itself”.²¹

As Habermas argues, there is nothing inherently left wing about such critiques. Claims for the artwork’s constitutive exteriority to, or autonomy from an instrumentalized or self-interested rationality are common both to Marxists such as Adorno and Marcuse, and to thinkers of the political right such as Friedrich Nietzsche and Martin Heidegger.²² This perennial availability or appropriability of autonomy-claims to thinkers across the political spectrum

²⁰ Gerhard Richter, “*Aesthetic Theory* and Nonpropositional Truth Content in Adorno” (2006).

²¹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 140; cited in Richter, p. 119.

²² Indeed, Marcuse studied under Heidegger during the 1920s, and his early work has been read as an attempt to reconcile Hegelian Marxism and Heideggerian existentialism. See Richard Wolin and John Abromeit (ed.), *Heideggerian Marxism* (2005).

characterizes the recent history of literary and aesthetic theory. Indeed, autonomy-claims of one form or another are arguably the central currency of mainstream twentieth century literary theory, from New Criticism (“a poem should not mean but be”) to deconstruction (“there is nothing outside the text”). That the former is often associated with the political right and the latter with the left - and that the former asserts the autonomy *of* literary form and the latter the autonomy of literary language *from* form - is indicative of the constitutive antinomies between which the concept has tended to oscillate. Autonomy, as a claim to irreducible particularity and non-instrumentality, can be at once conservative (art’s autonomy is a moral example of the best that can be thought and said) and radical (art’s autonomy from everyday discursive norms places it in implacable opposition to the white-supremacist-hetero-patriarchal-capitalist symbolic order). This produces a curious circularity: the concept of aesthetic autonomy serves as the glue that problematically sutures a romantic-modernist conception of art and aesthetic experience to the lineage of continental philosophy that has, paradoxically, provided much of the conceptual basis for the “School of Resentment” that to a conservative critic like Bloom represents a terminal threat to the romantic-modernist concept and practice of autonomous art.²³

At the heart of this tension lies the fact that autonomy-claims can be at once aesthetic and anti-aesthetic, depending on what one means by “aesthetic”. As Simon During reminds us, “if the categories of literature and the aesthetic are taken *stricto sensu*, then they are not just different from each other but in tension. The aesthetic is fundamentally sensory while literature is linguistic” (501).²⁴ Accordingly, we can differentiate between a Kantian tradition of aesthetic autonomy-claims that takes the experience of the non-literary artwork as its paradigm, and a

²³ Bloom identifies “six branches of the School of Resentment: Feminists, Marxists, Lacanians, New Historicists, Deconstructionists, Semioticians”. Bloom, *The Western Canon* (1994), p. 527.

²⁴ Simon During, “The Postcolonial Aesthetic”, *PMLA*, Volume 129, Issue 3, May 2014, pp. 498-503.

poststructuralist lineage of anti-aesthetic (or, textual) autonomy-claims that take the literary work as its paradigm. If the former emphasizes unmediated sensory criteria such as purity, unity, totality and synchronicity, the latter emphasizes various forms of mediation: impurity, iterability, temporality, and fragmentation. In Paul de Man's frequently-quoted terms, "the statement about language, that sign and meaning can never coincide, is what is precisely taken for granted in the kind of language we call literary. Literature, unlike everyday language, begins on the far side of this knowledge; it is the only form of language free from the fallacy of unmediated expression".²⁵ Such textual criteria are, furthermore, frequently ascribed a political value precisely insofar as they subvert the aesthetic criteria, which are taken to epitomize some variant of patriarchal ideology. But if these two sides are opposed to one another, this opposition is also the locus of their relation. If proponents of "the new aesthetic discourse" such as Elaine Scarry and Peter de Bolla hold the aesthetic experience to be autonomous,²⁶ and a practitioner of anti-aesthetic critique such as de Man regards this as the definition of "aesthetic ideology", they nonetheless share an equally doggedly held notion of the specificity of the literary and/or the aesthetic. They therefore occupy opposite poles of a constitutive dialectic that has structured much of academic literary theory since the mid-twentieth century.

Modernist autonomy-claims have thus sponsored various arguments for a specific politics of aesthetics, of form, or of textuality, from both the political left and the right. Yet regardless of the rhetoric used to justify and politicize them, such autonomy-claims have the marked

²⁵ de Man, *Blindness and Insight* (1971), p. 17.

²⁶ Peter Uwe Hohendahl, *The Fleeting Promise of Art: Adorno's Aesthetic Theory Revisited* (2013), p. 4. As Hohendahl argues, "what de Bolla and Scarry share is the belief in the immediacy of the aesthetic experience. Both would argue that the aesthetic experience is always present and unambiguous in its nature. Both of them resist a hermeneutics of suspicion and the suggestion that the aesthetic experience itself might be ideological (Eagleton, Bourdieu) or that artworks owe their existence to concrete material conditions. Put differently, the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere is taken for granted - either as an objective realm of the beautiful (Scarry) or as a distinct realm of experience (de Bolla)", p. 5. See Scarry, *On Beauty and Being Just* (1999); de Bolla, *Art Matters* (2003).

disadvantage of tending to problematize, if not to disqualify altogether any text that aspires to make a more direct political intervention at the level of its represented content. The autonomous artwork is that which has been rendered mute - self-reflexive, without historical referents - regardless of whether one interprets this as a cause for celebration (the free-play of the signifier) or lament (the prison-house of language).²⁷ The concept of autonomy can thus be mobilized to supply the grounds for the separation of aesthetics and politics (or alternatively, the replacement of politics by aesthetics); and the beneficiaries of such a separation have traditionally been those who already hold a position of privilege within the social and political status quo that the autonomous aesthetic is claimed to transcend. “It is childish to study a work of fiction in order to gain information about a country or about a social class or about the author”, writes Vladimir Nabokov, chief ideologue of twentieth century formal autonomy and, perhaps not entirely coincidentally - like fellow travelers ranging from Samuel Beckett, James Joyce, T.S. Eliot, Stéphane Mallarmé, Marcel Proust, Jorge-Luis Borges, Alain Robbe-Grillet, Thomas Bernhard, Peter Handke, William H. Gass, Gordon Lish, J.M. Coetzee, Martin Amis, David Markson and Tom McCarthy to Clement Greenberg, Theodor W. Adorno, Maurice Blanchot, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man and Michael Fried - conspicuously white and male.²⁸

Whether or not positions such as Nabokov’s were ever defensible, they seem anachronistic at best in a contemporary age of “world literature”, with its “zeitgeist marked by a ‘compulsion’ to be world-oriented”.²⁹ If autonomy is a refusal of the world, twenty-first century literature in several influential accounts has been defined by a refusal of this refusal.

Contemporary literature is worldly in the sense of its greater geographic and demographic

²⁷ Jacques Derrida, “Structure, Sign and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences” (1966); Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language* (1972).

²⁸ Nabokov, *Lolita* (1955), “Postscript”, p. 332.

²⁹ Debjani Ganguly, *This Thing Called the World* (2016), p. 1.

diversity, comprising a bricolage of forms in which heterogeneous cultural traditions are juxtaposed and combined, and the narrow aesthetic values of a formalistic high-modernist tradition dominated by white men find themselves relativized. As two of the most influential theorists of this new globalized world-order, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri put it in their 2000 opus, *Empire*, “Over the past several decades, as colonial regimes were overthrown and then precipitously after the Soviet barriers to the capitalist world market finally collapsed, we have witnessed an irresistible and irreversible globalization of economic and cultural exchanges”.³⁰ Not only do cultural productions such as novels (and their authors) circulate and influence one another transnationally, contemporary novelists frequently take the globe as their subject matter or object of representation.

The contemporary novel is worldly, then, in the sense of being cosmopolitan. Yet it is also worldly in its desire to break out of the prisonhouse of form and to reconnect, however problematically, with the world outside of the text. We are now firmly within a post-postmodernist literary period, in which realist representation has reemerged in various forms, having apparently survived the assaults of modernism, postmodernism, formalism and the “hermeneutics of suspicion” relatively unscathed. And this development in literary style has been accompanied by a broader transvaluation of critical values. Contemporary culture is marked by an affirmative turn that reverberates across multiple fields and registers: from an ironically self-negating postmodern metafiction to new forms of realism; from ironic distance to a “New Sincerity”; from an anti-aesthetic “hermeneutics of suspicion” to post-critical modes that affirm the value of literature; and from an avant-garde tradition that sought to dismantle the ideological status quo to a new populist pluralism that seeks to affirm the identities and values of previously

³⁰ Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000), p. xi.

marginalized subjects, cultures and communities. Twenty-first century literary culture as a whole seems to have heeded Edward Said's advice: "If it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate the aesthetic from the worldly domain, the time has come to rejoin them".³¹

If the global contemporary has thus seen a movement away from autonomy in the sense of the assertion of the artwork's extra-referential formal closure, it has also tended to cast doubt upon the notion of a constitutive hostility or tension between the values of art "as such" and those of the capitalist marketplace. Fredric Jameson famously theorizes the transition from modernism to postmodernism as (in Nicholas Brown's terms) art's "real subsumption by capital", the total incorporation of aesthetic production into commodity production and the final exhaustion of "non-commodified space" such as the autonomous aesthetic.³² Critics such as Wendy Brown have likewise characterized neoliberalism as a "governing rationality" in which "all spheres of existence are framed and measured by economic metrics, even where those spheres are not directly monetized".³³ For critics such as Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri and Alexander Galloway (following Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault), we live in "control societies" in which "mechanisms of command become ever more 'democratic', ever more immanent to the social field, distributed throughout the brains and bodies of the citizens".³⁴ For Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, Sarah Brouillette and Jasper Bernes the contemporary "creative economy" reappropriates the modernist values of creative autonomy, disinterest, spontaneity and expressivity, as articulated by an "artistic critique of modernity" running from

³¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), p. 58.

³² Jameson, *Postmodernism* (1990); Brown, *Autonomy* (2019).

³³ Wendy Brown, *Undoing the Demos: Neoliberalism's Stealth Revolution* (2015), p. 9.

³⁴ Hardt and Negri, *Empire*, (2000) p. 23. See also, Deleuze, "Postscript on Societies of Control" (1990); Galloway, *Protocol: How Control Exists After Deregulation* (2004).

Friedrich Schiller to Guy Debord, into a model of the ideal neoliberal subject.³⁵ In all of these accounts, then, the specificity of the contemporary is that there is no longer any “outside” to the logic of capital. In a late-neoliberal age of Amazon, Netflix and 24/7 capitalism, real subsumption and globalized commodity chains, in which everyone is obliged to be an “entrepreneur of the self”,³⁶ the avant-garde-ist assertion of art’s autonomy from capital seems “at best ridiculous and at worst disingenuous”.³⁷

Yet even outside of the terms of such historicizing narratives, the very notion of a fundamental tension between art “as such” and the mere “art-commodities”³⁸ of the marketplace has come to seem suspect, a way of preserving the status of a white-washed elite while refusing to take seriously the more popular forms often favored by those for whom the commodification of art is not so much a delegitimizing threat as an avenue of access and democratization. Is it really a coincidence that postmodernist claims for the death of literature and the eclipse of art’s autonomy by the market emerged hot on the heels of the proliferation of novels and artworks by those whom the ever-shrinking domain of extra-market autonomy and its attendant anti-realist discourses had historically functioned to exclude? Does the very fear of and resistance to “selling out”, which runs from romantic aestheticism to Grunge, not involve (in Jess Rowe’s terms) a kind of “white flight”: a denial of the *historical constructedness* of one’s position of relative autonomy in relation to the forces of commodification, of the racialized hierarchies that such a position and set of values presupposes, and of the histories of violence and oppression that produced and continue to sustain them? Does the counterposing of an embattled domain of

³⁵ Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999); Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014); Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017).

³⁶ Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1978).

³⁷ Rachel Greenwald Smith, *On Compromise* (2021), p. 67.

³⁸ Nicholas Brown, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption by Capital” (2012).

imaginative autonomy to the heteronomous compulsions of the marketplace not simply presuppose and naturalize such hierarchies of oppression, and thus express a deeply if covertly racialized faith in the “white autonomy of the imagination”? Does the attempt to preserve an ever-shrinking domain of non-commodified artistic and imaginative freedom in contradistinction to the market therefore function practically as a defense of whiteness, oblivious to the fact “that autonomy, which often feels like vacancy, is a state of oppression”?³⁹

Under the pressure of such questions the twenty-first century has seen a pendulum swing from what we might term the modernist anti-commercial critique of realism (as commodification and debasement) to the realist anti-elitist critique of modernism, and thus a critical revaluation of all that modernism rejected or constitutively excluded. And with this revaluation comes a larger questioning of an entire economy of prestige, and an associated historical narrative, predicated on permanent formal revolution as the motor of literary history, and thus of formal autonomy as (in Pascale Casanova’s terms) the “Greenwich Meridian Time” of world literature.⁴⁰ The idea that the novel follows a single developmental path - marching, in dialectical lock-step with the capitalist mode of production, through realism and modernism on to postmodernism - has thus given way to a more inclusive pluralism that recognizes a multiplicity of lineages and legitimate novelistic sub-genres.

As such, the great “aesthetics and politics” debates of the twentieth century - which counterpose an autonomous modernism and a politically (or commercially) instrumental realism in zero-sum ideological confrontation - have largely given way to a post-critical pluralism that mirrors the aesthetic heterogeneity of contemporary literary production.⁴¹ Is literature after

³⁹ Rowe, *White Flights* (2019), (pp. 82-84).

⁴⁰ Casanova (2004), p. 87.

⁴¹ Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977).

postmodernism defined by the “return of the real”?⁴² By the explosion of autofictional or post-fictional writing that exists at the “edges of fiction”?⁴³ By the reemergence of modernist autonomy in the face of art’s “real subsumption by capital”?⁴⁴ By the emergence of new voices and subjects - writers from the global periphery, or racially, sexually or culturally minoritized writers within the core - to the literary mainstream? By a “genre turn”?⁴⁵ By the return of historical fiction?⁴⁶ By institutional contexts such as the MFA program, Amazon, or the “conglomerate era” of corporate publishing?⁴⁷ Or simply by the fact of this pluralism itself, and thus the demise of homogenizing periods or stylistic dominants?

In all of these senses, then, the concept of autonomy nowadays seems like an anachronism: a high-modernist aesthetic ideology whose major thinkers and practitioners, from Samuel Beckett and Vladimir Nabokov to Clement Greenberg and Theodor W. Adorno, have by now become signifiers of a conservative, exclusionary and fundamentally Western-centric concept and practice of high literature. Indeed, in a post- colonial, post- civil rights and post- culture wars Anglo-American academy, autonomy is on one level surely a code-word for the tweed and elbow-padded forces of reaction; epitomized perhaps by the tragi-comic spectacle of an aging Harold Bloom railing, like King Lear on the heath, against the (Marxist, feminist, postcolonial, queer and ethnic minority) “School of Resentment” and insisting upon the “purely

⁴² Hal Foster, *The Return of the Real* (1996).

⁴³ Jacques Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction* (2020).

⁴⁴ Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy* (2019).

⁴⁵ Tim Lanzendorfer, *The Poetics of Genre in the Contemporary Novel* (2017), p. 3.

⁴⁶ Xander Manshel, *Writing Backwards: Historical Fiction and the Reshaping of the American Canon* (2023).

⁴⁷ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era* (2009), *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021); Dan Sinykin, *Big Fiction: How Conglomeration Changed the Publishing Industry and American Literature* (2023).

aesthetic” criteria proper to literary judgment, all the while brandishing a “Western Canon” consisting of writing almost exclusively by dead white men.⁴⁸

To be sure, theories of formal and aesthetic autonomy - and their correlatives: purity, disinterest, literariness, abstraction, absorption, medium-specificity, formalism, modernism - have frequently served as the ideological ballast for a purportedly apolitical aestheticism. Yet I will argue in what follows that to reduce autonomy to any of these approaches, values or literary archives is to conflate the problem of art’s autonomy with a set of ideologically overdetermined and culturally specific *responses* to that problem. Indeed, this dissertation argues that, far from having been eclipsed by the transition from modernism to postmodernism, or from postmodernism to the global contemporary, autonomy remains a structuring preoccupation for contemporary novelists, including Teju Cole, Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie, Jonathan Franzen, NoViolet Bulawayo, Valeria Luiselli, J.M. Coetzee, Kazuo Ishiguro, Jon Fosse, Rachel Cusk, W.G. Sebald and Thomas Bernhard. I identify three narrative logics operative within the contemporary global novel, each of which constitutes a direct response to the problem of the artwork’s autonomy: (1) storytelling, (2) autofiction and (3) metaculture. Far from being an outmoded relic of high-modernist aesthetic ideology, I argue, autonomy is the constitutive problematic of the contemporary novel, the predicament in relation to which the meaning of its characteristic formal strategies becomes legible.

In doing so, I follow a range of work within contemporary literary studies which has attempted to rehabilitate one or another version of the argument for art’s autonomy, from critics

⁴⁸ Harold Bloom, *The Western Canon* (1994). Bloom’s book features chapters on William Shakespeare, Dante Alighieri, Geoffrey Chaucer, Miguel de Cervantes, Michel de Montaigne and Molière, John Milton, Samuel Johnson, Johann Wolfgang von Goethe, William Wordsworth and Jane Austen, Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Charles Dickens and George Eliot, Leo Tolstoy, Henrik Ibsen, Sigmund Freud, Marcel Proust, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, Franz Kafka, Jorge Luis Borges, Pablo Neruda and Fernando Pessoa, and Samuel Beckett.

such as Derek Attridge, Nicholas Brown, Walter Benn Michaels, the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), Anna Kornbluh, Caroline Levine, Tom Eyers, Pheng Cheah, Andrew Goldstone, Patrick Kalliney, Pascale Casanova, Timothy Bewes, Jacques Rancière and Sianne Ngai.⁴⁹ Yet unlike many of these critics, I argue that autonomy is not just a problem for a certain kind of contemporary novel, but that the problem of autonomy is *constitutive* of literature “as such”, and thus a condition of entry into, and legibility as, “world literature”. Autonomy, I will argue, is neither a quality of particular works, nor a status that the artwork either does or does not achieve in relation to an “other” such as capitalism, ideology, reification or the status quo. Autonomy is simply the predicament of the work of art “as such”, which is to say, the work of art under capitalism. Autonomy is therefore misunderstood if it is approached solely or primarily as a characteristic, or an aspiration, of a particular kind of novel (which is not to say that such novels do not exist). Autonomy is not characteristic of, but *constitutive* of the novel form. Autonomy is the “political unconscious” (to use Fredric Jameson’s term) not of a particular kind of novel (realism, modernism, postmodernism), but of the medium as a whole: the ontological predicament to which any given novel responds and that it performatively enacts, automatically and by definition, regardless of the views of the author or the novel’s own explicit self-theorization.⁵⁰

⁴⁹ See Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (2019); Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015); Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015); Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019); Levine, *Forms* (2017); Eyers, *Speculative Formalism* (2017); Cheah, *What is a World?* (2016); Goldstone, *Fictions of Autonomy* (2013); Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters* (2013), *The Aesthetic Cold War* (2022); Casanova (2004); Bewes, *Free Indirect* (2022); Rancière, *Aisthesis* (2011); Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005); *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012); *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020).

⁵⁰ On the concept of the “political unconscious”, see Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981). I address Jameson’s argument (and my own use of it) at length in chapter three (“Autonomy and the Unconscious”, pp. 186-206).

Such a conception of autonomy thus demands a revision of Eurocentric notions of the novel's formal evolution. If modernism asserts its autonomy in relation to the market, and postmodernism sets out to expose the anti-referential autonomy of purportedly referential forms such as realism, the "worldly" orientation of the contemporary novel does not constitute a new stage along a path of linear development, but rather an untimely return to "the novel problematic" as diagnosed by Georg Lukács in 1916: the predicament of the novel form's constitutive autonomy, or, of its necessary inadequacy to an object of representation that is nonetheless its *raison d'être* and ethical justification.⁵¹ Overcoming autonomy is the sustaining yet constitutively unrealizable dream of the contemporary novel, the disaffordance that is, paradoxically, the form's affordance.

The tendency of a certain kind of modernist work to turn away from the world and to assert the extra-referential autonomy of form is therefore just one of many available responses to a real historical predicament: the severing of the artwork from its functional embeddedness within a particular cultural context, and its circulation as a commodity to be judged according to its merits as a work of art "as such". Autonomization is a material process in which a range of distinct and heterogeneous cultural practices are deterritorialized, and then reterritorialized under the putatively transcendental, universal and homogeneous category of "Art": put on display and/or commodified as autonomous works of art "as such", available to the disinterested gaze of the consumer, and to be appreciated for their specifically artistic, or aesthetic value.

Yet whereas in the West this process is often framed in terms of art's teleological self-realization or liberation from ritual subservience, the status of artistic autonomy was imposed upon colonized cultures largely via plunder and under duress. In *Potential History: Unlearning*

⁵¹ Timothy Bewes, "The Novel Problematic" (2011); Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (1916).

Imperialism (2019), Ariella Azoulay argues that imperial “plunder” is the basis for the establishment of modern art: “Violently separating people from the objects they hold in common, and objects from the communities that create them and give them different types of meaning, is what we now call art... Imperial violence is not secondary to art but constitutive of it”.⁵² This problem not only survives within, but is arguably exacerbated by the globalization of culture and the contemporary institution of “world literature”. By representing processes of deterritorialization and cultural hybridization the contemporary global novel literalizes the “transcendental homelessness” that Lukács sees as the predicament of the form⁵³. This is the sense in which, as Yoon Sun Lee puts it, “As the novel assumes the formal task of representing migration and dislocation, it continues to pursue its destiny as a genre”.⁵⁴

Yet the problem of autonomy is no less operative in works that seek to renounce this condition of “transcendental homelessness” and reaffirm their connection to the world, whether through the revival of communal storytelling practices, or through the attempt to directly convey demotic speech or the bodily intensities of lived experience with a minimum of formal mediation. Autonomy is neither the direction toward which the novel travels (as in the realism, modernism, postmodernism sequence) nor the condition from which the contemporary novel successfully departs, but the originary ontological fracture that it constantly strives and fails to repair. Nor, then, can autonomy be considered a synonym for a bygone Western modernism and an antonym for a more inclusive and diverse realism. Autonomy is both modernism and realism’s condition of (im)possibility, the non-transcendable predicament to which they constitute perennially available yet necessarily self-defeating responses.

⁵² Azoulay, *Potential History*, pp. 58-59.

⁵³ Lukács (1916), p. 41.

⁵⁴ Lee, “The Postcolonial Novel and Diaspora”, p. 133.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I provide a (necessarily truncated) account of the genealogy of the concept of autonomy, as it develops across nineteenth and twentieth century literary and cultural theory. I differentiate three dimensions of the problem of autonomy: the autonomy of the artist, of the artwork, and of art. I then identify two conceptions of the autonomy of the artwork that stand in tension within literary studies: autonomy as an assertion, and autonomy as a predicament. I outline an evolution in the understanding of autonomy, concurrent with the rise of “Theory” and the institutionalization of literary studies over the course of the twentieth century. I outline my concept of autonomy as the constitutive predicament of art “as such”, in contradistinction to what I describe as the “real subsumption” narrative, in which art’s autonomy is a condition of possibility (for modernism) that either has or has not been historically transcended.

If the postmodern conception of the artwork’s autonomy seems to lock the novel within the prisonhouse of form, the contemporary novel has devised a number of exit strategies. In the final part of this dissertation I track three dominant narrative logics at work in contemporary global Anglophone fiction, each of which represents a particular kind of response to the predicament of autonomy: storytelling, autofiction and metaculture (or, respectively, the escape through form, the escape from form, and the critique of art “as such”). In doing so, I hope to provide a new account of the untimely persistence of autonomy in an age of art’s alleged “real subsumption by capital”, as well as contributing to contemporary debates surrounding periodization, world literature, and the politics and ethics of literary form.

CHAPTER ONE

The Predicament of Autonomy

Modernist Autonomy: Clement Greenberg, Theodor W. Adorno

Given how recently it was still considered the epitome of *passé*, one can easily imagine a certain skepticism accompanying the recent resurgence of theoretical interest in the problem of aesthetic and artistic autonomy. The autonomy of art was, after all, the foundational modernist myth that was supposed to have been once and for all dismantled – or, depending upon one’s theoretical inclination, historically superseded – by both the rise of postmodernism and the postcolonial critique of Eurocentrism. Indeed, to an observer transported in a time-capsule from the front lines of the culture wars of the 1980s and 90s, the recent resurgence of critical interest in the concept of autonomy would likely appear as a conservative regression, perhaps portending a more general lurch back into long-deconstructed high-modernist “aesthetic ideology”. Like the rolling back of history depicted in the closing sequence of Elem Klimov’s film *Come and See* (1985), our visitor might imagine this return to autonomy as part of a montage of iconic reversals and reconstructions: from the networked postmodern “dividual” back to the modernist charismatic creator-genius; from the open postmodern text back to the autotelic closure of the modernist work; from enlightened mass-cultural pluralism back to an insular “minority culture”; and from a politicized anti-aesthetic critique back to the self-serving “disinterest” and “universality” of an elitist concept of beauty and aesthetic merit.

While such a dramatic epochal return has not exactly taken place, it is nonetheless the case that since the heyday of postmodernism, the question of art’s autonomy has re-emerged, both in theory and artistic practice, in tandem with a broader set of returns to critical categories

that were not so long ago considered to be outmoded: to form and formalism, to aesthetic experience and disinterest, and perhaps most pervasively of all, to modernism and modernity.

Claire Bishop writes in her 2012 work, *Artificial Hells*, that the aesthetic,

has been highly contentious for several decades now, since its status – at least in the Anglophone world – has been rendered untouchable through the academy’s embrace of social history and identity politics, which have repeatedly drawn attention to the way in which the aesthetic masks inequalities, oppression and exclusions (of race, gender, class, and so on). This has tended to promote an equation between aesthetics and the triple enemy of formalism, decontextualisation and depoliticisation; the result is that aesthetics became synonymous with the market and conservative cultural hierarchy. While these arguments were necessary to dismantle the deeply entrenched authority of the white male elites in the 1970s, today they have hardened into critical orthodoxy.¹

In retrospect, even by 2012 Bishop’s sense that the renewed attention to form and the aesthetic that her work proposes was necessarily waged in opposition to an extant “critical orthodoxy” may already have been a little dated. But certainly today, her final sentence resonates with (and her work contributed to) what is now an established trend within both cultural theory and literary criticism: a suspicion that the *negative*, anti-aesthetic critique - which was correlated with the postmodernist rejection of a particular, aestheticist version of modernist orthodoxy - is less effective when it comes to constituting a positive theory of artistic praxis in its own right. Hal Foster echoes this sentiment in his more recent *The Bad New Days* (2015), in a passage that clarifies some of the stakes of the return to the aesthetic in both artistic practice and critical theory:

A generation ago some critics (I was one) viewed the aesthetic suspiciously as a realm of resolution, not only in terms proposed by Kant – as a space where judgments of fact might be reconciled with judgments of value – but also in the manner questioned by poststructuralist theory – as a space where subjectivity might be experienced as more integrated and society more unified than they in fact are. At this time, too, the dominant account of modernist art, advanced by Clement Greenberg with reference to Kant, also posited the aesthetic as a space of absolutes, ‘beyond ideological violence and confusion’.

¹ Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*, (2012), p. 18.

It was in defiance of these two positions that both critical theory and art turned ‘anti-aesthetic’. Yet this polemic was situational and its time is past.²

The “anti-aesthetic” critique to which Foster refers registers a historically “situated” moment of reaction to a then-dominant modernist paradigm: a neo-Kantian formalism personified in the figure of the arch-aesthete, Clement Greenberg.³ In Greenberg’s account, modernism constitutes art’s pursuit of an ever more absolute formal autonomy; defining itself, in opposition to a debased commodity culture, as “a space of absolutes, ‘beyond ideological violence and confusion’”.⁴ “Avant-garde” for Greenberg is an embattled enclave of authentic culture assailed on all sides by an invasion of “kitsch”: the “ersatz” pseudo-culture of mechanized twentieth century capitalist societies, and “the epitome of all that is spurious in the life of our times”.⁵ The response of avant-garde art is to differentiate itself by becoming ever more autonomous, which for Greenberg is closely connected to the idea of medium-specificity.⁶ Avant-garde artists across a range of media “derive their inspiration from the medium they work in”, whether that is a “pure preoccupation with the invention and arrangement of spaces, surfaces, shapes, colors, etc” in the abstract painting of Pablo Picasso, Georges Braque and Piet Mondrian, or modernist novels such

² Hal Foster, *Bad New Days: Art, Criticism, Emergency* (2015), p. 122.

³ Greenberg’s status as a negative personification of an insular modernist aestheticism is nicely summed up by the British artist and professor John Latham’s 1966 performance piece, “Still and Chew”: “in which he and some of his students masticated a copy of Clement Greenberg’s *Art and Culture* borrowed from the library of St Martins School of Art. When the library requested that he return the book, Latham did so – but as a vial of chewed-up pages. (The performance caused Latham to be fired from his job at St Martin’s, but its remains – ‘Art and Culture, 1966-69’ – were acquired by MoMA in 1970).” Bishop, p. 164.

⁴ Foster’s reference is to Greenberg’s essay, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939).

⁵ Clement Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” (1939), p. 10.

⁶ Since Peter Bürger’s influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984) it has become customary within art theory to differentiate between “modernism” and “avant-garde”. For Bürger, “modernism” tries to preserve (or to radicalize) the autonomy of art, whereas “avant-garde” tries to “negate” the autonomy of art by overcoming “the distance between art and life” (Bürger, pp. 47-54). Greenberg, writing some 50 years earlier and before the term “modernism” had become widespread, makes no such distinction. By “avant-garde” Greenberg simply means what he considers to be the advanced (in the dual sense of up-to-date and aesthetically consequential) art of his day: above all, the lineage of abstract painting that runs from Cubism to abstract expressionism. However, the way in which Greenberg describes the “avant-garde” as asserting its autonomy through the pursuit of medium-specificity provides the major paradigm (alongside Adorno) for what Bürger and many other critics mean by “modernism”.

as James Joyce's *Ulysses* and *Finnegan's Wake*, which for Greenberg represent "the reduction of experience to expression for the sake of expression, the expression mattering more than what is being expressed" (8). Purifying itself of extraneous content, the avant-garde artwork aspires to a state of absolute formal singularity and self-containment:

The avant-garde poet or artist tries in effect to imitate God by creating something valid solely on its own terms, in the way nature itself is valid, in the way a landscape-not its picture -is aesthetically valid; something given, increate, independent of meanings, similars or originals. Content is to be dissolved so completely into form that the work of art or literature cannot be reduced in whole or in part to anything not itself. (6)

The logic of this claim is binary, placing the avant-garde, autonomy and form on one side, and kitsch, heteronomy and content on the other. That which is (or aspires to be) autonomous is avant-garde; that which is (or does not aspire *not* to be) heteronomous is "kitsch". Which is to say, that which is kitsch in art at least potentially includes everything that derives from, or refers to, something other than the artwork itself. Examples of such extraneous content might include: commercial appeals to pre-constituted taste or market demand; mechanical, or otherwise standardized production techniques; formal or genre conventions; resources or procedures that are non-exclusive to a given artistic medium (for example, the use of narrative in poetry); imitation of a model (whether that is a mythic or folkloric paradigm, a historical subject or event, or an object that is represented); subject matter; or a "meaning" which could be paraphrased, or translated into other terms. Placing itself in opposition to all of these things, the autonomous artwork neither contains, nor refers to, anything other than what it is. As a painting it is (or aspires to be) pure color and shape (hence non-representational); as a poem it is (or aspires to be) pure sound, meter and cadence (hence non-communicational).

The first thing that one would want to observe about this set of requirements is that it would be difficult, if not impossible to truly fulfill them; or at the very least, it would be difficult

to think of many worthwhile artworks that do. Greenberg is describing a conceptual logic that he takes to underpin, but which is only partially fulfilled by modernism, rather than describing the varied characteristics of actually existing modernist artworks. Hence the equivocations: “tries in effect to” rather than “does”; “is to be” rather than “is”. The conceptual basis of the claim is a fetishizing of irreducible particularity that is central to a lineage of philosophical aesthetics, conventionally traced back to Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of the Faculty of Judgment* (1790). For Kant, aesthetic judgment is not only “disinterested”, but also non-teleological (the pleasurable apprehension of an object’s “purposiveness without a purpose”), a-conceptual (concerning that which “pleases universally without a concept”) and a-moral (distinct from both the good and the true). As Giorgio Agamben has pointed out, these are all negative criteria: the account of the aesthetic judgment in the “Analytic of the Beautiful” chiefly consists of a definition of the various forms of heteronomy whose subtraction from a given judgment constitutes its specifically aesthetic character.⁷ Purified of the extraneous and/or subjective content that corrupts non-aesthetic judgments (values, preconceptions, interest, utility), the object of the properly aesthetic judgment is that which is apprehended as pure form: in its unique sensuous particularity, free from any generalizing concept, category or meaning. It is in this subtractive sense that the Kantian aesthetic judgment can be said to be autonomous, and this is also why it is conventionally taken to inaugurate a tradition of thought – stretching from romanticism through decadence, symbolism and *l’art pour l’art*, and culminating in the high-modernist “cult of form” – in which art comes to be conceived as a world apart. As Edward Said observes, “it has been the practice in the West since Immanuel Kant to isolate cultural and aesthetic realms from the worldly domain”.⁸

⁷ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (1994), p. 41.

⁸ Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), p. 68.

In 1944, Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer would echo Greenberg's attack on "kitsch" in a landmark polemic. They argue that the consummate commodification and industrial rationalization of cultural production in advanced capitalist societies has produced "The Culture Industry": a semi-autonomous system of "mass deception", functioning to produce docile subjects and above all to pacify a proletariat which has now lost any erstwhile revolutionary potential, and is instead helplessly in thrall to modern capitalism and its "administered world".⁹ Rather than being a conspiracy theory, for Adorno and Horkheimer this is merely the latest stage in the "dialectic of enlightenment": the nightmarish and ineluctable process by which a reified, "instrumental" rationality penetrates ever further into society, human relations and subjectivity. Through standardized techniques continuous with those used by F. W. Taylor's "scientific management" to increase workplace productivity, the very *form* of the product of the culture industry is now instrumentally rationalized. This means that the ersatz form of aesthetic experience that it affords ("entertainment") is an extension of industrial production, shaping compliant forms of subjectivity by conditioning the viewer, reader or listener to respond in a prescribed manner to standardized stimuli:

Entertainment is the prolongation of work under late capitalism. It is sought by those who want to escape the mechanized labor process so that they can cope with it again. At the same time, however, mechanization has such power over leisure and its happiness, determines so thoroughly the fabrication of entertainment commodities, that the off-duty worker can experience nothing but after-images of the work process itself. The ostensible content is merely a faded foreground; what is imprinted is the automated sequence of standardized tasks. The only escape from the work process in factory and office is through adaptation to it in leisure time. This is the incurable sickness of all entertainment. (109)

The horror of the culture industry for Adorno and Horkheimer, then, is that it is the mechanism through which even the aesthetic judgment - the Kantian space of autonomy and reconciliation -

⁹ Theodor W. Adorno and Max Horkheimer, "The Culture Industry", in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944), pp. 120-167.

is colonized, rendered heteronomous, and converted into an insidious form of control and domination.

Two men of European high-cultural sensibility with an instinctive allegiance to high modernism, Greenberg and Adorno are the quintessential theorists of what Andreas Huyssen has called “the great divide”.¹⁰ Both were in need of a theory of the debasement and colonization of the cultural tastes (and with them, the political aspirations) of the proletariat in order to reconcile a visceral disgust for mid-twentieth century American mass culture with their respective complicated allegiances to Marxism. However, beyond a tendency to polarize high and low culture based on their respective associations with autonomy and heteronomy, what more fundamentally connects Greenberg and Adorno is their shared reading of modernism as a process of rarefaction and retreat, as opposed to the standard, positive characterization of modernism as the exploration of new formal possibilities and an explosive release from the mimetic conventions of nineteenth century realism. This is what Fredric Jameson has called Adorno’s “extraordinary reversal of the conventional account of modernist innovation”, in which “it is not a matter of new materials so much as the continuous invention of new taboos on the old positivities”.¹¹ Likewise, for Greenberg, “the purification of the work and the extirpation of everything extrinsic to it can... be seen as the way in which art defends itself against a hostile environment (whether that be capitalism or simply middle-class prejudice)”.¹²

Though there are important differences, Greenberg’s account of modernism in “Avant Garde and Kitsch” is Adornian in two senses: (i) insofar as it is positioned, dialectically, as the determinate negation of an industrially rationalized mass culture; and, perhaps still more

¹⁰ Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (1987).

¹¹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity: Essay on the Ontology of the Present* (2002), p. 157.

¹² Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 171.

fundamentally, (ii) insofar as the formal autonomy of the authentic artwork is taken to constitutively oppose the contingency of a modern world that has been, to use Max Weber's famous term, "disenchanted" (emptied of transcendental meaning and absolute values).

Greenberg:

the true and most important function of the avant-garde was not to 'experiment,' but to find a path along which it would be possible to keep culture moving in the midst of ideological confusion and violence. Retiring from public altogether, the avant-garde poet or artist sought to maintain the high level of his art by both narrowing and raising it to the expression of an absolute in which all relativities and contradictions would be either resolved or beside the point. 'Art for art's sake' and 'pure poetry' appear, and subject matter or content becomes something to be avoided like a plague. (5)

Contrary to Ezra Pound's slogan, "make it new" – which is often mobilized to characterize modernism as a cult of experimentation for its own sake – Greenberg reads modernism as a defensive formation, and as a rejection of the historical conditions of modernity. The key term for Greenberg here is "absolute", since it constitutes the grounds of art's will to separate itself from the contingency ("relativities and contradictions") of the secular modern world. For Greenberg, as for a whole lineage of post-Hegelian aesthetic theorists including Adorno, the vocation of art to express the "absolute" is the remnant of its former religious function: to give sensuous embodiment to the transcendent values around which a given community constitutes its sense of self and its place in the world. The historical withdrawal of art, first from religion and then (with modernist abstraction) from the world altogether, is therefore the measure of the dissolution both of transcendent values, and of the binding ethos of the community. Both are replaced with the "ideological confusion and violence" of modern mass society: in which values are contingent, lacking any absolute or transcendent standard against which to measure themselves; and in which society is merely an aggregate of self-interested individuals lacking any organic principle of inner cohesion. Menaced on all sides by the triple threat of modern

capitalism, fascism and Stalinism, for Greenberg authentic culture and the experience to which it gives rise (the aesthetic) has become the surrogate, secular form of the absolute:¹³ the autonomous artwork is a utopian space of internal necessity (“purposiveness without purpose”), in the apprehension of which the self and sensibility can be experienced in a state of harmonious reconciliation and self-identity, and which art can only attain by withdrawing ever further from the world and rejecting everything extraneous to itself.

Yet if Adorno and Greenberg share an understanding of modernism as the refusal and negation of the dominant culture, there is nonetheless a crucial distinction to be made between Adorno’s deeply conflicted construal of the problem of art’s autonomy and Greenberg’s more straightforwardly celebratory account. If Greenberg and Adorno are largely in agreement in their blanket condemnation of mass culture, in Adorno’s work from his essays of the 1930s to the late, unfinished *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), there is a complicated attempt to shackle this mandarin modernism to a progressive politics, most famously with his claim, in “Commitment” (1962), that “This is not a time for political art, but politics has migrated into autonomous art, and nowhere more so than where it seems to be politically dead”.¹⁴ Greenberg too positions the avant-garde as defending autonomous artistic values that are threatened by modern industrial capitalism. Yet unlike Greenberg, for Adorno the autonomous artistic values through which art opposes capital are themselves a historical product of capitalism, and thus simultaneously the means and the object of their own critique.

Art’s autonomy for both Adorno and Greenberg is in one sense a historical phenomenon: with the rise of capitalism and the “falling away of aristocratic patronage”, art is separated from

¹³ For an important account of the genesis of these positions in Jena Romanticism, see Jean-Luc Nancy and Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe, *The Literary Absolute* (1978).

¹⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, “Commitment” (1962) in *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977), p. 194.

its former uses, functions and occasions; the forms and content of art are no longer externally prescribed but must be constantly reinvented and justified by the artist.¹⁵ Yet for Greenberg, art's autonomy is in another sense ahistorical, since it also designates the set of purely aesthetic standards and criteria that are under threat by the rampant philistinism of the modern world. For Greenberg, then, the modern artist's turn to his own medium is fundamentally conservative, an attempt to "maintain the high level of his own art" while nonetheless "keeping culture moving" in order to forestall its ossification into "academicism" (5). Though modern, autonomous art for Greenberg is a historical phenomenon, the standards that it tries to defend against capital are not, or not entirely: "there does seem to have been more or less of a general agreement among the cultivated of mankind over the ages as to what is good art and what is bad. Taste has varied, but not beyond certain limits" (13). While abstraction is on one hand a break with traditional practices of representation, then, it nonetheless provides a connection between modern art and tradition, since prior to art's autonomization, "The subject matter of art was prescribed by those who commissioned works of art, which were not created, as in bourgeois society, on speculation. Precisely because his content was determined in advance, the artist was free to concentrate on his medium" (16). The inward turn toward abstraction and medium-specificity is thus not just an historically novel response to the problem of art's autonomy under capitalism, but also allows art to defend itself against the debasements of the modern world by maintaining its pre-existing, autonomous aesthetic standards.

Greenberg's "half-assed" and temporary flirtation with historical materialism is thus problematically welded to his considerably deeper underlying commitment to an ahistorical

¹⁵ Greenberg, p. 5.

aestheticism.¹⁶ Though art changes historically, the standards that differentiate good and bad art do not: “taste is ultimately objective. The best taste, that is”.¹⁷ This is why the real adversary of “Avant-Garde and Kitsch” is not capitalism per se, but philistinism. Capitalism is indicted more incidentally, alongside Fascism and Stalinism, to the extent that it is guilty of fostering philistinism, while the prospect of socialism is desired to the extent that it offers hope for “the preservation of whatever living culture we have now” against the onslaught of kitsch (21).

Yet if for Greenberg “art” is thus a self-evident and historically continuous (if evolving) object of analysis, for Adorno art’s ontology and social status, and hence the criteria by which it is to be judged, are fundamentally transformed by its autonomization under capital: “It is self-evident that nothing about art is self-evident anymore. Not its inner life, not its relation to the world, not even its right to exist”.¹⁸ While on one hand autonomization threatens art’s legitimacy, at the same time it gives art a complicated new vocation that is at once political, philosophical and moral. Art’s autonomy is in one sense the symptomatic expression of the world of the commodity, insofar as the development of art as an autonomous practice is determined by its status as a commodity. As J.M. Bernstein puts it, “Art’s autonomy... is not the achievement of art’s securing for itself a space free from the interference of social or political utility, but a consequence and so an expression of the fragmentation and reification of modern life”.¹⁹ Yet at the same time,

¹⁶ In a 1992 interview, Greenberg describes himself as having been “A half-assed Trotskyist” at the time that he wrote “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, though he also clarifies that his political leanings, such as they were, “never had anything to do with art. Marx himself said so little about art. He struggled with the fact that the Greeks, as he saw it, had produced the best visual art, and had done so in a slave society. He couldn’t square that, so he dropped it”. By 1950, Greenberg had joined the CIA-funded Cold War anti-communist organization, the Congress for Cultural Freedom. “On Art and Politics”, *Frieze Magazine*, 06 Sept 1994 <https://www.frieze.com/article/art-and-politics>.

¹⁷ Greenberg, “Can Taste be Objective?”, in *Homemade Esthetics: Observations on Art and Taste* (2000), p. 26.

¹⁸ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970), p. 1.

¹⁹ J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies: Late Modernism and the Meaning of Painting* (2006), p. 3.

art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art. By crystallizing in itself as something unique to itself, rather than complying with social norms and qualifying as 'socially useful', it criticizes society by merely existing, for which puritans of all stripes condemn it. There is nothing pure, nothing structured strictly according to its own immanent law, that does not implicitly criticize the debasement of a situation in which everything is heteronomously defined. Art's asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.²⁰

Adorno sees the modern, autonomous artwork as embodying a form of value that does not precede capitalism, but that is produced by capitalism as its own "determinate negation". Yet this means that art's autonomy inheres not only in its constitutive opposition to the logic of capital, but also, in a further dialectical twist, to the logic of its own opposition to capital as determined by capital. Unlike Greenberg, then, this leads Adorno to posit a distinction between autonomous art proper and *l'art pour l'art*, since the latter straightforwardly embraces its ascribed autonomy and in doing so becomes merely decorative or consolatory: "What is ideological in the principle of *l'art pour l'art* does not have its origin in the energetic antithesis of art to the social world but rather in the abstract and facile nature of this antithesis". It thus "becomes entangled in the fate of artificial ornamentation" (237). Autonomous art can only maintain its autonomy by simultaneously asserting and refusing it. Rather than counterposing the formal perfection of the artwork to the "relativities and contradictions" of the world and thereby "raising it to the expression of an absolute", the autonomous artwork articulates its critique of the world through the performance of its own impossibility: "Artworks are, *a priori*, socially culpable, and each one that deserves its name seeks to expiate this guilt. Their possibility of surviving demands that their straining toward synthesis develop in the form of their irreconcilability" (234). Autonomy is thus, as Bernstein puts it, "a wound as well as a condition for art's claiming".²¹

²⁰ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 226.

²¹ J.M. Bernstein, *The Fate of Art: Aesthetic Alienation from Kant to Derrida and Adorno* (1992), p. 197.

If for Greenberg art's autonomy is more straightforwardly that which must be defended against the debasements of kitsch, then, for Adorno autonomy is a considerably more mixed blessing, since he sees more clearly that the absolutizing of the aesthetic is a historical outcome of (and hence a merely symptomatic response to) the process of commodification that the autonomous aesthetic is taken to resist or transcend. If Greenberg turns to the aesthetic as a surrogate for the absolute and sees this as a justification for the practice of art as an end in itself in opposition to mere kitsch, Adorno recognizes that the absolutized aesthetic risks becoming kitsch by another name: "As a result of its inevitable withdrawal from theology, from the unqualified claim to the truth of salvation, a secularization without which art would never have developed, art is condemned to provide the world as it exists with a consolation that - shorn of any hope of a world beyond - strengthens the spell of that from which autonomy wants to free itself".²² To simply assert the autonomy of the aesthetic in opposition to the instrumentality of the commodity is to affirm the degraded position of art within the social structure it purports to transcend, like a Jackson Pollock painting used to decorate a corporate lobby.

This is the problem that Adorno's colleague at the Frankfurt Institute for Social Research, Herbert Marcuse, had in 1936 identified as "The Affirmative Character of Culture":

By affirmative culture is meant that culture of the bourgeois epoch which led in the course of its own development to the segregation from civilization of the mental and spiritual world as an independent realm of value that is also considered superior to civilization. Its decisive characteristic is the assertion of a universally obligatory, eternally better and more valuable world that must be unconditionally affirmed: a world essentially different from the factual world of the daily struggle for existence, yet realizable by every individual for himself 'from within,' without any transformation of the state of fact. It is only in this culture that cultural activities and objects gain that value which elevates them above the everyday sphere. Their reception becomes an act of celebration and exaltation.²³

²² *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 2.

²³ Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture", in *Negations: Essays in Critical Theory* (1968), p. 95.

Art, rendered autonomous and thus powerless to change society, becomes the vehicle for an individualized experience of aesthetic transcendence; or as Foster puts it in the passage quoted above, “a space where subjectivity might be experienced as more integrated and society more unified than they in fact are”. The utopian longing to transform the world is sublimated into the harmless domain of the aesthetic, where it is recuperated as a form of false consolation that functions to affirm (by making more bearable, at least for some) the tyranny of the actual. It is this recognition that art’s autonomy and the pleasures that may derive from it are inextricable from art’s complicity with the world it purports to oppose - his sense that “Wrong life cannot be lived rightly”²⁴ - that fundamentally separates Adorno’s aesthetic theory from the aestheticism of uncritical proponents of art’s autonomy, from Greenberg to his more recent inheritors such as Michael Fried, Nicholas Brown, Walter Benn Michaels, Todd Cronan and Michael Clune.²⁵

If Greenberg sees art as seeking refuge from society in medium-specificity, for Adorno the artwork that simply affirms its autonomy relinquishes it in that very gesture: “If art cedes its autonomy, it delivers itself over to the machinations of the status quo; if art remains strictly for-itself, it nonetheless submits to integration as one more harmless domain among others. The social totality appears in this aporia, swallowing whole whatever occurs”.²⁶ Whereas Greenberg sees art’s autonomy as a condition that is achieved or asserted by a certain kind of artwork, then, for Adorno autonomy is better thought of as an “aporia” (or, a predicament) in which asserting autonomy and renouncing it are equally impossible. For Greenberg, art must affirm its absolute

²⁴ Theodor W. Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life* (1951), p. 39.

²⁵ See Fried, *Why Photography Matters As Art As Never Before* (2008); Brown, *Autonomy* (2019); Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015); Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism* (2013); Clune, *A Defense of Judgment* (2021). I address some of the shortcomings of Friedian autonomy-claims below, in “Autonomy as a Predicament” (51-72), “Against ‘Real Subsumption’” (124-148) and “Autonomy and Hauntology” (158-174).

²⁶ *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 237.

autonomy by seeking out its medium-specific essence; for Adorno, “art’s inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its inmost fiber” (2).

As Thierry de Duve notes, for all that Greenberg insisted his account was “a neutral account of art history” that did not “seek to establish criteria for aesthetic judgment”, it is nonetheless “informed by its author’s taste, which seems to have evolved under the same pressure as modernist painting itself”.²⁷ Insofar as he famously and unequivocally champions modernist abstraction Greenberg thus has a tendency to take the purity of the aesthetic experience as a given, just as he takes the inherent worthlessness of “kitsch” as a given. The choice is not relative and quantitative, but absolute and qualitative: “The alternative to Picasso is not Michelangelo, but kitsch”;²⁸ which is to say, were Michelangelo alive in the early twentieth century, he would be painting Picassos not Michelangelos (or anything else). The choice is binary: modernist autonomy is the only option for would-be authentic art, and the only alternative is kitsch. Greenberg’s account is therefore dialectical only up to a point; it lapses into an uncritical aestheticism insofar as it appears to consider the aesthetic absolute as a state that a particular kind of artwork is able to actually *attain* - and therefore gets to lay exclusive claim to - as opposed to itself being an ideological longing or projection. The major problem with Greenberg’s theory is then not so much that he reads modernism and aesthetic experience as surrogates for a lost sense of the “absolute”, but rather that he sometimes appears to regard them as being able to actually *constitute* that absolute, rather than simply being the space in which its absence or impossibility is figured from a particular cultural and historical perspective. In doing so, the logical conclusion of a Greenbergian reading of modernism - or, more pertinently, of

²⁷ Thierry de Duve, *Kant After Duchamp* (1993), p. 203.

²⁸ Greenberg, “Avant-Garde and Kitsch”, p. 13.

modernism itself as Greenberg describes it - is to (literally) absolutize the claims of a particular Western cultural lineage, one which is inevitably, to a greater or lesser degree, conditioned by the characteristic concerns of a particular class, gender and racial group. Simultaneously, it relegates all that lies outside of this lineage of “authentic” culture - for example, the productions, motives or characteristic concerns of other social groups or cultures - to the realm of “ideological confusion and violence” (which is to say, “kitsch”): so much noise that threatens to drown out the single, pure note of authentic culture. It is this undialectical and moralized binary between a pompously aggrandized avant-garde and its constitutively excluded others that has given rise to (and continues to legitimate) critiques of the covert ethno-centrism and Eurocentrism of Greenbergian modernism. To cite a recent example, Rizvana Bradley has argued with specific reference to Greenberg that there is a “constitutive relation between the aesthetic formalism that subtends art historical modernism and the raciality this formalism both mobilizes and erases”.²⁹

It is therefore easy enough to see why, from the culture wars and postmodernism to psychoanalysis, deconstruction and postcolonial theory, an entire critical industry has devoted itself to the task of dismantling this insular and exclusionary concept of both modernism and the aesthetic, instead revealing the ways in which the assertion of aesthetic autonomy has functioned as a “mask of conquest”, concealing various ideological interests.³⁰ To cite only a few of the most influential lines of argumentation: Psychoanalysis, particularly in its Freudian lineage, has critiqued the Kantian notion of “disinterest” by instead interpreting the aesthetic as a site of sublimated desire.³¹ Scholars working in fields from deconstruction to postcolonial theory and contemporary Black and minority ethnic studies have associated modernist “aesthetic ideology”

²⁹ Rizvana Bradley, *Anteaesthetics: Black Aesthetics and the Critique of Form* (2023), p. 40. Bradley is elaborating on arguments made by Huey Copeland, in *Bound to Appear* (2013), pp. 10-11.

³⁰ Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989).

³¹ Sigmund Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1930).

and the notion of the autonomous artwork with a conservative and implicitly Eurocentric depoliticizing of art, and a simultaneous absolutizing of autonomous, self-legislating (white, male, bourgeois, Western) subjectivity as the model of true humanity.³² Cultural studies has contested the ascribed autonomy of the aesthetic from the political, ideological and economic by approaching artworks not as *sui generis*, but rather as a particular category of functional objects that participate within the “whole way of life” of a collectivity.³³ In the influential Bourdieuan version of this critique, the Kantian valorization of aesthetic disinterest is unmasked as a way of creating and maintaining class-based social distinctions by spuriously universalizing the historically relative tastes and values of the European middle and upper classes as transhistorical arbiters of value per se.³⁴ And in the dominant Marxist version – outlined most extensively in Fredric Jameson’s *Postmodernism* (1989) – the autonomy of art is consigned to the past, as a constitutive feature of a modernist period that has now been definitively superseded by the transition to postmodernism.³⁵

On their own terms and as far as they go, many of the recurrent objections to the equation of modernist autonomy with disinterest and authenticity - for example, that which points out its manifest Eurocentrism - are valid, and indeed unanswerable. The problem for both Bishop and Foster is rather the opposite: that in its various forms, the postmodern critique of modernism’s privileged categories - the autonomous artwork; the author (auteur) and her signature style; aesthetic disinterest and its opposition to, or transcendence of, politics, ideology and

³² See, for example, de Man, *Aesthetic Ideology* (1996); Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1994); Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* (1989); Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (1998); Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2018); Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2019).

³³ Raymond Williams, “Culture is Ordinary” (1958); Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms” (1980).

³⁴ Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1987).

³⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1989).

commodification - has, in Foster's terms, "done its job, even done it too well".³⁶ Anti-aestheticism, in this account, is a good servant but a bad master. It is therefore susceptible to a version of Jameson's critique of poststructuralism, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981), as a "second-order" philosophy that "depends structurally on the pre-existing molar or unifying impulse against which its truth is read".³⁷ Like poststructuralism for Jameson, postmodernism for Bishop and Foster is unsatisfactory only when it ceases to be a means – deployed in opposition to, say, an institutionalized high-modernist aestheticist elitism – and instead becomes an end, or an orthodoxy, in itself. It is more effective at providing an account of what establishment culture is not (autonomous) than it is at providing an alternative account of what culture actually is, or does, or why it matters, and why a given artwork, or a given interpretation thereof, might matter more or less than any other.

Put another way: even supposing that we have once and for all dismantled the logic of a certain *kind* of recurrent, aestheticist assertion of art's autonomy, that does not necessarily mean that we can simply do without autonomy altogether, reverting instead to the mere sociological description of cultural practices that we arbitrarily or tendentiously agree to call "art" (or "literature"). The return to the question of autonomy in contemporary criticism and theory is therefore in some sense a return to the question of what, to use Jurgen Habermas' terms, we might call art's "normative foundations".³⁸ And indeed, this is continuous with the way in which recent literary and cultural theory - from the "new formalism" to the "post-critical turn" - has recently found itself circling back, in search of *post*-postmodernist and post-Eurocentric answers to some of the discipline's most basic, foundational questions: What - if anything - differentiates

³⁶ Foster, *Bad New Days*, p. 134.

³⁷ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act* (1981), p. 53.

³⁸ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985), p. 294.

a given artwork from, or prevents it being entirely reducible to, the historically situated viewpoint of a particular group or individual? Is there anything that aesthetic form in particular does to mediate interest and effect, or input and output? Which is perhaps really to ask: is there any final distinction between the aesthetic and the political, or the ideological? Is there anything that the aesthetic can do that could not be done better and more effectively - or, at the very least, more honestly - through direct political action or propaganda? And if the answer to this question is “no”, then on what grounds does one justify producing, criticizing and/or theorizing art as opposed to acting in the world? Indeed, can one ultimately distinguish artistic production from any other form of commodity production, craftsmanship or design? Insofar as we regard these as questions that are still worth asking, we have not yet overcome the need for an understanding of the nature, meaning and extent of art’s autonomy, the historical problematic to which Greenberg’s mandarin aestheticism constitutes just one unsatisfactory (if highly influential) variety of response.

Autonomy and “Late Modernism”

For all that they serve to justify the refusal and negation of prevailing aesthetic standards and popular sensibility, Greenberg’s ideas regarding modernist autonomy were, like the art they served to justify, belatedly a runaway success. In the years following World War II modernism went from being a largely European minority culture of resistance to something like a cultural dominant within the West, and especially the US. As part of this process, Greenberg’s account of modernist autonomy was, according to critics such as Jameson, Frances Stonor Saunders, Serge Guilbaut, Alan Sinfield, Robert Genter and Patrick Kalliney, institutionalized and even

canonized in the post-World War II Anglo-American academy as what Jameson calls the official “ideology” of modernism.³⁹ For Jameson, Greenberg is “the major theoretical figure of the late modern age and indeed that theoretician who more than any other can be credited as having invented the ideology of modernism full-blown and out of whole cloth”.⁴⁰

The position of personal centrality that Jameson ascribes to Greenberg in his narrative of the postwar co-optation of modernism is perhaps surprising, especially for a thinker who has influentially criticized the simplistic “mechanical causality” inherent within genealogical accounts of literary influence, and whose stock in trade involves the revelation of larger patterns of structural causation.⁴¹ To be sure, the process by which Greenberg became the spokesperson for “late modernism” was overdetermined, and his ideas were no doubt simplified and distorted as they were opportunistically appropriated as a justification for more generic modernist notions of “experimentation” and “self-reflexivity” as ends and markers of aesthetic value in and of themselves. Nonetheless, in establishing art’s autonomy as the official doctrine of modernism, the reception and canonization of Greenberg and the abstract expressionist painters he championed contributed to modernism’s conversion from a conflicting and heterogeneous set of artistic practices into a stultifying and self-satisfied, state-sanctioned “ideology” of formal experimentation for its own sake. For Jameson, “this ideology - even as a theorization of modernist artistic practices - was not contemporaneous with the modern movement itself”, but is “an American invention” and “a product of the Cold War” (164, 165). Following Greenberg’s interventions, modernism as the pursuit of art’s autonomy becomes a unifying refrain, not only

³⁹ Jameson, “Modernism as Ideology”, in *A Singular Modernity* (2002), pp. 139-210. See also, Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (1999), Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983); Sinfield, *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1988), Genter, *Late Modernism: Art, Culture and Politics in Cold War America* (2010); Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War* (2022).

⁴⁰ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 169.

⁴¹ *The Political Unconscious*, pp. 25-26.

retrospectively corralling the various modernist movements into a single ideological program, but also serving as the theory of “late modernism or neo-modernism, the survival and transformation of more properly modernist creative impulses after World War II”, in the work of postwar writers like Samuel Beckett, Vladimir Nabokov and Alain Robbe-Grillet (197).

For Jameson, what separates late modernism from modernism proper is the very fact of its belatedness; that is, while modernism was genuinely experimental and lacked a coherent theoretical program, “late” modernism proceeds from the existing model of modernism, and its retrospective codification into a coherent ideology: the autonomy of the aesthetic. As such, autonomy ceases to be a politically oppositional or self-critical gesture, but instead comes to represent the institutionalization and neutralization of modernism as the official form of high culture: “The autonomy of art stands for little more than high literature as such, which is to say high modernism and its canon” (176). This is the process of assimilation that Mark McGurl refers to, at the beginning of *The Program Era* (2009), as “the fate of US literary modernism after World War II, when the modernist imperative to ‘make it new’ was institutionalized as another form of original research sponsored by the booming, science-oriented universities of the Cold War era”.⁴²

Though Jameson groups Adorno - along with Greenberg, Paul de Man, Maurice Blanchot, Gilles Deleuze and Jean-François Lyotard - as one of the ideologues of “late modernism”, he is careful to separate the Adornian (along with the de Manian) account of art’s autonomy (in which the affirmation and critique of autonomy are inseparable) from Greenberg’s undialectical aestheticism. In Adorno and de Man’s work, “a full-throated ideology of the modern reaches a moment of true self-critical and ‘reflexive’ ambiguity which can be said to cast

⁴² Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), p. 4.

doubt on the whole ideological project”.⁴³ What separates Adorno and de Man from Greenberg is thus the way in which,

each keeps faith with a deeply rooted dissatisfaction with the trivializations of the merely aesthetic which propels them towards a deconstruction of the autonomy of art on one hand and a reinvention of the classical modernist Absolute on the other: in short, an effort to articulate the vocation of art to be somehow more than mere art. (181)

For Greenberg there is nothing “mere” or “trivial” about either art or the aesthetic; divining the presence or absence of such qualities in a given work is how a critic such as Greenberg is able to differentiate between art and its debased mirror-image, kitsch. And this is in part what makes Greenberg’s account conducive to the institutionalization and establishment appropriation of modernism, since Greenbergian autonomy affirms the authority of the modern, autonomized artwork by transmuting its social purposelessness into an intellectual justification and *raison d’être*. Adorno agrees to some extent, but also sees that the very autonomy that secures that authority is simultaneously that which evacuates it; that the assertion of art’s autonomy is a self-contradiction, a merely aesthetic solution to the problem of the merelessness of the aesthetic. Rather than simply elevating the autonomous aesthetic to the status of a surrogate absolute, Adorno sees the merely aesthetic autonomy of the modernist artwork as figuring, in its very self-annihilating impossibility, the space of an absolute that is no longer attainable, that survives only as the experience of its own absence. If autonomy for Greenberg affirms the authority of art, then, Adorno’s critique of autonomy positions art’s possibility and impossibility, its authority and lack of it, as dialectically inseparable and issuing from the same source. “It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether with its complete emancipation it did not sever its own preconditions”.⁴⁴ Or as Hegel puts it, “art, taken purely as art, becomes to a certain extent something

⁴³ Jameson, *A Singular Modernity*, p. 181.

⁴⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 1.

superfluous”.⁴⁵ Autonomy, art’s last remaining hope of legitimacy in a world governed by capital, is also that which compromises the legitimacy of the entire artistic undertaking.

Whatever the contradictions and liabilities of autonomy in Adorno’s account, to which we shall return, it was Greenberg’s aestheticist version of autonomy that proliferated in the Cold War years, and that thus became the object of a generation’s worth of anti-modernist or anti-aesthetic critiques, from Jacques Derrida, Rosalind Krauss and Pierre Bourdieu to Chinua Achebe, Clyde Taylor and Edward Said.⁴⁶ An established body of scholarly work has shown how the Greenbergian, aestheticist narrative of modernism’s progressive “conquest of autonomy” was instrumental in US Cold War politics, sponsored and promoted by the CIA as an advertisement for the unbridled creativity and individualism of the Western capitalist world as opposed to the drab conformism of the Soviet Bloc.⁴⁷ Likewise, as critics such as Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, Sarah Brouillette and Jasper Bernes have argued, what Boltanski and Chiapello call the “artistic critique of modernity” (the opposition of artistic autonomy to the bureaucratic rationality of the modern institution) became the model for the neoliberal “creative economy” that reimagined the white-collar worker not as a flannel suit-wearing corporate drone but as a flexible, self-actualizing (and economically precarious) “affective laborer” or “entrepreneur of the self”.⁴⁸ And it is the “late modernist” caricature of autonomy as aestheticism that Pierre

⁴⁵ G.W.F. Hegel, *Hegel's Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art, Vol. I* (1975), p. 535.

⁴⁶ Derrida, *The Truth in Painting* (1978); Krauss, *The Optical Unconscious* (1993); Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1979); Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (1988); Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (1998); Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993).

⁴⁷ For accounts of the appropriation and active promotion of autonomy as the official ideology of Western liberal democracy during the Cold War, see in particular Frances Stonor Saunders, *Who Paid the Piper?: The CIA and the Cultural Cold War* (1999), Serge Guilbaut, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art* (1983), Eric Bennett, *Workshops of Empire* (2015), Juliana Spahr, *Du Bois's Telegram: Literary Resistance and State Containment* (2018), Patrick Kalliney, *The Aesthetic Cold War* (2022).

⁴⁸ See Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999), Sarah Brouillette, *Literature and the Creative Economy* (2014) and Jasper Bernes, *The Work of Art in the Age of Deindustrialization* (2017). For an influential theory of “affective labor” see Miachel Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000). On the neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self”, see Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979).

Bourdieu, in his highly influential institutional sociology of culture, installs as the governing logic and rationality of the “literary field”. Bourdieu thus completes the ethical evacuation of the problem of autonomy as addressed by Adorno, by reading the modernist assertion of autonomy as the expression of the mindless pursuit of “literary capital” within a literary field ruled by competitive individualism.⁴⁹

Autonomy and “World Literature”

The dominance of the Greenbergian understanding of modernist autonomy can be seen in the French critic and literary sociologist Pascale Casanova’s hugely influential *The World Republic of Letters* (2004), which goes so far as to install it as the unifying logic of “world literature”.⁵⁰ As Casanova puts it, “the great writers have managed, by gradually detaching themselves from historical and literary forces, to invent their literary freedom, which is to say the conditions of the autonomy of their work” (xiii). “Great” here carries an ironic undertone, since it describes an assigned position of privilege within the structure of value that Casanova’s work sets out to critique. Within this structure of value, the “great” writers are modernists, like James Joyce, Samuel Beckett and Franz Kafka, who assert their autonomy by devoting themselves to the values of literature “as such”, over and above any instrumental or political concerns. Realism, by contrast, “excludes any form of literary autonomy and makes literary production a function of politics” (197). The autonomy of modernism is thus counterposed to the “essential heteronomy

⁴⁹ Pierre Bourdieu, *The Rules of Art: Genesis and Structure of the Literary Field* (1992), *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993).

⁵⁰ Originally published as *La république mondiale des Lettres*, 1999. English translation, *The World Republic of Letters*, first published 2004. All subsequent references are to the 2007 Harvard University Press edition, translated by M.B. Debevoise.

of literary realism” as the positive and negative terms in a hierarchy of literary value (197). For Casanova, these respective approaches to literary form are neither benign cultural differences nor contrasting individual responses to the question of the social responsibility of the writer. Modernism and realism (which is to say, autonomy and heteronomy) are instead positionalities within the “world republic of letters”, reflecting their authors’ contrasting status within a relatively autonomous literary world-system governed by the uneven distribution of “literary capital”. Greenberg’s opposition between avant garde and kitsch is thus rearticulated as an “antagonism” between the fully developed modernism of the Western core and the underdeveloped realism of the postcolonial periphery.

Casanova’s *The World Republic of Letters* takes the analysis of the dynamics of the modern French “literary field” that her mentor Bourdieu proposed in *The Rules of Art* (1992) and *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), and globalizes it by combining it with a “core-periphery” dynamic derived from the “world-systems theory” of Immanuel Wallerstein. Bourdieuan institutional sociology is intended in part as a corrective to what is often alleged to be the reductive economism of more orthodox Marxist critical models, in which the cultural “superstructure” is taken to be determined more or less directly by the economic “base”.⁵¹ Bourdieu identifies an additional mediating level between the economic and the cultural in the internal dynamics of the “literary field”, which has a relative autonomy in relation to the economic. Amplifying Bourdieu’s “literary field” to a global scale, Casanova describes the “world republic of letters” as “a world that is structured according to its own laws, its specific

⁵¹ For classic accounts of the problem of “base” and “superstructure” in Marxist theory, see Stuart Hall, “Rethinking the ‘Base and Superstructure’ Metaphor” (1977), in *Essential Essays Volume 1* (2019) pp. 143-171, Raymond Williams, “Base and Superstructure”, in *Marxism and Literature* (1977) pp. 75-82; Fredric Jameson, “On Interpretation”, in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) pp. 17-102; Ernesto Laclau and Chantal Mouffe, “Hegemony: The Genealogy of a Concept”, in *Hegemony and Socialist Strategy* (1985), pp. 7-46; and Louis Althusser, “Contradiction and Overdetermination”, in *For Marx* (1965), pp. 87-128.

geography and chronology. This world is quite separate from the ordinary world, but it is only *relatively* autonomous, only relatively independent of it - which is to say, relatively *dependent* upon it” (349).

This relative autonomy is established analytically through the metaphorical substitution of capital in the monetary sense for “literary capital”, which designates the specific form of power operative within the literary field. Writers, whatever their conscious motives or self-justifications, are in both Bourdieu and Casanova’s accounts unconsciously engaged in the competition to accrue literary capital. Yet whereas one achieves monetary capital by satisfying the demands of the market, the literary field is governed by an inverted economy in which “the loser wins”.⁵² In other words, one achieves literary capital by sacrificing commercial success to the anti-commercial values of literature “as such”. If one can accrue economic capital by writing like J.K. Rowling or Stephen King, one accrues literary capital by writing like James Joyce or Samuel Beckett.

The assertion of literary autonomy, then, is the means of accumulating literary capital, and the extent that one has achieved autonomy reflects the amount of capital that one has accumulated. Yet autonomy is not equally available to all, since access to literary capital is differentially distributed according to one’s position within the literary world-system. Within the para-economy of the “world republic of letters”, national literatures exist in a state of uneven development. “International literary space” emerges in incipient form amidst the birth of the European nation-state, whereupon imaginative literature takes on a new role as the means for the development of national languages and cultures. Here Casanova draws on Benedict Anderson’s classic account of the role of the realist novel, in the context of the emergence of nineteenth

⁵² Bourdieu, *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), p. 39.

century “print capitalism”, in establishing the nation as an “imagined community”.⁵³ Yet as these national literary traditions develop they accrue reserves of literary “capital” (history, tradition, consecrating power, aesthetic theories, established forms and styles) on which individual novelists can draw, and which gradually come to afford them a relative autonomy from the direct representation of local political realities. With the historical accumulation of a national reserve of literary capital, literary works become to an ever greater extent intertextual and self-conscious commentaries on their own position in relation to that history. Thus, to take one of Casanova’s examples, if W.B. Yeats and other writers of the Irish Revival assert the autonomy of Irish literature by rejecting the colonial inheritance of British literary culture, modernist writers of the next generation such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett are in turn able to reject this national inheritance and to assert the deterritorialized and extra-referential autonomy of literature “as such”.

This process of development accounts for the progression, within Western literary culture, from the politically instrumental and nationally specific realism of nineteenth century novelists such as Charles Dickens and George Eliot, to the formally autonomous and deterritorialized modernism of twentieth century writers such as Samuel Beckett, James Joyce or Franz Kafka. The endpoint and logical conclusion of this process of autonomization is a work like Beckett’s *Worstward Ho* (1983), in which, as Casanova puts it in her separate book-length study, *Samuel Beckett, Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (1997),

Beckett accomplishes his project of an absolutely self-sufficient writing, generating its own syntax, vocabulary, self-ordained grammar, even creating terms that respond exclusively to the logic of the pure space of the text: no more referents, no more attempts to imitate reality or provide an equivalent to it, no more direct links of transposition or

⁵³ Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).

description of the world - a text that is indebted solely to itself for the fact that it could be written.⁵⁴

The territorializing function of realism, which helps forge the space of the nation by representing the political realities and conflicts of a situated collectivity, is gradually replaced by a deterritorialized “autonomous” literature, which pursues the purely aesthetic criteria of literature “as such”, and thus declares its increasingly absolute independence from the imperatives and concerns of the nation. Beckett’s late modernism thus does for literature what abstract expression does for painting in Greenberg’s account: “Beckett finally attained total literary abstraction, having managed to create a pure object of language, totally autonomous since it refers to nothing other than itself”.⁵⁵

The supersession of realism by modernism is thus, at least within the context of a given national literature, a teleological principle; the process of autonomization is, as Casanova puts it, the “Greenwich Meridian Time” of literary development. Autonomization, however, is not and cannot be the universal history of literature as a whole, since the distribution of literary capital (and therefore, of literary autonomy) is governed by the structurally necessary domination of the periphery by the core, or of the former colonial world by the West. Just as there can be no universal prosperity under capitalism according to world-systems theorists, since the prosperity of the core is produced by its exploitation of the periphery, in Casanova’s literary world-system the opposition between modernist autonomy and realist heteronomy is the expression of the structural dominance of the periphery by the core. Peripheral nations are proletarians in a literary economy rigged in favor of the established Western nations, who have already accrued vast reserves of literary capital before peripheral literatures enter into the global economy in the wake

⁵⁴ Pascale Casanova, *Samuel Beckett: Anatomy of a Literary Revolution* (1997), p. 21.

⁵⁵ *World Republic of Letters*, p. 347.

of decolonization. The underdeveloped nations of the “periphery” lack any such historically accumulated reserves of literary capital; their literary cultures thus remain locked in an earlier phase of development, directly participating in the establishment of national consciousness. Thus for Casanova, when a first-generation postcolonial writer like Chinua Achebe rejects modernism in favor of an overtly political and historically engaged realism, this is consistent with his sense of himself as a producer not of “pure art” but of “applied art”, or as what Casanova calls “the bard and repository of Nigerian cultural history”.⁵⁶

As in the work of her mentor Bourdieu, then, Casanova’s account of the structure and genesis of the “world republic of letters” involves a paradoxical elevation and diminution of literary autonomy. On one hand, autonomy is installed as both an aesthetic value and a normative temporality. Autonomy is both the “Greenwich Meridian Time” of literary development in relation to which the underdevelopment of the periphery is legible, and the currency of literary distinction whose abundance or scarcity is the barometer of the domination of the periphery by the core. Yet autonomy-claims are afforded this position of structural centrality in the same gesture through which they are demystified as merely a displaced manifestation of the self-interested pursuit of “literary capital”. Bourdieu, as Patrick Kalliney puts it, “treats the disinterested pose of intellectuals simply as a form of self-interested activity unique to the cultural field”.⁵⁷ Modernist assertions of autonomy from economic value thus fall apart under the disenchanting objectivity of sociological scrutiny; the normative rationality within the “literary field” reveals itself to be every bit as transactional and morally vacuous as the “instrumental reason” in opposition to which the disinterested and autonomous literary sensibility has

⁵⁶ *World Republic of Letters*, p. 196.

⁵⁷ Patrick Kalliney, *Commonwealth of Letters* (2013), p. 31.

historically sought to identify itself. *Homo aestheticus* is unmasked as another iteration of *homo economicus*.⁵⁸

Autonomy is thus at once the normative currency of the “world republic of letters” and an ideological delusion, the expression of a privileged positionality within the structure of value that it claims to transcend. “In thrall to the notion of literature as something pure, free, and universal, the contestants of literary space refuse to acknowledge the actual functioning of its peculiar economy, the “unequal trade”... that takes place within it”.⁵⁹ “Literary belief”, in other words, “obscures the very mechanism of literary domination” (10). The institution of literature, for these thinkers, is thus founded on false premises. The pursuit of literature as an end in itself - the entire discursive and aesthetic construction of “literariness” and its associated values - serves to hide from writers or readers, and thus to ideologically deflect, the nature and extent of their own participation in the reproduction of existing social hierarchies. Literature is an ideological laundering service in which the bad conscience of the bourgeoisie's self-interested pursuit of social distinction is displaced and sublimated into the surrogate spirituality of the autonomous aesthetic. Bourdieu had already analyzed these dynamics on a national scale, showing how cultural taste, as a socially acquired *habitus*, functions both to reflect and to produce social distinctions, establishing an opposition between the common tastes of the masses and the elevated connoisseurship of the upper classes.⁶⁰ Casanova's intervention is to expand the Bourdieuan hypothesis from the national to the global, or from class struggle to geopolitical antagonism, showing how literary autonomy mediates the domination of the merely instrumental

⁵⁸ One wonders why Bourdieu's own sociological disinterest is exempt from such an analysis; why the objectivity of his own anti-aesthetic theoretical interventions is not ultimately compromised by the same imperative to accrue field-specific “capital” that he discerns as the true motive of the aesthetic autonomy-claims of the modernist.

⁵⁹ Casanova, *World Republic of Letters*, p. 12.

⁶⁰ Bourdieu, *Distinction* (1979).

national culture of the postcolonial “periphery” by the deterritorialized art “as such” of the Western “core”.

Whereas Adorno sees the modernist artwork as torn between affirming and critiquing its autonomy, then, in the Casanovan binary construction the dialectically conjoined sides of this constitutive “aporia” are parceled out into a division of labor between the mindless aestheticism of the writer (who is “In thrall to the notion of literature as something pure, free, and universal”) and the enlightened objectivity of the literary sociologist, whose job is to reveal this literary autonomy as the “mechanism of literary domination”. The ethical and philosophical stakes of the literary work are diminished as a condition of the aggrandizement of the critic. The contradictions of a writer like Beckett - whose works betray an irresolvable ambivalence toward the entire literary undertaking, and who for Adorno thus exemplifies the paradox of autonomy’s simultaneous necessity and impossibility - are hammered out into the ready-made template of a facile aestheticism, the necessary counterpoint to the sociologist’s critical awareness. Much like Bourdieu, then, Casanova’s sociological certainties are the mirror image of what Jameson describes as the Greenbergian “aesthetic certainties” of a more straightforwardly aestheticist late modernist like Nabokov, who (at least in theory) pompously asserts and uncritically embraces the autonomy of literature as such.⁶¹ Both are bought at the price of evacuating the stakes of the problem to which they purport to be the solution. Insofar as it fails to distinguish a Nabokov from a Beckett or a Greenberg from an Adorno (or indeed, a peripheral realist like Achebe from peripheral modernists and postmodernists like Clarice Lispector, Yukio Mishima, Bessie Head, Wilson Harris, G.V. Desani, J.M. Coetzee or Can Xue), the detached sociological perspective that affords critical distance from the claims of the literary may be a form of blindness as well as

⁶¹ *Singular Modernity*, p. 200.

insight. The philosophical and ethical complexity of the predicament of art's autonomy, which has given rise to a range of artistic and literary responses, is reduced to little more than a handful of vacuously aestheticist clichés that can easily be demystified. The Greenbergian account of modernism, itself ideologically appropriated and simplified into an account of modernism as the uncritical assertion of literary autonomy, thus provides conveniently low-hanging fruit for the sociological anti-aesthetic critique of autonomy as a Eurocentric literary ideology. Whether it sheds much useful light on either the predicament of autonomy or the literary response to it is, however, another matter.

Autonomy After Postmodernism

This tendency to regard autonomy as little more than an aesthetic ideology that can be deconstructed or historicized by the theoretically enlightened critic has contributed to a widespread sense, at least until relatively recently, that the problem of autonomy can be safely consigned to the past. And certainly, if we take Greenberg as our model then a critique of autonomy is synonymous with a critique of a deeply exclusionary and elitist notion of art “as such”. To be sure, Adorno is open to many of the criticisms that can be directed at Greenberg: his more acute diagnosis of what is at stake in the problem of autonomy is counterbalanced by his absolutist, exclusionary and parochial sense of what constitutes an acceptable form of response to that problem, which narrows the range of legitimate art to an ever-dwindling high-modernist hyper-canon consisting (by the time of *Aesthetic Theory*) of Beckett, Kafka, Arnold Schoenberg, Paul Celan and not a great deal besides.

Yet notwithstanding his personal prejudices and the limitations of his historical perspective and subject-position, Adorno's understanding of the stakes of the problem of autonomy nonetheless points us toward a different and potentially more fruitful line of inquiry that may help us to bypass both the simplistic assertion and the dismissal of autonomy. Adopting some critical distance from his insistence that only a handful of works have constituted a satisfactory response to the problem of autonomy, a contemporary rearticulation of Adorno's position might begin from the claim that autonomy is not necessarily a quality of the artwork that must either be asserted, achieved or defended (on one hand) or critiqued on the other, but rather a constitutive predicament that is imposed upon the artwork as the condition of its legibility *as an artwork*. Terry Eagleton's summary of the birth of autonomous art at the beginning of *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990) provides a useful point of departure:

The emergence of the aesthetic as a theoretical category is closely bound up with the material process by which cultural production, at an early stage of bourgeois society, becomes 'autonomous' - autonomous, that is, of the various social functions that it has traditionally served. Once artifacts become commodities in the market place, they exist for nothing and nobody in particular, and can consequently be rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves.⁶²

This is no more than a passing remark, offered in the context of a study that chiefly concerns the ideological function of "the aesthetic as a theoretical category". *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* has little to say about autonomy as a predicament of and for the artwork, and nothing at all to say directly about the novel form. Yet Eagleton's comments are crucial to my argument here because he highlights a distinction between two dimensions of the process of autonomization: the "material process" by which artworks "become commodities in the market place" and are thus separated from the "various social functions that (art) has traditionally served", and the subsequent *interpretation* of these altered material circumstances, in which autonomized

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (1990), p. 9.

artworks are “rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves”.

What has tended to happen in discussions of autonomy within literary studies, it seems to me, is that the two dimensions of the process of autonomization are conflated. Critics and defenders of autonomy alike have thus tended to argue for or against one or another version of the second, interpretative dimension (autonomy as ideology, or what Charles Altieri calls “modernist autonomy-claims”) while ignoring the persistent facticity of the first dimension: autonomy as a material process which modern works of art, which is to say works of art “as such”, have by definition undergone as their prehistory, and which they thus preserve within them as what Fredric Jameson (in an argument on which I will draw here, yet whose important differences from mine will be laid out in what follows) calls their “political unconscious”, or “the ideology of form”.⁶³

This tendency to conflate autonomy as a historical process with autonomy as aesthetic ideology is visible in, and accounts for some of the limitations of, various attempts within literary and cultural theory to rehabilitate the concept of autonomy in the wake of the alleged demise of postmodernism. There is a broad distinction to be drawn between the way the problem of autonomy has been framed by critics working within historically white-coded fields such as modernist studies and post-45 Anglophone literature, as opposed to those working more specifically on a minoritized subfield, such as Black studies, Asian American studies or queer studies. For the former, the return to the question of autonomy has tended to be framed in terms of the finality or otherwise of the postmodern critique of modernism, or what Nicholas Brown calls the problem of art’s “real subsumption” by the commodity. Yet for the latter group, the

⁶³ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), p. 76.

question of autonomy has more often been approached from the perspective of the critique, on behalf of cultural difference, of universalizing categories such as the aesthetic and the work of art “as such”.⁶⁴

For critics in the former camp, then, the return to the question of autonomy is often framed in terms of the survival or otherwise of the historical conditions of possibility of an aesthetic politics (usually, but not always modernist) articulated in terms of art’s autonomy from capital. Postmodernism, in Fredric Jameson’s highly influential account, is not a style (such as metafiction) or a literary theory (such as formalism), but an underlying “cultural logic” in which “aesthetic production is integrated into commodity production more generally”.⁶⁵ The modernist conquest of aesthetic autonomy through formal experimentation, once pitched against a nascent capitalist “culture industry”, is for postmodernists just one stylistic option among a range of neither more nor less valid alternatives; no longer a meaningful protest against the commodification of art, but a targeted appeal to the elevated tastes of a particular consumer demographic. The explicit project of critics such as Brown, Walter Benn Michaels, Neil Lazarus and the Warwick Research Collective is to demonstrate, *contra* Jameson, that art’s autonomy has survived, or has reemerged within the contemporary conjuncture. In Lazarus’s terms this means identifying a contemporary literature of “disconsolation”, or “a modernist writing after the canonization of modernism”, which “says ‘no’; refuses integration, resolution, consolation,

⁶⁴ Postcolonial studies is ambiguously positioned within this disciplinary partition, since the field has historically been split between nationalist-affiliated approaches that emphasize cultural difference (such as Subaltern Studies) and internationalist approaches that emphasize either hybridity and bricolage (as in the work of Homi Bhabha or Paul Gilroy) or that seek to sublate the opposition between difference and universalism (or, the national and the transnational) by reading both in relation to the determining frame of capitalism (as in the work of Fredric Jameson or the Warwick Research Collective). Broadly speaking, the latter set of critics have tended to approach autonomy in terms of the question of “real subsumption”, while the former have tended to approach it through the rubric of cultural difference and the anti-aesthetic critique of Eurocentric ideology.

⁶⁵ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, p. 4.

comfort; protests and criticizes”.⁶⁶ In this branch of contemporary aesthetic theory, then, the demise of postmodernism is associated with the contemporary rediscovery or reinvention of practices of autonomous aesthetic resistance - whether modernist, realist or otherwise - that were rather too hastily assumed, by theorists of postmodernism such as Jameson and Jean Baudrillard, to have been exhausted.

As in the Adornian and Greenbergian tradition, such contemporary rehabilitations of autonomy have tended to focus on one or another conception of medium-specificity. Critics such as Timothy Bewes, Anna Kornbluh and Lazarus approach this specificity as a potentiality, latent within the novel form, that is most fully realized in a specific form or genre, and to which a political value is ascribed. Others such as Brown and Benn Michaels have approached autonomy in still more general terms, as a claim about what Derek Attridge calls “the singularity of literature”: its irreducibility to everyday discourse, direct communication, propositional statements or political propaganda. For Attridge, the “singularity” of literature “solves no problems and saves no souls”.⁶⁷ Though a given literary work may have any number of political uses or effects in a given case, such outcomes have little to do with its “singularity”, which is constitutively opposed to all forms of “instrumentalism”, political or otherwise (17). Yet for a neo-Kantian Marxist like Nicholas Brown, in an age of apparently universal commodification the singularity of the artwork constitutes a political protest, whether it knows it or not: “art as such does not precede capitalism and it will not survive it; instead, art presents an unemphatic alterity to capitalism: art is not the before or after of capitalism but the deliberate suspension of its logic, its determinate other”.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), p. 31.

⁶⁷ Derek Attridge, *The Singularity of Literature* (2004), p. 5.

⁶⁸ Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art under Capitalism* (2019), p. 88.

Brown's position thus involves a combination of Adornian and Greenbergian claims, though the latter are routed through the neo-Greenbergian theories that the American art theorist Michael Fried has developed in a series of works stretching from "Art and Objecthood" (1967) to *Absorption and Theatricality* (1976) and *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008).⁶⁹ The opposition between "absorption" and "theatricality" is Fried's version of Greenberg's autonomy-heteronomy binary. The modern artwork is constituted as such by its resistance to and successful overcoming of the threat of what Fried calls "theatricality", or the condition of existing merely for the viewer. Detached from the sphere of the sacred by its reduction to a commodity, the modern autonomous artwork must assert its specificity as an artwork (as opposed to a mere object of consumption) by its assertion of indifference to the viewer, i.e. its assertion of autotelic compositional integrity. Fried's account of absorption thus directly picks up from Greenberg's account of the avant-garde artist as motivated by the desire not to "experiment" but to "maintain the high level of his art" in the face of the threat of philistine debasement. Fried sees the continuation of this desire as what connects the artistically significant works of today with those of the eighteenth century, which were themselves trying to maintain their connection to artistic tradition in the face of the problem of art's autonomization. Whereas the theatrical work of art renounces its autonomy and becomes merely decorative, the true work of art maintains its status as art to the extent that it is able to "escape the theatricalizing consequences of the beholder's presence".⁷⁰

Brown translates this into a claim about the artwork's assertion of autonomy from "the determination of the market", or in other words, from art's "real subsumption by capital". The

⁶⁹ Michael Fried, "Art and Objecthood" (1967); *Absorption and Theatricality: Painting and Beholder in the Age of Diderot* (1980); *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008).

⁷⁰ *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 4.

artwork that successfully asserts its formal autonomy negates not only the presence of the beholder but the determination of the market. This task of preserving the specificity of the modern artwork as capitalism's determinate other becomes art's historical vocation in an age in which the process of "real subsumption" has threatened to eclipse the distinction between the artwork and the commodity. Art's determinate "alterity" to capitalism thus applies only to works that are in Brown's estimation formally autonomous; those that fail to achieve autonomy are mere art-commodities. "Autonomy" is thus an honorific bestowed upon any artwork in which Brown is able to identify a satisfactory level of autonomous formal coherence (or, Kantian "purposiveness without purpose"), regardless of style or media. Indeed, "autonomous artwork" is, for Brown, a tautology: an artwork worthy of the name is one which has asserted its formal autonomy and in doing so transcended its commodity status. Thus for Brown, J.M. Coetzee's early novel, *Dusklands* (1974) qualifies as an artwork, while his later *Age of Iron* (1990) is a mere commodity. Tom McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005)? Artwork. Cormac McCarthy's *The Road* (2006)? Commodity.⁷¹

Brown's positioning of the work of art "as such" not as a transhistorical phenomenon but as a historically specific "determinate other" of capitalism is entirely Adornian. So is his notion that this determinate otherness has some sort of political value, however minimal or symbolic: "Art opposes capitalism, but it is powerless" (182). Yet his claim that the work of art successfully transcends its commodity status, and thus ascends to the status of art "as such", only to the extent that it successfully asserts its formal autonomy, is entirely Friedian. Indeed, this claim may recall us to the distinction Adorno draws between autonomous art and *l'art pour l'art*, the former seeking impossibly to inhabit a position of immanent criticality that automatically

⁷¹ *Autonomy*, pp. 41-45, 93-102.

betrays itself, the latter simply asserting its inherent autonomy, and in doing so obediently “submit(ing) to integration as one more harmless domain among others”.⁷² As I argue in the next chapter, moreover, the notion that the artwork’s successful assertion of formal autonomy is the only way in which it avoids the catastrophe of its “real subsumption” by capital and maintains its status as art “as such” derives from a teleological and idealist misconstrual of the categories of Marxian political economy.

For all that it conceives of itself as Adornian, then, Brown’s claim for the ontological autonomy of the artwork is in fact simply a contemporary rearticulation of Greenberg’s neo-Kantian position: “The Kantian formula for aesthetic judgment, which opens the way to a concept of art that lends coherence to over two centuries of artistic practice, is the perception of ‘purposiveness without purpose’” (8). The extent to which such a “formula” lends coherence to “over two centuries of artistic practice” in general, or simply to a particular kind of artistic practice that lends itself to this mode of aestheticist interpretation, is simply not addressed. And indeed on Brown’s terms it does not need to be, since Brown’s conflation of “purposiveness without purpose”, “autonomy” and “art” in opposition to the commodity form means that his own adjudication of a given work’s success or otherwise *as* a work of art according to these Greenbergian criteria is what determines whether it is an artwork or a mere commodity. Via this series of confluences Adorno’s notion of autonomy as an insoluble predicament is transmuted into Greenberg’s notion of autonomy as a marker of aesthetic (which for Brown also means political) distinction. For all of the indisputable brilliance of the readings in which Brown teases out the “immanent” formal logic of individual works, then, there is a circularity (and hence ultimately, a triviality) to the larger argument in whose services they are offered. Like Greenberg

⁷² *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 237.

and Fried, yet unlike Adorno, Brown takes a particular kind of ideological response to the problem of autonomy - in which artworks are (in Eagleton's terms) "rationalized, ideologically speaking, as existing entirely and gloriously for themselves" - to be a solution to that problem, as opposed to merely a symptom of it. In doing so his argument succeeds only in obscuring the stakes of the problem to which it purports to be the solution.

Brown's attempt to rehabilitate the category of autonomy loosely connects to a range of recent work, both by the thinkers mentioned above and by others such as Neil Lazarus and the Warwick Research Collective, Timothy Bewes, Pheng Cheah and Anna Kornbluh, that has (in a variety of ways and with very different conclusions) sought to reinvigorate the longstanding tradition of thought that Deepika Bahri has called "critical aesthetics", stretching from Marxist critics such as Georg Lukács, Adorno and Greenberg and to poststructuralists such as Maurice Blanchot, Julia Kristeva and Gilles Deleuze, in which the irreducible specificity of the aesthetic is celebrated as enacting a refusal or transcendence of the status quo.⁷³ Such theories have historically taken as their privileged object experimental, modernist works that refuse realist conventions and, via their pursuit of *sui generis* formal singularity, radically reconfigure the thinkable and the sayable: from Adorno (1970) and Blanchot's (1955) championing of Beckett and Kafka, to Kristeva (1974) and Helene Cixous' (1975, 1990) identification of an anti-patriarchal subversion inherent within the formal transgressions of modernist writers such as Stéphane Mallarmé, Clarice Lispector and Marguerite Duras.⁷⁴ Neil Lazarus and the Warwick Research Collective are writing squarely within this tradition when they identify a neo-Adornian

⁷³ Deepika Bahri, *Native Intelligence: Aesthetics, Politics, and Postcolonial Literature* (2003), p. 7.

⁷⁴ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970); Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (1955); Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1974); Cixous, "The Laugh of the Medusa" (1975), *Reading With Clarice Lispector* (1990). As discussed below (ch.3, "Autonomy and the Novel Form"), the obvious exception is Lukács, who is famously critical of modernism and who instead sees the tradition of "critical realism" from Walter Scott to Thomas Mann as staging a resistance to capitalist ideology.

aesthetic of “disconsolation” in “late modernist” writers like Kazuo Ishiguro and J.M. Coetzee. By refusing the consolations of the well-made novel, such writers are said to evince the continued capacity of modernism to disrupt the postmodern sensorium, thus challenging more conventional periodizations that see modernism as coming to an end some time in the years after World War Two.⁷⁵

Indeed, as we shall see in the next chapter, theories of contemporary literature’s continued aesthetic autonomy logically emerge out of (or give rise to) challenges to strong periodizing arguments, such as Jameson’s, which posit a linear evolution from realism to modernism and on to postmodernism. Yet if claims for the politics of autonomy have historically gone hand in hand with an endorsement of modernism over realism, contemporary critics have also sought to diversify the range of forms to which such gestures of autonomous resistance can be attributed. If Brown is the critic for whom aesthetic and political judgments most explicitly coincide, there is a sense in which all of these critics attempt, in one way or another, to rationalize such an identification. Thus while Benn Michaels’ *The Beauty of a Social Problem* (2015) opens with a cursory protestation of Kantian disinterest (“This book began with a desire to write about what seemed to me some aesthetically ambitious works of art”), he manages surely and swiftly enough to reason his way from this purely aesthetic intuition to a claim that in the context of neoliberal ideology, these works’s “commitment to form and meaning as technologies of autonomy has new political meaning”, “embody(ing) an alternative to neoliberal

⁷⁵ See Lazarus, “The Politics of Postcolonial Modernism”, in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), pp. 21-88; Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development: Towards a New Theory of World-Literature* (2015).

aesthetics and, in that alternative, the possibility of and (for some) the desirability of an alternative to neoliberalism itself”.⁷⁶

Bewes has as little interest in gatekeeping the distinction between the artwork and the commodity as he has in Brown and Benn Michaels’s privileged categories of “form”, “meaning” and “intention”, all of which his argument specifically rejects. However, his project parallels theirs to the extent that it functions to justify an aesthetic hierarchy in political terms, and to assert the specificity of novelistic discourse as embodying an aesthetic politics. The “nonideological thought specific to the novel” is for Bewes most fully expressed not in high modernism, and certainly not in Victorian realism, but rather in contemporary works of “post-fiction” by the likes of Coetzee, W.G. Sebald, Jesse Ball, Renee Gladman and Rachel Cusk.⁷⁷ Kornbluh, meanwhile, identifies a more formidable adversary to capital in the autonomous world-building capacities of the nineteenth century realist novel, as well as in those contemporary novels that stick to her favored template of third-person omniscient narration.⁷⁸ And for Cheah, the postcolonial novel’s autonomous world-building powers enable “the opening of new worlds against the globalizing grain”.⁷⁹

For all of these critics, then, the assertion of autonomy has been accompanied by the institution of a hierarchy of forms. Such autonomy-claims are typically made on behalf of particular kinds of novel or artwork that either monopolize or particularly effectively embody a critical potentiality latent within the novel or aesthetic form more generally. Yet for critics working in minoritized subfields, the problem of autonomy has historically been framed in terms

⁷⁶ Walter Benn Michaels, *The Beauty of a Social Problem: Photography, Autonomy, Economy* (2015), pp. 1, xii, 68.

⁷⁷ Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect: The Novel in a Postfictional Age* (2022), p. 22.

⁷⁸ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms: Realism, Formalism, and Social Space* (2019); *Immediacy: Or, The Style of Too Late Capitalism* (2024).

⁷⁹ Pheng Cheah, *What Is a World?: On Postcolonial Literature as World Literature* (2016), p. 16.

of the critique of such hierarchies, which were approached not so much as normative claims for the politics of form, but rather as instituting or entailing exclusionary and implicitly racist hierarchies of cultural value. The critique of autonomy in this sense has thus gone hand in hand with a process of diversification. In the context of the US in particular, the “culture wars” largely consisted in the contestation of an entrenched model of modernist autonomy as synonymous with literature as such. This is part of the larger process by which literary studies was reorganized along the lines of cultural studies, a process that Kandice Chuh summarizes as:

a shift to cultural studies approaches underwritten by Marxist, post-structural, and postmodern theories: ‘works’ become ‘texts’, and the definition of literary value and the politics of canonicity come to the fore as flashpoints for critical debate. Catalyzed by activists and critics (sometimes one and the same) of the post- civil rights era, that shift resulted from their illumination of the interrelation of education, acculturation and social stratification. A variety of scholars taking ethnic studies and feminist approaches denounced divisions between ‘high’ and ‘low’ culture and undermined the idea of a bias-free subject as the arbiter of universal value. Aesthetics, strongly associated with such conservative formalist movements as New Criticism and aestheticism - movements working in the service of deeply entrenched hierarchized notions of culture - receded from prominence, and textual and curricular diversification increased quite dramatically. In brief, where established modes of literary study aimed to advance a putatively disinterested practice of evaluating greatness based on objectively neutral formal properties, feminist critics and scholars of ethnic literatures, among others, argued the nonneutrality and ideological underpinnings of objectivity and disinterest.⁸⁰

Such critiques of the division between high and low culture, of the specificity of art or aesthetic experience, and of the universality and objectivity of either literary value or the evaluating subject, have in practice tended to entail a problematizing of the concept of art “as such”. Rather than occupying the rarefied domain of the aesthetic, cultural studies approaches cultural artifacts of all kinds within the context of their function within a “whole way of life”. “Culture”, as Raymond Williams famously asserts, is “ordinary”.⁸¹ In Stuart Hall’s account, the emergence of cultural studies thus involves the replacement of an established Leavisite paradigm in which art

⁸⁰ Kandice Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes: On the Humanities “After Man”* (2019), pp. 15-16.

⁸¹ Williams, “Culture is Ordinary” (1958).

is “assigned... a privileged position, as touchstone of the highest values of civilization” - that is, as culture with a capital C - by one in which art is “redefined as only one, special, form of a general social process - the giving and taking of meanings, and the slow development of ‘common’ meanings”. There is thus “no way in which this process can be hived off or distinguished or set apart from other practices in the historical process”.⁸² The reduction of large-C to small-c culture, or from art “as such” to art as situated cultural practices, thus comprises a challenge to the finality of the narrative of art’s institutional autonomization that critics such as Adorno, Jurgen Habermas and Peter Bürger describe in terms of its establishment as a separate sphere of value.⁸³

The proliferation of the cultural studies paradigm in the wake of the “culture wars” has led among other things to the tendential replacement of a universalizing and covertly white-coded disciplinary partition and set of critical assumptions and values, by what Clyde Taylor calls an “aesthetic pluralism”, in which literature is compartmentalized by cultures (queer literature, black literature, Asian American literature, and so on), each of which gets to establish, to some degree, the particular criteria by which its objects are to be identified and evaluated.⁸⁴ Hence (for example) well-known accounts of the distinctive “vernacular” (Baker Jr.), “signifying” (Gates Jr.) or (more recently) “fugitive” (Walcott) quality of African American culture, the specificity of African literature based on its socially pedagogical role (Achebe) or extant connection to oral cultures (Irele), or for the characteristic hybridity and syncretism of diasporic literary cultures (Gilroy, Glissant, Edwards, Mercer).⁸⁵ The same impulse is also

⁸² Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms” (1980), p. 50.

⁸³ See Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970); Habermas, “Modernity - an Unfinished Project?” (1980); Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984).

⁸⁴ Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract—Film and Literature* (1998), p. 7.

⁸⁵ Houston Baker Jr., *Blues, Ideology and African American Literature* (1984); Robert Louis Gates Jr., *The Signifying Monkey* (1988); Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation* (2021); Chinua Achebe, “The

legible in attempts, within literary subfields based on cultural identity rather than geography, to theorize culturally assigned identities such as “blackness” or “queerness” as quasi-aesthetic categories that emerge within or characterize certain kinds of artwork or literary texts. From this point of view, Fredric Jameson’s notorious essay, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986) errs not so much by positing the essential difference of “third world literature”, but in its insufficient commitment to difference.⁸⁶ In homogenizing the “third world”, Jameson posits it as the un- (or, incompletely) differentiated other to a Western default.

Yet at the same time, precisely insofar as it has been concerned to reconstruct positive criteria of identification, judgment and evaluation as opposed to merely critiquing existing ones, literary studies in its partitioned form has tended at some stage to encounter the limits of the small-c approach to literature as culture, and to reencounter the need for an account of its own specificity *as* literature in some inevitably more general sense. Within fields such as postcolonial and ethnic studies, recent work has addressed this problem in terms of what Chuh has described as an “overemphasis on minoritized writing as political or anthropological documents rather than artistic creations. Coupled with the institutional validation of minoritized literary studies as a sign of commitment to diversity, such literatures have in the main been framed and studied in terms of authenticity, racism, and resistance rather than literariness *per se*” (16). Likewise, critics such as Deepika Bahri and Leela Gandhi have observed that postcolonial critiques of Eurocentric notions of aesthetic autonomy have tended to have the unfortunate effect of diverting critical attention away from what Bahri calls the “aesthetic dimension” of postcolonial works.⁸⁷ There

Novelist as Teacher” (1965), in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988); F. Abiola Irele, *The African Imagination* (2001); Paul Gilroy, “Diaspora, Utopia and the Critique of Capitalism” (1987); Edouard Glissant, *Poetics of Relation* (1990); Brent Hayes Edwards, *The Practice of Diaspora* (2003); Kobena Mercer, *Travel & See: Black Diaspora Art Practices Since the 1980s* (2016).

⁸⁶ Fredric Jameson, “Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism” (1986).

⁸⁷ Bahri, *Native Intelligence* (2003), p. 1.

has thus been a broad movement in these fields away from the “discursive logic whereby anticolonial thought seeks its contemporary articulation in and as a bias against literary autonomy”, and back toward accounts of the specifically literary qualities - or, the relative autonomy - of such works.⁸⁸

Of course, the elaboration of the specificity of minoritized literary production *as* literature does not necessarily have to mean the elaboration of its specificity as literature (or art) in a sense such as Brown’s, Attridge’s, Greenberg’s or Adorno’s. In *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2019) Chuh argues that “the humanities” in its established form is “of a piece with the civilizational discourses subtending the legitimation of capital and empire and bespeaks the onto-epistemologies that have come to secure liberalism’s common sense” (1). If this means that Western literature in its entirety can in effect be filed under “liberal humanism”, Chuh theorizes “minoritized” literature as part of a “counter-hegemonic” “illiberal humanities” that seeks to “disidentify from liberalism and its onto-epistemologies”. Illiberal humanities reconceive of literature and the aesthetic not as autonomous, but in terms of their “constitutive relationality”, in opposition to “knowledge paradigms that hold the political and the cultural, the economic and the artistic as discreetly bounded realms” (xi). But Chuh is ironically only able to secure the specificity of her archive through just such a partitioning gesture, categorically separating novels by authors who occupy minoritized subject-positions from the archive of Western literature with which they are often demonstrably in sympathetic dialogue, and which has likewise often enough been motivated by a desire both to overcome its bounded autonomy and to “disidentify from liberalism and its onto-epistemologies”. This remains true even when Chuh is analyzing a self-

⁸⁸ Leela Gandhi, *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-de-Siecle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship* (2006), p. 146.

consciously post-modernist novel such as Ruth Ozeki's *A Tale for the Time Being* (2013),⁸⁹ which is explicitly in dialogue with European writers including Laurence Sterne and Marcel Proust, as well as the Japanese tradition of the "I" novel. Far from supporting Chuh's insistence on a hard distinction between the Western literary tradition and its minoritized others, Ozeki's novel is quite explicit in its ambition to connect these traditions and explore their affinities as well as their differences.⁹⁰ And the same could be said of another of Chuh's examples of "minoritized discourse", Toni Morrison, whose obvious and frequently acknowledged dialogue with modernist writers such as William Faulkner and Virginia Woolf Chuh simply disregards.

There is thus a sense in which Chuh's argument is merely a mirror image of Brown's. Chuh's insistence that novels by minoritized writers occupy a position of critical autonomy in relation to Western aesthetic ideology ironically recreates Greenberg's (and thus Casanova's and Brown's) binary between avant-garde and kitsch in inverted form, privileging the negative term (entanglement, theatricality, heteronomy) precisely for its autonomy *from* autonomy. Yet like all binaries, this one gains its illusory coherence only by reifying its opposed terms. Absolutizing and essentializing the difference between novels by "minoritized" and white writers does more than simply obscure affinities that could be established or falsified through genealogical accounts

⁸⁹ Ruth Ozeki, *A Tale for the Time Being: A Novel* (2013).

⁹⁰ The novel is structured around a diary, discovered washed up on the beach by a Japanese-American novelist named Ruth, written by a teenaged American-Japanese girl called Nao, who emigrated with her Japanese parents to California as a child before returning to Tokyo as an adolescent. The diary has been concealed inside a French edition of Marcel Proust's *À la recherche du temps perdu* (1913), and contains various implied references to Laurence Sterne's *Tristram Shandy* (1759); not least the girl's name (Nao), which is the basis for an extended riff on the ironies of narrative temporality, echoing a running joke in Sterne's novel, whose autobiographical narrative endeavors absurdly to catch up with the "now" of its own narration. One of the functions of Nao's narrative is to link the modernist tradition of autobiographical literature exemplified by Proust and Sterne with the Japanese tradition of the "I" novel (also frequently referred to in the text). This ambition is hardly very cryptic – the diary literally connects Japan and America by being posted in a bottle from one to another, and thus enables a cross-cultural dialogue between Ruth and Nao – but Chuh's reading simply ignores all of this in its eagerness to assimilate Ozeki, implausibly, to a tradition of "minoritized discourse" that she insists on seeing as constitutively opposed to the Western literary tradition as a whole.

of influence, and that are occluded by the essentializing of white literature and “minoritized” literature *tout court* as either promoting and subverting “liberalism and its onto-epistemologies”. What novels have in common regardless of the subject-position of their authors, I will argue here, is something other than a set of consciously held attitudes toward political ideology or the social function of the artwork. What such works more fundamentally share is a constitutive predicament that arises from their having been automatically incorporated into the relatively autonomous medial and institutional forms of literature “as such”, precisely by virtue of their ontology *as* novels.

Ideologies, Louis Althusser reminds us, consist not just in “the ‘ideas’ of a human subject”, but in “actions inserted into practices. And I shall point out that these practices are governed by the rituals in which these practices are inscribed, within the material existence of an ideological apparatus, be it only a small part of that apparatus: a small mass in a small church, a funeral, a minor match at a sports’ club, a school day, a political party meeting, etc”.⁹¹ As Fredric Jameson has famously argued, literary “ideology” is not a question of subjective identification or disidentification, but of the omissions, foreclosures and exclusions sedimented within forms, structures, institutions and material practices.⁹² Chuh’s binary between a literature that participates in “liberal humanism” and one which simply chooses not to is itself arguably liberal humanist. What Chuh’s argument elides, in other words, is the distinction that Eagleton highlights: between autonomy as an ideology from which one may “disidentify”, and autonomization as a “material process” that novels (and works of art more generally) have by definition undergone by virtue of their being novels. As Larry Shiner has argued in his important book, *The Invention of Art* (2001), “art is not just an ‘idea’, but is, instead, a system of ideals,

⁹¹ Louis Althusser, *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1968), p. 166.

⁹² Jameson (1981), p. 79.

practices, and institutions”, meaning “much of the current rhetoric about the death of art or literature” (whether melancholy or, in the case of a critic like Chuh, celebratory) “underestimates the staying power of the established art system”.⁹³

Literary works throughout the epoch of modernity have frequently resisted, or aspired to overcome their autonomy. Indeed, Clyde Taylor has drawn a comparison between African American culture and European avant-garde movements such as Dada and The Situationist International on precisely this basis.⁹⁴ What the emergence of the “black aesthetic” represents for Taylor is a version of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak has elsewhere called a practice of “strategic essentialism”,⁹⁵ in which the cultural autonomy and specificity of black art is asserted in opposition to universalizing and essentializing, white-coded notions of art and the aesthetic “as such”: “By asserting the validity of a particular cultural matrix, they problematized the universal value of art. They challenged formalist assumptions and the notion of the autonomy of art”.⁹⁶ Thus, “in attempting to essentialize their own cultural articulation they were deessentializing the concepts of art and the aesthetic” (6).

Yet part of my argument in what follows is that the problem of the artistic as a “discreetly bounded realm” is not something that can simply and voluntarily be renounced or transcended, but is instead sedimented within the forms and institutions of art and literature “as such”, forms and institutions from which a given artist, artwork or cultural movement may well “disidentify”, but within which they are nonetheless incorporated as the price of their entrance into the “world republic of letters”. As Adorno argues, the autonomy of the artwork cannot simply be wished

⁹³ Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (2001), p. 8.

⁹⁴ *The Mask of Art*, p. 7.

⁹⁵ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *The Post-Colonial Critic: Interviews, Strategies, Dialogues* (1990), pp. 11-12.

⁹⁶ *The Mask of Art*, p. 5.

away. And if anything this fact has been compounded by the twenty-first century globalization of literature and the tendential substitution of the national or cultural for a global perspective. Regardless of the original context of its conception or the intentions of its author, the “world-literary” text is subject to a mode of reading and distribution that deterritorializes its meaning and function, by abstracting it from a specific context and offering it up as an aesthetic object: to be consumed and evaluated according to specifically *literary* criteria (however construed) as opposed to normative or context-specific criteria, such as the forms and conventions, symbolism or mythology, or the particular uses and functions of artworks within a given culture or community. David Damrosch captures an aspect of this deterritorializing and decontextualizing process in his claim that world literature is literature that “gains in translation”.⁹⁷ Yet Damrosch’s breezy faith in the inherently progressive character of literary globalization obscures the ethical quandary that the establishment of world “literary space” represents for writers whose work does not (or, does not straightforwardly) share the aestheticist ambition toward autonomy and formal purity that is often ascribed to Western modernism, but which on the contrary seeks to intervene in a particular concrete historical situation, and which is directed to the site-specific concerns and meanings of a particular audience.⁹⁸

Within the context of the world-literary system, then, when we speak of the novel as a “medium” we need to broaden the term to include the entire system of distribution and consumption of which a given novel forms a component part. The act of writing is then the site of an encounter with contingency operating on multiple levels: not only with language (the iterability and materiality of the signifier that, as in the classic deconstructive account,

⁹⁷ David Damrosch, *What is World Literature?* (2003), p. 283.

⁹⁸ For a counterargument to Damrosch see Emily Apter, *Against World Literature* (2013), which invokes “untranslatability as a deflationary gesture toward the expansionism and gargantuan scale of world-literary endeavors”, p. 3.

perennially frustrates and defers the communication of particularity) and narrative form (the “ontological gap” between the world and the text, and the arbitrary conventions that render any representation a construction of “reality”), but also a deterritorializing mode of circulation, which has as its correlative a specifically *literary* mode of reading. This chain of mediations comprises the process of autonomization, which is not just the prehistory of the novel’s production as a medium distinct from oral tradition and the epic, but which is ongoing: sedimented within and hence ceaselessly perpetuated by the media, institutions and forms of “world literature”.

Andre Malraux gave voice to some of these concerns in his fable of the system of modern art as a “Museum Without Walls”, in which artworks are “divested of their functions”:

The Middle Ages were as unaware of what we mean by the word ‘art’ as were Greece and Egypt, who had no word for it. For this concept to come into being, works of art needed to be isolated from their functions. What common link existed between a ‘Venus’ which was Venus, a crucifix which was Christ crucified, and a bust? But three ‘statues’ can be linked together. When, with the Renaissance, Christendom selected, from amongst the various forms created for the service of other gods, its most congenial methods of expression, there began to emerge that specific ‘value’ to which we give the name of art, and which was, in due time, to equal those supreme values in whose service it had arisen. Thus, for Manet, Giotto’s *Christ* was to become a work of art; whereas Manet’s *Christ aux Anges* would have meant nothing to Giotto. By a ‘good painter’ had been meant a competent painter, capable of convincing the spectator by the quality of his ‘Virgin’ that she was more the Virgin than was an average artist’s Virgin – and this called for superior craftsmanship. Thus, when art became an end in itself, our whole aesthetic outlook underwent a transformation.⁹⁹

Art does not need to be conceived or pursued as an end in itself in order to be made to function as an end in itself; autonomy need not be sought out, but can be imposed under duress. The “world republic of letters” is the “museum without walls” writ large. Under such circumstances, we might suggest that minoritized literary works, which refuse the ideology of autonomy by asserting their “ordinariness” as cultural objects that address a particular community, are nonetheless subjected to autonomy as a predicament insofar as their circulation and ontology *as*

⁹⁹ Andre Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (1949), pp. 53-54.

works of transnational literature ensures that they are “isolated from their functions”. It is in this context that the problem of autonomy reemerges, not just in the Greenbergian sense - as a set of self-aggrandizing claims on behalf of the artwork that can be debunked by the critic - but as a *predicament* that cannot be voluntaristically overcome or disregarded, but that is embedded in the forms and structures of world literature itself. Autonomy in this sense is not just a source of (aesthetic) authority, but a threat to art’s (extra-aesthetic) authority; not just a condition of exceptionalism in relation to the commodity, but a position the artwork is forced to occupy precisely by virtue of its being a commodity.

Such a conception of autonomy need not be unduly beset by melancholy or nostalgia for narratable communities, “integrated civilizations” or the ethnocentric *gemeinschaft*. Autonomy is a mixed blessing: the very dissonance between the autonomized artwork’s extra- or supra-artistic ambitions, and its embeddedness within forms and structures that tend to frustrate those ambitions, may be analytically recuperated as the locus of its particular insights, and thus as the autonomous artwork’s paradoxical (dis)affordance. This is the positive recuperation of the negative side of the Adornian critique of autonomy that informs Sianne Ngai’s work, which famously reads the “powerful powerlessness” of the titular character in Herman Melville’s *Bartleby the Scrivener* (1853) as an allegory for the “reduced status” of the work of art under capitalism:

For Bartleby’s powerful powerlessness can also be thought of as exemplified by literature or art itself, as a relatively autonomous, more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society. As Adorno’s analysis of the historical origins of this aesthetic autonomy suggests, the separateness from ‘empirical society’ which art gains as a consequence of the bourgeois revolution ironically coincides with its growing awareness of its inability to significantly change that society - a powerlessness that becomes the object of the newly autonomous art’s ‘guilty’ self-reflection. Yet one could argue that bourgeois art’s reflexive preoccupation with its *own* ‘powerlessness and

superfluity in the empirical world' is precisely what makes it capable of theorizing social powerlessness in a manner unrivaled by other forms of cultural praxis.¹⁰⁰

Ngai's work typically focuses on the contemporary, and her work in general sets out to provide a symptomatology of an age in which the boundaries between high and low culture, the aesthetic "as such" and the minor or everyday affect, and the artwork and the commodity, have been called into question (ambiguous distinctions that her work, unlike Brown's, has no interest in trying to resolve). Yet the choice of an exemplary figure from the 1850s as her allegorical protagonist underscores the fact that in Ngai's account the artwork's "powerlessness" is not a consequence of the surrender of modernist autonomy to some uniquely postmodern "real subsumption" by capital, but a "consequence of the bourgeois revolution", or of the process of commodification by which art was established as a "more or less cordoned-off domain in an increasingly specialized and differentiated society". In Ngai's account the artwork under capitalism, like the aesthetic experience it occasions, is constitutively "damaged", "compromised" or "degraded"; haunted - in a manner that she ultimately sees as more comic than tragic - by its undecidable proximity to the "gimmick".¹⁰¹ Yet this compromised status is also a paradoxical (dis)affordance insofar as it allows the diminished artwork to embody, through its performative contradictoriness, larger social contradictions that it cannot articulate directly. As Ngai puts it in a recent interview, "aesthetics, you could say, has a sort of unavoidable 'error' at its core. But one that discloses a truth that could not be arrived at any other way".¹⁰² (For Ngai's "aesthetics", I would substitute "autonomy"). Rather than a claim to the *sui generis* authority of the artwork, then, autonomy - for Ngai, as for Adorno - is better thought of as the

¹⁰⁰ Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), p. 2.

¹⁰¹ Sianne Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick: Aesthetic Judgment and Capitalist Form* (2020).

¹⁰² Matthew Rana, "Bad Contemporaneity" (2021), interview with Sianne Ngai, *Kunstkritikk* <https://kunstkritikk.com/bad-contemporaneity/>.

predicament in which dysfunction constitutes the artwork's particular mode of functioning, or in which its failure is a precondition of its possibility of success.

Autonomy as a Predicament

My purpose in outlining this genealogy of the proliferation and institutionalizing of modernist autonomy-claims, then, has been both to sketch out and to historically account for a persistent theorization of the concept of autonomy that my argument will oppose. To summarize, dominant accounts of artistic and aesthetic autonomy - at least in the form in which they have been imported from philosophy and critical theory into literary criticism - have tended to operate within a shared framework of premises and assumptions. Within this framework, autonomy is understood as:

- (i) A set of *claims or assertions* made by or on behalf of artists, artworks and/or artist production more broadly.
- (ii) A *property* that either is or is not possessed by a given artwork; or alternatively, that either does or does not emerge in the experience of the reader or viewer.
- (iii) A set of historical *conditions of possibility* that account for the social constitution of art's autonomy, and that either have or have not been exhausted.

Claim or assertion, property, condition of possibility: what all of these premises assume is that autonomy is something *positive* or desirable: something that is (or at least ought to be) striven toward, asserted or aspired to. The most common form these autonomy-claims take is the assertion of the irreducibility of aesthetic form to (variously) paraphrasable meaning, authorial

intent, representation, instrumentality, political ideology, and - as I show in the next chapter - capitalist rationalization, reification and/or commodification. And as I have argued, an entire critical industry has devoted itself to critiquing, moving beyond or dismantling this conception of art's autonomy, exposing its self-proclaimed neutrality or immunity as an ideological delusion, and thus revealing the self-ascription of autonomy as art's specific form of complicity with the ideology of capitalist, patriarchal and/or colonial domination.

The central claim I have advanced here is that the nature and historical significance of the problem of aesthetic and artistic autonomy can be only partially comprehended within this positive framework. But this also means that negative critiques of autonomy - whether psychoanalytic, deconstructive, postcolonial, feminist, or Marxist - have themselves tended to be limited in their reach, insofar as they have taken as their object a simplistic and incomplete formulation of the problem. What we need to recapture, in order to grasp the complexities of its status and function within both high modernist and contemporary literary practice, is a sense of the fundamentally *ambivalent* character of autonomy, both as a formal claim about particular artworks and as a historical problematic. Autonomy, in the sense in which I approach it in what follows, is not primarily an assertion, a style, a property or a set of formal characteristics, but rather a *predicament* in which art has lost its transcendental self-justification, and therefore any absolute standard in relation to which to legitimize itself. What is fundamentally at stake in the concept of autonomy, that is to say, is the unresolved - because unresolvable - question of art's social status and function as a socially autonomous practice.

Considered sociologically, there is an important sense in which the phrase "autonomous art" is a tautology: an autonomy-claim of one form or another is arguably presupposed in the very definition of the artwork as categorically distinct from the object or the commodity, or in

the distinction between artistic production and other kinds of work, craftsmanship or design. From this point of view, even to speak of art “as such” is already implicitly to make a certain claim for the autonomy of art, since the use of the term “art” to group together diverse practices such as literature, painting, sculpture, music, drama, dance, film and photography already suggests that they share some fundamental characteristic that renders them distinct from, and hence in some sense autonomous in relation to other kinds of social practice.

Since “artistic” activities such as painting, music, poetry and storytelling have existed in one form or another throughout human history, from one point of view this observation would appear to work against any periodizing concept of autonomous art. Yet as art historians and theorists from Adorno, Paul Oskar Kristeller, Arnold Hauser and Andre Malraux to Hans Belting, Peter Bürger, Larry Shiner and Jacques Rancière have argued, from the perspective of the *longue durée* the concept and practice of art “as such” is actually a relatively recent innovation, gaining currency for perhaps the first time in Western Europe over the course of the eighteenth century.¹⁰³ To return to Eagleton’s distinction, we need to differentiate between the *concept* and the *practice* of art “as such” (or, socially autonomous art), which are obviously related, but do not necessarily coincide. Raymond Williams provides a hugely influential account of the rise of the *concept* of art as such in *Culture and Society* (1958). Williams’s argument chiefly concerns “culture”, a concept which, he argues, over the course of the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries changes from a verb to a noun: “Before this period, it had meant, primarily, the ‘tending of natural growth’ and then, by analogy, a process of human training. But this latter use, which had usually been a culture *of* something, was changed, in the nineteenth

¹⁰³ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970); Kristeller, “The Modern System of the Arts” (1951); Hauser, *The Social History of Art*, vols. I-IV (1951); Malraux, *The Voices of Silence* (1949); Belting, *Likeness and Presence* (1990); Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1984); Shiner, *The Invention of Art* (2001); Rancière, *Aisthesis* (2011).

century, to *culture* as such, a thing in itself'.¹⁰⁴ The same process can be observed across a range of other terms which have come to be constitutive of “modern”, as opposed to “traditional” societies, such as “industry”, “democracy”, “class”, “art” and “aesthetic”.

The emergence of culture “as such” (“as an abstraction and an absolute”) for Williams is paralleled by the way in which the term “art” during this period changes from “its original sense of a human attribute, a ‘skill’”, and instead comes to designate “a kind of institution, a set body of activities of a certain kind” (xiii). Previously the various arts had been separate practices that were generally tied to specific social occasions or functions: from courtly music and poetry, to religious painting and sculpture, to poetry and plays performed on specific occasions as part of social rituals, and concerning issues relating to the collective life, beliefs and values of a particular community. Now, however “the arts... were grouped together, in this new phrase, as having something essentially in common which distinguished them from other human skills” (xiv). Thus the birth of art “as such” is for Williams a historical novelty, constituting a “remarkable change in ideas of the nature and purpose of art, and of its relation to other human activities and to society as a whole” (xiv).

Though Williams’s account primarily concerns the origin and evolution of the *concept* of art and culture “as such”, sociological accounts of the *practice* of autonomous art have emphasized the process by which the different art-forms become detached from specific social and ritual contexts, and instead, with the transition to capitalism and the generalization of market relations, come to be produced, bought and sold as commodities on a market. This account has been central to the now-familiar sociological account of modernity as a process consisting of the “rationalization” of society and the “separation of spheres”, first formulated by Max Weber, and

¹⁰⁴ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society, 1780-1950* (1958), p. xiv.

subsequently developed into a Marxist theory of “reification” by Georg Lukács and the Frankfurt School. Jurgen Habermas provides a condensed summary of the position of art within this narrative in his important essay, “Modernity – an Unfinished Project”:

Greatly oversimplifying, I would say that in the history of modern art one can detect a trend towards ever greater autonomy in the definition and practice of art. The category of ‘beauty’ and the domain of beautiful objects were first constituted in the Renaissance. In the course of the 18th century, literature, the fine arts and music were institutionalized as activities independent from sacred and courtly life. Finally, around the middle of the 19th century an aestheticist conception of art emerged, which encouraged the artist to produce his work according to the distinct consciousness of art for art’s sake. The autonomy of the aesthetic sphere could then become a deliberate project: the talented artist could lend authentic expression to those experiences he had in encountering his own decentered subjectivity, detached from the constraints of routinized cognition and everyday action.¹⁰⁵

As Habermas argues at greater length in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (1962), the progressive autonomization of artistic production takes place as an aspect of the larger development of capitalist modernity.¹⁰⁶ As for Williams, Habermas argues that with the historical development of market society and the secular nation-state following the bourgeois revolutions in Europe, art is progressively liberated from its role as a ceremonial component of religious or courtly ritual, and the formerly distinct arts of music, painting and literature are consolidated into the unified category of “art as such”. Within this process we might further differentiate three interconnected but relatively distinct levels: the aesthetic, the formal and the social (or, the autonomy of the aesthetic, the autonomy of the artwork, and the autonomy of art). Aesthetic autonomy concerns the status of the aesthetic as a distinctive kind of sensory experience, supported by its own discrete philosophical discourse (aesthetics). Formal autonomy concerns the artwork’s progressive detachment from representation and its pursuit of various

¹⁰⁵ Jurgen Habermas, “Modernity – an Unfinished Project”, in Hal Foster (ed.) *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (1983), p. 10.

¹⁰⁶ Jurgen Habermas, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society* (1962).

forms of abstraction and self-referentiality. And the autonomy of art designates the social function of artistic production, and its historical emancipation from institutions such as the church and state.

Yet whereas Williams focuses primarily on the discursive evolution of the concept of art “as such”, Habermas’ 1962 sociological study pays greater attention to the material preconditions of its autonomization: the establishment of a market for artworks, the decline of patronage, and the commodification of artistic production. Importantly, then, whereas Marxist critics such as Fredric Jameson and Nicholas Brown have characterized commodification as that which threatens to *subsume* art’s autonomy, for Habermas (as also for Adorno and Bourdieu) it is the process of commodification that *produces* autonomous art: the autonomous artwork was always-already a commodity for Habermas, because it is the establishment of a market for artworks that creates the historical conditions within which artistic production can be practiced for its own sake, as an end in itself. Pierre Bourdieu provides an account of this process, in his essay “The Market for Symbolic Goods” (1985):

Dominated by external sources of legitimacy throughout the middle ages, part of the Renaissance and, in the case of French court life, throughout the classical age, intellectual and artistic life has progressively freed itself from aristocratic and ecclesiastical tutelage as well as from its aesthetic and ethical demands.¹⁰⁷

The importance of Bourdieu’s account for the present discussion is twofold: like Habermas, he acknowledges the causal agency of the emergent art market (and hence, the broader transition from feudalism to capitalism) in creating the social autonomy of art; and he also sees that one of the important effects of this social autonomy is art’s detachment from “external sources of legitimacy”. Bourdieu’s primary concern is to describe the way that, in the particular context of nineteenth century France, this creates conditions that lead to the *assertion* of art’s autonomy –

¹⁰⁷ Pierre Bourdieu, “The Market of Symbolic Goods”, in *The Field of Cultural Production* (1993), p. 112.

that is, the positive embrace of art's newfound freedom from tradition and "external sources of legitimacy", and the reactive formulation of theories of "pure art", or *l'art pour l'art*:

those 'inventions' of Romanticism – the representation of culture as a kind of superior reality, irreducible to the vulgar demands of economics, and the ideology of free, disinterested 'creation' founded on the spontaneity of innate inspiration – appear to be just so many reactions to the pressures of an anonymous market. (114)

As Bourdieu's account makes clear, the emergence of theories of "pure art" is not *constitutive* of artistic autonomy, but such theories are rather particular, contextually specific ways of *responding* to the social fact of art's autonomization, and the loss of "external sources of legitimacy" that this entails. From this point of view, we can regard the varieties of aestheticism from Kant to Greenberg as so many historical attempts to reconstitute art's *normative* force on aesthetic rather than religious or traditional terms, by replacing the "external sources of legitimation", which according to Bourdieu were relinquished with art's autonomization, with a new legitimizing discourse internal to artistic production itself. Like modernity as a whole, then, autonomous art has to "create its own normativity out of itself".¹⁰⁸ But this normativity is contingent, in the sense that it corresponds to no absolute truth pertaining to the world outside of art. This means that, insofar as it acknowledges its own autonomy, art is confronted with the need to justify its own right to speak about or represent the world, to command attention or assume authority, and hence finally to exist at all. The autonomous artwork, then, is that which is tendentially (either explicitly or implicitly) constituted in dialogue with its own theorization.

The foundational account of art's autonomy in these terms is provided not by Immanuel Kant, but by G.W. F. Hegel's *Lectures on Aesthetics*, which contain his precipitous diagnosis of the "end of art". As Robert Pippin has recently argued, "although overstated, Hegel's 'pastness of art' claim lands him very close to, if not directly in, the historical situation - the crisis - of

¹⁰⁸ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, p. 7.

modernist art”, which is to say, of “art produced under the pressure of art having become a problem for itself, in a period in which the point and significance of art could no longer be taken for granted”.¹⁰⁹ Hegel’s theory concerns not the (obviously false) predicted cessation of artistic production, but the rather different idea that the transition from what Hegel terms the “classical” to the “romantic” epochs represents the “self-transcendence of art”:¹¹⁰

the spirit of our world today, or, more particularly, of our religion and the development of our reason, appears as beyond the stage at which art is the supreme mode of our knowledge of the Absolute. The peculiar nature of artistic production no longer fills our highest need. We have got beyond venerating works of art as divine and worshiping them... Thought and reflection have spread their wings above fine art.¹¹¹

Art is no longer the privileged source of modernity’s higher truths. No longer an object of religious veneration, the artwork becomes an object of aesthetic contemplation, enjoyment or critique, its normative claim upon the viewer fatally diminished: “No matter how excellent we find the statues of the Greek gods, no matter how we see God the father, Christ, and Mary so estimably and perfectly portrayed, it is no help; we bow the knee no longer” (103). Such circumstances lead Hegel to the still-crucial insight that “Art, considered purely as art, becomes to a certain extent something superfluous” (535). This observation reverberates throughout the history of modern art theory and criticism as a perpetual anxiety that there is always a silent “merely” implied by the term “aesthetic”, no matter the lengths to which one or another variety of aestheticism might go to return art to its former sacred status by elevating it into a surrogate religion.¹¹² “The sacred fear”, as Edgar Wind puts it in his classic 1964 book, *Art and Anarchy*, “is no longer with us”. Yet, “perhaps the fear has become superfluous. Diffusion brings with it a

¹⁰⁹ Robert Pippin, *After the Beautiful: Hegel and the Philosophy of Pictorial Modernism* (2015), pp. 8, 1.

¹¹⁰ Pippin, p. 36.

¹¹¹ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 10.

¹¹² For a helpful account of the enduring centrality of Hegel’s “end of art” thesis to aesthetic theory from Friedrich Nietzsche to Walter Benjamin, Theodor W. Adorno and Martin Heidegger, see Eva Geulen, *The End of Art: Readings in a Rumor After Hegel* (2002).

loss of density. We are much given to art, but it touches us lightly, and that is why we can take so much of it, and so much of so many different kinds”.¹¹³ As Giorgio Agamben observes, “only because art has left the sphere of *interest* to become merely *interesting* do we welcome it so warmly”, a claim that anticipates Sianne Ngai’s analysis of “the interesting” as one of the contemporary “minor” aesthetic categories that have come to seem more descriptive of the nature of aesthetic experience than such elevated responses to art as the beautiful and the sublime.¹¹⁴ As Ngai puts it in a recent interview, “Everything around us is a commodity. We’re raised on a steady stream of advertising. It therefore stands to reason that most of the aesthetic experiences that come with this culture are going to be ones that are ambivalent and uncertain”.¹¹⁵

Though the metaphysical system in which he locates this historical crisis is to say the least problematic, I nonetheless regard Hegel’s “end of art” thesis as the inaugural description of the ongoing problem of the social status and function of the artwork under capitalism (which is to say, socially autonomous art). What is really at stake in Hegel’s formulation – and what is also the foundational question that continues to haunt artistic production throughout the modern era – is the status of art once it has been stripped of the authority with which it was formerly invested as an aspect of communal ritual and belief, and therefore of its assumed status as the repository of socially consecrated absolute values. This is also the process that Walter Benjamin is describing when he writes of the “loss of aura” that follows from art’s detachment from its

¹¹³ Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (1964), p. 7.

¹¹⁴ Agamben (1994), p. 4; Ngai, *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (2012).

¹¹⁵ Ngai, “Bad Contemporaneity” (2021), *Kunstkritik* <https://kunstkritikk.com/bad-contemporaneity/>.

“embeddedness within the context of tradition”.¹¹⁶ The late-modernist novelist and theorist

Gabriel Josipovici describes a version of this predicament in the following terms:

for Homer, the Muses dictated both the content and the form of what he had to say; for medieval artists such as the sculptors of the great cathedrals, what was to be depicted was determined by the cathedral's clerics, and the form - the way the beard of Moses or the hand of Christ were to be carved - was given by tradition. This gives medieval art, as both Pound and Proust recognised, an innocence and freedom from ego that both writers felt went missing from European art in the ensuing centuries.

By the 16th century, the consensus on which this was based had disappeared. Though patrons went on giving specific commissions to artists and composers for the next two centuries, artists were becoming increasingly conscious that, from now on, they had to rely only on their imagination. Our culture, which is still in thrall to the individualistic strain in the Renaissance and in Romanticism, welcomed this as a splendid new freedom. More prescient souls, however, sensed what Duchamp would eventually articulate so icily - if every choice is merely the artist's, why is one choice better than any other? This is what Kafka, Beckett and Borges struggled with: how to escape the conclusion that whatever you do is private self-indulgence. Your work may earn you and your publisher money but, having no authority, it remains nothing more than an object of consumption, like a pair of shoes.¹¹⁷

In their different historical contexts, Hegel, Benjamin and Josipovici all articulate a version of the same anxiety: the threat to a given artwork's normative status and authority that is at least potentially entailed by its detachment from external sources of validation and authority, and which arises from art's historical autonomization. Considered in these terms, autonomization entails both a radical new freedom and an equally radical *contingency*. In liberating a given artwork to be or do whatever the artist likes, autonomization also threatens to remove any particular reason for it to do any one thing rather than any other, or indeed to do anything at all. This also lies at the heart of the predicament that forms Adorno's point of departure in *Aesthetic*

¹¹⁶ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility” (1934), p. 24. I address Benjamin's “Work of Art” essay elsewhere in this dissertation (‘Autonomy and Hauntology’, pp. 166-173). Suffice it to say here that when Benjamin associates art's technical reproducibility with its loss of autonomy, I think he misconstrues the logic of his own argument. Technical reproducibility and the “loss of aura” are instead aspects of the larger underlying process which Benjamin's essay really concerns: the social autonomization of art, which takes place as a result of the transition from feudalism to capitalism.

¹¹⁷ Gabriel Josipovici, “Modernism Still Matters”, *The New Statesman*, 6th September 2010 <https://www.newstatesman.com/long-reads/2010/09/writers-english-modernism>.

Theory, in which “It is self-evident that nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore; not its inner life, nor its relation to the world, not even its right to exist” (1).

Contrary to Marxist critics such as Jameson and Nicholas Brown, the analysis of art’s autonomy is therefore not *necessarily* the assertion or denial of its neutrality, transcendence or immanent criticality in relation to commodification, politics or ideology; though variations on these assertions are certainly among the possible responses to the condition of autonomy. Rather, autonomy more fundamentally designates the set of historical conditions within which art’s relationship to commodification, politics and ideology becomes a problem in the first place: a question that the artwork itself may respond to in any number of ways, but which it can never in any final sense resolve. The social autonomization of art therefore also designates the historical situation in which it becomes relevant for art to measure itself against political action (and, in doing so, to be found wanting). As Maurice Blanchot states, “as soon as art measures itself against action, immediate and pressing action can only put it in the wrong”.¹¹⁸ For this and other reasons, “art’s profound disquiet... is symptomatic of the artist’s malaise in a world where he perceives himself to be unjustified” (218). Blanchot’s “malaise” is nothing other than the predicament of autonomy.

This is not to say that aestheticist theories of “pure art” are or were the only kinds of positive discourse that have emerged from socially autonomous art; that autonomous art has nothing useful to say about society or politics; or that “modern”, capitalist societies have not used autonomous aesthetic productions as a way to understand themselves and their place in the world every bit as much as “traditional”, pre-capitalist ones did. Importantly, I am not making the conservative claim that art’s autonomy is wholly negative or tragic, but rather that it is

¹¹⁸ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (1955), p. 213.

ambivalent, in ways that are occluded by theoretical approaches that treat the problem of autonomy as if it were reducible to the validity or otherwise of aestheticism. Autonomous art and literature have demonstrably continued to serve as privileged sites in which both traditional and new forms of collective life and normativity are imagined, transmitted, staged, experimented with, and related to lived experience. Yet autonomous art is also one of the places in which the situatedness, limits, and hence contingency of these constructions has been most forcefully encountered. Autonomy is therefore simultaneously and inseparably the source of both utopian claims for the *sui generis* creative capacity of aesthetic production, and a deep-seated anxiety arising from the very distance from external sources of authority and consecration that is the source of that utopianism.

Given that my analysis rejects both the theory of art's real subsumption under capital and the teleological historical narrative that it presupposes, I instead read autonomous art as existing in a definitively problematic relation to a commodity status that is simultaneously its condition of possibility. And from this point of view, since the social autonomization of art is characteristic of the capitalist mode of production, the problem of art's autonomy is at least potentially coextensive, both geographically and temporally, with the capitalist world-system itself. This is why autonomy can be a problem for Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o and Chinua Achebe every bit as much as it is for Beckett or Nabokov; for Henry James and Virginia Woolf as much as for Coetzee and Ishiguro; and for Laurence Sterne and Jonathan Swift as much as for Thomas Bernhard or V.S. Naipaul, even if the respective contexts of these authors, and hence both their formulations of and responses to the problem of autonomy, are quite different.

As I have already indicated, for the writers whose work I analyze in this dissertation, the condition of autonomy is encountered as an ethical predicament that entails a particular

relationship to form. To describe this relationship, I will repurpose terms borrowed from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari by describing art's social autonomization as its *detrterritorialization*: that is, in this case, art's abstraction from its former embeddedness within the context of a particular set of social rituals and beliefs. To do this is to reverse the causality implicit in the Eurocentric narrative of art as moving teleologically from the concrete positivism of realism to the abstraction of modernism. If we think of art's social autonomization as its detrterritorialization, this is an *originary* and constitutive (but also ongoing) problematic for the modern, aesthetic concept of art, which henceforth lacks an absolute standard of external validation.

Autonomous art, in order to exist at all, therefore has to *reterritorialize* itself in relation to a more or less contingently adopted set of standards, norms, motives and self-justifications. The most immediate and prevalent of these is a particular political cause, or a self-ascribed social function: examples of which might include, Percy Bysshe Shelley's self-ascription of the poet's role as the "unacknowledged legislator of the world"; the Romantic-Marxist claim that the artist is a repository for the human values that are under threat from capitalist commodification; the nineteenth century realist novel, insofar as it is (in Benedict Anderson's account) bound up in the project of the formation of national consciousness; the overtly politicized work that devotes itself to the evocation or critical examination of a particular injustice or social problem; or, conversely, the pursuit of formal autonomy as legitimated by the ideology of *l'art pour l'art*. But the concept also has a broader applicability: indeed, all of the heteronomous criteria that Greenberg invokes as "kitsch" - utility, concepts, conventions, values, content, meaning - are in this sense reterritorializations.

Approached in these terms, we can characterize the contemporary novelistic tendencies that I analyze in the final section of this dissertation as emerging not so much from an assertion

of autonomy as from an ongoing crisis of reterritorialization. This crisis is by no means universal, nor homogeneous; a particular reterritorialization may well be capable of performing a good enough legitimizing function for a given autonomous artwork in a given time and place. But the works that I will be concerned with here are those that are animated by the tension between an awareness of the necessity of reterritorializing themselves (to avoid either silence, or the triviality of pure abstraction) and the simultaneous awareness of the contingency of any given reterritorialization. The main result, I will suggest, is a pervasive anxiety about what is felt to be the inadequacy of any given form to the task at hand.

This dynamic of deterritorialization and reterritorialization also helps explain what might be the rather counterintuitive claim that the problem of autonomy is most centrally worked through in what is often thought of as the *least* formally autonomous (in the sense of anti-referential abstraction) of modern art-forms: the novel. This is because the novel, as the secular form whose rise coincides with that of Enlightenment positivism and its project to objectively represent reality, is thereby the form that is most consistently and consequentially forced to confront the arbitrariness of the formal resources it possesses for doing so. The problem of autonomy as I conceive it is in fact none other than what the young Georg Lukács is describing, in *The Theory of the Novel*, when he calls the novel the “epic of an age that has been abandoned by God”.¹¹⁹ “Art,” Lukács observes, has “become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever” (37).

Though we need to bracket the idealist and teleological assumptions in which it is couched, Lukács’s theory still articulates something important about the self-critical compulsion

¹¹⁹ Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (1916), p. 88.

that I read as characteristic of the contemporary novel. The essential problem of the novel for Lukács is that it is the attempt to reconcile the “extensive totality of life” with the “created totality” of narrative form; yet its very condition of existence is precisely the *loss* of the sense of “immanent meaning” - the correspondence between “form” and “life” - that would lend such an attempt any generalizable validity or representativeness. As Lukács puts it, “The novel is the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, but that still thinks in terms of totality” (56). The novel is therefore constitutively *ironic*. Always at some level aware of the inescapably rhetorical, and hence arbitrary character of the construction that it places upon the world, the novel is therefore for Lukács always implicitly or explicitly self-reflexive. Yet as the epic of an age that “still thinks in terms of totality”, the novel is simultaneously constituted as a rearguard action against the consequences of this very insight. The novel bears this “fundamental dissonance” within its form: it is therefore the medium that both historically emerges with, and epitomizes the predicament issuing from the autonomy of art (62).

CHAPTER TWO

Autonomy and the Untimely

Prelude: The Untimely Contemporary

‘The tradition of the dead generations weighs like a nightmare on the minds of the living,’ Karl Marx famously wrote in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte*: in a warming world, it weighs down heavier and heavier, on the bodies of the living and their surroundings, in a relentless consolidation of the tyranny of the past.¹

For the distinction between the past and the present founders on the interminable grief engendered by slavery and its aftermath. How might we understand mourning, when the event has yet to end? When the injuries not only perdure, but are inflicted anew? Can one mourn what has yet ceased happening?²

Twenty-First Century Anglophone literary culture is shot through with intuitions and irruptions of the untimely: with ruins, revivals, returns, reruns, afterlives, détournements, repetition, citation, remainders, palimpsests, ghosts. The timely official narrative of the novel’s formal evolution - progressing, in dialectical lockstep with the development of capitalism, from an epistemologically naïve realism; to the modernist discovery of formal autonomy; to a deconstructive postmodern metafiction - has long-since given way to an untimely pluralism characterized by retro revivals and reappropriations. Contenders for the label of “successor to postmodernism” are numerous, united both by their obvious lack of descriptive completeness and their conspicuous reliance on categories resuscitated from the past. This pervasive sense of the untimely - of historical stasis, recursion or fragmentation - is unwittingly demonstrated by the

¹ Andreas Malm, *Fossil Capital* (2016), p. 6.

² Saidiya V. Hartman, “The Time of Slavery” (2002), p. 2.

critical manifestos collected in the 2015 anthology, *Supplanting the Postmodern*.³ Across chapter headings such as “metamodernism”, “altermodernism”, “automodernism”, “hypermodernism”, “remodernism” and “digimodernism” the term “modernism” ironically reverberates, a dirge to the apparent exhaustion of its own vocational exhortation to “make it new”. Once designating a radical break with tradition, modernism and modernity have instead come to serve as names for an undead past that seemingly cannot be transcended: an endless interregnum between an old that is dying and a new that cannot be born.

For all of its unwieldiness, this inventory of paradoxically retro “modernisms” points to one of the recurrent forms in which the problem of periodization has appeared in recent cultural theory. A widespread rejection of the concept of postmodernism, as either a stylistic dominant or a periodizing concept, has prompted a return to an expanded or pluralized periodization of modernism and modernity. This sense of a persistent, intractable or untimely “singular modernity” has been compounded in recent years by an emergent series of loosely related discourses across the theoretical humanities - from scholars working in Black and Africana studies, feminist and queer theory, postcolonial, decolonial and indigenous studies, psychoanalysis and trauma theory, Marxism and world-systems theory, new materialisms and the environmental humanities - that have powerfully challenged conventional, developmentalist models of periodization and temporality. What has loosely united these discourses across their many local disagreements is a rejection or problematizing of the formerly hegemonic self-representation of postmodernism: as a distinct historical period, and an attendant “cultural logic”,

³ David Rudrum and Nicholas Stavris, *Supplanting the Postmodern* (2015).

predicated on the dissolution or overcoming of the various organizing categories of Western modernity.

“Postmodernism as it is generally understood involves a radical break, both with a dominant culture and aesthetic, and with a rather different moment of socioeconomic organization against which its structural novelties and innovations are measured”, wrote Jameson in his 1984 foreword to Jean-François Lyotard’s *The Postmodern Condition*.⁴ This “radical break” was frequently understood as representing either the completion or the supersession of the project of modernity, and so as either a consummation or an inauguration of the new. Francis Fukuyama famously proclaimed the “end of history”, and Jameson rather hubristically assured us all that “postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good”.⁵ In critical theory this inaugural (or, consummatory) sensibility was frequently manifested in the dismantling and purported supersession of the various organizing conceptual categories of Western modernity. High theory from structuralism to deconstruction declared the “death of the subject” (and also, therefore, of the author).⁶ Judith Butler and Donna Haraway heralded the end of binary conceptions of gender and sexuality.⁷ Globalization theorists from Thomas L. Friedman to Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri declared the end of the modern nation-state, and of modern imperialism.⁸ Western conservatives and liberal humanists alike

⁴ Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1984), p. vii.

⁵ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (1992); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991), p. ix.

⁶ Rei Terada, *Feeling in Theory: Emotion After the Death of the Subject* (2001); Roland Barthes, “The Death of the Author” (1967).

⁷ Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990); Donna Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto” (1985).

⁸ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (2005); Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000).

exulted in the prospect of a “classless” and “post-racial” society.⁹ And thinkers from Jameson and Jean Baudrillard to Hans Belting, Arthur Danto and Michael Fried construed the exhaustion of modernism (whether gladly or melancholically) as the end of art itself: marking the transcendence of the Western bourgeois category of art “as such” (or, autonomous art), and either the expansion and reintegration of aesthetics into the praxis of everyday life (Jameson, Eagleton), the collapse of the distinction between the artwork and the object (Fried), or the artwork and the commodity (Jameson, Baudrillard).¹⁰

In retrospect this interconnected series of purported supersessions can itself perhaps be viewed as a late efflorescence of the modernist passion for the new which traversed the twentieth century, from dada, futurism, constructivism and situationism to cybernetics and posthumanism. Indeed, from a contemporary vantage point the “post” in postmodernism itself seems curiously self-erasing, or perhaps simply tautological. Rather than a departure, postmodernism now looks more like the inevitable continuation of a modernism constitutively required sooner or later to overthrow itself, having internalized the very logic of endless revolution that had been taken to underpin the capitalist economy it nonetheless dreamed of circumventing, negating or transcending.

⁹ Both of these terms were commonplace in UK and US mainstream political discourse during the 1990s and 2000s. The notion of the “post-racial” society was particularly widespread after the election of Barack Obama in 2008. For a critical overview of the notion of the “postracial society” see David Theo Goldberg, *Are We All Postracial Yet?* (2015). The idea of a “classless” society is often associated with John Major, who used it as a catchphrase upon succeeding Margaret Thatcher as the leader of the British Conservative party in 1990 <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-politics-38553797>.

¹⁰ See Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism* (1990), Terry Eagleton, “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism”, (1985), Jean Baudrillard, *The Conspiracy of Art* (2005), Hans Belting, *The End of the History of Art?* (1987), Arthur Danto, *After the End of Art* (1996), Michael Fried, “Art and Objecthood” (1967).

Within the US and (to a lesser extent) European cultural core in whose context postmodernism thrived in the 1970s and 80s, a sense of its waning emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s amidst a confluence of factors: the rise of a “new sincerity” that rejected what was perceived as a problematically relativist, politically quietist, dehistoricizing, all-consuming postmodern irony;¹¹ a disenchantment with deconstruction and poststructuralism, initially in the wake of the revelations concerning Paul de Man's collaborationist wartime journalism, and more recently in the form of a “post-critical” dissatisfaction with an allegedly automatic “critique” and the pursuit of more affirmative alternatives to the “hermeneutics of suspicion”;¹² the critical rehabilitation of a literary and artistic realism simplistically conflated by modernists and postmodernists with the multifarious ills of white bourgeois hetero-patriarchal liberal humanism¹³; a sense of the “rebirth of history” in the wake of 9/11, the War on Terror, the systemic crisis of neoliberalism, and the looming climate catastrophe;¹⁴ and a return to realist modes of thought such as a resurgent (post)-Marxism, various new materialisms, and a more pragmatic, positivist historicism.

Postcolonial, decolonial, multiculturalist and globalist critiques of the concept of postmodernism have pointed to its Western- and white ethno-centrism; its allegiance to a Eurocentric, developmentalist concept of universal history; and its conceptual irrelevance to

¹¹ See Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters* (2016) and Adam Kelly, “David Foster Wallace and the New Sincerity in American Fiction” (2010).

¹² Bruno Latour, “Why Has Critique Run Out of Steam? From Matters of Fact to Matters of Concern” (2004); Elizabeth S. Anker and Rita Felski, *Critique and Postcritique* (2017).

¹³ See Matthew Beaumont, *Adventures in Realism* (2007); Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019); Warwick Research Collective (WReC), *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015); Jed Esty and Coleen Lye, *Peripheral Realisms* (2012); Lauren E. Goodlad, *Worlding Realisms* (2016).

¹⁴ Alain Badiou, *The Rebirth of History* (2012); Peter Boxall, *Twenty First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013); Philip E. Wegner, *Life Between Two Deaths: U.S. Culture, 1989-2001* (2009).

artists working within local, national or regional traditions that had not passed through the assumed realism to modernism to postmodernism trajectory.¹⁵ And sociological critiques of postmodernism as a distinct historical period have pointed to the constitutive unevenness of global capitalism, and so to the partiality and Western-centrism of models that periodize postmodernism according to a teleological state of completed modernization or “real subsumption”.¹⁶ If global capitalism is conceived as constitutively uneven - actively producing, exacerbating and proliferating differences on multiple scales rather than proceeding toward an eventual state of developmental homogeneity - then the concept of a distinct postmodern phase of global capitalism begins to look like Eurocentric parochialism writ large.

If the high postmodernism of the 1980s and 90s was an artistic and a critical orientation that often celebrated a vertiginous deterritorialization and the alleged destruction of the false idols of a hetero-patriarchal-humanist past, the twenty first century has been marked by what we might describe as a series of (alternately) oppressive, politically catalyzing or uncanny reterritorializations, in which the submerged past reasserts itself, and the persistence of these apparently non-transcendable categories, and of the social forms and power relations that underpin them, is encountered afresh. The irruption of anti-systemic and/or anti-globalization movements on both the right and left, from Al-Qaeda, Isis, Boko Haram and the white nationalist groups associated with the “alt-right”, to the Zapatistas, the Arab Spring, Occupy, Antifa and Black Lives Matter, are perhaps only the most visible signifiers of what Alain Badiou calls the

¹⁵ Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (1998); Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2000); Arjun Appiah, “Is the Post- in Postmodernism the Post- in Postcolonial?” (1991); WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015).

¹⁶ Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx* (2015); Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (2004); Nathan Brown, “Postmodernity, Not Yet: Toward a New Periodization” (2018).

“rebirth of history”, suggesting either the prematurity or the incoherence of both Fukuyama’s liberal triumphalism and breezily dystopian predictions of a homogeneous, totally reified society characterized by the eclipse of critical consciousness and the biopolitical production of automatically consenting subjects. Declarations of a “flat” earth and the transcendence of the nation-state have begun to look at best counterintuitive in the context of unprecedented economic inequality, the apparent resumption of the imperialist project in the US-led War on Terror and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, and a more recent resurgence of ethno-nationalism and economic protectionism, with the rise to power of rightwing authoritarian figures such as Jair Bolsonaro, Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Boris Johnson, Narendra Modi, Benjamin Netanyahu, Vladimir Putin and Donald Trump.¹⁷ Indeed, with the ongoing aftermath of the 2008 crisis, the climate disaster, and now the surely disastrous long-term economic consequences of Covid-19, the capitalist system itself looks less like the formidable, shiny new total system of postmodernist prophesy, and more like a sclerotic yet stubbornly persistent mode of production in the advanced stages of a potentially terminal decline.

Accordingly, critical theory has long-since renounced its attachment to postmodernism as an organizing concept, or as an economic or aesthetic period. Rather than dedicating itself to denouncing the old and heralding the arrival of the new, contemporary theory has instead frequently attacked the very notion of linear time and historical supersession: from queer, black and decolonial temporalities, to postcolonial work on “alternative modernities”, to Bruno Latour’s influential claim that *We Have Never Been Modern*.¹⁸

¹⁷ Thomas L. Friedman, *The World is Flat* (2005).

¹⁸ Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern* (1991).

Within Marxism, the influential “world-systems analysis” pioneered by Samir Amin, Giovanni Arrighi, Andre Gunder Frank, Immanuel Wallerstein and others has served to deflate, qualify or relativize previously dominant theorizations of a distinct “postmodernist”, “post-Fordist” or “late capitalist” period of global capitalism and culture, from Ernest Mandel, Fredric Jameson and David Harvey to Paolo Virno, Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri.¹⁹ World-systems theory decenters the narrative of postmodernism as a “radical break” along two axes: one synchronic (concerning the dynamic of core and periphery), and one diachronic (concerning the *longue durée* of historical capitalism). In the former case, the global perspective assumed by world-systems analysis has tended to “provincialize” postmodernism by repositioning it as the self-representation of the West rather than as a global condition, and hence as insufficiently attentive to the persistence of the international division of labor and the reciprocal relationship between an exploitative core and a proportionately underdeveloped periphery. And in the latter case, world-systems analysis reconceives the contemporary US-led world-system as merely the latest in a series of hegemonic cycles of capitalist accumulation stretching back to the 1500s or earlier.²⁰ As such, world-systems theory has offered a kind of compromise account of history as neither a continuous progression nor a non-narrate-able heterogeneity, but rather as cyclical (or, as Nico Israel puts it, as a “spiral”): mediating between the developmentalist assumptions of a more orthodox Marxism and the various poststructuralist, postcolonial, decolonial and indigenous critiques of what Arjun Appadurai has called “Eurochronology”, in which the self-

¹⁹ For key texts see Samir Amin, *Unequal Development* (1976), Giovanni Arrighi (1994), Andre Gunder Frank, *Capitalism and Underdevelopment in Latin America* (1967), Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System, Vol. 1* (1974), Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism* (1975), Fredric Jameson (1991), David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (1989), Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude* (2003), Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri (2000).

²⁰ Arrighi (1994); Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-Systems Analysis: An Introduction* (2004).

aggrandizing developmental narrative of the West is installed as a putatively universal teleology.²¹

Far from connoting an unprecedented “radical break”, then, postmodernism now finds itself folded back into a persistent “singular modernity” whose chronology and internal dynamics have become the site of intensified contestation.²² No longer a linear process of continuous development, global capitalism emerges as a highly complex and uneven system of articulated relations, temporalities and trajectories, irreducible to teleological schematizing yet nonetheless still conceptualized as a totality (a “world-system”). And this revisionary conception of totality has coincided with a renewed interest, throughout the theoretical humanities, in the perspective of the *longue durée*, which emphasizes the systemic production of unevenness, and the persistence and even renewal of the very forms and structures whose demise postmodernity – perhaps betraying its Euro-American provincialism – had prematurely announced.

Postcolonial and black studies have pointed to the intractable legacy, respectively, of colonialism²³ and slavery in the form of structural anti-black racism. Contrary to the liberal fantasy of a “post-racial” society, the turn within Black studies toward “Afropessimism” has approached racialization not as a potentially eradicable feature of modernity, but rather as constitutive of, and thus foundational to the modern world.²⁴ Queer theory has likewise lamented

²¹ Nico Israel, *Spirals* (2015); Arjun Appadurai, *Modernity at Large* (1996).

²² Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (2002).

²³ See Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress* (2016), Walter Dignolo, *The Darker Side of Western Modernity* (2011), Anibal Quijano, “Coloniality of Power, Eurocentrism, and Latin America” (2000), Achille Mbembe, *Necropolitics* (2019).

²⁴ See Saidiya V. Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection* (1997), Christina Sharpe, *In the Wake* (2016), Ian Baucom, *Specters of the Atlantic* (2005), Frank Wilderson III, *Red, White and Black* (2010), Sylvia Wynter, “Unsettling the Coloniality of Being” (2003), Rinaldo Walcott, *The Long Emancipation* (2021), Achille Mbembe, *Critique of Black Reason* (2017), Calvin Warren, *Ontological Terror* (2018), David Marriott, *Of Effacement* (2023).

the continued hegemony of heteronormativity and its associated categories and forms. In Lee Edelman's influential "anti-social hypothesis", queerness is positioned - much as blackness is in the work of Afropessimists such as Frank Wilderson and David Marriott - as that which is constitutively excluded from the modern world and its symbolic order.²⁵ And the persistence of structural misogyny has been further underlined by the international "me too" movement, as well as by the rolling back of progressive reforms in the wake of the Donald Trump presidency. Even as I write this paragraph, the BBC News website reports that the Arizona Supreme Court has voted to reinstate a near-total abortion ban dating from 1876.²⁶

Even within the continental poststructuralist tradition that was so closely associated with postmodernism, perhaps the two most influential contemporary thinkers have dedicated their work of the past two decades to thinking versions of the *longue durée*, emphasizing the persistence of the modern episteme's constitutive forms. Giorgio Agamben's influential *Homo Sacer* series (1995-2016) both revises and expands the specifically modern (if chronologically slippery) Foucauldian notion of biopower by tracing its roots back to ancient Roman law, and proposing a persistent and constitutive logic of sovereignty – and indeed, of Western metaphysics *tout court* – that both traverses and underpins modernity in its various temporal manifestations.²⁷ And in aesthetic theory the notion of more or less homogeneous, successive stylistic periods wedded to economic ones, formulated most famously by Fredric Jameson, has

²⁵ Lee Edelman, *No Future: Queer Theory and the Death Drive* (2004); Frank Wilderson III, *Afropessimism* (2020); David Marriott, *On Effacement: Blackness and Non-Being* (2023).

²⁶ Holly Honderich, "Arizona Supreme Court Reinstates Near-Total Abortion Ban From 1864", *BBC News Online*, 10 April 2024 <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-68774959>.

²⁷ See Giorgio Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (1994), *State of Exception* (2003), *Stasis* (2015), *The Sacrament of Language* (2011), *The Kingdom and the Glory* (2011), *Opus Dei* (2013), *Remnants of Auschwitz* (2013), *The Highest Poverty* (2013), *The Use of Bodies* (2016).

been challenged by Jacques Rancière's concept of the "aesthetic regime": a persistent and apparently non-transcendable cultural logic (or, "distribution of the sensible") that, as with Agamben's logic of sovereignty, runs through modernity in its *longue durée* and shows no sign of being superseded.²⁸

The logic of anti-futurism and anti-development – of untimeliness, persistence or recapitulation – therefore pervades contemporary literary and cultural critique in various guises, and indeed provides perhaps the central differentiator between the postmodern and what I will call in what follows simply the "global contemporary" (the much remarked-upon absence of a generally accepted term for what "comes after" postmodernism itself being further evidence for the interruption of the logic of sequential periodization to which I am referring). This persistent, recursive, or "hauntological" temporal structure is given perhaps its fullest expression - its apocalyptic materialization - in the slow-burning catastrophe of the Anthropocene, in which the past returns to haunt both the present and the future in the form of the historical emissions-generated erosion of the ozone layer and the resultant warming of the planet. Andreas Malm has recently referred to this phenomenon as "the paradox of historicized nature":

The nature that is knocking on the door of the postmodern condition – occasionally breaking it down, crashing through glass, sweeping away screens, even in its heartlands – is something of a spectral creature, for it is carried forward by a human past. The mad force it possesses is a function of the shafts through which time has flown since the early nineteenth century; more than the revenge of nature, this is the revenge of historicity dressed in nature. The larger the cumulative emissions of CO₂, the more uncontrollable the storm; the more society has intruded and intrudes on nature, the more nature invades society with a haunted army whose early incursions are now felt.²⁹

²⁸ See Jacques Rancière, *The Politics of Aesthetics* (2004), *The Future of the Image* (2007), *The Aesthetic Unconscious* (2009), *Aesthetics and its Discontents* (2009), *The Emancipated Spectator* (2009), *Dissensus* (2010), *The Politics of Literature* (2011), *Mute Speech* (2011), *Aisthesis* (2011).

²⁹ Andreas Malm, *The Progress of This Storm* (2017) p. 56.

Covid-19 is perhaps simply the latest irruption of this hauntological temporality, managing to feel at once uncannily retro and bleakly anticipatory. As the return of the real from its purported vanquishing in the airless artifice of postmodernity - emblemized in Jameson's landmark analysis of the deterritorialized "hyperspace" of the Los Angeles Bonaventure Hotel - Covid resembles an uncanny reemergence of the plagues and pestilences of pre-modernity.³⁰ Yet it is also a bleak dress-rehearsal for a climate change-impacted future, and - insofar as we regard it as another indirect consequence of capitalist enterprise - a further instance of the recursive temporality of the hauntological: the revenge of an undead nature both unleashed by and oblivious to the programmed futurism of capitalist enterprise. Far from transcending modernity we are living, as Christina Sharp puts it, "in the wake": a hauntological aftermath that is neither past, present nor future, but rather all and none of them at once.³¹

The "Eurochronology" Problem

The theoretical approach that I have outlined thus far positions autonomy not as a characteristic of a particular kind of novel, but as the constitutive predicament of the novel form, and of the work of art "as such". Such an approach entails a particular relation to historicity. In conventional Western periodizing accounts, autonomy is typically positioned as the signature stylistic characteristic or aspiration of modernism; as opposed to realism, which is associated with both heteronomy (political commitment, populism, didacticism) and philosophical naivete.

³⁰ Jameson (1991), pp. 43-44.

³¹ Sharpe, *In the Wake: On Blackness and Being* (2016).

Postmodernism is associated with the generalization and entrenchment of autonomy, and hence with the tendential replacement of modernist experimentation with (ironic and/or despairing) narrative self-consciousness: if all artworks are characterized by anti-referential formal closure then the modernist assertion of autonomy through particular anti-realist formal strategies becomes redundant. Realism, modernism and postmodernism are conceived as period-specific stylistic dominants that follow one another sequentially, in a progression from heteronomy to an absolutized autonomy. In Fredric Jameson's influential account, these three stylistic dominants are wedded to three sequential phases of capitalist development.³²

This approach to the history of the novel has been complicated by recent developments within both global Anglophone literature and critical theory. The globalization of literature has exposed Western readers and critics to a range of styles that do not fit easily into the narrative of art's progressive autonomization. The "transnational turn" and the tendential substitution of a global for a national perspective has, furthermore, meant that Western literary critics now feel obliged to revise their critical categories and periodizing narratives to accommodate works, cultures and demographics that were formerly simply ignored, and indeed, whose exclusion was a precondition of those narratives's coherence. Even within the Western nations in which postmodernism formerly predominated, literary critics have tended to characterize the contemporary novel as involving a broad movement away from anti-referential formal closure and metafictional irony, and toward more conventional and traditional forms such as the *bildungsroman* and historical fiction, toward the greater incorporation within literary fiction of

³² Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (1991). I discuss Jameson's argument in more detail below ("Fredric Jameson's Critique of Autonomy", pp. 118-125).

formerly discredited genres such as science fiction, fantasy, crime fiction and the Western, or toward hybrid forms that combine elements of realism, modernism and postmodernism, or that incorporate nonfictional forms such as the essay, critical theory and autobiography.

The twenty-first century has accordingly seen both a weakening of the distinction between high and mass culture, and a waning of the prestige and sense of historical mission of the avant-garde. As Mark McGurl puts it in his 2021 book, *Everything and Less*,

whatever excitement may once have been associated with, say, postmodernism in fiction long ago subsided into more or less excellent permutations of familiar forms. If it were ever true, the narrative of continual innovation running from realism to modernism to postmodernism no longer compels belief that the future of the form will depart significantly from the repertoire of techniques it inherits from the past.³³

Not only has the pace of the novel's generation of stylistic novelty seemed to decelerate since the experimental efflorescence of the early twentieth century, but styles that were previously thought to be outmoded, such as the *bildungsroman* and historical fiction, have now returned to the forefront of critically esteemed literary production. Even some of the most theoretically self-aware novelists - US liberal arts-educated members of what Nicholas Dames has called the "Theory Generation", who are using the novel to "think back on their training" - are doing so "in a form older than Theory, a form that Theory has done much to denaturalize and demystify (OK, 'deconstruct'): the more or less realist novel, which describes individual lives in a fairly linear manner in conventional, if elegant or well-crafted, prose".³⁴ As Mark Fisher has melancholically

³³ Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: The Novel in the Age of Amazon* (2021) p. 3.

³⁴ Nicholas Dames, "The Theory Generation" (2012). Dames leaves the term "theory" rhetorically undefined, in a way that underscores its assumed familiarity to readers of *N+1* (who are likely themselves members of the "theory generation"). Three texts are cited as "recognizable talismans": *The Foucault Reader* (1984), Adorno's *Negative Dialectics* (1966) and Deleuze and Guattari's *One Thousand Plateaus* (1980). For a useful history and critique of the phenomenon of "Theory" and its broader cultural impact in the US, see Francois Cusset, *French Theory* (2005).

observed, “Rather than the old recoiling from the ‘new’ in fear and incomprehension, those whose expectations were formed in an earlier era are more likely to be startled by the sheer persistence of recognisable forms”.³⁵

The notion that realism, modernism and postmodernism correspond to distinct phases of capitalist development is immediately complicated if we simply choose to take (say) Chinua Achebe or Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie (as opposed to Charles Dickens) as our privileged example of realism; Clarice Lispector or Jon Fosse (as opposed to James Joyce) as our privileged example of modernism; and Laurence Sterne or Machado de Assis (as opposed to John Barth) as our privileged example of postmodernism. The transnational turn has accordingly entailed a challenge not only to the periodizing model in which the novel form follows a linear trajectory dictated by Western capitalist development (positioned as the history of capital as such), but also to claims for the organic connection between a given form and given historical conjuncture. This is what Eric Hayot calls “the Eurochronology problem”, or, the fact that “as long as the categories governing the profession’s sense of literary history insist on the vital importance of such notions as originality, novelty, progress - being first, in short - then we are essentially doomed by the fact that Harold de Campos read James Joyce first and not the other way round, to tell a progressive history of Western innovation in which the contributions of the non-West remain supplemental, or constitute thematic appendixes to form”.³⁶ Rather than authentically flourishing within the concrete conditions that nourished them before become obsolete, inauthentic, or instances of postmodern pastiche, contemporary criticism has tended to approach

³⁵ Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), p. 9.

³⁶ Eric Hayot, *On Literary Worlds* (2012), p. 6.

literary forms as (in Caroline Levine's terms) "iterable" or "portable" templates with no authentic referent, that "can be picked up and moved to new contexts", and that carry with them their own characteristic range of "affordances".³⁷

Hayot's proposal for a theory that would allow "a non-progressive model of literary history" involves substituting "progressive" categories for those that are "structural and relational" (9, 10). Thus Hayot proposes a "structural" understanding of the "modes of modern literature" not as a progressive sequence of forms that originate in one set of historical circumstances before being progressively perfected and eventually becoming obsolete, but as modes (or, "modal logics") that emerge in various contexts and forms. Thus "Realism" is associated with "affirmation and conceptualization", "Romanticism" with "creation and destruction" and "Modernism" with "negation and refusal". Indeed, the particular formalizing "logics" that comprise these respective modes are not specific to "the modern period": "Modernity" is just one of many possible scales of analysis" (164).

Hayot's approach involves the near-total abstraction of a particular "modal logic" from any origin, narrative or context of emergence, meaning an absolutized autonomy is taken not as the endpoint of a historical process, but as an *a priori*. Hayot can thus be positioned at the opposite end of the scale to Jameson, for whom literary forms emerge as the "symbolic resolution" to real historical contradictions, and thus progress in dialectical lockstep with the historical conditions of possibility that they mediate.³⁸ As I will discuss in more detail below, for Jameson the narrative of art's progressive autonomization emerges from a process of

³⁷ Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Hierarchy, Network* (2015), p. 7.

³⁸ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981), p. 79.

“reification”, in which literary forms are progressively abstracted from their original conditions of emergence, just as in Jean Baudrillard’s “consumer society” or Guy Debord’s “society of the spectacle” exchange value is detached ever more completely from use value, and the signifier is detached ever more completely from the historical referent.³⁹ The predicament of postmodernity is thus that of an achieved reification, in which forms are totally autonomized, deterritorialized, and thus rendered easily and meaninglessly iterable and portable across contexts. This is why for Jameson postmodernism is not associated primarily (as for many other critics) with styles such as “metafiction” and narrative self-consciousness, but rather with the phenomenon of “historicism”: “the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion, and in general what Henri Lefebvre has called the increasing primacy of the ‘neo’”.⁴⁰

From Jameson’s perspective, then, the tendency of critics like Hayot and Levine to dehistoricize forms by abstracting them from any organic connection to a given context of emergence is legible as part of the “loss of the sense of historicity” that he diagnoses as the classic postmodern pathology. Likewise for Fisher, contemporary novelistic trends such as “neorealism” and “new sincerity” are legible not as evidence of the demise of postmodernism or the inadequacy of models of linear periodization, but rather as symptoms of postmodernism’s ever-deepening entrenchment: so many “hauntological” ruins commemorating the death of

³⁹ Jean Baudrillard, *The Consumer Society* (1970); Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle* (1967). Jameson is explicitly drawing on both of these theories, positing the detachment of signifier from referent, use value from exchange value, and literary form from historical context, as a parallel outcomes of a single process of “reification”: “the culture of the simulacrum comes to life in a society where exchange-value has been generalized to the point at which the very memory of use-value is effaced, a society of which Guy Debord has observed, in an extraordinary phrase, that in it ‘the image has become the final form of commodity reification’” (*Postmodernism*, p. 66).

⁴⁰ *Postmodernism*, p. 18.

modernism's will to formal innovation, and portending instead the triumph of postmodernity's "slow cancellation of the future".⁴¹

If Hayot's model absolutizes form's autonomy and Jameson's reads it as the outcome of a progressive economic logic, I have already observed that Casanova and Bourdieu insert an additional mediating level in the relatively autonomous logic of the literary field itself, or the "world republic of letters". Yet their model sneaks economic determinism in through the back door via the simple substitution of economic capital for literary capital, thus reading the structure of the literary field as a manifestation of the logic of the (quasi)economic. This in turn entails the evacuation of the autonomy, and hence the philosophical and ethical stakes, of the literary work itself, which is instead positioned simply as a reflex of an underlying economic logic. The vacuously aestheticist assertion of autonomy is thus counterposed to the naively anti-aesthetic assertion of heteronomy, both of them equally and unwittingly symptomatic. Autonomy is thus transmuted from a constitutive predicament, that novelists respond to in various conflicted and overdetermined ways, back into a teleology of literary development, in a way that tends ultimately more to confirm than to contest the conclusions of Jameson's more unreconstructed Hegelian Marxism. Indeed, for all that Bourdieuan institutional sociology is supposed to counter the alleged economism and Eurocentrism of orthodox Marxism, Casanova's conclusions are in fact largely consistent with Jameson's controversial notion, in his 1986 essay, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism", of a "radical structural difference between the dynamics of third-world culture and those of the first-world cultural tradition", the latter

⁴¹ See Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014), pp. 8-26. The phrase, "slow cancellation of the future" derives from Franco "Bifo" Berardi, *After the Future* (2009) p. 17.

characterized by having undergone the historical process of autonomization, the former by the heteronomy and embeddedness of art within its local contexts.⁴²

For the Warwick Research Collective (WReC), the substitution of literary for economic capital means Casanova's model "abstract(s) too strongly from the world of politics".⁴³ They thus aim to "synthesize" Casanova's approach, which "stresses aesthetic *autonomy* as a foundational precondition of the literary field" (the autonomy, that is, of the field literary itself) and Franco Moretti's approach in his "Conjectures on World Literature" (2000), which "emphasizes the *heteronomy* of literary production to world-economic relations" (6). This in effect means a return to a revised version of Jameson's position, in which forms emerge as distinct responses to aspects of capitalist development, or as "the literary registration and encoding of modernity as a social logic" (15). Yet rather than conceiving of the history of the novel form as either a teleological process of progressive autonomization, or as a stable hierarchy of core and periphery, WReC attempt to reinterpret Marxist historicism through a more flexible model of "combined and uneven development", in which "capitalist development does not smooth away but rather *produces* unevenness, systematically and as a matter of course" (12). This means that rather than progressing teleologically from realism to modernism and beyond, the persistence of realism and modernism within both the core and the periphery

⁴² Jameson's essay has become notorious, particularly within postcolonial studies, for its reductive economism and Eurocentrism. The classic critique of Jameson's essay is Aijaz Ahmed's "Jameson's Rhetoric of Otherness and the 'National Allegory'" (1987). For reassessments and qualified defenses of Jameson's position, see Imre Szeman, "Who's Afraid of National Allegory? Jameson, Literary Criticism, Globalization" (2001) and Neil Lazarus, "Fredric Jameson on Third World Literature: A Defense", in *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), pp. 89-113. This and all subsequent references are to the version of "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (unchanged from the 1986 original) that is reprinted in Jameson's recent collection, *Allegory and Ideology* (2019), which also contains a new commentary in which Jameson responds to some of the essay's many critics.

⁴³ Warwick Research Collective, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015), p. 9.

symptomatically reflects (or to use WReC's rather vague term, "registers") the untimeliness of the capitalist world-system itself.

If Jameson's model involves a progressive abstraction of form from its referents, then, WReC's is in fact vastly more reductive, positioning literary form as an epiphenomenon of the capitalist system itself. The autonomy of the literary work is thus evacuated: the "irrealism" of "world-literary" novels (which on WReC's terms is to say, novels) is a "registering" or "encoding" of the world-system's political and material contradictions. Yet what the mechanical causality of WReC's model misses is the mediation between the economic and the cultural that is specific to the capitalist mode of production: the autonomization of art and literature "as such" which produces the predicament of the novel's formal autonomy. Drawing on the work of Jacques Rancière, Mikhail Bakhtin and Georg Lukács, I argue in the final two chapters that the novel "registers" the capitalist world-system not directly but through the mediation of the problem of its constitutive and irresolvable formal autonomy, or what Lukács calls, its "normative incompleteness".⁴⁴

Though Hayot's approach strikes me as excessively abstract and WReC's as excessively reductive, I join them in rejecting both the teleology of the Jamesonian narrative and the rigidity of the core-periphery model. Like theirs, my approach to the problem of autonomy logically entails that formal categories such as realism, modernism and postmodernism should be regarded not as aesthetic epiphenomena arising from a process of progressive autonomization, but rather as perennially available critical categories that describe particular *responses* to the predicament of art's autonomy, and which emerge in different forms throughout the history of the novel.

⁴⁴ *Theory of the Novel*, p. 73.

Broadly speaking, I would suggest that realism designates the *refusal* of autonomy through the problematic reaffirmation of art's connection to the world; modernism designates the *affirmation* of autonomy through formal abstraction or medium-specificity; and postmodern designates the *exposure* of the anti-referential autonomy of literary form through metafictional self-consciousness, pastiche or defamiliarization. As with Hayot's "modes", these critical categories should not be confused with the novels that they purport to describe. No individual novel perfectly coincides with any one of these stylistic terms; the most interesting novels will involve more than one kind of response to the predicament of autonomy; and all of these responses to autonomy tend to performatively contradict themselves in practice. Furthermore, though they may predominate within a given historical conjuncture, they are not specific to a particular moment. The kind of response to the predicament of autonomy that will later come to be termed "postmodernism" is already present in the early novels of Francois Rabelais, Miguel de Cervantes and Laurence Sterne; and the realism of Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie or the modernism of Jon Fosse are neither more nor less historically authentic, neither more nor less descriptive of or responsive to the material conditions of their emergence, than those of Charles Dickens or James Joyce.⁴⁵

⁴⁵ Gabriel Josipovici has argued that the persistent predicament of "modernism" is what connects the experimental literature of the twentieth century and the contemporary to writers such as Dante, Rabelais and Cervantes. Like T.J. Clark, Josipovici frames the problem of modernism in terms of the "disenchantment of the world" rather than autonomy. Josipovici has no real interest in the problem of the connection of the artwork to politics or the economic, or in the problem of the global, and as a result his critical judgments tend toward a theoretically unexamined binary between the authentic "modernist" work and its naively realistic other that resembles the Greenbergian binary between "avant-garde and kitsch". Nonetheless Josipovici's basic insight that a loss of authority haunts art throughout modernity in its *longue durée* is an important precursor to and influence on my argument about the predicament of autonomy. See in particular, *The World and the Book* (1979) and *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010). See also Clark, *Farewell to an Idea* (1999). For another insightful reading of the proto-modernism of Cervantes, see Marthe Robert, *The Old and the New: From Don Quixote to Kafka* (1977).

I also join WReC and Jameson (as well as a history of materialist criticism from Lukács, Bakhtin and Ian Watt to Michael McKeon, Guido Mazzoni, Fredric Jameson, David Cunningham, Timothy Bewes and Anna Kornbluh) in insisting upon the fundamental connection between the novel form and capitalism.⁴⁶ But as I have already argued, this connection arises not out of direct economic determination (the novel as the formal expression or encoding of the contradictions of capital), but through the specifically capitalist social construction of the work of art “as such”, through the commodification of the artwork and its tendential separation from “the various social functions that it has traditionally served”.⁴⁷ This produces the constitutive (and hence persistent) problem of the work of art that “exist(s) for nothing and nobody in particular” that I have referred to as the predicament of autonomy; a predicament that the novel, having no inherited rules or ritual derivation, uniquely exemplifies. Whereas traditional genres such as the lyric, the tragedy, comedy, romance or the epic codify the relations between a particular subject matter and the forms and conventions that are agreed to be appropriate to it, the novel (as Jameson recently put it, paraphrasing Georg Lukács’s classic 1916 work, *Theory of the Novel*) “is not a genre but follows the disintegration of the various precapitalist generic traditions”.⁴⁸ The novel becomes a privileged form for the expression of the contradictions and dislocations of a world dominated by the commodity form not because of its realism but because, in its constitutive autonomy from any generic rules, contents or extra-artistic social function, it

⁴⁶ See Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (1916); Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963); Ian Watt, *The Rise of the Novel* (1957); Michael McKeon, *The Origins of the English Novel 1600-1740* (1987); Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* (2011); Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981); David Cunningham, “Capitalist Epics: Abstraction, Totality and the Theory of the Novel” (2010); Timothy Bewes, *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011); Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019).

⁴⁷ Eagleton, *ibid.*

⁴⁸ Jameson, “Criticism and Categories” (2022), p. 566 in *PMLA* Volume 137, Issue 3, May 2022, pp. 563-567.

epitomizes the more general predicament of the modern artwork that has no particular reason to exist, that is condemned by its commodity status to be pursued and consumed as an end in itself.

Rather than either a process of constant formal revolution or an ahistorical structuralism, then, I join Jacques Rancière in regarding the history of the novel as a history of situated and conjuncturally specific responses to a relatively stable set of institutional conditions, or what Rancière calls an “aesthetic regime of art”. Rancière’s “aesthetic regime” parallels my account of the artwork under capital as constitutively autonomized, since the aesthetic regime is coextensive with (if not exactly reducible to) the modern institution and practice of art “as such”. The aesthetic regime is constituted by the breakdown of the “representative regime”, or what Erich Auerbach’s *Mimesis* (1953) identifies as the “*Stiltrennung*”: the premodern “separation of styles” in which conventions both govern the appropriateness of given styles to particular kinds of content, and dictate that which is and is not appropriate matter for inclusion in a given literary form (such as comedy or tragedy).⁴⁹ Thus for example, as Guido Mazzoni puts it, “The Homeric singers distinguished the narratable from the unnarratable in a hierarchical and classicist way: significant deeds are performed for the most part among the ruling and warrior class, while the other parts of society have a secondary, servile function. During the fourth century BCE, this

⁴⁹ Erich Auerbach, *Mimesis: The Representation of Reality in Western Literature* (2003). Edward Said summarizes Auerbach’s “main thesis” as follows: “In classical literature, Auerbach says, high style was used for nobles and gods who could be treated tragically; low style was principally for comic and mundane subjects, perhaps even for idyllic ones, but the idea of human or worldly life as something to be represented through a style proper to it is not generally available before Christianity” (xviii). Hence, “The historical trajectory that is the spine of *Mimesis* is the passage from the separation of styles in classical antiquity, to their mingling in the New Testament, their first great climax in Dante’s *Divine Comedy*, and their ultimate apotheosis in the French realistic authors of the nineteenth century—Stendhal, Balzac, Flaubert, and then Proust” (xiv/xv). *Mimesis*, in other words, traces the historical emergence of realism through the democratizing movement from the “separation” (*stiltrennung*) to the “mingling” (*stilmischung*) of styles. Edward Said, “Introduction to the Fiftieth-Anniversary Edition”, *Mimesis* (2003) pp. ix-xxxii.

tendency gave rise to a sort of law”, eventually formalized as the *Stiltrennung*, which “cast a hierarchical vision of society onto literature”.⁵⁰

This “hierarchical vision” is what Rancière calls the “representative regime”. The “aesthetic regime”, by contrast, is constituted by the breakdown of this system of genres, alongside the distinction between the Fine Arts (the “pastime of free men”) and the mechanical arts that “an artisan or slave could accomplish”: “Art as such began to exist in the West when this hierarchies of forms of life began to vacillate”.⁵¹ Rancière locates this development at the end of the eighteenth century. *Aisthesis* (2011) is the most historically comprehensive of a series of works in which Rancière narrates the persistence of the aesthetic regime from the 1760s to the present day, thus refusing any narrative of art history as linear progress. The aesthetic regime is therefore not reducible to either realism, modernism or postmodernism: each of these styles or movements is legible as a mode in which the aesthetic regime’s constitutive contradictions are worked through or staged in a variety of situated contexts.

What is more crucial to my argument, though, is that for Rancière the autonomization of form - the rendering arbitrary of the connection between a given form and a given content, or between the totality of form and the world that it purports to represent - is not the teleological endpoint of the aesthetic regime, but is constitutive of the aesthetic regime. This may seem a counterintuitive reading of Rancière, because in one sense the hierarchies that separate literary form (or, “fictional rationality”) from the flow of life are what tend to disappear in the movement from the representative to the aesthetic regime, which “abolish(es) the limits that circumscribed a

⁵⁰ Guido Mazzoni, *Theory of the Novel* (2011), pp. 102, 105.

⁵¹ Jacques Rancière, *Aisthesis: Scenes From the Aesthetic Regime of Art* (2011), p. ix.

real specific to fiction”.⁵² In the aesthetic regime, anything at all is representable.⁵³

Representative hierarchies thus become arbitrary, or, defensible only as explicitly political actions: the novel’s choice of what to represent or not to represent is no longer justified by recourse to a higher authority, but constitutes a political intervention, a “redistribution of the sensible” (that is, either a conservative retrenchment of formal hierarchies, or a form-defying act of “dissensus”).⁵⁴

Yet this is also why form’s autonomy becomes a problem. The novel is beset by an ineradicable tension between the aesthetic regime’s democratizing impulse toward inclusion and the hierarchical impulse toward exclusion that it requires for its narrative coherence, but that it can no longer justify on normative terms. “Modern fiction” is thus “divided from within”, characterized by a “constitutive movement” in which “its center of gravity was shifted from its traditional core, constituted by a knot of narrative events, toward those edges in which fiction is confronted with its possible cancellation, or returned to such and such a figure of alterity”.⁵⁵ Form is autonomized not in the sense of being asserted as an end in itself, but in the opposite sense of being detached from any larger “regime” of normative justification, and thus being rendered arbitrary, becoming intrinsically problematic. If the democracy of the aesthetic regime were to be realized, this would entail form’s erasure: a pure parataxis or “bad infinity” of undifferentiated narratability. There is thus a sense in which the “hierarchical vision” of the “representative regime” inevitably carries over into the aesthetic regime, but does so in

⁵² Rancière, *The Edges of Fiction* (2016), pp. 3, 6.

⁵³ See Jacques Rancière, “Are Some Things Unrepresentable?”, in *The Future of The Image* (2007), pp. 109-138.

⁵⁴ Rancière, *Dissensus: On Politics and Aesthetics* (2010).

⁵⁵ *Edges of Fiction*, p. 9.

inherently problematized form, detached from the larger system of correspondences and justifications in which such hierarchies took on their meaning. The aesthetic regime thus comprises an underlying logic (a tension between hierarchy and democracy, or between “fictional rationality” and the “random occurrence”) that may be either progressively or recursively realized, that continues to haunt the novel form in all of its iterations, yet that cannot be overcome by the novel because it is constitutive *of* the novel.⁵⁶ As I will argue in chapter three, the aesthetic regime - or in my terms, the autonomizing of art - thus constitutes the “political unconscious” not of a particular kind of novelistic form, but of the novel form *per se*.

Thus conceived, the novel and the artwork “as such” are not forms that have become untimely (in the sense of being obsolete) with the transition from modernity to postmodernity. These categories are untimely in a more complicated sense of being constitutively at odds with themselves, having no moment of authentic realization or transcendence, being always simultaneously too early and too late. The novel, I will argue, is not a form that evolves, but an untimely logic that underpins and delimits the actually existing novel’s possibility of formal evolution. Yet in order to make this argument I will first insist upon a periodization of the novel form and the work of art “as such” as coextensive not with a particular historical phase of capitalism, but with the commodity form itself. Jameson sees autonomy as a phase in the progressive reification (or, “real subsumption”) of the lifeworld in which art gains a temporary autonomy from society that is then extinguished. Drawing on more recent work within Marxist political economy, I argue below for a different periodization that is more consistent with Rancière’s periodizing of the aesthetic regime, and with WReC’s periodization of “world

⁵⁶ See *The Edges of Fiction* pp. 1-12.

literature”: art’s autonomy is not a phase preceding art’s “real subsumption” by capital, but the persistent consequence of its merely “formal” subsumption by capital, a circumstance that is not preliminary to its real subsumption, but that leaves art “as such” constitutively suspended between two historical “regimes” with which it cannot coincide.

Autonomy and Postmodernism

Unlike WReC or Hayot, Jameson follows Adorno and Rancière in insisting that the autonomization of art “as such” is the specificity of the artwork under capitalism. Yet autonomy for Jameson is not a predicament but a process. For Jameson, the reason postmodernism represents a “radical break” with modernity is because capitalism has reached a new, transnational phase in which the formerly relatively autonomous levels that make up the social totality are de-differentiated, equally “subsumed” by the commodity form. And for this reason, the “postmodern” as Jameson conceives it constitutes the most influential and theoretically formidable contemporary challenge to the continued tenability of the concept of artistic and aesthetic autonomy. Jameson’s theory hinges on the striking claim that, following the transition to a new phase of global capitalism in the latter half of the twentieth century, art’s status as a relatively autonomous practice has come to an end: “What has happened is that aesthetic production has been incorporated into commodity production more generally”⁵⁷.

For Jameson this “incorporation” entails a radical diminution of art’s critical capacity. Whereas the formal experiments of high modernism once scandalized bourgeois sensibility, for

⁵⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism* (1991), p. 4.

Jameson the imperative to “make it new” is now the definitive cliché of establishment high culture. Modernist transgression is a self-defeating gesture in a world in which abstract expressionist paintings decorate the walls of hotel lobbies, and performances of Samuel Beckett’s *Waiting for Godot* (1953) elicit reverential applause from polite audiences in the West End. Under such circumstances, postmodernism finds that the more subversive option is to reject art’s autonomy, and to admit that an artwork is simply a commodity like any other. Thus characterized, the artist is no longer a romantic rebel or charismatic visionary, but simply a particular kind of commodity producer. Indeed, under the conditions of Jameson’s “late capitalism” the creative artist might even be regarded as the ultimate conformist: an ideal type of what Michel Foucault described as the neoliberal “entrepreneur of the self”.⁵⁸

Rather than fundamentally challenging the terms of Greenberg’s account of modernism, then, Jameson attempts to historicize it by re-conceptualizing modernism and postmodernism as “cultural logics” corresponding to respective concrete historical conditions of possibility. In order to do so, Jameson adapts a schema from Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* (1975), which identifies three distinct historical phases of global capitalism, culminating in the transition, during the mid twentieth century, from “modernity” to the current period of “late capitalism”. If modernism was the “cultural dominant” corresponding to a previous phase of “incomplete modernization”, postmodernism is the cultural logic of “late capitalism”, in which “the modernization process is complete”, and capital has subsumed the last “enclaves of pre-capitalism” that had survived during the phase of modernity: the third world, the unconscious, and the aesthetic.

⁵⁸ Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics* (1979).

The transition to “late capitalism” therefore signals not just the ideological recuperation of modernist autonomy, but moreover – and crucially for what follows – the exhaustion of its objective conditions of possibility: the historical tipping point that Nicholas Brown has described (in an important reinterpretation of Jameson’s argument) as art’s “real subsumption under capital”.⁵⁹ As Brown argues, postmodernism for Jameson is therefore not only a decisive break with modernism, but – when taken to its logical conclusion – in fact represents a delayed realization of the Hegelian “end of art”: art’s final capitulation to capital and its embrace of its own commodity status constitutes the end of the ontological distinctness of art and objecthood, and hence the end of art’s existence as such. “Art” is now simply a label designating a particular category of commodity: one that can be applied no more and no less appropriately to *Ulysses*, the “Mona Lisa”, a Hollywood blockbuster, a Brillo box, a urinal, a pickled shark, or the shredded remains of a spray painting.

In the years following its publication, Jameson’s “subsumption” narrative has (in various iterations) come to constitute perhaps the unifying premise of contemporary Marxist and post-Marxist cultural critique: from Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri’s work on “biopolitics”, the “real subsumption” of the general intellect and the colonization of affect; Maurizio Lazzarato and Franco “Bifo” Berardi’s descriptions of contemporary techno-capitalism as a “semiotic machine” operating primarily no longer through coercion but through the “production of subjectivity”; Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello’s narrative of neoliberalism as the ideological recuperation of the “artistic critique” of modernity and its assimilation into a “new spirit of

⁵⁹ Brown, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption Under Capital” (2012) and *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of the Artwork Under Capitalism* (2019).

capitalism”; Pierre Bourdieu and Pascale Casanova’s demystifying of the modernist artist’s will-to-autonomy as simply the expression of the inner logic of the field of cultural production; through to recent work on “cognitive capitalism” by Yann Moulier Boutang, and the “accelerationist aesthetics” theorized by thinkers such as Steven Shaviro and Benjamin Noys.⁶⁰

Whatever else they may disagree about, one thing these theorists hold in common is that under the conditions of contemporary capitalism there is no longer an *outside* to the all-pervasive reach of (variously) commodification, power, ideology, real subsumption, reification, biopolitical production, or the logic of the cultural field. And this means that the concept of art’s autonomy is now either anachronistic, self-deluding, reactionary, or simply symptomatic. Autonomy is now thoroughly recuperated and installed as the designated function of an institutionalized, ideologically incorporated and hence fundamentally complicit establishment high culture. As Shaviro puts it, “Transgression is now fully incorporated into the logic of political economy. It testifies to the way that, under the regime of real subsumption, “there is nothing, no ‘naked life,’ no external standpoint ... there is no longer an ‘outside’ to power”.”⁶¹

In what follows I question the tenability of the narrative of art’s real subsumption under capital, drawing on recent work within Marxist theory to show that this narrative lacks a robust theoretical basis even on its own terms (that is, even if we accept the tenets of orthodox Marxian

⁶⁰ Miachel Hardt and Antonio Negri, *Empire* (2000); on “real subsumption” of the general intellect, see Antonio Negri, *Marx and Foucault* (2017); Maurizio Lazzarato, *Signs and Machines: Capitalism and the Production of Subjectivity* (2014); Franco “Bifo” Berardi, *The Soul at Work: From Alienation to Autonomy* (2019); Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, *The New Spirit of Capitalism* (1999); Yann Moulier Boutang, *Cognitive Capitalism* (2004); Steven Shaviro, “Accelerationist Aesthetics: Necessary Inefficiency in Times of Real Subsumption” (2013); Benjamin Noys, *The Persistence of the Negative: A Critique of Contemporary Continental Theory* (2010). Noys is a critic not a proponent of accelerationism, but is widely credited with coining the term.

⁶¹ Shaviro (2013), *ibid* <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/46/60070/accelerationist-aesthetics-necessary-inefficiency-in-times-of-real-subsumption/>.

political economy). I therefore argue that Jameson's larger periodizing argument is misleading on two counts: that it makes a theoretically dubious claim for the "real subsumption" of artistic labor and aesthetic experience under the specific conditions of "late capitalism"; and moreover, that Jameson's narrative in any case presupposes an aestheticist account of the very autonomy that he claims has been subsumed. Jameson therefore implicitly validates and indeed relies upon the often questionable premises of a particular lineage of both romantic and modernist aestheticism - the tradition that Boltanski and Chiapello refer to as the "artistic critique of modernity" - even as he purports to consign it to historical oblivion.

My broader claim, both here and in the chapters that follow, will be that there is a fundamental connection between the aestheticism of the subsumption narrative and its inherent Eurocentrism. In positing the existence of an autonomous realm of aesthetic production that is then progressively subsumed beneath the logic of the commodity, both Jameson and the Marxist theorists who follow him reproduce the flawed logic of a Eurocentric, idealist and ultimately teleological account of universal history. It is precisely this historical narrative that we need to un-think; though *not* in the interests of rejecting the concept of aesthetic autonomy altogether, but rather in order to allow for the formulation of a new concept of autonomy commensurate with what I will claim is the latter's actual status: as a historical *predicament* that has a special relevance for the transnational novel in an age of "world literature".

The value and importance of Jameson's work is unquestionable on several fronts: its dizzying range and synthetic virtuosity; its continued explanatory value in characterizing a particular historically situated reaction against an aestheticist modernist paradigm; its seminal role in revitalizing an Anglo-American Marxist cultural critique then languishing in a post-1968,

post-Stalinist and post-Althusserian malaise; its rigorous defense of dialectical and systemic critique in the face of the poststructuralist and deconstructive “logics of disintegration”.⁶² But nonetheless, in its rehabilitation and extension of a totalizing neo-Hegelian periodizing narrative and its associated tendency to collapse the aesthetic into the economic, Jameson’s account has ultimately served to mischaracterize, sequentially, both modernism (the semi-conscious symptom of art’s historical autonomization), postmodernism (the post-autonomous “cultural logic of late capitalism”), so-called “third-world literature” (heteronomous “national allegory”) and, more recently, what Jameson has called “late modernism” (“modernism as ideology”, or, the self-consciousness of art’s autonomy after the fact).⁶³ On the contrary: art was never autonomous in the specific sense that Jameson’s argument assumes, and its autonomy has therefore not been subsumed in the way that he wants to claim. If this basic observation can be shown to be correct, then the vast architecture of Jameson’s monolithic periodizations begins to crumble.

One of the consequences of this critique, I suggest, is that it now becomes an urgent theoretical task to reassess the status of the concept of autonomy from the perspective of a non-dogmatic and non-teleological historical materialism (what Stuart Hall has called a “Marxism without guarantees”);⁶⁴ a task towards which I devote the second part of this dissertation. Drawing on the literary sociology of the Warwick Research Collective, and the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School, Jacques Rancière, Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin and others, I propose

⁶² Peters Dews, *Logics of Disintegration: Poststructuralist Thought and the Claims of Critical Theory* (1987).

⁶³ On postmodernism, see Jameson (1991); on “national allegory”, see Jameson (1986); on modernism and “late modernism”, see Jameson (2002).

⁶⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology - Marxism Without Guarantees” (1986), in *Selected Writings on Marxism* (2021), pp. 134-157.

an alternative framing and periodization of the problem of autonomy, which locates the latter outside of the Jamesonian succession of realism, modernism and postmodernism. Rather than being synonymous with modernism (as Jameson and many others have claimed), the problem of autonomy is instead better thought of as modernism's paradoxical condition of (im)possibility, both preceding and outliving it.

Fredric Jameson's Critique of Autonomy

When Jameson argues that the incorporation of aesthetic production into commodity production is constitutive of postmodernism as opposed to modernism, it is clear that he is not simply arguing that art is now bought and sold, as opposed to occupying a zone outside of commodity relations altogether. Clearly nothing in this regard immediately differentiates postmodern artworks from those of the nineteenth and early twentieth century. The Parisian audience members who rioted at the inaugural performance of Igor Stravinsky's *The Rite of Spring* in 1913 were paying patrons, meaning that the ability of the performance in question to scandalize bourgeois sensibility has no bearing on the question of whether it was or was not a commodity, provided that question is posed in literal terms. In order to get at the precise nature of Jameson's claim about the commodification of the aesthetic we will therefore need to reconstruct the deeper logic of his argument, which is routed through a particular reading and re-deployment of the work of Theodor W. Adorno: particularly the latter's account of modernist autonomy, as well as the related concept of "reification", which Adorno adapts from the work of Georg Lukács. Jameson mobilizes the dialectically interlocking concepts of reification and aesthetic autonomy in order

simultaneously to extend and consign to historical oblivion a tradition of European aesthetic thought that I will term here, following Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello, the “artistic critique” of modernity: a tradition in which art’s autonomy becomes synonymous with human freedom in the face of the progressive encroachments of technology, commodification, reification and instrumental rationality.

As I have already suggested, Jameson’s decisive theoretical contribution in *Postmodernism* is not just his virtuosic diagnosis of the various ideological symptoms of contemporary culture – the “loss of historicity”, the rejection of modernist autonomy and the embrace of art’s commodity status, the waning of affect, the replacement of the closed modernist “work” with the open postmodernist “text”, the decline of individualized style, and the death of the subject – but rather his underlying periodizing account, which argues that these surface effects have their origins within a systemic mutation in the capitalist mode of production. In a theoretical model outlined most extensively in *Postmodernism*, but present either implicitly or explicitly throughout much of his work, Jameson employs a schema borrowed from Ernest Mandel’s *Late Capitalism* (1972), which identifies three major historical phases of capitalist development, “each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage”: the free competition stage, the monopoly stage, and the multinational stage (*Postmodernism*, 35). Mandel associates this movement with three underlying technological revolutions:

Machine production of steam-driven motors since 1848; machine production of electric and combustion motors since the 90s of the 19th century; (and) machine production of electronic and nuclear-powered apparatuses since the 40s of the 20th century. (35)

These technological revolutions are for Jameson important primarily insofar as they enable successive stages in capitalism’s continuous historical expansion into new geographical areas

and domains of human experience. What separates multinational capitalism from the previous stage of monopoly capitalism in Jameson's account is that it signals a point of total subsumption, in which the world-system as a whole and the subconscious are both completely incorporated into the regime of capitalist production and exchange. This in turn entails the erasure of the conditions of possibility of art's autonomy that were established with the rise of bourgeois society. Whereas in Adorno (writing in the late 1960s) autonomous art is valuable primarily insofar as it represents an enclave in which resistance to capitalist rationality is, during the period of modernity, still perceived to be possible, for Jameson (writing some twenty years later), the 1960s are retrospectively identified as the tipping point at which the grounds for this resistance finally give way. This is stated perhaps most clearly in his 1984 essay, "Periodizing the 60s", which lays out the basic historical narrative that serves as the blueprint for his later and more widely cited *Postmodernism*:

late capitalism in general (and the 60s in particular) constitute a process in which the last surviving internal and external zones of precapitalism – the last vestiges of noncommodified or traditional space within and outside the advanced world – are now ultimately penetrated and colonized in their turn. Late capitalism can therefore be described as the moment in which the last vestiges of Nature which survived on into classical capitalism are at length eliminated: namely the third world and the unconscious. The 60s will then have been the momentous transformational period in which this systemic restructuring takes place on a global scale. (207)

"Late capitalism" for Jameson - a designation he later upgrades to "postmodernity" - therefore denotes the point at which the process of modernization is complete, and capital no longer has an "outside" left to expand into. If the expansion of capital previously proceeded laterally - incorporating new geographical territories into its economic infrastructure - with the exhaustion of "noncommodified space" it also expands vertically into culture, eroding the distinction between economic and non-economic areas of life and experience. Rationalization, which is

modeled on the intensified control over time in the workplace - as exemplified in the practice of Taylorism - has in Jameson's account expanded into "the subconscious", signifying a generalization of instrumental rationality throughout culture and everyday life.

In Jameson's account, then, the three major phases of capitalist development denote not just technological revolutions but also particular stages in culture and subjectivity's increasingly total subsumption beneath the logic of commodity production and exchange; and for this reason, they align more or less symmetrically with three dominant aesthetic paradigms in Western cultural production: realism, modernism and postmodernism.⁶⁵ The phenomenon that renders this symmetry of the economic and the aesthetic thinkable for Jameson is "reification", a concept originally derived from Marx's analysis of the commodity structure in *Capital* volume one (though Marx himself does not use the term there), and subsequently developed (in Jameson's reading) through Max Weber's concept of "rationalization" and, especially, in Georg Lukács's essay "Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat" (1923)⁶⁶. Jameson defines reification in *The Political Unconscious* as:

the dynamic... in which the traditional or 'natural' unities, social forms, human relations, cultural events, even religious systems, are systematically broken up in order to be reconstructed more efficiently, in the form of new post-natural processes or mechanisms; but in which, at the same time, these now isolated bits and pieces of the older unities acquire a certain autonomy of their own, a semi-autonomous coherence which, not merely a reflex of capitalist reification and rationalization, also in some measure serves to compensate for the dehumanization of experience reification brings with it, and to rectify the otherwise intolerable effects of the new process. (63)

The first point to be noted here is that Jameson grants the concept of reification a vastly inflated importance compared to most other thinkers, even within Marxism (with the exception, perhaps,

⁶⁵ See in particular, *Postmodernism*, pp. 1-55.

⁶⁶ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1971), pp. 83-222.

of the earlier Lukács, and Adorno); and part of the reason for this is that he expands the term to also encompass the Weberian process of “rationalization”. One of the central difficulties in interpreting Lukács’s 1923 essay is ascertaining to what extent reification can be conceptually isolated from parallel aspects of capitalist development including rationalization, alienation and the social division of labor.⁶⁷ Yet in Jameson’s reading it is clear that reification is taken to encompass the entire fragmenting, alienating and objectifying logic of the historical process of capitalist development. As he puts it in *Postmodernism*, reification is “a force whose logic is one of ruthless separation and disjunction, of specialization and rationalization, of a Taylorizing division of labor in all realms” (96). For Jameson then, reification is elevated to the status of a totalizing concept, which we might think of as consisting of an infrastructure (the *process* of rationalization) and a superstructure (the *phenomenon* of reification). The former is synonymous with the creative destruction of capitalist development: breaking down traditional communities, hierarchies and forms of attachment into monadic and increasingly mechanized units of production, whose value is increasingly measured solely by their efficiency. The latter consists of the psychological and discursive *effects* of this process: people are reduced to the status of things, and contingent economic relationships between people conversely come to obtain a “phantom objectivity”.⁶⁸ At the same time, for Jameson, the individual rationalized elements within the capitalist system of exchange come to appear, and experience themselves, as

⁶⁷ Ben Parker, for example, has recently insisted that “Notwithstanding Lukács’s own heavy reliance on the Weberian vocabulary of ‘rationalization’ in Section I of the reification essay, *the concept of reification should not for a moment be assimilated to rationalization*” and “*Neither should reification be confused with ‘alienation’*” (Parker, 2016, italics in original). Appositely, Timothy Bewes points out that reification is a “reversible” concept, always liable to itself become reified. Bewes, *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (2002), p. xvi.

⁶⁸ Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), p. 83.

autonomous, self-contained and disconnected. Thus class relations that are contingent products of the capitalist economy come to be viewed as essential, blinding subjects to their objective position within the system, and thus allowing it to perpetuate itself despite it being exploitative to all but those who control the means of production.

Within Jameson's model of reification, then, the modernist autonomization of art and the aesthetic are subsumed beneath a single, totalizing societal logic. And indeed, the three dominant stages of art in capitalist modernity - realism, modernism and postmodernism - come to be seen as expressions of respective epochal degrees of reification, manifested in this case via the gradual fragmentation of the once-unified linguistic sign into three increasingly separate component parts: the signifier, the signified and the historical referent. Jameson lays out this grand (to the point of self-parody) historical narrative perhaps most explicitly at the conclusion of the "Video" chapter of *Postmodernism*:

Once upon a time at the dawn of capitalism and middle-class society, there emerged something called the sign, which seemed to entertain unproblematical relations with its referent. This initial heyday of the sign – the moment of literal or referential language or of the unproblematic claims of so-called scientific discourse – came into being because of the corrosive dissolution of older forms of magical language by a force which I will call that of reification. (96)

According to this logic, modernism corresponds to a middle stage in the all-encompassing historical process of the incremental penetration of reification into culture and subjectivity, in which the signifier and the signified are increasingly detached from the historical referent. This translates in Jameson's schema into the partial detachment of art and the aesthetic from society and commodity exchange:

(The) autonomy of culture, (the) semiautonomy of language, is the moment of modernism, and of a realm of the aesthetic which redoubles the world without being

altogether of it, thereby winning a certain negative or critical power, but also a certain otherworldly futility. (96)

Here the formal autonomy of aesthetic modernism is conceived as the cultural logic of the imperial, or “monopoly” phase of capitalism, in which art and the aesthetic achieve a partial independence and autonomy from society, commodity exchange and the historical referent: a condition of possibility that is subsequently extinguished by the shift to the phase of transnational capitalism, and its aesthetic expression, postmodernism:

Now reference and reality disappear altogether, and even meaning – the signified – is problematized. We are left with that pure and random play of signifiers that we call postmodernism, which no longer produces monumental works of the modernist type but ceaselessly reshuffles the fragments of pre-existent texts, the building blocks of older cultural and social production, in some new and heightened bricolage. (96)

In Jameson’s schema, then, the cultural, aesthetic and even linguistic superstructure is in the final analysis almost entirely deducible from the development of the economic mode of production. The Lukácsian theory of reification is expanded into a totalizing concept that accounts for the link between base and superstructure, and the cultural “logic” manifested in the increasing abstraction of aesthetic production and its divorce - first (in modernism) from historical referentiality and finally (in postmodernism) from meaning altogether - is simply a barometer of a given epoch’s position along a developmental scale stretching from non-reified (pre-capitalism) to totally reified (postmodernity).

Furthermore, taking his cue from Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* (2023), Jameson conceives of the dialectic as the conceptual tool which counteracts reification and in doing so renders it visible, allowing for the kind of historicization that Jameson himself employs. In *Postmodernism* this theoretical method also becomes an aesthetic prescription. Given the theoretical impossibility of modernist, autonomous art that would resist the triumphant and all-

pervasive regime of capitalism reification, Jameson calls for an aesthetic of “cognitive mapping”, which he defines as “a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system” (54). Whereas modernism attempted a form of *aesthetic* de-reification - possible for Jameson at a specific historical moment when capitalism’s penetration of the superstructure had yet to be fully completed - Jameson conceives of cognitive mapping as a form of *dialectical* de-reification. Given the fully accomplished reification of both the aesthetic and the subconscious in postmodernity, Jameson’s “cognitive mapping” is posited as a form of epistemological reorientation in which the individual’s objective position within history and the totality of the capitalist world-system is to be rendered newly visible. The possibility of autonomous and therefore genuinely critical art is still theoretically discounted in advance, but an aesthetic of “cognitive mapping” will at least in Jameson’s account allow the subject to register the historical reality of her de-subjectification.

Against “Real Subsumption”

Jameson’s subsumption narrative is in part a response to, and an attempt to historicize the various discourses, emerging with structuralism and poststructuralism, that set out to “decenter” both the autonomous, self-legislating rational subject, and the related notion of a universal subject of history. Jameson’s narrative of the establishment and eclipse of autonomous art is therefore simultaneously a narrative of the emergence and disappearance of the autonomous individual. Modernism’s apotheosis of stylistic individuality, novelty and the creation of unique forms (“make it new”), corresponds to the last gasp of a subjective interiority that is itself on the

verge of being eclipsed by the progressive reification of subjectivity and experience: an historical process whose final achievement Jameson refers to as the “death of the subject”. In postmodernism there is no longer any individual style, in part because there is strictly speaking no longer an individual either to originate or to possess a style: the “individual” is merely the product and location of transpersonal “intensities”, and consciousness is now so thoroughly mediated that the notion of a unique “self” that is continuous through time is exposed once and for all as an ideological fiction. This is of course a critique with a heritage that stretches back in various forms at least as far as Friedrich Nietzsche, via Sigmund Freud and Martin Heidegger, and through to structuralism and poststructuralism. Jameson’s account of the “death of the subject” is an attempt to historicize the reemergence and rise to hegemony of the critique of the subject with the rise of French “theory”, and in doing so to recuperate it within just the sort of totalizing historical narrative that the critique of the subject has tended to call into question.

In the years since Jameson’s argument these discourses have influenced and mutated into various forms of anti- or post-humanism: from media ecology, cybernetics and systems theory, to more recent critiques of Anthropocentrism offered by object oriented ontology, the various posthumanisms, eco-criticisms, neo-vitalisms and new materialisms⁶⁹. In this context, any engagement with the question of the current meaning and stakes of the question of art’s autonomy risks swimming against the tide of recent work across the spectrum of the theoretical humanities, which has more often sought to question the concepts of the human, the subject,

⁶⁹ Of course, this is not to say that there is internal agreement either between, or within these various schools of thought, or (especially) between them and Jameson. However, the one point on which they can be said to converge to some degree is the critique of the autonomous subject, and the broader Anthropocentric worldview Jason W. Moore refers to as “Cartesian dualism”. See Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), p. 28.

agency and autonomy. Indeed, any claim for the autonomy of art would seem especially inauspicious in an age of “surveillance capitalism” and “algorithmic governmentality”, in which technological means of controlling, monitoring and shaping collective patterns of consumption, thought and habit are ever more pervasive, and in which the scope for individual agency and autonomy has accordingly never looked more obviously and minutely foreclosed.⁷⁰

As will become clear, neither my critique of the subsumption narrative nor my argument concerning art’s autonomy takes the form of a defense of autonomous subjectivity. Indeed, one of my claims will be that Jameson’s tendency to equate artistic autonomy too easily and symmetrically with the historical emergence and eclipse of the category of the subject is one of the reasons why he misconceives the problematic, as I interpret it. Yet, more broadly speaking, it is partly in the context of these anti-humanist paradigms that a reckoning with the current meaning, tenability and stakes of the concept of artistic autonomy takes on its greatest urgency, particularly since these are currents with which literary studies, with its deeply entrenched and perhaps even constitutive humanism, is still coming to terms. What would be the consequences of accepting the historical obsolescence of both the autonomy of art and the concept of the autonomous individual, for categories that remain foundational to the practice of literary criticism, such as “form”, the “aesthetic”, the “artwork”, the “author”, and “interpretation”? What would be the status of categories such as “meaning”, “reading” or “intention” if the autonomous individual has indeed been replaced by the postmodern “dividual”; if the author is replaced by the “author-function” or “collective assemblages of enunciation”; if the concept of

⁷⁰ On “surveillance capitalism”, see Shoshana Zuboff, *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2019). On “algorithmic governmentality”, see Bernard Stiegler, *Automatic Society: The Future of Work, Volume 1* (2016), pp. 17-18.

originality is replaced with those of intertextuality, transmission and a collective literary unconscious; and if the rational subject is replaced by a neo-empiricist *tabula rasa*, ceaselessly traversed and inscribed by molecular flows of data and affect, “signifying” and “asignifying semiotics”? What would it even mean to “write”, to “think”, to “act” or to “speak” in an age of “machinic enslavement”, if subjectivity is now in some unprecedented sense *produced*: whether as an effect of the “signifying chain”, or as a node within an invisible media ecology, always-already inserted into and programmed by invisible “distributed networks”, “machinic assemblages” and ever more minutely reticulated technologies of subject production?⁷¹

The connection between these questions and Jameson’s thesis is made clear in Nicholas Brown’s 2012 essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Real Subsumption by Capital” (subsequently expanded in his 2019 book, *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism*) an important reinterpretation of Jameson’s argument to which I have already alluded. As Brown makes clear, Jameson’s argument logically extends to a profound challenge to the established disciplinary protocols and methodology of literary criticism. Faced with the heteronomous postmodern art-commodity and the “death of the author”, according to Brown it no longer makes sense for critical method to consist in the traditional hermeneutic procedure of interpreting the unique significations or effects contained within or produced by a given work (close reading), or revealing the autonomous intentions of its author-creator. For Brown these methods are predicated on the very concepts - the autonomy of art, and authorial intention as the basis of meaning - that the subsumption narrative (and, in their different ways, the anti-humanisms that it attempts to re-historicize) purports to consign to historical oblivion. As Brown

⁷¹ See Lazzarato (2014), pp. 23-54.

puts it in a more recent essay, “The incoherence of postmodern ideology was to insist explicitly on the commodification of the work of art while insisting implicitly that it was still worth talking about as a work of art”.⁷²

One way out of this apparent contradiction - between the critique of art’s autonomy on one hand, and the ongoing practice of interpretation or close reading which logically presupposes its autonomy on the other - has been through what Todd Cronan has called the turn toward “affective formalism”, which swaps the category of the artwork as intentional representation for that of the artwork as the occasion for an affective response, and in which the focus is therefore no longer on a text or artwork’s meaning, but rather on its effect upon a given observer.⁷³ Yet for both Brown and Cronan, the fatal drawback of an aesthetics based on affective formalism is that it can have no ontological account of what differentiates the artwork from any other kind of object or commodity: “the work of art becomes a kind of object, one that is not interpreted but experienced” ... “The consequences of this denial are political. Without an appeal to intention - trying to understand what someone meant by something (a sign, a mark, a gesture, a sound, a word, an idea) - there are no grounds for disagreement”.⁷⁴ The problem for both Brown and Cronan therefore boils down to that of whether an artwork contains a normative truth, in the form of an intended meaning that we can interpret with a greater or lesser degree of validity; or whether the art-object is simply the vehicle for whatever user-specific and hence private truth

⁷² Brown, “What We Worry About When We Worry About Commodification: Reflections on Dave Beech, Julian Stallabrass, and Jeff Wall” (2016), p. 17 <https://nonsite.org/what-we-worry-about-when-we-worry-about-commodification/>.

⁷³ Todd Cronan, *Against Affective Formalism: Matisse, Bergson, Modernism* (2013).

⁷⁴ Cronan, pp. 15, 17.

one cares to project onto it in the moment of its apprehension: the autonomy of the artwork itself, versus the autonomy of the experience of the art-object. As Brown argues,

The ideology of consumer sovereignty (or, if you like, ‘affect’, ‘punctum’, ‘the emancipation of the spectator’, ‘relational aesthetics’, or even, in most but not all of its acceptations, ‘political art’) proclaims, in its various vocabularies, that the consumer is king. If the consumer is king, the artwork bears no normative force: rather than challenging forth judgments, it merely elicits preferences. From this standpoint the market is prior to labor: only if market preferences triumphed once and for all over aesthetic judgments would the real subsumption of artistic labor (that is: the real death of art) be in view.⁷⁵

In Walter Benn Michaels’s polemical terms, this tendency to posit the private validity of the experience of the viewing subject (“the consumer is king”) over the normative validity of the autonomous artwork constitutes the dominant tendency of “neoliberal aesthetics”.⁷⁶ In neoliberal aesthetics the loss of the artwork’s normative meaning and hence potential criticality is passively accepted, and the aesthetic becomes simply another form of consumer experience. One therefore effectively accepts the “real subsumption” of the artwork, and tacitly accedes to the self-justifying rhetoric of the neoliberal “commodification of everything”. The more politically desirable alternative, for both Brown, Cronan and Michaels, is to re-assert the autonomy of art and attempt to recover a theoretical space for the critical potential of aesthetic production in the face of neoliberal hyper-commodification. As Brown argues, “A plausible claim to autonomy is in fact the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the dictates of the market”.⁷⁷

⁷⁵ Brown (2018), p. 7.

⁷⁶ Benn Michaels, “Neoliberal Aesthetics: Fried, Rancière and the Form of the Photograph” (2011) <https://nonsite.org/neoliberal-aesthetics-fried-ranciere-and-the-form-of-the-photograph/>. Michaels’s prime example of a purveyor of “neoliberal aesthetics” is Jacques Rancière, who is also the target of Brown’s reference to “the emancipation of the spectator” as an instance of the “ideology of consumer sovereignty” in the above quotation.

⁷⁷ Brown (2012), p. 18.

But according to these critics, in order to do this, one has to establish that the artwork contains an intended meaning: a normative *truth* that is denied to either the commodity or the object, and that therefore serves as the grounds for its ontological distinctness. The problematic is summed up in a 2016 essay by Boris Groys:

The central question to be asked about art is this one: Is art capable of being a medium of truth? This question is central to the existence and survival of art because if art cannot be a medium of truth then art is only a matter of taste. One has to accept the truth even if one does not like it. But if art is only a matter of taste, then the art spectator becomes more important than the art producer. In this case art can be treated only sociologically or in terms of the art market—it has no independence, no power. Art becomes identical to design.⁷⁸

Approached in these terms, the argument about “subsumption” is about much more than just a kneejerk Marxist squeamishness toward commodification, or even a more traditional critique of the aesthetic on the grounds of its ideological complicity. For Brown, what is at stake in, and called into question by Jameson’s argument - along with the various other critiques of the subject that imply to a greater or lesser degree the illusory nature of art’s autonomy - is both the continued existence of art “as such”, as opposed to other kinds of commodity production; and also, by extension, the continued possibility of critical *interpretation*, as opposed to a branch of cultural sociology that takes aesthetic production and consumption as its object. If we are to avoid conceding the political ground of the work of art altogether to the regime of neoliberal hyper-commodification, we need to re-establish, in the very teeth of both the Marxist critique of “real subsumption” and the poststructuralist critique of the autonomous subject, grounds for re-establishing a space of relative autonomy for artistic production. Autonomy thus needs to be re-

⁷⁸ Boris Groys, “The Truth of Art” (2016) <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/71/60513/the-truth-of-art/#:~:text=Boris%20Groys,-Issue%20%2371&text=The%20central%20question%20to%20be,one%20does%20not%20like%20it>.

established in four overlapping areas: the ontological distinction between art and objecthood; the distinction between interpretation and “consumer preference”; the autonomous intentionality of the artist; and the distinction between artistic production and commodity production.

So the shape of the problematic with which we are presented is as follows. The immediate question, is: can we accept the terms on which contemporary Marxist cultural critique has posited the “real subsumption” of art and subjectivity under capital, and hence the dissolution of the ontological distinction between art and objecthood, the artwork and the commodity, the critical capacity of art and aesthetic experience, and the “death of the subject”? But the broader stakes of this question are: can we establish grounds for ascribing agency, normativity, and *meaning* to a given artwork in such a way that we could establish its claim to being treated differently to any other kind of object or commodity? Do such concepts, as Brown insists, require a theory of the autonomy of art? What might such a theory look like under the conditions of contemporary capitalism? And we will also need to take into account a further implied distinction between two apparently opposing types of aesthetic theory: an intentional aesthetics predicated on the primacy of the artwork, and the *normative* meaning it contains; and an affect-based aesthetics predicated on the primacy of the subject and the *private* meaning she perceives, or the occasion-specific experience she undergoes.

As I have suggested, until recently the consensus Marxist and post-Marxist position in relation to the contemporary model of global capitalism - variously described as postmodernity, late capitalism, the society of the spectacle, post-Fordism, 24/7 capitalism or neoliberalism - has been

that the problematic *du jour* for cultural critique is that of the consequences of the achieved subsumption of culture, aesthetics and subjectivity beneath the logic of commodity reification. As Brown rather sardonically observes at the beginning of his 2012 essay, “Whatever previous ages might have fancied, we are wise enough to know that the work of art is a commodity like any other”. Yet a notable feature of Jameson’s work in particular is a telling vagueness when it comes to the actual mechanism of this subsumption. How does the reification of subjectivity and the aesthetic actually work in literal, material terms? Is it really so final and irrevocable that we have to regard it as absolute? After all, the series of claims that hangs upon this premise is not inconsiderable. As the foundation for an entire periodizing argument - one which declares no less than the eclipse of the historical conditions of possibility of art as such - its actual theoretical status is surprisingly speculative. And indeed, more recent work within Marxist theory has begun to find that the theoretical basis for such a claim within Marxian political economy is rather fanciful.

Other than in a brief appendix to *Capital: Volume One* (1867) and a short discussion in the *Grundrisse* (1939), the question of the relationship between art and capital, or the aesthetic and the commodity, is scarcely touched upon anywhere in Marx’s extensive writings on political economy. Traditionally, Marxist treatments of art and literature have focused on their relationship not to commodification, but rather to class struggle and ideology. Indeed, Georg Lukács’s famous critiques of modernism focus neither on commodification, nor even on reification - a concept that Lukács has renounced as “idealist” by this time - but rather on what he regards as modernism’s ahistorical formalism and subjectivism: the way in which techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness uncritically reproduce the characteristically

bourgeois, alienated experience of the modern world as meaningless, chaotic and fragmentary, without showing how that experience is conditioned by its position within the historically developing totality of relations of production.⁷⁹ When Lukács contrasts what he regards as the politically conservative “ideology of modernism” as represented by James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) to the more progressive “critical realism” of Thomas Mann’s *Lotte in Weimar* (1940), his line of reasoning has nothing to do with the question of whether or not one or the other of those novels is a commodity.⁸⁰

The connection that both Jameson and Brown draw between the question of art’s commodity status and the question of art’s continued conditions of possibility comes into play (albeit indirectly) with Adorno, with the latter’s claim for the political value of modernist autonomy and his famous critique of the industrial rationalization and assimilation of cultural production into the “administered society” via the “culture industry”. But again, Adorno’s argument for the critical force of aesthetic autonomy actually has little to do with the question of whether a given artwork is or is not bought and sold as a commodity. Rather, it is centered on the neo-Schillerian notion that the autonomy of the artwork and aesthetic experience historically come into being as both an antidote to, and protest against the fragmenting and alienating effects of the social division of labor and the degeneration of autonomous subjectivity and experience into instrumental rationality and “identity thinking”.⁸¹ As the definitive example (and indeed, historical concretization) of the logic of “identity thinking”, the commodity form is the

⁷⁹ Though given how closely this resembles Lukács’s description of “reified consciousness” in *History and Class Consciousness*, we may feel entitled to question how genuine his renunciation of the concept, while living in Moscow at the height of Stalinism, ever really was.

⁸⁰ Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1962).

⁸¹ Gillian Rose argues that for Adorno “identity thinking” is a synonym for reification. See Rose, *The Melancholy Science* (1978), p. 59.

dialectical counterpart to the irreducible particularity that Adorno sees as constituting the formal autonomy, and hence political value of the artwork.⁸² Yet by this very logic, for Adorno commodification is not just a threat to art's autonomy, but also the condition of its possibility, liberating the artist from what Walter Benjamin calls his "parasitic subservience to ritual" and thereby creating the conditions for the emergence of art "as such".⁸³

In the case of Adorno (and of Jameson after him) the question of whether art's conditions of possibility have been eclipsed is therefore not a question about commodification per se, but rather a question about *reification*. The relationship between art's autonomy and reification constitutes what Adorno calls a "negative dialectic": art's autonomy is the determinate negation of reification, yet reification is simultaneously the condition of possibility of art's autonomy. The relationship between the two therefore resists sublation into any higher synthesis. Autonomy and reification instead remain locked in un-sublatable antagonism: a mutual constitution that is simultaneously, and inseparably, a mutual cancellation. Yet this also means that commodification *per se* does not represent an existential threat to autonomous art, since the threat of art's impossibility lies at the heart of the predicament of art's autonomy, and is inseparable from that within autonomy which Adorno finds to be of value. As he states at the beginning of *Aesthetic Theory*, "It is uncertain whether art is still possible; whether, *with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions*".⁸⁴ It is therefore not some future state of total commodification and hence heteronomy that threatens art's continued possibility,

⁸² "Artwork" and "art" are designations that Adorno reserves only for "genuine" works that exemplify what he regards as art's latent critical force, as opposed to the interchangeable commodities produced by the culture industry.

⁸³ Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (1934), p. 24.

⁸⁴ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 3, my italics.

but *the condition of autonomy itself*. The conditions of possibility of art's autonomy for Adorno were therefore *always* also, simultaneously, conditions of impossibility: a claim that does not so much look forward to the potential "real subsumption" of aesthetic production beneath the commodity, but rather backwards to Hegel's original diagnosis of the "end of art", and his observation that "Art, considered purely as art, becomes to a certain extent something superfluous".⁸⁵ Adorno's work therefore does not legitimate, but in fact specifically *opposes* the sort of precipitous periodizing claim that Jameson makes in *Postmodernism*.⁸⁶

So in what precise sense can it be the case that with postmodernism, "aesthetic production has been incorporated into commodity production more generally": a transition that in Jameson's account is explicitly posited as the transition from one mode of production to another, "each one marking a dialectical expansion over the previous stage" (which for Jameson means, precisely, sublation)? To address this question, we need to return to the status of the distinction between commodification and reification. This distinction is central to Dave Beech's recent study, *Art and Value* (2016), which reconsiders the position of art within both Marxian, classical and neoclassical economics in order to make the case for art's "economic

⁸⁵ Hegel, *Aesthetics Vol.1*, p. 535.

⁸⁶ It is true that Adorno sometimes makes reference to the nightmarish vision of the "totally reified" society of the future; but according to Gillian Rose, had total reification indeed taken place then Jameson himself would not have been able to theorize it: "To say that society is 'completely reified' is to say that the domination of the exchange process has increased to the point where it controls institutions, behavior and class formation in such a way that it prevents the formation of any independent and critical consciousness. To say that consciousness is 'completely reified' is to say that it is capable only of knowing the appearance of society, of describing institutions and behavior as if their current mode of functioning were an inherent and invariant characteristic or property, as if they, as objects, 'fulfil their concepts'. Therefore, to say that consciousness of society is completely reified implies that no critical consciousness or theory is possible. It is to say that the underlying processes of society are completely hidden and that the utopian possibilities within it are inconceivable. The mind (*Geist*) is impotent; the object is inaccessible. The thesis of complete reification is therefore unstatable, because if it were true it could not be known" (*The Melancholy Science*, p. 62).

exceptionality”: “what has been neglected is the difference between art’s cultural, social and political incorporation by capitalism, on the one hand, and its economic incorporation on the other” (1). As Beech points out, the commodity form is not peculiar to capitalism, but instead constitutes one of capitalism’s historical preconditions. For Beech, the key question that has tended to remain unanswered in Marxian critiques of the relationship between art and capital is therefore not that of whether a given artwork is or is not a commodity, but that of what *sort* of commodity it is: “Instead of theorizing art’s relationship to capitalism through the concepts of commodification, culture industry, spectacle and real subsumption, all of which have a superficial ring of truth, the key to understanding art’s relationship to capitalism must be derived from questioning whether art has gone through the transition from feudalism to capitalism” (8). A given artwork may well be a commodity, but is it a *capitalist* commodity? Beech’s answer to this question is an emphatic “no”:

The artist is also a commodity producer today insofar as she owns her own ‘petty implements’ and, unlike the wage labourer, continues to own the product she produces. However, since the independent craftsman was neither a capitalist nor a wage labourer, and handicraft production does not conform to the capitalist mode of production, then the artist can be a commodity producer without this fact suggesting by any means that the artist has been economically transformed by the capitalist mode of production. Thus, the evident ‘commodification’ of art is not proof that art has become capitalistic. (9)

For Beech, the key to understanding both the nature of the artwork’s commodity status and the reason for its fundamental “economic exceptionality” lies in the distinction between the categories of “formal” and “real” subsumption, which Marx outlines in an appendix to *Capital Volume One*, “Results of the Immediate Process of Production”:⁸⁷

Marx links the concept of the formal subsumption of labour to the concept of absolute surplus value and, correspondingly, connects the concept of the real subsumption of

⁸⁷ See Marx, *Capital Vol. 1*, pp. 949-1085.

labour to the concept of relative surplus value... So, the formal subsumption of labour is the process by which the productive capitalist first extracts surplus value from labour, and the real subsumption of labour is the process by which the productive capitalist increases the proportion of surplus value within the process of valorization. (244)

Formal subsumption is commodification at the point of exchange: labor creates a product (a use-value) which is then sold as a commodity (an exchange-value) in excess of the cost of producing it (thereby creating an *absolute* surplus value). Real subsumption is the product of the conflict between capital and labor *within* the production process, and so arises in the wake of formal subsumption: that is, real subsumption designates the process by which the capitalist enforces the rationalization of the labor process in the name of increased productivity, in order to increase the rate at which the capitalist is able to exploit the unpaid labor-time of the worker (thereby increasing the capitalist's share of the absolute surplus value; ie, her *relative* surplus value).

Formal subsumption can take place without reorganizing the labor process, not least because the laborer and the person who sells the product as a commodity can be the same person. This is the model of pre-capitalist commodity production - "handicraft", or C-M-C - to which according to Beech the artist still conforms: she is a commodity producer who owns both the means and the product of her labor, rather than a worker who sells her labor power to a capitalist on the market and therefore owns neither. Her incorporation into the capitalist system therefore remains merely formal. Real subsumption, on the other hand, presupposes the split between capitalist and wage laborer. It is not enough for the *product* of labor to be a commodity; rather, real subsumption presupposes that *labor itself* has been commodified: the capitalist purchases a quantity of abstract labor-time, in the form of an investment that leads to the production of a commodity that she will then sell so as to exact a profit on her original investment (M-C-M'). The specificity of the capitalist (M-C-M') circuit is that both capitalist and laborer are for their

own reasons indifferent to the commodity as a use value: the capitalist wage laborer merely sells her labor time to an arbitrary end, whereas the capitalist merely invests capital in the production of an exchange value. But since the artist is neither a wage laborer nor a capitalist, the claim for the “real subsumption” of artistic production - its reorganization according to the specifically capitalist model of commodity production - is not a literal claim, but at best a speculative metaphor.

This returns us to Jameson’s description of reification. Indeed, at this point in our analysis it seems clear that reification for Jameson is in effect another name for “real subsumption”; though it is given a far greater range of application because it is inflated from a specific *mechanism* that takes place at a particular stage of the production process, into a quasi-metaphysical “force” (“a force whose logic is one of ruthless separation and disjunction, of specialization and rationalization, of a Taylorizing division of labor in all realms”). As Nathan Brown argues in his 2018 essay, “Postmodernity, Not Yet”:

What is (Ernest) Mandel talking about when he refers to ‘the period in which all branches of the economy are fully industrialized for the first time’? And what is Jameson talking about when he describes the completion of the ‘modernization’ process? They are talking about the achievement of what Marx calls ‘real subsumption’: the achievement of a properly capitalist process of production through the subsumption not only of relations of production but also the process of production under capitalist social and productive relations.⁸⁸

We might therefore venture to suggest that the distinction between commodification and reification is (at least as Jameson mobilizes these categories) actually another name for the distinction between formal and real subsumption. This is how reification is able to play the role it

⁸⁸ Nathan Brown, “Postmodernity, Not Yet: Toward a New Periodization” (2018) p. 16
<https://www.radicalphilosophy.com/article/postmodernity-not-yet>.

does for Jameson as the link between base and superstructure: it names the reorganization of the latter by the former. Which is to say, reification is the way in which the economic mode of production is able to assert a directly determining force in Jameson's analysis, unlike in that of Louis Althusser, who rejects reification as an "expressive" category, and for whom the "last instance" of determination by the economic never actually comes.⁸⁹

Reification in Jameson - which, let us remember, he also runs together with the social division of labor, rationalization, and alienation - is therefore a way of positing (or, really, of speculating) that real subsumption has in some more intuitive than literal sense happened to categories (the aesthetic, the unconscious) to which it is, technically speaking, inapplicable. As Beech points out, the precondition for "real subsumption" and the rationalization of the labor process is the division between capitalist (owner of the means of production) and laborer (who sells his labor power to the capitalist as a commodity). Since according to Beech the kind of labor that we term artistic is by definition not that which is bought and sold as a commodity on the labor market, the category of real subsumption is therefore constitutively inapplicable to artistic labor. For Beech art's "formal" subsumption is its commodification; but as I have already argued via the work of Adorno, Bourdieu and Habermas, this is not the moment of the *dissolution* of autonomy (with real subsumption and postmodernism) but rather the moment of the *creation* of autonomy (with art's emancipation from ritual): the establishment of art "as such" as a thing in itself. But "formal subsumption" does not in and of itself entail any necessary or predictable change in the character of the artwork in the form of the subsumption of artistic

⁸⁹ "From the first moment to the last, the lonely hour of the 'last instance' never comes". Althusser, *For Marx* (1965), p. 113.

labor. Such a change only comes into play with “real subsumption”, which designates the rearrangement of the labor process itself. And this for Beech cannot take place, because the artist is neither a wage laborer nor a capitalist.

Though Beech’s analysis is helpful as far as it goes, it cannot provide a satisfactory basis for a critique of Jameson on its own terms. In a certain sense Beech’s argument is a strangely reductive one, since its premise – that art’s relationship to capital can be clarified by paying attention to its economic exceptionalism – really just constitutes a return to the sort of reductive economism whose inadequacy was the point of departure of Western Marxism and the “cultural turn”. As Nicholas Brown points out in a penetrating 2016 review essay, the one thing that Beech never really establishes is *why* exactly it matters if art is or is not economically exceptional.⁹⁰

After all, Beech states:

Art’s economic exceptionalism is not an economic argument for art’s autonomy. Since Adorno argues that art’s commodification is the precondition for art’s autonomy – that is, art’s liberation from church, state and tradition – a separate case would have to be made that art’s economic exceptionalism (particularly in the strong sense that art does not conform to the capitalist mode of commodity production) is or is not the grounds for art’s self-determination.⁹¹

The fact that economic exceptionalism is insufficient to establish “the grounds for art’s self-determination” therefore, rather anticlimactically, ends up simply returning us to Jameson and Adorno’s original problematic and point of departure; and it is not even particularly clear that we are much the wiser as a result of the detour. We have established, negatively, that “real subsumption” is a pseudo-concept when applied to the form of production that we designate as artistic, but we have not in the process of establishing this shed much *positive* light on the nature

⁹⁰ Brown, “What We Worry About When We Worry About Commodification” (2016).

⁹¹ Beech, *Art and Value*, p. 28.

of art's autonomy (conceived here as its capacity for "self-determination"). "Real subsumption" in a literal sense may well be a fantasy when applied to artistic production, but this in and of itself does nothing to suggest that art's autonomy is not also a fantasy on some other set of terms.

However, using the critique of real subsumption as a basis for establishing art's autonomy (in the sense of "self-determination") in positive terms is exactly the ambition of the current work of Nicholas Brown.⁹² Brown has a much clearer sense than either Beech or Jameson of why exactly it matters whether or not an artwork is "a commodity like any other", which Brown spells out in his review essay:

The subtraction of normativity (the a priori disqualification of Beech's 'judgments of value in art') is what we worry about when we worry about the 'commodification' of art. Since meanings are normative (you can misunderstand a meaning, but then you have misunderstood it), the commodity, produced for exchange, can have no meaning. It can only elicit (or fail to elicit) a preference: consumer sovereignty. Most of us, most of the time, are rightly worried about the labor process: speed-up, automation, and the rest. But for the work of art, the threat of its 'real subsumption under capital' is posed via the mediation of the market: commodification means subsumption under the market; it means the erosion of the normative force of the artwork.⁹³

What is important for Brown is therefore no longer the rationalization of the labor process per se, but rather the relocation of "normativity" from the producer (and hence the work itself) to the market (and hence the consumer). Unlike Jameson, then, Brown's analysis has no need of the concept of reification (a term that is conspicuously absent from his 2012 essay). The decisive question for Brown is instead whether the form of the artwork can plausibly be said to derive from the intentions of its author (which would then serve as the basis for a meaning that the critic may interpret), or whether its form is instead dictated by the demands of the market (a

⁹² See *Autonomy: The Social Ontology of Art Under Capitalism* (2019).

⁹³ Brown, "What We Worry About When We Worry About Commodification" (2016).

circumstance which would obliterate the distinction between the artwork and the object, and thus render the question of its meaning irrelevant). This is

the distinction between an object whose use (or purpose) is normatively inscribed in the object itself – a meaning that is universal, in Hegel’s terms simply *allgemeine*, available for everyone and not therefore a private matter – and an object whose use is a matter of indifference from one standpoint and a matter of possibly intense but necessarily private concern from another.⁹⁴

For Brown this “subtraction of normativity” from producer to market is a fundamental characteristic of the value form of capitalist exchange: M-C-M’. Briefly, the specificity of the M-C-M’ model is that the capitalist invests capital in the production of a commodity that can then be exchanged in return for more capital, which may then be reinvested in the production of more commodities, and so on *ad infinitum*. Since capital is pure exchange value rather than use value – more precisely, it can only be a use value for the capitalist insofar as it is an exchange value – exchange value now determines the entire production circuit from the point of view of the producer: the commodity itself exists simply as a way of turning exchange value into more exchange value. The commodity producer is therefore indifferent to the product except insofar as it facilitates this conversion. The market determines what is a use-value; the capitalist is concerned merely to produce an exchange value. The definition of the properly capitalist commodity is therefore that it is necessarily a use-value for the consumer (which is why she buys it), but it can only be a use-value for the producer insofar as it is an exchange value (which is why she sells it). Its use value is that it can be exchanged. “Normativity” is therefore relocated from the producer to the market, which determines what constitutes a use-value (and therefore,

⁹⁴ *Autonomy*, p. 6.

from the point of view of the producer, an exchange value). Since production is now necessarily determined by market demand, autonomy - in the sense of “self-determination” - has therefore definitively been relinquished. The artwork now really is just a commodity like any other.

But as Brown sets out to show in *Autonomy*, “real subsumption” in this sense cannot actually have taken place in any final or definitive sense, because the capitalist form of value is always a *dialectic* between that which is internal and external to commodification. Brown’s intervention then is not to deny Jameson’s claim that “real subsumption” in the sense of the generalization of the M-C-M’ form is tendentially complete, and hence constitutes a general, systemic condition under “late capitalism”; rather, it is to assert that even *within* an achieved regime of “real subsumption” there is still a dialectic between real and formal subsumption, or between “zones” of heteronomy and autonomy within the production circuit. Accordingly, we can distinguish between art that has been merely “formally” subsumed (and is hence still autonomous) and art that has been “really” subsumed (and which is hence no longer art at all, but an art-commodity) by attending to its structural position within the circuit of capitalist production:

In order for formal subsumption in a given corner of industry to obtain with any permanence, it must be afforded some degree of protection: professional guilds, research-based tenure, Adorno’s well-funded cultural institutions, or... something like Bourdieu’s concept of a field of restricted production.⁹⁵

For Brown, market “protection” creates zones of autonomy within “real subsumption” by insulating the artist from the M-C-M’ form of commodity production, and hence ensuring that artistic production is able to continue to operate along the lines of the C-M-C form. Brown’s

⁹⁵ Brown (2012), p. 12.

strategy for conceptualizing this distinction in his 2012 essay is by redeploying, perhaps counterintuitively, Bourdieu's dual model of the "field of mass production" and the "field of restricted production": "the establishment of a field of restricted production forcibly carves a zone of formal subsumption out of the field of large-scale production which is really and entirely subsumed under capital" (13).⁹⁶

In Bourdieu's model, the "field of restricted production" designates a particular, protected sector within the field of cultural production as a whole, in which economic capital (in the form of profit) is replaced by "symbolic" capital, which is conversely accrued through the *refusal* of the demands of the market and hence the assertion of artistic autonomy. The logic of the "field of restricted production" for Bourdieu is thus that of "the economic world reversed".⁹⁷ Under these conditions, the artist is able to assert her relative autonomy from market forces, and hence to create artworks according to (and in dialogue with) the internal standards of a given form or genre, rather than catering directly for external demand by creating saleable commodities. But the field of restricted production can only exist as a protected enclave *within* the field of mass production. Rather than asserting the existence of a residual zone outside of real subsumption that has not yet been eclipsed, Brown therefore conceives of the dialectic of mass (commercial) production and restricted (protected) production, and hence the dialectic of real and formal subsumption, heteronomy and autonomy, as something that subsists *within* real subsumption. And this allows Brown to assert the contemporary continuation of the modernist

⁹⁶ Counterintuitively, because, as Brown notes, Bourdieu's intention is certainly not to affirm the validity or political expediency of modernist autonomy-claims, but rather to knock them off their pedestal. Whereas Brown is explicitly using Bourdieu for the opposite purpose, to justify what he sees as a neo-Adornian claim for the politics of artistic autonomy, waged against the neoliberal "commodification of everything".

⁹⁷ Bourdieu (1993).

project of autonomous artistic production, and hence the distinction between the artwork and the commodity: “the Bourdieusian restricted field is the condition of possibility of modernism as such, the condition of possibility of a Hegelian concern for the ‘matter at hand’ under full-blown capitalism” (14).⁹⁸

For Brown the question of whether or not the artwork is autonomous, and that of whether or not it is a (specifically capitalist) commodity, are really just different ways of getting at the real question: does the artwork have a *meaning*? Because if the form of the commodity is dictated by the market (which determines what is a use-value) then its meaning is not contained within itself, or in the intention of the producer, but in the market itself. Hence we can produce a sociological reading of what a given art-commodity tells us about the society that produced the demand for it, but we cannot produce an interpretation of its meaning, because strictly speaking it does not have one. This is because “meaning” for Brown is intended, and hence normative. Intention is the only thing that can distinguish for us between something that was put there for a purpose (a meaning), and a private consumer preference (an affect). And so we can only produce an *interpretation* of an artwork in which the power to dictate what is and is not a use value lies with the producer rather than with the market, because that artwork has a meaning, in the form of an intention that is realized in it. So we have a series of equivalences: autonomy = self-determination = intention = meaning.

The connection between autonomy, meaning and intention is a crucial insight in helping us to understand the political and philosophical stakes of the problem of art’s autonomy. Yet at

⁹⁸ Though in an important modification of Bourdieu’s binary model, Brown points out that in contemporary cultural production there are now multiple fields of restricted production, as opposed to the classic divide between modernist “high” culture and commercial “mass” culture.

the same time, reading Brown's analysis one cannot help but feel that his attempts to *resolve* the question one way or another by establishing in theoretical terms where the location of "normative force" lies - whether in the intention of the artist or in the market - is ultimately rather a distraction from the actual problem. Brown's analysis is finally unconvincing because he approaches the problem of autonomy in both *ontological* and *spatial* terms: ontological in the sense of autonomy being a property of the artwork (insofar as it is an artwork), and spatial in the sense that autonomy is only to be found in "zones of restricted production" that have been "carved out" within real subsumption. That is, Brown perfectly demonstrates the established logic of the conceptualization of the problem of autonomy that I have criticized in my first chapter. For Brown, autonomy is a claim or assertion, which is posited as a property of the artwork, and which is the consequence of a set of conditions of possibility which allow us as critics to establish autonomous from heteronomous works, and hence make evaluative judgments that distinguish between artworks and objects, and artworks and commodities.

Yet Brown's analysis can hardly be said to succeed in resolving objectively the series of provocative questions he develops into grounds for making these categorical discriminations. For all that it is rigorous on its own terms, there are many areas of Brown's theory that are eminently open to critique. The distinction between the artwork that is intended by an individual and one that is dictated by the market is excessively neat and surely naïve: Brown arguably overestimates the heteronomy of the commodity just as he overestimates the autonomy of the artwork, in part because he implicitly relies on a rational-actor model of economic behavior which assumes an identity between *structural* claims about the (rational) location of normativity and hence intentionality (the market or the artist), and *psychological* claims about the respective (rational)

“interests” of commodity producers and artists.⁹⁹ One does not need to dwell for too long upon this distinction to complicate it with the observations that people may well have (strictly speaking) irrational attachments to and investments in the commodities and objects that they produce, and that artistic intentions are in any case themselves socially produced and consecrated. What is more, the economism of Brown’s explanation reproduces the reduction that is the obvious flaw of Beech’s analysis. While Brown establishes the stakes of the question of artistic autonomy to a greater extent than Beech, he nonetheless also leaves us with the sense that we have circled back to the beginning of the problem that confronted Western Marxism: the inadequacy of a purely economic analysis. Even if we were to accept Brown’s terms for establishing the autonomy of a given artwork in purely economic terms, does this not simply point to the need to expand those terms in order to account for the various extra-economic mediators - say, language, power, ideology, reification, the unconscious, or biopolitical production - that would tend to complicate the neat distinction between autonomous and heteronomous intentions, and hence internal and external forms of meaning?

Yet for the purposes of the literary readings that I pursue in this dissertation, there is a yet more significant gap in Brown’s analysis: it does not account for any of the reasons why the artworks that have “achieved” autonomy in his terms in relation to the market (modernist artworks located within the “field of restricted production”), are precisely those that most often encounter autonomy *not* as a solution to and liberation from the threat of commodification, but rather as *itself constituting* a problem and an existential threat. This is because for Brown,

⁹⁹ For a critique of Marxian political economy that replaces the category of the logically inevitable “contradiction” between labor and capital with that of the contingent “antagonism”, see Ernesto Laclau, *New Reflections on the Revolution of Our Time* (1990), p. 9.

autonomy is something that is “achieved”. Brown’s analysis therefore simply brings us back to the start of the problem as I conceive it, which is the question of what can possibly justify or legitimate art which is produced purely as art, and which hence has no recourse to any absolute standard of legitimation. What Brown does not seem to see, this is to say, is that the questions that he wants to solve *theoretically* - can the artwork have a meaning of its own? Can it lay claim to any “normative force”? Is there ultimately anything that distinguishes it from a mere commodity? - are also (and moreover) the very questions that the autonomous artwork is forced to ask *of itself*.

The artwork that is autonomous in Brown’s terms is therefore the very artwork that *begins* to encounter and work through the problematic of autonomy in my terms. And this brings me to the point where I can introduce what will be my essential claim in the next section of this chapter: what Brown calls “the erosion of art’s normative force” - and as its correlatives: the grounds for making categorical distinctions between artworks, objects and commodities, extra-market and market-dictated intentions, or the question of whether an artwork can be said to have a meaning - precisely *is* the problematic of art’s autonomy. Brown has therefore put his finger on the very nub of the problem, but he is looking at it the wrong way around. Rather than something that would be entailed were art to *cease* to be autonomous any longer in ontological terms, art’s loss of “normative force” is actually coextensive with the historical process by which art first *became* autonomous in social terms. It is therefore not something that could potentially happen, but rather something that already *did* happen, and that as such forms the starting point for an analysis of autonomy: *not* as an ontological property that a given artwork might possess, but

rather as a problematic and a constitutive set of contradictions that arises with, and is inseparable from the very concept and practice of art “as such”.

From this point of view, we might move away from Beech, Brown and Jameson: whereas for these theorists autonomy is ultimately a property of a certain kind of artwork under certain conditions, in what follows I will elaborate a theory of autonomy as an insoluble and hence *untimely* problematic: one which is inseparable from the concept of art as such, and which is therefore neither possessed by the artwork nor experienced by the reader or viewer, but instead worked through immanently as a series of problems and recurrent self-contradictions. Commodification is therefore not that which threatens to *end* art’s autonomy, but rather the paradoxically self-canceling condition of possibility of that autonomy (and hence therefore, the condition of its impossibility). As Sarah Brouillette suggests in her perceptive 2016 review of Beech’s *Art and Value*:

the fact of art’s association with uniqueness and irreproducibility... is one that emerged historically in relation to capitalism’s dominant tendencies. So while aspects of art may indeed be ‘non-economic’, it is just as true that the emergence of the category of art, and the privileged place held for aesthetic autonomy within that category, cannot be separated from the emergence of capitalism, in that it only becomes possible to conceive of art as an autonomous and ‘self-consistent’ set of practices vis-à-vis what Spaulding describes as ‘a different logic’, namely, the logic of capitalist value production. Far from representing a pure non-capitalist other, the production of art exists in an uneasy and conflicted relationship with the capitalist value form, and that unease will remain in force so long as capitalism itself does. I suggest then... that whereas Beech emphasizes fine art as non-economic, we might broaden that inquiry to conceive aesthetic activity of various kinds, as *trapped in a definitively problematic relation to the production of capitalist value*.¹⁰⁰

As I will show in what follows, we can use such a conceptualization of the relationship between artistic and capitalist “forms of value” - as neither definitively identical nor mutually distinct, but

¹⁰⁰ Sarah Brouillette, “On Art and Value”, *Mediations* Volume 29, No. 2: Lukács 2016 <https://mediationsjournal.org/articles/on-art-and-real-subsumption>, my italics.

instead “definitively problematic” - to call into question both the subsumption narrative and, by extension, the entire Eurocentric concept of history that it presupposes. Developing a more comprehensive version of the line of argumentation that Brouillette speculates upon above will therefore be central to my account of autonomy as a problematic that has a central and conceptually underappreciated relevance to the contemporary “transnational” novel in an age of “world literature”.

“Formal Subsumption” and the Untimely: Harry Harootunian, Anna Tsing

Such a conception of art and capital as “trapped in a definitively problematic relation” corresponds to a wave of recent work that has sought to “deprovincialize” Marxism by critiquing the Eurocentric teleology that has subtended many of its more prominent iterations. Eli Jelly-Schapiro’s 2023 book, *Moments of Capital: World Theory, World Literature* exemplifies this tendency in recent Marxist thought. Jelly-Schapiro identifies an “abiding tension” in Marx’s *Capital*, between

the teleology of development - the assumption that all societies, if asymmetrically advanced, are moving toward the same future of industrial production and universalized wage labor - and the fact of capital’s intrinsic unevenness - the recognition that the development of the metropolises is enabled by the underdevelopment of the colonized periphery.¹⁰¹

¹⁰¹ Eli Jelly-Schapiro, *Moments of Capital: World Theory, World Literature* (2023) p. 163.

Whereas orthodox Marxist theory has committed to various forms of developmentalism or “stage-ism”, contemporary Marxist theory has attempted to reconcile capital’s diachronic temporality of development with the synchronic coexistence of multiple temporalities and chronologies in a state of constitutive unevenness. Jelly-Schapiro’s contribution to this collective revisionary endeavor is to theorize the “synchronic” coexistence of three “moments of capital” that characterize the contemporary conjuncture: “primitive accumulation”, “expanded reproduction” and “synthetic dispossession” (or, violent dispossession, ideological hegemony and neoliberal privatization). If “stageist” Marxism regards these categories as temporary and sequential processes that characterize particular phases of development before being superseded, Jelly-Shapiro instead figures them as recurring or persistent aspects of capitalism, the latter now conceived not as a closed, homogeneous totality but rather as an assemblage of heterogeneous “moments”.

Jelly-Schapiro’s emphasis on synchronic unevenness extends a tradition of work, by the likes of Frantz Fanon, Walter Rodney, Immanuel Wallerstein, Stuart Hall, Cedric Robinson, Dipesh Chakrabarty, Sylvia Federici, Massimiliano Tomba, Harry Harootunian, Giovanni Arrighi, Anna Tsing, Alexander Anievas and Karem Nisancioglu, WReC and Nikhil Singh that has sought (in Harootunian’s terms) to “deprovincialize” Marxism by critiquing and revising its “Eurocentric premises”.¹⁰² In his 2015 work, *Marx After Marx*, Harry Harootunian critiques a

¹⁰² Jelly-Schapiro, p. 178. See in particular, Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961), Walter Rodney, *How Europe Underdeveloped Africa* (1972), Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Massimiliano Tomba, *Marx’s Temporalities* (2012), Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2000), Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx* (2015), Immanuel Wallerstein, *The Modern World-System Vol.1* (1974), Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) and *Adam Smith in Beijing* (2007), Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), Alexander Anievas and Karem Nisancoglu, *How the West Came to Rule* (2015), WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015), Nikhil Singh, *Race*

lineage of Western Marxism running from Georg Lukacs to Ernest Mandel to Antonio Negri that, in its exaggerated focus on the “commodity fetish” and the “totalization” of capital through the alleged completion of the process of “real subsumption”, has paid inadequate attention to the constitutively uneven temporalities of capitalist development, and in particular to the nature of the dynamic between the categories of formal and real subsumption:

Lukács represented a shift from preoccupations with labor and the production process, as such, to the force of the commodity form to structure thought and culture. In our time, this tendency has become so hegemonic or commonsense among Marxist and non-Marxian interpreters of cultural studies that it has managed to mask its own culturally and politically specific origins and run the risk of making its claims complicit with capitalism’s self-representation. This reflection undoubtedly derives from the presumption that the commodity relation has been finally achieved everywhere, signaling the final realization of what Marx named ‘real subsumption’ and announcing the final completion of capitalism’s domination of everyday life. The apparent consequence in this changed perspective that assumes capital’s completion has been the accompanying conviction that all of society has been subsumed, whereby value has trumped history.¹⁰³

For Harootunian this has contributed to a kind of theoretical “provincialism”. Western Marxism generates an account of capitalism per se out of a critique aimed at the specific form of capitalism predominant in Western Europe during the twentieth century; a critique centered on the process of real subsumption, the commodity fetish, and the progressive reification of social relations. In doing so, Western Marxism became “infected with the idea of progressive developmentalism”, internalizing and unwittingly reproducing capitalism’s own ideology of historical progress in the form of an account of capitalist development as progressive, linear and unidirectional (7). The narrative of postmodernism as the system-wide transition from “formal” to “real subsumption” is thus for Harootunian not only ahistorical, but “complicit with

and America’s Long War (2017), Stuart Hall, “Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance” (1980), in *Stuart Hall: Essential Essays, Vol. 1* (2019).

¹⁰³ Harry Harootunian, *Marx After Marx: History and Time in the Expansion of Capitalism* (2015), p. 1.

capitalism's own self-representation" (1). Such a narrative assumes a "stageist" teleology, in which formal subsumption inevitably and uniformly progresses to "real subsumption" via the rationalization and Taylorization of the labor process, that sublimates into Marxist terminology the Eurocentric narrative of history as the *bildungsroman* of capital, and of the West as the subject of history.¹⁰⁴

From Harootunian's perspective, theoretical approaches such as world-systems theory and dependency theory, whose explicit project has been to unthink Eurocentrism from within a Marxist framework, have not gone far enough. The binary opposition between a developed core and an underdeveloped periphery risks replicating the fallacy of the "real subsumption" hypothesis to the extent that it fails to recognize "the very unevenness lived by all societies, both the putatively advanced and the backward, as a condition of fulfilling capital's law of accumulation" (8). Rather than throwing the baby of historical materialism out with the bathwater of Eurocentrism, however, Harootunian identifies a counter-lineage of non-Eurocentric Marxism that, starting with a revisionary return to Marx himself, runs through figures such as Leon Trotsky, Rosa Luxembourgh, Antonio Gramsci, Ernst Bloch and José Carlos Mariátegui.

The key to remedying the provincialism of Western Marxism, for Harootunian, is the more nuanced understanding that he finds within this tradition (explicitly stated as such or

¹⁰⁴ For key critiques of the "real subsumption" narrative see in particular Harootunian, *Marx After Marx* (2015); Chakrabarty, "Two Histories of Capital", in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), pp. 47-71; Cedric Robinson, *Black Marxism* (1983); Stuart Hall, "Race, Articulation and Societies Structured in Dominance" (1980), Sylvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch* (2004), Jason W. Moore, *Capitalism in the Web of Life* (2015), Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World* (2015), Alexander Anievas and Karem Nisancioglu, *How the West Came to Rule* (2015), Giovanni Arrighi, *The Long Twentieth Century* (1994) and Adam Smith in *Beijing* (2007), Massimiliano Toomba, *Marx's Temporalities* (2014).

otherwise) of the dynamic between formal and real subsumption, which accounts for the uneven development that is constitutive of capitalism on a global scale. As we have seen, Jameson's work is typical of a tendency within Western Marxism to regard "formal subsumption" as a stage, or as the preliminary to "real subsumption". If capital "formally subsumes" existing productive processes by appropriating them for the production of commodities within a capitalist economy, those existing processes are taken to become properly capitalist ("really subsumed") only once they have been rationalized and reorganized along what are taken to be specifically capitalist lines (ie, those that resemble the streamlined, instrumentally and technologically rationalized processes typical of industrial production). Yet for Harootunian, this notion of an ineluctable progression from formal to real subsumption has its basis neither in empirical reality nor in Marxian political economy properly understood, but in a residual idealism. "What this tendency (in Marxist theory) reveals is the power of stagism to act as a political unconscious that posits the ironclad necessity of a completed capitalism as the condition for realizing socialism" (41).

Harootunian proposes that we read "formal subsumption" as "a form rather than a chronologically measured stage in the development of capitalism" (126). Indeed, far from being merely vestibular to real subsumption (or, capitalism proper), for Harootunian formal subsumption itself constitutes "capitalism's rule of development" (19):

The really important feature of Marx's conceptualization of formal subsumption as the principal logic of capitalist development was its capacious aptitude for appropriating what it found near at hand, thus designating a division between what was outside of it, what was seen as 'different,' and what was inside, and incorporating and combining it with the capitalist production process as if it naturally belonged there, literally metabolizing it in such a way that it was retrojected back and seen as an 'always-already' presupposition of capital's claim to a natural history. The actual process of what Marx described as capital's 'becoming' consistently required absorbing these outside,

noncapitalist elements and making them part of its metabolic system, which, in every phase of development, would present itself as completed and identical with its origins. (12)

Formal subsumption therefore names a condition of hybridity, in which pre-capitalist social forms or productive processes are harnessed to the ends of capitalist commodity production without necessarily being reorganized to correspond specifically to the logic of capitalist production. As Anna Tsing observes in *The Mushroom at the End of the World*, (published, like Harootunian's work, in 2015), "Amassing wealth is possible without rationalizing labor and raw materials".¹⁰⁵ Tsing calls this process "salvage accumulation": "the process through which lead firms amass capital without controlling the conditions under which commodities are produced" (34), or, "the creation of capitalist value from noncapitalist value regimes" (64). As Tsing elaborates,

Sites for salvage are simultaneously inside and outside capitalism; I call them 'pericapitalist.' All kinds of goods and services produced by pericapitalist activities, human and nonhuman, are salvaged for capitalist accumulation. If a peasant family produces a crop that enters capitalist food chains, capital accumulation is possible through salvaging the value created in peasant farming. Now that global supply chains have come to characterize world capitalism, we see this process everywhere. 'Supply chains' are commodity chains that translate value to the benefit of dominant firms; translation between noncapitalist and capitalist value systems is what they do. (34)

Tsing's "pericapitalist" "sites" are legible in Harootunian's terms as processes or forms that have been merely formally subsumed by capital, and which therefore retain a hybrid identity, existing in perpetuity in a state "simultaneously inside and outside capitalism". As both Tsing and Harootunian argue, this modification to the teleological premises of Marxian political economy involves a multiplication and decentering of the temporalit(ies) of both capitalist production and

¹⁰⁵ Anna Tsing, *The Mushroom at the End of the World: On the Possibility of Life in Capitalist Ruins* (2015), p. 33.

history. The “empty, homogeneous time” of capital masks the heterogeneous temporalities and rhythms of the various cultures, forms of life, and productive processes that are disjunctively synthesized - or, formally subsumed - within it: harnessed to its ends without being systematically restructured in its image. Thus capitalism for Tsing is best thought of not as a homogenizing totality that subsumes the particular, but a “polyphonic assemblage” of heterogeneous parts. If real subsumption involves the rationalization of a given production process - and hence its being brought up to speed with the developmental present of capitalist temporality - formal subsumption is a kind of mausoleum in which the ruins or remains of previous modes of production are preserved, and continue to haunt the present like the undead: “The interesting thing about this form is that it embodied the inscription of experience of the encounter between capitalism and what it found from previous modes of production but was no longer bound by it... In this way the logic of formal subsumption acted to interrupt the temporal continuum of the very process of capitalist production it also fueled”.¹⁰⁶

How might a theoretically refurbished account of formal subsumption such as Harootunian’s relate to the problem of art’s autonomy? Precisely by enabling (and even requiring) us to think of the work of art “as such” not as that which is progressively subsumed by capital (along the lines of the narrative of progressive subsumption), but rather as having been harnessed to the ends of capitalism without having been in any systematic, teleological or predictable way reorganized by it, and hence as “trapped in a definitively problematic relation to the production of capitalist value”. Art “as such” - or, art under capital - is cryogenically suspended, in a state of incomplete (and uncompletable) adaptation to its new social

¹⁰⁶ Harootunian, p. 36.

environment: liberated from its former functions and sources of legitimacy yet retaining within itself the unconscious sediment of those former functions and values.

This unconscious or sediment of art's former ritual functions survives within the novel in the form of an incommensurability between the collectivizing and territorializing function retained with its "narrative impulse",¹⁰⁷ and the deterritorializing logic of the medium itself. The paradigmatic analysis of this incommensurability is Walter Benjamin's 1933 essay, "The Storyteller", in which he argues, counterintuitively, that the novel is a symptom of the decline of storytelling:

The earliest symptom of a process whose end is the decline of storytelling is the rise of the novel at the beginning of modern times. What distinguishes the novel from the story (and from the epic in the narrower sense) is its essential dependence on the book. The dissemination of the novel became possible only with the invention of printing. What can be handed on orally, the wealth of the epic, is of a different kind from what constitutes the stock in trade of the novel. What differentiates the novel from all other forms of prose literature—the fairy tale, the legend, even the novella—is that it neither comes from oral tradition nor goes into it. This distinguishes it from storytelling in particular. The storyteller takes what he tells from experience—his own or that reported by others. And he in turn makes it the experience of those who are listening to his tale. The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself uncounseled, and cannot counsel others.¹⁰⁸

Storytelling for Benjamin is threatened with obsolescence within the disenchanted world of capitalism; the public figure of the pre-capitalist storyteller, who gives voice to the traditions, wisdom and self-understanding of a situated collectivity, becomes the "isolated" producer of

¹⁰⁷ In *The Antinomies of Realism* (2013), Fredric Jameson identifies a "narrative impulse" (or, *récit*), associated with plot and linear temporality, as one of the "twin sources of realism"; the other being a "scenic impulse" associated with "affect, or, the body's present" (see chapter one, "The Twin Sources of Realism: The Narrative Impulse", pp. 15-26, and chapter two, "The Twin Sources of Realism: Affect, or, the Body's Present", pp. 27-44). For Jameson, these "antinomies" problematically coexist in all realist novels. I discuss Jameson's *Antinomies of Realism* in greater detail below ("Conclusion: Storytelling, Autofiction, Metaculture", pp. 297-300).

¹⁰⁸ Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1933), in *Illuminations* (1955), p. 87.

artworks, which he manages more or less successfully to sell to an anonymous market. This loss of authority is reflected in what Benjamin describes as a degradation in the content of the story itself, from “counsel” to mere “information”. In its melancholy account of the destruction of traditional collective ways of life and forms of cultural expression during the transition to a disenchanted and technologically rationalized modernity, Benjamin’s essay can be read as one of the key articulations of what Timothy Brennan has called a “strain of nostalgic modernism”, which became one of the dominant paradigms for philosophical approaches to modernist art and literature, in the work of theorists such as Martin Heidegger, Georg Lukács, Theodor W. Adorno, Clement Greenberg, Maurice Blanchot, Roland Barthes, Paul de Man and Giorgio Agamben.¹⁰⁹

To the extent that we choose, like Brennan, to read it as positing a single logical trajectory for the novel form (the decline of storytelling), Benjamin’s essay sits squarely within this tradition. The notion that the novel’s technologizing of oral narrative inevitably leads to the demise of storytelling is of a piece with the claim, in the “Work of Art” essay, that “To an ever greater degree the work of art reproduced becomes the work of art designed for reproducibility”, a claim to which one can counterpose the subsequent rise of site specificity, installation art and performance art, in which the reproducible work is replaced by the non-reproducible event. Modernism was always among other things the formal registering of the shock of modernity: techniques such as stream of consciousness, montage, bricolage, abstraction and fragmentation internalize the material and technological changes of capitalist deterritorialization and reproduce them as form. To the extent that modernism also internalized the capitalist ideology of progress as part of its theoretical self-justification, these developments were viewed as historically

¹⁰⁹ Timothy Brennan, *Salman Rushdie and the Third World*, p. 17.

inevitable. As Alain Robbe-Grillet put it as long ago as 1957, “To tell a story has become strictly impossible” (to which one can reasonably respond, impossible for whom?).¹¹⁰

Yet an alternative way to read Benjamin’s essay is not as a prophecy of the decline of storytelling, but rather, as an account of the latter’s indefinite persistence “under erasure”, in constitutively problematized form: as a characteristic and perhaps even necessary component of novelistic discourse that nonetheless exists in a relationship of fundamental and constitutive tension with the logic of the medium itself. As Jonathan M. Hesse has argued, Benjamin’s “Artwork” essay (to which we might add “The Storyteller”) is a reworking of the Hegelian theory of the “end of art”, which likewise underpins the predicament of the novel form as articulated in Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*.¹¹¹ Like Benjamin’s account of the ironically self-annulling logic of the novel form, Hegel’s theory is not a prediction of the cessation of artistic production, but a confrontation with its untimely persistence, in constitutively problematized form, following its establishment as a socially autonomous practice. This is why art’s autonomy is (as I argue below) “hauntological”, poised between two incommensurable states: it is either still-to-come (ritual) or already past (commodity). As William Marx puts it, “literature is what remains when everything else has been removed”, a restatement of the Blanchotian paradox: “Literature is heading towards its essence, which is its disappearance”.¹¹²

The death of the novel from such a point of view is not an event that occurs with the exhaustion of modernism, but rather one that is constitutive of the novel, as the form that most

¹¹⁰ Alain Robbe-Grillet, *For a New Novel: Essays on Fiction* (1966), p. 33.

¹¹¹ See Jonathan M. Hesse, “Aesthetics, Politics and the End of Art”, in *Reconstituting the Body Politic* (1999), pp. 59-81.

¹¹² William Marx, *Hatred of Literature* (2018), 2; Maurice Blanchot, “The Disappearance of Literature”, in *The Book to Come* (1959).

fully embodies the immanent contradictions of the work of art “as such”. The novel is the mausoleum of a collectivizing storytelling tradition that it preserves under erasure, in spectral form. Novelistic history is an unending series of reenactments that are by turns melancholy, comedic, ironic, self-defeating or bathetic: a self-canceling narrative impulse whose constitutive lack is the condition of ritual embeddedness whose absence every novel serves to reinscribe. Failure and dysfunction are thus hardwired into the medium, which draws its lifeforce from its own constitutive antagonism with itself. As Tom McCarthy puts it in a 2015 interview:

I think the novel is and always has been dead, and this is the very precondition of its perpetual regeneration. *Don Quixote* is a novel about how novels don’t work (the hero tries to enact all these episodes from books, as though to test their propositions, and he, they, flunk each time); about a fundamental, systematic dysfunction written right into the medium’s core. And that’s more or less the first major novel! It’s a peculiarly zombie art form, with all the goriness, the cannibalism, and so forth that that term implies (it’s not as though you need to cut open *Ulysses*’s stomach to see what it’s been eating: it’s got everything from Defoe to Sacher-Masoch dribbling down its chin!). The novel stumbles onwards, ineluctably, gorging and disgorging its own death, its own deadness. So the novel’s not just dead—it’s undead.¹¹³

McCarthy’s sense of the novel as “undead” brings us back to Sianne Ngai’s formulation of the artwork under capital’s “powerful powerlessness”. Like its autonomy, the novel’s untimeliness is constitutive: obsolescence is not a consequence of postmodern conditions of “real subsumption”, but is hard-wired into the medium. Dysfunction is the novel’s particular mode of functioning, its specificity.

¹¹³ “Tom McCarthy by Frederic Tuten”, *Bomb Magazine*, March 15, 2015
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2015/03/18/tom-mccarthy/>.

Autonomy and “Hauntology”

What is the untimely? Self-evidently, in order to answer this question one first needs to ask, what is the timely? For G.W.F Hegel, timeliness is the continuously unfolding present of *Geist*, or “spirit”. Regardless of whether one approaches his thought (with Left Hegelians from Georg Lukács to Fredric Jameson) as an “open” system or (with poststructuralists from Louis Althusser to Jacques Derrida) as a closed Eurocentric teleology, Hegel’s revolutionary theoretical contribution is the positing of *Geist* as the subject of a universal history, now thinkable as a continuous narrative: the dialectical development of *Geist* toward reason and self-consciousness through its progressive self-objectification. *Geist* objectifies itself through formalization; it develops historically by ascending what Jameson calls “the ladder of forms”.¹¹⁴ But “form” is both a verb and a noun: both a timely process of formalization and an untimely mode of persistence. The timely and the untimely are the forms that are either adequate or no longer adequate to *Geist* at a given stage of history: the timely forms through which it manifests itself in the present of its historical unfolding; and the untimely forms, the things of the past that persist.¹¹⁵

This means that within the Hegelian system timeliness is, among other things, the measure of the authentic artwork. Art “in its highest vocation” for Hegel is the sensuous embodiment of *Geist* as it moves through a particular stage (preceded by religion, succeeded by philosophy) in its historical ascent to self-consciousness. Authentic art for Hegel is not only by

¹¹⁴ Fredric Jameson, *The Hegel Variations* (2010), p. 4. Or as Nico Israel has it, “the present form of Spirit comprehends, and preserves within it, all earlier ever-present “steps”, as on a spiral staircase whose upper flights bear material traces of the lower flights that precede them” (*Spirals*, 2015, p. 32).

¹¹⁵ G.W.F Hegel, *The Phenomenology of Spirit* (1807).

definition timely; it is the concrete instantiation *of* timeliness, the sensuous embodiment of the Absolute. That art in Hegel's time had outlived or been left behind by this timeliness - that it had been replaced by philosophy as the expression of the authentic self-knowledge of the modern age - is what Hegel means by the "end of art".¹¹⁶ Modern art for Hegel is thus a residual formation, simultaneously negated and preserved in accordance with the double logic of dialectical *aufhebung*. As Slavoj Žižek summarizes it, "The fundamental operation of *aufhebung* is reduction: the sublated thing survives, but in an 'abridged' edition, as it were, torn out of its life-world context, stripped down to its essential features, all the movement and wealth of its life reduced to a fixed mark".¹¹⁷ The "end of art" is not the cessation of art but rather art's becoming untimely: "a thing of the past" that nonetheless persists within the present, like a ghost. Modern art is not so much dead as undead.

Hegel's *Aesthetics* can and has been read (albeit against the more optimistic bent of his philosophy as a whole) as the ur-text in a romantic anti-capitalist tradition that, tending toward a certain melancholic nostalgia, reads the end of art as the symptom of humanity's fall from an originary state of authenticity (plenitude, presence to self) into a modern state of inauthenticity, "irony", or "transcendental homelessness".¹¹⁸ But as poststructuralist theory from Jacques Derrida to Judith Butler has argued, this positing of the prior existence of an authentic original

¹¹⁶ G.W.F Hegel, *Aesthetics Vol.1 (ibid)*.

¹¹⁷ Slavoj Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989) p. viii.

¹¹⁸ See for example, Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality* (1755); Friedrich Schiller, *Letters on the Aesthetic Education of Man* (1794); Karl Wilhelm Friedrich Schlegel, *Philosophical Fragments* (1991); Georg Lukács, *Theory of the Novel* (1916); Walter Benjamin, "The Storyteller" (1933), "The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility" (1935); Martin Heidegger, "The Origin of the Work of Art" (1950); Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature* (1955); Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (1970); Edgar Wind, *Art and Anarchy* (1963); Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (1994); Clement Greenberg, "Avant-Garde and Kitsch" (1939); Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality* (1976); J.M. Bernstein, *Against Voluptuous Bodies* (2006); Gabriel Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010).

that is subsequently debased into an inauthentic copy is also the quintessential ideological form of phallogocentric essentialism.¹¹⁹ Though Derrida and Butler focus on language and gender respectively, their key theoretical move is the same: to reverse the relationship between the authentic original and the inauthentic copy, by reading the very concepts of origin and authenticity as ideological constructions grounded in (and used to perpetuate) particular patriarchal regimes of power (“phallogocentrism”, or “compulsory heterosexuality”). The historical sequence of the fall from authenticity is replaced by a genealogical account of the ideological production of “authenticity” that instead posits the ontological priority of inauthenticity.

Approached on these terms, Hegel’s theory of the end of art would seem to present us with the unedifying interpretative choice of either crypto-conservative nostalgia (the end of art is art’s fall from an originary state of grace into inauthenticity) or chauvinistic liberal triumphalism (the overcoming of art by philosophy is another stage in the triumphant march of history). Yet if we attend more closely to what is meant by the category of “art” itself within the historical periods and cultures that Hegel narrativizes (as well as those that he fails to narrativize), his account can be productively viewed - and the concept of art’s autonomy can be productively re-conceptualized - through the lens of “hauntology”.

Derived from Derrida’s *Specters of Marx* (1993), hauntology is a play on “haunting” and “ontology”, which according to Mark Fisher “was in part a restatement of the key deconstructive claim that ‘being’ is not equivalent to presence. Since there is no point of pure origin, only the

¹¹⁹ Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967); Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (1990).

time of the ‘always-already’, then haunting is the state proper to being as such”.¹²⁰ Fisher here draws on Martin Hägglund’s description of Derrida’s oeuvre as a “general ‘hauntology’”, which deconstructs the “myth of presence” to show that subjectivity, experience, ontology, events, speech acts, literary texts and linguistic meanings are always “spectral”: at once composed of and mediated by iterable signifiers, and so always internally divided; constituted “under erasure”, as the (non)event of their own simultaneous presence, absence and deferral. “What is important about the figure of the specter, then, is that it cannot be fully present: it has no being in itself but marks a relation to what is *no longer* or *not yet*.”¹²¹ If Hegel’s system constitutes a framework for thinking universal history, and so for distinguishing between the timely and the untimely in relation to a collective historical narrative, Derrida’s hauntology functions to undermine such a distinction by positing both being and time as constitutively “out of joint”. Since the present never coincides with itself but is always simultaneously past and still to come, the timely is in this sense always shot through with the untimely; and so the untimely is in a sense always timely. Being and time are temporally mediated constructions, specters of themselves.

Whatever the limits of the Derridean framework as a critique of either ontology or historicity per se, the ironic structure of a (non)event that is always-already past - of a “place/non-place between presence and absence, appearance and disappearance” - allows us to understand the Hegelian “end of art” as neither a fall from an originary state of “presence” nor an aspect of a reified, stage-ist historical teleology.¹²² But in order to do so we need to employ hauntology against itself, as a *historical* (rather than a de-historicizing) category of analysis. The

¹²⁰ Mark Fisher, “Metaphysics of Crackle: Afrofuturism and Hauntology” (2013).

¹²¹ Hägglund, *Radical Atheism: Derrida and the Time of Life* (2008), p. 82.

¹²² Christopher Prendergast, “Derrida’s Hamlet” (2005), p. 45.

ironic mode of constitutive self-negation - which Derrida posits as a universal, transhistorical condition - actually describes the historical predicament of the work of art “as such” following its formal subsumption by capitalism. Art does not fall from a state of autonomy or authenticity into inauthenticity, because the autonomy of art has no historical moment of instantiation. Art “as such” is instead constituted as a classic deconstructive “double bind”, in which its condition of possibility is also the condition of its impossibility.¹²³ Autonomous art (or simply, art under capitalism) is a specter, constituted in and through the process of its own disappearance.

To understand why this is a historically specific predicament we can turn back to Hegel, since art’s formal subsumption by capitalism is the historical process that subtends Hegel’s announcement that art “in its highest vocation” is “a thing of the past”. As Guy Debord notes in *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), the paradox of this claim is that according to Hegel’s reasoning “art” was dead on arrival: “Art’s declaration of independence is the beginning of the end of art”.¹²⁴ The moment of the birth of art “as such” - through the combined historical process of its commodification, its detachment from ritual, its desacralizing, its territorial disembedding, its technical reproducibility, and its institutionalization as a separate sphere serving no external purpose - is also the moment in which art becomes a sector of the capitalist economy, and artists and artworks are confronted with the prospect of their loss of cultural authority. As Hegel puts it, with uncharacteristic concision, “Art, considered purely as art, becomes to a certain extent something superfluous” (*Aesthetics*, 535). Or, as Adorno puts it in *Aesthetic Theory*: “It is

¹²³ On the “double bind”, see Spivak, *An Aesthetic Education in the Era of Globalization* (2012), pp 1-34.

¹²⁴ Debord, *Society of the Spectacle* (1967), p. 133.

uncertain if art today is still possible; whether, with its complete emancipation, it did not sever its own preconditions” (1).

Art “as such” in Hegel’s account is therefore not just untimely, but hauntological: it comes into being in and through the very process that renders it a thing of the past, and thus never actually attains or passes through a moment of authenticity, presence and plenitude *as art*. Not only does Hegel’s end of art prophesy art’s fall into irony; the theory itself has an ironic (we might even say, a deconstructive) structure, since it theorizes art “as such” as constitutively dead. In the very moment in which it is liberated from ritual, art has already degenerated into mere commodity production: art “as such” is a “self-annihilating nothing” constituted as the non-event of its simultaneous appearance and disappearance.¹²⁵ Art “as such” therefore has a fundamentally spectral ontology: it does not and cannot coincide with itself, but is rather both always-already past (commodity production) and still to come (ritual). Art “as such”, in other words, conforms to the deconstructive logic of the “trace”: it is constituted “under erasure”, as the self-negating simultaneity of its own presence, absence and deferral.

In *White Mythologies* (1990), Robert J.C. Young argues that Hegel’s dialectical philosophy of history is based on his astute contemporary diagnosis of the real expansionist logic of European imperialism, which Hegel then falsely abstracts and systematizes into a universal teleology.¹²⁶ Could we not also apply this argument to Hegel’s theory of the end of art? Hegel was articulating a genuinely valuable intuition about the radical changes to the social status and function of artworks that were in the process of taking place around him (“in solution”, to use

¹²⁵ Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (1994), p. 56.

¹²⁶ Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West* (1990), pp. 2-4.

Raymond Williams's metaphor for an emergent "structure of feeling") in Europe at the turn of the nineteenth century.¹²⁷ That insight being that the autonomization of art (the production of art "as such", for no particular use or purpose), which on one hand gives birth to an ongoing compensatory aestheticist discourse, value-system, ideology and style of artistic production, at the same time involves a vast desacralizing of the sphere of the aesthetic. If art is no longer the means for expressing some collectively binding, normative (religious, moral, mythological) truth, but is instead simply the self-expression of an individual, what authority or grounds for universality can it possibly retain? Does the production of artworks not then risk becoming either private self-indulgence or simply another form of capitalist enterprise?

The same spectral logic, and the same problem of legitimacy, also applies to aesthetic experience "as such". What I have just called the "desacralizing of the sphere of the aesthetic" conforms to the hauntological structure insofar as the autonomization of art, which is coextensive with this desacralizing of the aesthetic, is also the very process through which the aesthetic "as such" becomes thinkable, that is, by which the experience of art is detached from spirituality and becomes (merely) aesthetic. With the detachment of art from religion, the balance of power logically shifts from the artwork to the consumer of the artwork, who is now a connoisseur (or, a customer) under no particular compulsion to respond in any particular way to a given artwork, or to value any given artwork more or less than any other. The former religious supplicant, beholden to communal structures of authority and belief, becomes the modern "man of taste",

¹²⁷ Raymond Williams, *Marxism and Literature* (1977), p. 113.

who is beholden to nothing but his own individual (and individuating) aesthetic preferences, and who accordingly “bow(s) the knee no longer”.¹²⁸

But this shift in the balance of power, in the same moment that it gives birth to the aesthetic experience “as such”, simultaneously compromises the entire premise of that experience: the authority and normative force of the artwork. The birth of the aesthetic “as such” is coextensive with the desacralizing and loss of authority of the artworks that are the source and premise of the aesthetic experience. Therefore, the moment in which the aesthetic experience is born is the moment in which it becomes unmoored from its object, and is faced with the prospect of its own contingent subjectivism. Religious supplication is desublimated into mere taste, denuded of normative grounds in the very moment in which it is absolutized. The aesthetic is always-already desacralized, but this condition of possibility is a condition of impossibility insofar as it also entails a negation of the very object that the aesthetic experience is an experience *of*. The “autonomous aesthetic” is therefore on one level a performative contradiction, or a self-negation: in absolutizing the aesthetic experience it simultaneously assumes and negates the grounds for that experience, i.e. the unique power and authority of the work of art. The autonomous aesthetic therefore has no authentic moment of realization: it never coincides with itself, but is either still to come (religious supplication) or too late (mere taste).

This condition of spectrality, or this double constitutive negation (of the work of art and the aesthetic experience “as such”), underpins an ongoing historical crisis of autonomization, whose consequences Walter Benjamin famously describes in terms of art’s loss of “aura”, and that Michael Fried tracks chronologically from the eighteenth century to the present, in a series

¹²⁸ Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 103.

of works running from “Art and Objecthood” (1967) through to *Absorption and Theatricality* (1976) and *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (2008). Though on one level Benjamin and Fried’s accounts are obviously contradictory - Benjamin positing a quality, “aura”, that is progressively destroyed with the onset of modernity; Fried positing a seemingly comparable quality, “absorption”, that characterizes modernist painting from the eighteenth century onward - in another sense they can be read as complimentary (if antagonistic) responses to the predicament of autonomy. On one hand, Benjamin’s “aura” describes the sacred function of the pre-modern artwork, which for Benjamin is dissolved by its technical reproducibility. The latter detaches the artwork from its “embeddedness within the context of tradition”, rendering it portable across contexts (or as Derrida would put it, “iterable”), and in doing so shifts the hierarchy between artwork and observer: auratic submission is debased into mere aesthetic contemplation (24).¹²⁹ Apposite to Barthes’s “death of the author”, then, for Benjamin the death of the aura is the birth of the reader/viewer. Or in other words, the death of the suppliant who (de)subjects himself to the auratic authority of the religious work (its “cult value”), is the birth of the critic and aesthete, the “man of taste” who subjects the artwork to his disinterested, evaluative aesthetic judgments (its “exhibition value”).¹³⁰

In contrast, Fried’s historical account of the emergence, in French eighteenth century anti-Rococo painting and criticism, of the “primacy of absorption” - the negation of the presence

¹²⁹ This and all subsequent references are to Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility: Second Version” (1935), in Michael Jennings *et al* (eds.), *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008), pp. 19-55.

¹³⁰ Benjamin, p. 25. For Benjamin-adjacent accounts of the debasement of “aura” into aesthetics, and the consequent emergence of the categories of “taste” and “the interesting”, see Edgar Wind’s classic *Art and Anarchy* (1963), Giorgio Agamben’s *The Man Without Content* (1994), and Sianne Ngai’s more recent *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012).

of the beholder enacted through both the “absorbed” attitudes of the figures represented in the painting, and the overall formal unity and cohesion of their arrangement on the canvas - would more obviously be said to begin historically with the dissolution of aura that Benjamin describes. Whereas Benjamin posits the death of the aura as the birth of the reader/viewer, Fried posits the primacy of absorption as the negation of the viewer. Yet absorption can therefore also be read as a compensatory response to the loss of the aura: an attempt to reclaim the sacred authority, formerly grounded in art’s “parasitic subservience to ritual”, on purely aesthetic grounds (24). Indeed, the historical significance of absorption for Fried is as the determinate negation of the specifically modern problematic of “theatricality”, or, “the desire to escape the theatricalizing consequences of the beholder’s presence”.¹³¹ The death of the aura is the birth of the viewer; and the birth of the viewer is the birth of absorption as art’s rear-guard action against the theatricalizing consequences of autonomization. Benjamin is concerned with an “auratic” quality that is constitutively absent from the modern artwork, and with the reactionary and even proto-fascist character of modern attempts to recreate it. Fried is concerned with an “absorptive”, anti-theatrical style that only becomes a going concern when the authority of the artwork and its indifference to the observer can no longer be taken for granted: ie, precisely when the “aura” of the traditional, religious work dissolves into the “theatricality” of the debased modern art-commodity that is obliged to appeal both to the disinterested aesthetic sensibility of the observer, and to the vicissitudes of the anonymous market. In this reading, Benjamin’s (and behind him, Hegel’s) account is presupposed by Fried’s, whereas Fried’s account compliments Benjamin’s

¹³¹ Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality*, p. 4.

precisely to the extent that the compensatory strategy of absorption exemplifies the reactionary aestheticism that Benjamin was writing against.

Benjamin and Fried therefore represent two potential lines of response to the crisis of legitimacy that threatens art “as such” following its autonomization. For Benjamin, the end of art is, while not without its melancholy aspect, redeemable as a progressive development provided that socialism turns the newfound profanity of the aesthetic to its advantage by “politicizing art” (42). Fried’s strategy is virtually the opposite: to theorize the assertion of the artwork’s formal autonomy in the face of the threat of its commodification and debasement, and so to reassert the primacy of intentional form over the affective response of the viewer.¹³² Fried’s account therefore exemplifies an aestheticist response to autonomization, whereas Benjamin’s exemplifies an anti-aestheticist response. On these terms Fried would seem to have less in common with Benjamin than with Adorno, for whom the artwork’s autonomy, in this sense adjacent to anti-theatricality, emerges as a political quality through its precarious negation of the encroachments of the commodity form, which both presupposes and effects the debasement of “cult value” into “exhibition value”, and hence exacerbates the threat to the artwork’s normative status and authority that Benjamin is describing with the concept of its loss of aura.

Yet both the aura and absorption are decentered by the spectral logic that applies to art and the aesthetic “as such” in our reading of Hegel’s paradoxically constitutive “end of art”. The spectral character of the aura emerges in and through the very contradictions that problematize its conceptual articulation within Benjamin’s “Work of Art” essay. This relates firstly to a formal tension that runs through the essay. Benjamin’s primary analytical object is mechanical

¹³² See “Art and Objecthood” (1967).

reproducibility, which he identifies as the proximal cause of the dissolution of the aura. But the essay's relatively concentrated focus on reproducibility thereby comes into tension with the totality of the historical process of which reproducibility is itself a part: the historical development of the capitalist mode of production, and the autonomization of art via commodification. Mechanical reproducibility is therefore structurally reified by the form of the essay, leading Benjamin to posit a false technological determinism. Whereas Hegel misreads the process of art's autonomization as part of an idealist master-narrative of spirit's progressive unfolding, Benjamin misreads it as the mechanical effect of technical reproducibility.¹³³ This occludes the hidden mediator between the identifiable proximate cause (reproducibility) and the unrepresentable dialectical cause (the capitalist mode of production as a whole): the formal subsumption of art by capital, which detaches the artwork from its "embeddedness within the context of tradition" and its "parasitic subservience to ritual" and in doing so creates the problem of art and aesthetic experience "as such", whose consequences both Hegel and Benjamin describe so incisively (24). Reproducibility is bound up in this process and has its own particular agency, which Benjamin draws out with great insight. But because his argument presupposes (without identifying) the broader historical process of art's autonomization he falsely attributes all of its effects to a single, technological cause.

This occlusion of both the historical process and the philosophical problem of art's autonomization by a reified technological determinism leads to an additional structural tension in Benjamin's essay, between the aura and the aesthetic. This relates to the problem of

¹³³ As Peter Bürger puts it, "the theorem according to which reproduction techniques destroy art that has an aura is a pseudomaterialist explanatory model" (*Theory of the Avant-Garde*, p. 31).

periodization. One obvious way of approaching the aura is as an aesthetic category: an untimely after-effect of art's former religious authority that survives the "end of art" and is carried over into modernity precisely *as* the autonomous aesthetic, as the artwork's otherworldly power over the observer. This aura is then progressively dissolved by mechanical reproducibility, meaning both that the high modernist artworks of Benjamin's time were constitutively post-auratic, and that the auratic masterworks of classical high bourgeois culture were also progressively stripped of their power and authority. This reflects a broader crisis of bourgeois hegemony. The resultant power vacuum is the condition of possibility of fascism, but also (perhaps) of socialism. Fascism attempts to reconstitute the aura in an age of mechanical reproducibility through the aestheticizing of politics, thereby mobilizing the masses in a way that intensifies their subjection to auratic authority and preserves the existing property relations. The result is war.¹³⁴ Socialism "replies by politicizing art", and in particular by mobilizing the quintessential (post) art-form of mechanical reproducibility, the cinema (42). This involves not resisting but embracing the democratizing technological destruction of the artwork's auratic authority as a means of empowering the masses to rise up and dissolve the existing property relations.

According to this reading, the crisis of the destruction of the aura, while a long term process stretching back to the Renaissance, comes to a head with modernism in the early twentieth century. Such a reading is very nearly correct, but misses something crucial: to conflate the aura and the aesthetic in this way is fundamentally to misconstrue the spectral logic of

¹³⁴ "Fascism attempts to organize the newly proletarianized masses while leaving intact the property relations which they strive to abolish. It sees its salvation in granting expression to the masses-but on no account granting them rights. The masses have a right to changed property relations; fascism seeks to give them expression in keeping these relations unchanged. The logical outcome of fascism is an aestheticizing of political life... *All efforts to aestheticize politics culminate in one point. That one point is war.*" (Benjamin, p. 41).

autonomous art, and so of the aura itself. Benjamin describes the aura phenomenologically as the “here and now of the original” that is dissolved by the copy (21). This would describe the difference between, say, the actual “Mona Lisa” that Leonardo Da Vinci painted, and the one that today hangs in the Louvre: the former was an original, but the latter, despite being the same physical object, has been fundamentally altered, in its nature and its relation to the viewer, by mechanical reproducibility. The original “Mona Lisa” had an aura that was then progressively dissolved by its mechanical reproducibility, as the proliferation of copies render it a citational image rather than a unique icon, and this changes the balance of power between the artwork and the observer. So the aesthetic experience of the contemporary art lover who gazes at the “Mona Lisa” in the Louvre is itself a secondhand copy, an imitation of an authentic original.

But Benjamin’s essay stages the spectral character of the aura precisely through the way in which it performatively contradicts itself, and in doing so undermines the grounds for differentiating between an artwork “as such” that is an auratic original, and one whose aura has been dissolved by technical reproducibility. Again, the missing mediator is the historical autonomization of art. As various critics have noted, it is self-evident that the very concept of “originality” presupposes the existence, or at least the possibility, of the copy. The concept of the aura as applied to an artwork is therefore self-negating insofar as the condition of possibility of aura “as such” (reproducibility) is also its condition of impossibility. One obvious reading of this self-contradiction - following Derrida and Butler’s dehistoricizing logic - is to conclude that the

aura itself is simply a construction, a retrospective creation of modernity nostalgically (and ideologically) imposed upon the “integrated societies” of a pre-modern past.¹³⁵

There is undoubtedly something to this reading: the aura is only available to us through the historical mediation of our own post-auratic present, and to this extent it is necessarily a contemporary construction. Yet what such a reading misses is the buried historical mediator of the autonomization of art, and hence the problem of the artwork “as such”. Benjamin’s attempt to describe the aura in phenomenological terms - as a particular property of, or an experience afforded by, an artwork - is self-defeating. This is because the aura is neither a property of an artwork nor a kind of aesthetic experience, but rather a component of a total socio-historical configuration in which artistic production is functionally subsumed beneath religion. To describe the aura phenomenologically is to reify it, thereby reencountering the tension between an isolated phenomenon and its underlying historical conditions of possibility - that is, between part and whole - that also underpins the causal reification of technological reproducibility. The aura describes neither a formal property nor an experience to which the artwork gives rise as an artwork, but rather the collectively enacted ritual practice of religious worship, in which the artwork plays a subordinate role as the bearer of a meaning external to itself. This means that aura is not and cannot by definition be a property of an artwork. Aura instead indexes a social function of art, as a component of a collective belief system and its associated set of practices (“cult value”). The aura is thus ideological in Louis Althusser’s sense of being embedded within

¹³⁵ See Boris Groys, *Art Power* (2008): “the notion of aura becomes necessary as a criterion for distinguishing between original and copy only because the technology of reproduction has rendered all material criteria useless. And this means that the concept of aura, and aura itself, belongs exclusively to modernity” (p. 62).

material practices.¹³⁶ Or as Slavoj Žižek has it, “belief, far from being an ‘intimate’, purely mental state, is always *materialized* in our effective social activity: belief supports the fantasy that regulates social reality”.¹³⁷ Because Benjamin’s essay includes no historical account of art’s autonomization, he reifies both the aura and the technical reproducibility that is alone implied to be sufficient to destroy it.

There is and can be no aura “as such”. Aura describes a social function of art rather than a property or experience of an artwork. But since this social function no longer exists as a result of art’s autonomization, “aura” can only be conceived or described *as* an aesthetic category, and this is a contradiction in terms. The concept of the artwork “as such”, as the bearer of aesthetic qualities such as the aura, already presupposes the very autonomization that produces the death of the aura. To think of the aura as a property of an artwork is already to aestheticize the aura, and therefore to describe it in terms of its own negation. This is why aura “as such” cannot be described in positive terms, but only as the negation of a negation (the copy). The aura “as such” therefore is indeed simply another word for the aesthetic, but rather than showing that the aura survives within autonomous art before being dissolved by mechanical reproducibility, this in fact demonstrates that the aura “as such” is constitutively self-negating. The aura *of the artwork* has no authentic moment of realization: it is either too soon (religious experience) or too late (the aesthetic). The aura “as such” is therefore, like art “as such” and the aesthetic “as such”, a specter.

¹³⁶ See Althusser, “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses”, in *Lenin and Philosophy and Other Essays* (1968), pp. 127-188.

¹³⁷ Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989), p. 33.

Applying the same logic, it becomes almost disconcertingly straightforward to unravel the opposition between absorption and theatricality. Absorption presupposes the threat of theatricality as its historical condition of possibility. Absorption is not the absence of theatricality but its determinate negation. But self-evidently, this also makes theatricality the condition of absorption's impossibility. The terms are reversible: theatricality, in its unselfconscious indifference to absorption, ironically exemplifies the very absorptive purity that is constitutively unavailable to absorption which, as the motivated negation of theatricality, is itself inherently theatrical. On this reading, then, absorption - the assertion of formal autonomy as the negation of art's heteronomous appeal to the observer - becomes perhaps the highest form of theatricality, theatricality transmuted into (the fetishizing of) form.

Yet this reversibility, which on one level marks the fatal weakness of Fried's theory, is also precisely the historical insight that it affords into the predicament of autonomy. Because what is the historical condition of possibility of the very problem of absorption and theatricality if not the autonomization of art? The paradoxically theatrical anti-theatricality of absorption from this point of view simply marks the inevitable dialectical moment at which absorption becomes legible as an overdetermined response to a particular historical predicament; in which the artwork's assertion of formal autonomy is subsumed back into the history it purports to negate; and in which we register the inability of a *formal* response to the predicament of autonomy to transcend that predicament. The artwork cannot overcome the predicament of autonomy by asserting its formal autonomy, because such a response simply reinscribes the condition of autonomy itself, making an ideological virtue out of necessity. The predicament of autonomy is a double bind: the more one struggles against theatricality the more deeply mired in theatricality

one becomes, because either to submit or to struggle is equally to confirm the terms of the problematic. Overcoming the predicament of autonomy would mean escaping the condition of the artwork “as such”, which can evidently not be achieved by simply making a different kind of artwork. Autonomy’s supersession, as Benjamin realizes but Fried does not, can only mean the disentangling of art and the commodity through the destruction of the commodity form itself; but this would also entail the end of the entire institution, concept and practice of art “as such”. This is the ironic abyss that structurally subtends the untimely predicament of autonomous art: constituted under erasure, autonomous art is a specter that can never coincide with itself, that is both always-already too late and still to come.

There is admittedly always the danger that the deconstructive move of revealing a concept’s spectral ontology begins to run away with itself: intoxicated by its own unlimited potential applicability, reified through indiscriminate over-application, it runs the risk of degenerating into a shallow piece of rhetorical sophistry, a gimmick. But as I have already suggested, my interest in these four sequential analyses of the spectral logic of art, the aesthetic, the aura, and absorption is to make a historical, rather than a merely rhetorical claim, about the constitutively impossible predicament (or, the spectral ontology) of autonomous art. Because art “as such” is a historical, not simply a rhetorical premise, its spectrality - contrary to the Derridean use of the concept - is itself periodizable. The autonomization of art, the spectral birth of art “as such”, comes about in and through its commodification: the process that I have referred to as art’s “formal subsumption” by capital. This formal subsumption is a condition of possibility that is simultaneously and inseparably a condition of impossibility for the very autonomy it brings into (non)being. By detaching art from its embeddedness within tradition, formal

subsumption preserves art in spectral form: as a “self-annihilating nothing”, or as a ghost of modernity which emerges from the process that presupposes its own negation.¹³⁸ And this is why, as demonstrated by Fried’s unintentionally ironic concept of absorption, art’s autonomy can never be instantiated: any possible instantiation of autonomy is always-already a negation of that autonomy. Just as absorption is inherently theatrical, so the assertion of art’s formal or aesthetic autonomy, as a compensatory strategy in the face of the threat of commodification, becomes simply another marketing ploy, and thereby merely confirms and symptomatically reinscribes the very predicament it purports to transcend. And as we will see, this constitutive contradiction - this non-transcendable predicament - both underpins and is performatively enacted in and through the event of novelistic formalization, as brilliantly described in a text that continues to haunt contemporary literature and theory as perhaps the definitive description of the predicament of artistic autonomy: Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* (1916)

¹³⁸ Giorgio Agamben, *The Man Without Content* (1994), p. 56.

CHAPTER THREE

Autonomy and the Novel Form

Epic and Novel: Georg Lukács, Mikhail Bakhtin

Two conceptually related though distinct accounts of the novel's autonomy inaugurate the field of modern novel theory, and recur in various forms throughout its history. One of them laments the fundamental autonomy *of* novelistic form; the other celebrates the novel's fundamental autonomy *from* form. For the young Hungarian philosopher Georg Lukács writing in the summer of 1914, recently returned to Budapest from his studies in Germany and "in a mood of permanent despair over the state of the world", the novel is constitutively and tragically autonomous.¹

Lukács converted to Marxism in 1917, and it is from this perspective that he produced the work for which he remains best known within Anglophone literary studies: above all, his arguments for the political necessity of realism, as well as the series of anti-modernist diatribes that brought him into conflict with Theodor W. Adorno, Bertold Brecht and Ernst Bloch from the 1930s through the 1960s.² This work, in which Lukács counterposes a still-vital tradition of realist narration to a nihilistic modernist *l'art pour l'art*, has given Lukács a reputation as perhaps (along with Jean-Paul Sartre) the twentieth century's most vigorous opponent of aesthetic autonomy. Yet if Lukács would become one of modernism's most vociferous critics, he also had

¹ Lukács, "Preface" (1962) to *Theory of the Novel* (1916), p. 12.

² Contributions to this debate are collected in Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977). For Lukács's other key texts on the modernism vs realism question, see in particular, "Narrate or Describe?" (1936) and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1957).

a major hand in articulating the positions that he would later come to denounce.³ His early *Theory of the Novel* (1916) lays much of the conceptual groundwork for later theories of the modern artwork's formal autonomy, from Adorno's account of modernism⁴ to Jean-François Lyotard's work on the postmodern "sublime".⁵

For the later Lukacs of "Narrate or Describe?" (1936) and "The Ideology of Modernism" (1957), the historical significance of the European realist novel from Walter Scott to Thomas Mann lies in its continuity with the tradition of "epic narration" that stretches back to Homer. Though written some twenty years apart these essays represent an argument in two parts, the former comparing the realist narration of Leo Tolstoy to the naturalistic description of Emile Zola, the latter contrasting Thomas Mann's realism with the high modernism of James Joyce. In both cases, a realist work that upholds "the ancient rules of epic narration" is favorably counterposed to a naturalist or modernist work that renounces them.⁶ Like the epic, the novel's vocation is to give form to the shared life of a people by narrating society as a historically developing "totality". If realism upholds this tradition, the decline from realism to naturalism and

³ In his 1962 preface to *Theory of Novel*, Lukács reflects on the "somewhat grotesque situation" in which "During the debate between expressionism and realism in the 1930s... Ernst Bloch invoked *Theory of the Novel* in his polemic against the Marxist, Georg Lukács" ("Preface", p. 18).

⁴ See in particular, "Commitment" (1962), and *Aesthetic Theory* (1970). Even in his harshest critique of Lukács's later defense of realism, "Reconciliation Under Duress" (1962), Adorno is careful to exempt *Theory of the Novel* (1916) from his attack, praising it as a work which "has a brilliance and profundity of conception that was quite extraordinary at the time", and which "set a standard for philosophical aesthetics which has been retained ever since" (p. 151). See Adorno, "Reconciliation Under Duress", in Adorno et al, *Aesthetics and Politics* (1977), pp. 151-176.

⁵ See Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition* (1979), and *The Inhuman* (1991). As Timothy Bewes has argued, "Lukács's definition of the novel as an inherently broken, disrupted form, anticipates in significant ways Lyotard's definition of the postmodern as a mode of presentation in the situation of its impossibility. In other words, the problematic of the novel - the task of making a presentation in a situation where presentation has become impossible - is exactly that which for Lyotard animates postmodern artistic forms in general." Bewes, "The Novel as an Absence: Lukács and the Event of Postmodern Fiction" (2004), p. 7.

⁶ "The Ideology of Modernism", in *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, p. 18.

on to modernism constitutes a progressive “divorce of literature from epic significance”, characterized by the degeneration of what Lukács calls “objective” (third-person, omniscient) narration into the decontextualized description of individual, alienated subjectivity.⁷

For the Lukács of 1936, then, the task of the novel is to sustain the spirit of the epic within a contemporary “age of prose”, thereby defending the traditional communitarian and collectivizing function of art against a capitalist system that threatens to reduce it to a form of privatized self-expression or *l’art pour l’art*. By contrast, when the Lukács of 1916 describes the novel as the “bourgeois epic”, he is gesturing to a fundamental and constitutive breach. The epic is the characteristic form of what Lukács calls “integrated civilizations” - epitomized by ancient Greece, partially revived in Christian Europe during the middle ages - in which “form” and “life” are inseparable. The “formal perfection” of Greek art is rooted in what Lukács calls the “immanence of meaning to life”: a harmonious correspondence between “the world and the self”, in which “every impulse which springs from the innermost depths is coordinated with a form that it is ignorant of, but that has been assigned to it from eternity”.⁸ Being itself is aestheticized in this prelapsarian imagining; the subject is a harmonious “totality” because the world is a harmonious totality, a *gesamtkunstwerk* in which everything has its rightful place. Social forms and hierarchies are natural and unquestioned; the isolation of the post-Cartesian *cogito* dissolves, in Lukács’s rhapsodic invocations, into a “spontaneous totality of being”, an archaic condition of

⁷ “Narrate or Describe?”, p. 136.

⁸ *Theory of the Novel*, p. 29.

unmediated belonging that resembles the “oceanic feeling” to which modern religious and aesthetic experience, in Sigmund Freud’s account, offer a phantasmatic return.⁹

The novel is cast within this narrative as the epic’s deracinated progeny, emerging from the breakdown of the epic tradition and the premodern cultures that supported it. “The problems of the novel form”, as Lukács later summarizes his argument, are “the mirror-image of a world gone out of joint” (17); or, in the more purple-tinged strains of the original, “a symptom of the rift between ‘inside’ and ‘outside’, a sign of the essential difference between the self and the world, the incongruence of soul and deed” (29). Both a product of and a response to the loss of the “harmonious totality of being”, the novel emerges in modernity as the attempt to reconcile the “fundamental dissonance of existence” by reconstituting this lost totality. Yet this attempt is predestined to fail, since the loss of “immanent meaning” - or, the incommensurability of “form” and “life” - is the novel’s historical condition of emergence. Birthed from the wreckage of master-narratives both mythic and religious, in “a world abandoned by God” (88), the novel confronts the potentially endless narratability (the “bad infinity”) of a modern world without any intrinsic narrative pattern or design. The novel is thus condemned to invent its own arbitrary formal hierarchies and constraints in order to exist at all - “to produce out of (itself) all that was once simply accepted as given” - and thus to falsify the world in the very act through which it strives to grant access to it (38):

A totality that can be simply accepted is no longer given to the forms of art: therefore they must either narrow down and volatilize whatever has to be given form to the point where they can encompass it, or show polemically the impossibility of achieving their necessary object and the inner nullity of their own means. (38/9)

⁹ Freud, *Civilization and its Discontents* (1929). This is perhaps the connection that Walter Benjamin has in mind when he writes, at the beginning of his 1930 essay, “The Crisis of the Novel”, that “Existence, for the epic, is an ocean” (*The Storyteller Essays*, p. 9).

The bad faith of arbitrary narrative closure or the insularity of self-critique: these are henceforth the uninhabitable polarities between which the novel must oscillate. “We have invented the creation of forms”, writes Lukács, channeling the spirit of Thomas Bernhard, “and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete” (34).

In this account of novelistic autonomy, then, the novel’s formal autonomy is the symptom of a world no longer made to measure, that has ceased to be narratable as a meaningful totality. The novel’s constitutive self-alienation is, in other words, the correlative to the modern subject’s “transcendental homelessness”.¹⁰ “Bourgeois epic” is an oxymoron, and this ironic self-negation gestures to the essential character of the novel form itself. The novel’s historical vocation is not to accurately represent the world, but rather to stage, through its formal self-negation, the fundamental ungroundedness and contingency of all forms, whether civilizational, epistemological or aesthetic, in a modern world bereft of metaphysical foundations. “Art,” Lukács claims, has “become independent: it is no longer a copy, for all the models have gone; it is a created totality, for the natural unity of the metaphysical spheres has been destroyed forever” (37). The autonomy of form is at once the novel’s condition of possibility and impossibility; the predicament to which it responds, and the guarantor of its referential inadequacy. The “created totality” of every novelistic narrative - the movement from tension to resolution inherent within every story, the arrangement of spatial and temporal hierarchies without which no narrative can exist - is an arbitrary construction projected onto a fundamentally unrepresentable reality. Like the Lacanian subject, the novel for Lukács is constitutively decentered, alienated from the real by the very forms through which it seeks to know it. This “irony”, as Lukács memorably puts it, is

¹⁰ *Theory of the Novel*, p. 41.

the “objectivity” of the novel form (90). And it is this irony that makes the novel “the representative art-form of our age: because the structural categories of the novel constitutively coincide with the world as it is today” (93). Samuel Beckett’s deadpan injunction to “Fail again, fail better” might serve, for the Lukács of *Theory of the Novel*, as the novel’s self-defeating mantra.

If for Lukács the novel is condemned to the prison house of form, for the Russian Mikhail Bakhtin, writing in the 1930s amidst the murderous consolidation of the Stalinist totalitarian state, the novel is not a form at all, but the irruption into the order of forms of a signifying logic incommensurable with any narrative totality. Traditional forms - oral storytelling, history, poetry, religious dogma, political propaganda, but above all the epic - are for Bakhtin united by their “monological” character and worldview. In the monological text only one point of view is expressed, yet this point of view is paradoxically both singular and impersonal, Godlike and disembodied: “All ideological creative acts are conceived and perceived as possible expressions of a single consciousness, a single spirit... Everything capable of meaning can be gathered together into one consciousness and subordinated to a unified accent; whatever does not submit to reduction is accidental and inessential”.¹¹ Like the divine creation or the totalitarian state, monologic forms strive to excise randomness and absolutize order, installing the author-creator as the originator and guarantor of a meaning that is the sum of the text’s intentionally ordered parts. Monologism thus refers at once to artistic forms and to material processes of social formalization in which the unruly flux of life or matter is disciplined into abstract totalities, from the poetic stanza to the isolated “single consciousness”, the discrete

¹¹ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Problems in Dostoevsky’s Poetics* (1963), p. 82.

“official” language to the “spirit of a nation, the spirit of a people, the spirit of history and so forth” (82).

Like Lukács, then, Bakhtin associates the harmonious formal totality of the epic with the transmission of tradition and authority. Yet whereas for Lukács the novel’s formal irony is the symptom of its constitutive inadequacy in relation to the epic tradition, Bakhtin substitutes the category of “irony” for a revolutionary counter-principle that Bakhtin calls “dialogism”. Whereas monologism serves to unify a perspective, discourse in the novel has a propensity to fracture perspective into “an eternal harmony of unmerged voices” (30). Both form and meaning are endlessly displaced, deferred and disrupted by the “dialogical” interanimation - non-linear, unpredictable, irreducible to authorial intention - of the novel’s various component parts: characters, perspectives, languages, idioms, “in general, everything that has meaning and significance” (40). The order of these components can never be “finalized”; to speak of a novel’s “form” is to falsely abstract - or, to “monologize” - its “unfinalizable” relationality into a fixed hierarchy. If monological discourse narrows meaning to secure the unity of a perspective, then, dialogical discourse multiplies meaning to explode the unity of a perspective.

This is not, then, a claim about authorial intention, but about a signifying logic that decenters authorial intention. Though some novels realize dialogism more fully and fruitfully than others - as in the “polyphonic” novels of Fyodor Dostoevsky - this is nonetheless a claim about the novel’s constitutive ontology rather than about formal strategies self-consciously pursued by particular novelists. Monologic discourse emerges fully formed, or “completed”; language is “an obedient organ, fully adequate to the author’s intention”.¹² In dialogical

¹² Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination* (1981), p. 286.

discourse, by contrast, “the unmediated intention of a word presents itself as something impermissibly naive”.¹³ Novelistic discourse thus strips the word of its authority, its finality, its link to a unified authorial intention or subject of expression. Any perspective expressed within a novel is automatically dialogized by the other perspectives present within it; or even, by those not present but assumed, implied, or constitutively absent. Even where the author purports to express their real thoughts and sentiments in the first person, those expressions become mere “object(s) of representation”, automatically dialogized - ironically decentered, or placed in quotation marks - by the form of the novel itself.¹⁴ The novelistic first-person consists not in monologic self-expression, but in dialogized monologism: a monologism constitutively decentered by the very act of its articulation. The discourse of the novel is thus for Bakhtin, as Timothy Bewes puts it, “subjectively uninhabitable”; the pseudo-monological “I” of the first-person is as impersonal as the pseudo-monologic omniscience of the third person.¹⁵

If the novel is constitutively irreducible to any paraphrasable meaning or formal unity, this character of perennial “becoming” is both a formal ontology and a morphological principle. “The novel”, as Bakhtin puts it in “Epic and Novel” (1941), “is plasticity itself. It is a genre that is ever questing, ever examining itself and subjecting its established forms to review”.¹⁶ The novel is, in other words, an anti-genre; constantly exceeding its own bounds yet at the same time obedient to no principle of linear or teleological development. This form-defying excess is, furthermore, the locus of the novel’s aesthetic politics, dissolving patriarchal authority by subverting the monological hierarchies of all formal totalities. Thus conceived, the novel is

¹³ *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 278.

¹⁴ *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 44.

¹⁵ Timothy Bewes, *Free Indirect* (2022), p. 260.

¹⁶ *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 39.

constitutively opposed to, and serves to undermine the monologic totality of the Stalinist totalitarian state, which as Boris Groys has influentially argued, is modeled on the autotelic formal unity of the *gesamtkunstwerk*.¹⁷ The novel is not a fixed hierarchy but, to adopt Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari's Bakhtin-influenced terminology, a rhizomatic assemblage.¹⁸ If this involves an autonomy-claim, it is decidedly not a claim about the autotelic formal closure of individual novels, but rather about the constitutive autonomy of novelistic *discourse* from the reified categories that structure monologic discourse: form, expression, intention, the author, the subject, paraphrasable meaning, even the novel itself, since the novel signifies not in isolation but in relation to everything both in and outside of it. The novel thus offers an escape from form, even as it adumbrates form under erasure, in spectral or "chimerical" guise.¹⁹

The novel as form, or the novel as anti-form? The pessimistic and politically noncommittal Lukács of 1916, for whom the novel's spurious formal autonomy is an analogue for the existential predicament of the modern subject, can be counterposed to the more optimistically anti-authoritarian Bakhtin, who sees the novel as embodying a "carnavalesque" politics pitched in opposition to hierarchical authority, to "official culture", and to concept of the autonomous subject (or, the "bourgeois ego").²⁰ The very qualities that for Lukács are symptoms of the novel's fundamental impossibility - its arbitrary constructedness and hybridity, the inherent bad faith of formal closure, the impossibility of either objective representation or subjective expression - are for Bakhtin the novel's *raison d'être*. Like Walter Benjamin in "The

¹⁷ Boris Groys, *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* (1992).

¹⁸ See "Introduction: Rhizome", in Deleuze and Guattari, *One Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 3-26.

¹⁹ For a recent account of the "chimerical" character of novelistic form, see Aarthi Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914-2016* (2016).

²⁰ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World* (1965), pp. 101, 19.

Storyteller” (a text on which the influence of *Theory of the Novel* is writ large), the early Lukács sees the transition from the oral tradition to the novel as involving a precipitous loss of authority, compromising the traditional, communitarian function of art.²¹ Bakhtin agrees, but sees this as an entirely salutary development, part of the process by which monologic authority, either of the traditional community or the rationalist dictatorship of post-Enlightenment idealism (whether bourgeois or Stalinist), is challenged by a democratizing (dialogizing, hybridizing, decentralizing) cosmopolitanism.²²

Totality and dialogism; the novel’s inescapable formal autonomy (tragedy) and the novel’s irrepressible autonomy *from* form (comedy): these are established at the inception of novel theory as what we might respectively call (borrowing Fredric Jameson’s terminology) the novel form’s “positive” and “negative hermeneutic”.²³ If for Lukács the breach between “form” and “life” betokens a particularly modern loss of meaning, for Bakhtin the novel’s performative disarticulation of these terms points, beyond historicity, to the primacy of deterritorialization: the ultimate refusal of life’s “non-finalizable” multiplicity to be contained within the coercive rigidity of any given formal structure.

²¹ Walter Benjamin, “The Storyteller” (1936), in *Illuminations* (1968), pp. 83-107.

²² *The Dialogic Imagination*, p. 11.

²³ See *The Political Unconscious* (1981), “Conclusion: The Dialectic of Utopia and Ideology” (pp. 281-299).

Autonomy and the Unconscious

For both the early Lukács and Bakhtin, then, the specificity of the novel lies not in a particular formal tendency, or in its connection to a particular subject matter or theme, but rather in its fundamentally problematic (and self-problematizing) ontology. The novel, for these thinkers, is the form that emerges in and in response to a modern age in which art's ability to perform its traditional social functions has been compromised, if not rendered altogether untenable. The novel is not just contingently associated with, but co-constitutive with and ontologically inseparable from the crisis of art's autonomization within modernity: not just a form that has been used as a vehicle to express or articulate that crisis, but the crisis itself.

What are the stakes of such claims in a post-postmodernist age characterized by the achieved commodification and institutionalization of art and literature "as such", in which the sense of existential crisis that the young Lukács associates with modernity has been both domesticated into a particular kind of rarefied aesthetic experience and monumentalized into a canon of masterpieces to be diligently studied and consumed as cultural capital? Is it still possible to regard the novel as a form in and of perpetual crisis, or has the novel instead settled into a fixed generic identity, equipped with a recognizable repertoire of forms and styles of which anguished self-reflexivity is simply one among others? As we have seen, for a critic like Fredric Jameson the problem of autonomy has been superseded and can, like the modernist novel, be consigned safely to history. But for Lukács and Bakhtin, autonomy cannot be superseded *by* the novel because it is constitutive *of* the novel. Autonomy, to borrow Jameson's phrase, is for Lukács the "political unconscious" not of a particular kind of novel, but of the novel form per se. The transition from epic to novel - the severing of art from its former contexts

and meanings; the objectification of storytelling as a textual artifact to be interpreted and/or consumed individually, rather than an oral performance to be experienced communally; the birth of “fiction” through the privatizing of the imaginative commons and the detachment of art “as such” from metaphysics and mythology - is the prehistory to which every novel responds, and that remains sedimented within it not as a particular formal structure, but as the irresolvably problematic nature of formalization itself in the novel.

As Jameson and Pierre Macherey have argued, the “ideology of form” is legible to interpretation not just as a positive presence - as in familiar critiques that posit realism’s absolutizing of the given, or of modernism’s absolutizing of subjectivity - but as a constitutive absence, structuring a given form’s silences and exclusions. This constitutive absence is what Macherey first refers to as the work’s “unconscious”, and that Jameson works up into a thoroughgoing theory of the historicity and politics of novelistic forms in *The Political Unconscious* (1981). This notion of the “unconscious” has nothing to do with any psychologism; it is not an invitation to psychoanalyze the unconscious intentions or suppressed desires of the author as the originator of the text’s meaning. Rather, the “unconscious” for these thinkers is that of the work itself: the material sediment of a given form’s conditions of emergence that it carries within it independently of either the consciousness or the intentions of the author, or the content of the work itself:

we must show a sort of splitting within the work: this division is its unconscious, in so far as it possesses one - the unconscious which is history, the play of history beyond its edges, encroaching on those edges: this is why it is possible to trace the path from the haunted work to that which haunts it. Once again it is not a question of redoubling the work with an unconscious, but a question of revealing in the very gestures of expression that which it is not. Then, the reverse side of what is written will be history itself.²⁴

²⁴ Pierre Macherey, *A Theory of Literary Production* (1966), p. 106.

“To trace a path from the haunted work to that which haunts it”; “revealing in the very gestures of expression that which it is not”: these statements describe Lukács’s essentially negative intent and method in *Theory of the Novel*, which can only describe what the novel is in relation to the condition from which it is constitutively excluded. “That which haunts” the novel form, he argues, is the memory of its autonomization that remains within it not at the level of content, but as the condition of (im)possibility that guarantees its “normative incompleteness”. And “that which (the novel) is not” is the epic, or the condition of harmonious totality that is, in the world of the novel, always-already compromised. The novel is “the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given, in which the immanence of meaning in life has become a problem, but that still thinks in terms of totality”(ibid). This thinking of totality under erasure is the sedimented memory of the novel’s epic origins; or to put it negatively, the sedimented memory of the novel’s constitutive autonomization, that which introduces an irreparable breach between its extant orientation toward narrative totalization and the arbitrariness and partiality of any given narrative totality.

Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious* remains the exemplary account of how the evolution of the formal unconscious of the novel progresses in dialectical relation to the capitalist restructuring of the modern lifeworld. According to the master-narrative that Jameson first outlines there, and extends across his epic *The Poetics of Social Forms*, the novel’s evolution from realism to modernism to postmodernism is an epiphenomenon of the ever-more total restructuring of the lifeworld in the image of the commodity form. Yet as I have argued, the architectonic movements that Jameson traces there - in which the novel as a whole proceeds inevitably and irrevocably from representation toward an ever more absolute anti-

representational autonomy - presuppose a teleological narrative of progressive reification, and the inevitable transition from formal to real subsumption, that is ultimately unable to shake off the idealist and Eurocentric baggage of its historical emergence. Contemporary literary theory has challenged the Eurocentrism of this model of the novel's progressive evolution, just as contemporary Marxist theory has challenged the Eurocentrism of developmentalist models of the history of capital.

Jameson's mode of allegorical interpretation is on one level a situated polemical intervention that seeks to establish the centrality of the political and the historical, which were at the time being challenged by the various theoretical schools - from formalism and New Criticism to deconstruction - that had posited the irreducibility of the text to extrinsic or paraphrasable meaning, and had thus sought to discredit the very notions of authorial intention and textual interpretation. In one sense, then, Jameson's object of critique is, like Lukács's, the theory of aesthetic autonomy; and in particular, the version of it that ascribes the aesthetic or the literary a position of constitutive exteriority to history or politics, without seeing how that position is itself both historical and political:

To imagine that, sheltered from the omnipresence of history and the implacable influence of the social, there already exists a realm of freedom - whether it be that of the microscopic experience of words in a text or the ecstasies and intensities of the various private religions - is only to strengthen the grip of Necessity over all that such blind zones in which the individual subject seeks refuge, in pursuit of a purely individual, a merely psychological, project of salvation. The only effective liberation from such constraint begins with the recognition that there is nothing that is not social and historical - indeed, that everything is 'in the last analysis' political.²⁵

Against such ahistorical claims for the autonomy of literary form and/or aesthetic experience, Jameson's notion of the "political unconscious" seeks to uncover the historicity and ideology of

²⁵ *The Political Unconscious*, p. 20.

literary forms by reading them “against the grain”, as “symbolic resolutions” to real historical problems and aporias that they do not and cannot contain within them, yet whose constitutive absence is legible in the structure of their limits and internal contradictions, their silences and omissions. By restoring that which lies in the margins of the text, Jameson recuperates modernist strategies of transcendence or autonomy not as merely ideological in the facile sense of being spurious or deluded, but in the more concrete sense of constituting situated responses to particular configurations of real historical forces: “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” (79). This “allegorical” method assumes that history as a whole has a shape and a “plot” that renders it thinkable as a totality, and in relation to which the meaning of its necessarily partial and incomplete aesthetic forms becomes legible:

These matters can recover their original urgency for us only if they are retold within the unity of a single great collective story; only if, in however disguised and symbolic a form, they are seen as sharing a single fundamental theme - for Marxism, the collective struggle to wrest a realm of Freedom from a realm of Necessity; only if they are grasped as vital episodes in a single vast unfinished plot. (19/20)

Marxism as Jameson espouses it can thus be read as one particular response to the predicament of “transcendental homelessness”, a compensatory practice of “epic” totalization that seeks to reground the ungroundedness of form in a mythical version of history as totality. And indeed, for the later Lukács Marxism was the solution to the existential predicament outlined in *Theory of the Novel*. The later Lukács famously repudiates modernism, instead insisting upon realism as the transhistorical vocation not only of the novel form, but of art as such. Yet contrary to Adorno’s claim in “Reconciliation Under Duress”, this does not involve the substitution of the

philosophical sophistication of *Theory of the Novel* for a naively positivist “reflection” theory.²⁶ Far from being abandoned, Lukács’s early, pessimistic conception of the novel form’s constitutive formal autonomy is repurposed, upon his conversion to Marxism, into an alternative assertion of the novel’s historical vocation. In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) Lukács argues that, “Marx’s dictum, ‘The relations of production of every society form a whole’, is the methodological point of departure and the key to the *historical* understanding of social relations”.²⁷ This statement might also serve as the methodological point of departure of Lukács’s later theory of the novel. Whereas for the early Lukács the novel’s melancholy fate is to stage the autonomy (and hence the arbitrariness) of all forms within a disenchanted modernity, for the later Lukács it is the novel’s appointed duty to assert form’s “constructed totality” in opposition to the capitalist fragmentation of society into various component parts with their own relative (but ultimately illusory) autonomy.

In *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács describes the tendency of capitalism to break down communitarian pre-capitalist labor forms and social structures into ever more fragmented, rationalized or Taylorized components. This process of “reification” produces, among other things, the antinomies of post-Kantian subjectivity that Lukács had once thought it the novel’s historical vocation to formally enact. For the younger Lukács this process is legible solely as one of disenchantment and metaphysical disconsolation, the loss of unifying master-narratives and the dissolution of meaning into “bad infinity”. Yet for the Marxist Lukács this process of disarticulation is also, dialectically enough, a unifying principle. The apparently

²⁶ “(Lukács) remains indifferent to the philosophical question of whether the concrete meaning of a work of art is in fact identical with the mere ‘reflection of objective reality’, a vulgar-materialist shibboleth to which he doggedly clings” (*Aesthetics and Politics*, p. 153).

²⁷ Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), p. 9.

independent labor of disparate workers is connected by their common subjection to the value form, or their unconscious participation in the production of “abstract value”. Where the early Lukács sees only the disintegration of forms, then, the later Lukács sees a historical process that becomes thinkable precisely as a narrative totality. For Lukács, this principle of “totality” is provided by the classical realist novel’s impersonal “omniscient” third-person narration, which figures the unconscious link between its various represented perspectives and characters, or the basic Hegelian principle of the “identity of identity and non-identity”.²⁸ If the younger Lukács sees the novel’s formal autonomy as a tragic distortion of the real, then, the Marxist Lukács sees the same quality of constructedness as figuring the socially constructed “totality” of the mode of production itself: the arrangement of parts in ordered hierarchy expresses the principle of relationality that exists within capitalism.

If the novel cannot reproduce the real in its sensuous immediacy, then, it does something more vital and enabling: abstracting, from the illusory self-evidence of the merely given, to the hidden (but logically deducible) relations the former’s phenomenological immediacy serves to occlude. In thus asserting formal totality in the face of fragmentation - counterposing the order of form to the apparently formless flow of phenomena - the tradition of “critical realism” from Balzac and Tolstoy to Thomas Mann resists the capitalist reduction of art to mere expression or *l’art pour l’art*. In doing so, it extends the tradition of collective, “epic” narration that stretches back to Homer. The modernism of Kafka, Joyce and Beckett, by contrast, relinquishes epic narration for the mere description of decontextualized alienated subjectivity. In doing so it both

²⁸ G.W.F. Hegel, *The Difference Between Fichte’s and Schelling’s System of Philosophy* (1801), p. 156. Lukács discusses this passage in *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics* (1938), p. 275.

symptomatically reproduces the world as given by capitalism, and surrenders the traditional function of art - to articulate the collective imaginary of a culture - to an *ersatz* capitalist art “as such”, as merely individual self-expression or aesthetic (false) consolation.

Marxism for the later Lukács, as for Jameson, is therefore an intellectual and ethical (if not, as yet, practical) solution to the problem of the novel, the surrogate totality in relation to which the novel’s “normative incompleteness” can be historicized. Yet whereas Lukács stubbornly persists in seeing epic totality as the historical vocation of the novel itself, Jameson - ever the true Hegelian - sees art as having been superseded in this regard by philosophy, whose job it is now to narrativize the necessarily partial and fragmentary forms of modern art within a totality that they can neither represent nor embody. What for Lukács is an injunction to the novelist - narrate, don’t describe! - that lapses into moralism, is for Jameson an injunction to the critic - always historicize! - that serves to absolve the artwork of such moralistic judgment via a division of labor, a collaboration between critic and artist in which the former interpretatively completes the latter.

Whereas for Lukács the supersession of realism by modernism is a moral failure and a catastrophic renunciation of the epic vocation, for Jameson it is a morally indifferent reflex of history, a reflection of the dissolution of the specific set of historical problems to which the realist novel (and before it, the epic) served as the “symbolic resolution”. The “objective totality” of a global and uneven capitalism is no longer available to aesthetic representation; that task now falls to conceptual totalization (that is, properly speaking, to Marxism) as “the absolute horizon of all reading and all interpretation”.²⁹ As Jameson puts it in a 1978 essay on Kenneth Burke,

²⁹ *The Political Unconscious*, p. 17.

the very greatest critics of our time - a Lukács, for example, or, to a lesser degree, a Leavis - are those who have construed their role as the teaching of history, as the telling of the tale of the tribe, the most important story any of us will ever have to listen to, the narrative of that implacable yet also emancipatory logic whereby the human community has evolved into its present form and developed the sign systems by which we live and explain our lives to ourselves.³⁰

Jameson thus sides with the younger against the older Lukács insofar as he sees it as constitutively impossible for the novelist to occupy the position of the epic poet of the “integrated civilization”, as the teller of “the tale of the tribe”. Yet Jameson sides with the older Lukács in regarding the younger Lukács’s belief that totality is “gone forever” as an ideological delusion. The bounded totalities of traditional civilizations have given way to the uneven and globally dispersed - yet for all that singular - totality of the capitalist world-system itself. For Jameson, the Homer of the modern world is neither James Joyce, Marcel Proust nor Leo Tolstoy, but rather G.W.F. Hegel: the master-philosopher to whom the shape of history as totality revealed itself at the dawn of capitalism. If Karl Marx’s task was to stand Hegel on his head and thus to render this totality materialist, the historical task of Fredric Jameson is to extend the Hegelian-Marxist narrative into the epoch of postmodernity.³¹

Jameson’s entire project is thus in one sense an attempt to theoretically solve the problem of the novel as diagnosed by the early Lukács, defusing the epistemic and existential crisis of the dissolution of forms by regrounding the latter within a metahistorical narrative totality. Yet from the perspective of the early Lukács, this project can itself be regarded as an ungrounded act of novelistic formalization: a novelization of history that cannot help but stage, against Jameson’s intentions and convictions, the “normative incompleteness” of any given formalization within the

³⁰ Jameson, “The Symbolic Inference; or, Kenneth Burke and Ideological Analysis” (1978), p. 523.

³¹ For a more developed version of this claim, see Daniel Hartley, “Fredric Jameson: Epic Poet of Postmodernity”, in *The Politics of Style* (2017), pp. 170-203.

post-metaphysical world of the novel. What, after all, is the recent history of Marxist theory if not an ongoing dialectic between attempts at narrative totalization such as Jameson's, and protestations on behalf of the various discontents - race, slavery, gender, sexuality, feminized or affective labor, the unconscious, the aesthetic, nature, ecology, technology, power, desire, postcolonial difference - whose theoretical marginalization or constitutive exclusion is the condition of such narratives's rage for order? As Cornel West has argued, "The pressing problem that plagues Jameson is whether the Marxist quest for totalization - with its concomitant notions of totality, mediation, narrative (or even universal) history, part/whole relations, essence/appearance distinctions, and subject/object oppositions - presupposes a form of philosophical idealism that inevitably results in a mystification which ignores difference, flux, dissemination, and heterogeneity".³²

One can of course object that "totality" is, properly speaking, "not an object but a method", an "orientation toward thinking" not an appeal to an empirically existing referent.³³ For Anna Kornbluh, Marxism and the classical realist novel thus share a quality of speculative abstraction, or "political formalism", that enables them to "think in terms of totality". Kornbluh seeks to establish a political-aesthetic opposition between a Marxist-realist "political formalism", which views "forming (as) a value unto itself" and thus "embraces projects of building", and a modernist-poststructuralist lineage of "anarcho-vitalism", which allegedly holds that "to give form is to oppressively contain".³⁴ Whereas traditional approaches have characterized realism as the naively referential foil to the self-consciously formalist tradition of modernism and

³² Cornel West, *Keeping Faith* (2008), p. 149.

³³ Anna Kornbluh, "Totality" (2019), p. 672.

³⁴ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019), pp. 3-4.

postmodernism, Kornbluh agrees with formalists and postmodernists from Viktor Shklovsky to Roland Barthes and Jean Baudrillard that the realist novel is “a speculative, abstract, nonmimetic form” with no privileged referential relation to the extra-linguistic real (33). If novel theory has typically approached the politics of realism in relation to the problem of reference, then, for Kornbluh “it is the politics of the novel form to intervene in the dispensation of worlds” (78).

Rather than seeking to theoretically rehabilitate realism as a practice of representation, then, Kornbluh’s project in *The Order of Forms* is to provide an “anti-mimetic theory of realism as production”, or as “a speculative projection of hypothetical social space” (30). Yet absolving formal totalities from the problem of reference by elevating them to the empyrean of Platonic abstraction hardly solves the problem of the necessary referential inadequacy of any actually existing narrative totality. One of the key insights of Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel* is that the impulse to formalize and the encounter with the limits of formalization are not two distinct ideological positions (as in Kornbluh’s political formalist/anarcho-vitalist binary), but a dialectic at the heart of every form. Rather than artificially separating the utopian possibilities of the novel’s formal autonomy from the problem of its referential inadequacy, the challenge posed by Lukács’ *Theory of the Novel* is to think the two as inseparable and issuing from the same set of historical circumstances: the predicament of art’s autonomy.

The constitutively excluded excess simultaneously presupposed and produced by the event of formalization: from bare life to matter to the abject body to *differance* to the subaltern to queerness or blackness or indigeneity or the female or the animal or disability or irony or *objet petit a* or the aesthetic, this figure has known many iterations in and around poststructuralist

theory.³⁵ My point here is not to suggest that these theories are all the same, much less to dismiss them on such a basis. On the contrary, I would suggest that the figure of “formalization through constitutive exclusion” has proved to be so portable and so clarifying across multiple contexts and sites of political engagement simply because it describes the structure of *formalization as such*. Appositely, in a compelling reconstruction of Agamben’s complete *oeuvre* from *The Man Without Content* (1994) to the *Homo Sacer* series, Kevin Attell reads Agamben’s thought as underpinned by the claim that “the fundamental - and largely unacknowledged - structure of Western philosophy (is) that of negativity, the presupposition of a negative and unappropriable other to every positivity”, a structure that “renders immediacy and presence impossible”.³⁶ Whatever we make of either Agamben’s grand theory or Attell’s account of it, which is not my concern here, I would wager that what underpins such potential for generalization and portability across contexts is the fact that constitutive exclusion is simply the form *of* form, the ontology of formalization as such.

If this seems like an exorbitant or excessively abstract claim, I do not offer it as an original insight. This, in my view, is the conceptual breakthrough, and the existential predicament, opened up by Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*; and it is also, I suggest, what accounts

³⁵ For versions of this argument applied to the themes listed above, see (on bare life) Agamben, *Homo Sacer* (1995); (on materiality) Butler, *Bodies That Matter* (1993); (on bodily abjection) Kristeva, *The Powers of Horror* (1980); (on the subaltern) Spivak, “Can the Subaltern Speak?” (1988); (on *différance*) Derrida, *Of Grammatology* (1967); (on queerness) Edelman, *No Future* (2004); (on blackness) Wilderson, *Afropessimism* (2020); (on indigeneity) Jodi Byrd, *The Transit of Empire* (2011); (on the female) Irigaray, *Speculum of the Other Woman* (1974); (on the animal) Agamben, *The Open* (2003); (on disability) Quayson, *Aesthetic Nervousness* (2007); (on irony) de Man, “The Concept of Irony”, in *Aesthetic Ideology* (1977); (on *object petit a*) Žižek, *The Sublime Object of Ideology* (1989); for an account of theories of the aesthetic as a “constitutive outside” to Enlightenment rationality see Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1985).

³⁶ Kevin Attell, *Giorgio Agamben: Beyond the Threshold of Deconstruction* (2014), p. 6.

for that text's untimely contemporaneity within literary studies.³⁷ Indeed, the stakes of Lukács's text remain hidden if we do not recognize that it is not only a text about the novel, but about the structure of formalization per se within modernity (a structure that it becomes the novel's historical vocation to compulsively reenact). In the enchanted world of Lukács's "integrated civilizations", not only has form yet to become a philosophical problem, but formalization *as such* - like art "as such" - does not yet exist: "We have invented the creation of forms, and that is why everything that falls from our weary and despairing hands must always be incomplete" (34). This is obviously not to say that in "integrated civilizations" there are no forms; rather, forms are themselves aspects of a larger totality. "The extensive totality of life" is simply given; all of history is already contained within a larger metaphysical totality that gives each form, word and deed its meaning in advance. Yet in a world that has been "abandoned by God" - a world voided of transcendence and condemned to the sheer facticity of the actual; a world of pure contingency that could just as easily be otherwise - this state of grace gives way to a post-foundational condition (or, to what Kornbluh calls "ungroundedness" as "the essence of human experience"),³⁸ in which the world is no longer given but has to be actively constructed, formalized. Formalization as such enters into the continuum of history: no longer contained within a world whose character is already given, but now an active process of worlding, always imbricated in contingency, power and interest.

³⁷ On this phenomenon, see in particular Peter Vermeulen, "Lukacs's Contemporaneity", in *Contemporary Literature and the End of the Novel* (2015); pp. 105-10; Yoon Sun Lee, "The Postcolonial Novel and Diaspora", in Ato Quayson (ed.) *The Cambridge Companion to Postcolonial Novel* (2015) pp. 133-151; and Timothy Bewes, "The Novel Problematic" (2011), *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011) and *Free Indirect* (2023).

³⁸ *The Order of Forms*, p. 21.

Formalization is destined to fail by the very “ungroundedness” that makes it necessary; its condition of possibility is its condition of impossibility. This is neither an invitation to “wage war on every totality” nor to celebrate “forming” as “a value unto itself”.³⁹ Every form is, to use McKenzie Wark’s term, a “partial totalization”.⁴⁰ Form’s affordances and disaffordances are inseparable: every form is doomed to function by establishing its own limits, its blindspots and aporias, its constitutive exclusions. Staging the dialectical inseparability of a given form’s inclusions and constitutive exclusions - its affordances and disaffordances - is the novel’s “powerful powerlessness”. And this is what makes it model the acts of “ungrounded” formalization that take place in purportedly non-aesthetic contexts. A century’s worth of anti-realist critiques have pointed out that the “totality” of the realist novel is bought at the price of the constitutive exclusion of various forms of otherness.⁴¹ Likewise, one of the lessons of postmodernism and the emergence of previously subjugated identity-positions to historical visibility is that the choice of different subjects of history - the proletariat, blackness, femininity, queerness, indigeneity, the colonized, nature, bare life, or (more negatively) instrumental reason, reification, discipline, colonialism, racism, heteronormativity, geology - will produce difference narrative totalizations. This problem has played out within the theoretical humanities as a dialectic between Marxism and poststructuralism that has sustained decades’ worth of debate, in sub-disciplines from postcolonial studies to critical race theory to ecocriticism.

It is not within my remit here to propose any kind of theoretical resolution to these debates, or to adjudicate between the competing claims of Marxism and poststructuralism (or,

³⁹ *The Order of Forms*, p. 4.

⁴⁰ McKenzie Wark, *General Intellects* (2017), p. 11.

⁴¹ For paradigmatic critiques, see D.A. Miller, *The Novel and the Police* (1989), Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Eagleton, “Ideology and Literary Form”, in *Criticism and Ideology* (1976), pp. 102-161.

between those of Hegelian and poststructuralist Marxisms). Clearly the choice cannot simply lie between a dogged insistence upon the singularity of the orthodox Marxist historical narrative (simply plugging one's ears to the various dissenting voices whose subject positions and histories it marginalizes or erases) and an undifferentiated postmodern perspectivism in which history is revealed as an arbitrary narrative construction, leaving discourse to float free of its referents. Rather than hazarding any grandiose theoretical solution to this problematic, I more modestly want to suggest here that in the wake of postmodernism and the transnational turn, the problem of formalization becomes newly paramount, within both critical theory and the novel. As many critics have argued, the novel has departed from the negative deconstructive and defamiliarizing strategies of postmodern "historiographic metafiction" and sought, however problematically, to reconnect with the world outside of the text. Likewise, critical theory from new materialism to world-systems theory to affect theory to the wave of post-Eurocentric, postcolonial and globalist Marxisms has departed from the anti-realist prohibitions of poststructuralism and deconstruction, yet not by simply returning to the discredited, monologic "historical grand narratives" of old. Peter Boxall sums up the larger direction of this movement:

A central characteristic of later twentieth-century culture was a conviction, variously held, that there is a fundamental and mutually productive relationship between fiction and history. It is this relationship, this sense that our past is produced by narrative, and can thus be reshaped and reconstituted within it, that underlay much of the political and aesthetic energy of the later twentieth-century novel. With the new century, however, there has emerged a new commitment to the materiality of history, a fresh awareness of the reality of the past, and of our ethical obligation to bear witness to it.⁴²

In thus attempting to navigate between the Scylla of Marxist reductivism and the Charybdis of postmodern relativism, we are left with a sense of the simultaneous necessity and impossibility

⁴² Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First-Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013), p. 12.

of narrative totalization: a predicament in which the obligation to represent is inseparable from the knowledge of the inadequacy of the means through which to do so. And this incommensurability necessarily produces an encounter with the contingency and limits of form. Dipesh Chakrabarty expresses this predicament in *Provincializing Europe* (2000), a work which exposes the problematic Eurocentrism of the very concepts that render the history of Eurocentrism thinkable, and that in doing so gestures toward its own quasi-novelistic irony:

the project of provincializing Europe must realize within itself its own impossibility. It therefore looks to a history that embodies this politics of despair. It will have been clear by now that this is not a call for cultural relativism or for atavistic, nativist histories. Nor is this a program for a simple rejection of modernity, which would be, in many situations, politically suicidal. I ask for a history that deliberately makes visible, within the very structure of its narrative forms, its own repressive strategies and practices, the part it plays in collusion with the narratives of citizenships in assimilating to the projects of the modern state all other possibilities of human solidarity. The politics of despair will require of such history that it lay bare to its readers the reasons why such a predicament is necessarily inescapable. This is a history that will attempt the impossible: to look toward its own death by tracing that which resists and escapes the best human effort at translation across cultural and other semiotic systems.⁴³

“The project of provincializing Europe”, for Chakrabarty, cannot simply be deconstructive, but also entails the reconstructive attempt to “think in terms of totality” while acknowledging the simultaneous necessity and impossibility of doing so. Theory is thus left in the predicament of aspiring to the condition of the novel, the form that in Lukács’s account is condemned to “realize within itself” - “within the very structure of its narrative forms” - “its own impossibility”. And this for Lukács is the predicament of form’s becoming autonomous, the irruption of formalization *as such* into the continuum of history. Contemporary thinkers such as Jameson and Chakrabarty, in other words, seek to continue to “think in terms of totality” in an age in which

⁴³ Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe* (2000), p. 45.

narrative totalization is both necessary and impossible. Any historical narrative within the world of the novel must always confront its simultaneous necessity and impossibility; every totalization, or every act of narrative formalization, is defined as much by what it excludes as what it includes. “Totality” is no longer simply given, but must be articulated from a subject position and a position within history that offers up any particular discourse as an “object of representation”, a discursive act to be interrogated and interpreted. Even if we find Jameson’s solution to the problem of the novel persuasive or politically salutary, it can never reclaim the metaphysical authority of the master-narratives of old.

What I want to suggest, then, is that Lukács and Bakhtin’s theories of the novel’s constitutive formal autonomy become newly pertinent to the novel in an age in which narrative totality has become simultaneously necessary and impossible; in which postmodern skepticism toward grand narratives has given way to a new materialism, but not one that can simply revert to the master-narratives of old; in which history thus finds itself narrated under erasure, newly valorized yet unable to coincide with itself; and in which Marxism as guarantor of historical totality, meaning and transparency has been substituted for a Marxism “without guarantees”.⁴⁴ Autonomy, for Jameson, is a condition toward which the novel travels, and that is fully realized (and hence, in good Hegelian fashion, superseded) with postmodernism. But if we follow the logic of Lukács’s argument, autonomy is an untimely predicament; not a *telos* but the originary ontological rupture that the novel form constantly strives and fails to repair. We can thus modify Jameson’s argument about the historicity of particular novelistic forms by positing autonomy as the unconscious of the novel form itself; not the direction toward which it travels but the

⁴⁴ Stuart Hall, “The Problem of Ideology - Marxism Without Guarantees” (1986).

untimely predicament that none of its historical modifications and permutations can transcend. Such an unconscious is legible not at the level of a particular historical form of the novel (realism, modernism, postmodernism), but at the level of generality and abstraction at which Lukács theorizes it: not as a form, but as that which guarantees the novel form's "normative incompleteness". Lukács's account of the novel form as constitutively autonomous thus offers a challenge to later theories, including his own, that see the novel form as progressing (or, degenerating) historically from realism to modernism and beyond. The "loss of epic significance" that for the later Lukács distinguishes naturalism and modernism from realism is the condition of (im)possibility of the novel as such, the originary trauma that it compulsively reenacts. Likewise, the problem of metafiction, from Lukács's point of view, emerges with the novel's genesis, not with its postmodern exhaustion or dissolution.

The notion of autonomy as the unconscious of the novel form that I am proposing here, then, is not one that progresses, but that subtends and delimits the novel's possibility of formal progression, or of adaptation to new contexts; an unconscious that cannot be escaped or transcended because it is constitutive of the novel form itself, "the reverse side of what is written". Autonomy is not present in the work as a style (pastiche, long sentences, fragmentation, stream of consciousness, lack of punctuation) or as a formal tendency (interiority, abstraction, metafictional self-commentary, a predominance of "spatial form" over narrative), but as the structural predicament to which all of these stylistic and formal strategies respond, and that overdetermines in advance the range of options available to a given novel. Autonomy, in other words, is neither narrative closure nor metafictional self-commentary, but the impossibility of the choice between them. This is true regardless of a given author's self-consciousness or lack of it, or whether or not a given novel appears to acknowledge it.

What the novel performatively and ceaselessly communicates - at a pre-discursive level independent of the content or form of a given novel - is simply the fact *of* novel-ness and the set of social relations that it both indexes and tends to reinforce. We might think of this as a kind of extra-discursive performativity, along the lines of that which Judith Butler theorizes in relation to the political assembly:

Embodied actions of various kinds signify in ways that are, strictly speaking, neither discursive nor prediscursive. In other words, forms of assembly already signify prior to, and apart from, any particular demands that they make.⁴⁵

During a political assembly for Butler, “the bodies assembled ‘say’ we are not disposable, even if they stand silently” (18). Likewise, we might wager that what the novel “says” (or, performatively reinscribes) is the condition of the artwork “as such”: the constitutive absence of situated collectivity, ritual authority and collective endeavor (18). Or in other words, the predicament of autonomy. This observation obviously has its limits; it need not commit us to a neo-McCluhanite media determinism. Non-discursive performativity supplements, conditions and delimits the actual discourse of a novel; it clearly does not determine or render it irrelevant. The medium is not the message, but it is an important component of it, and one that “new formalist” criticism such as Kornbluh’s, with its decontextualized valorization of the political affordances of form in the abstract, has a predisposition to overlook.

David Kurnick makes an important contribution to rendering the novel’s extra-discursive performativity thinkable in *Empty Houses* (2012), his study of the Victorian novel’s failed theatrical ambitions. Kurnick theorizes the theater, along Butlerian lines, as an extra-discursive performance of the sheer fact of collectivity:

⁴⁵ Judith Butler, *Notes Toward a Performative Theory of Assembly* (2015), p. 8.

The collaborative nature of the theater - like theatrical improvisation - can... be described as powerfully dethematizing: no matter the plot, what happens on stage communicates first and always the fact of collective endeavor.⁴⁶

According to Kurnick, the “collective endeavor” exemplified by the theater leaves its “formal trace” in (or, as) the “collectivist imagination” of the Victorian realist novel (20). The collectivist imagination of the realist novel, then, is the site of its resistance to the condition of autonomy; a condition that the novel nonetheless also performatively reinscribes in and through the very fact of its being a novel rather than a theatrical performance. This internal contradiction manifests itself for Kurnick as an anxious self-consciousness, a sense of “artistic irrelevance” in relation to the actually existing collectivity of the theater: “these novels are intensely aware of their relative marginality and powerlessness”, a condition that Kurnick also theorizes in relation to a more encompassing sense of “the marginality of the aesthetic in modernity” (25). The novel’s collectivist ambitions therefore register the trace of theatrical collectivity as a constitutive absence, the phantom limb truncated from, yet hauntologically present within, novelistic discourse: “in its continued invocation of an absent theater the novel of interiority works to make the reader dissatisfied with his status as a reader by rendering palpable to him the fact of his social apartness” (28).

The collectivizing moves of the Victorian realist novel, in other words, are reterritorializing responses to an originary deterritorialization that is sedimented within the medium, but which they can therefore only performatively reinscribe, never truly overcome. This is the irony sedimented within the novel form: an irony deriving from the performative contradiction between the embodied address to a situated collectivity that novelistic discourse

⁴⁶ David Kurnick, *Empty Houses: Theatrical Failure and the Novel* (2012), p. 18.

simulates, and the constitutive absence of that collectivity that it extra-discursively performs in and as the political unconscious of the medium itself. Hybridity, deterritorialization, irony, abstraction, mediation, impersonality: these are not so much features of particular novels or aesthetic criteria deriving from them, but rather structural features of the medium itself, sedimented within the novel's material form.

To be sure, Lukács articulates this argument in metaphysical, and in some ways easily deconstructible terms. The logic of a fall from immanence into "absolute sinfulness" - of a "paradise forever lost" - is, in a literary academy well versed in poststructuralist critiques of origins and binary oppositions, easily recognisable as a version of the *ur*-narrative of patriarchal conservatism (85). The obvious political objection to Lukács's argument lies in its nostalgic idealism, yearning for an implicitly patriarchal (even crypto-fascist) past in which everyone knew their place in an organic social totality. Yet what Lukács is describing need not be interpreted in terms of a metaphysical fall from immanence whose tenability as an argument depends on the historical accuracy or otherwise of his account of "integrated civilizations". Rather, the transition from epic to novel can be redescribed in materialist terms as the establishment of art "as such", as a relatively autonomous practice detached from functional subservience to formal rituals of social reproduction, and pursued as an end in itself. The novel is both a product of this process and a response to it. Art's "transcendental homelessness" is the predicament of its autonomy: the separation from prior social functions and their associated forms of legitimacy and value that is constitutive of the specifically modern social construction of art "as such". "Integrated civilizations" in these terms would refer not to some prelapsarian state of harmonious totality or noble savagery, but to premodern societies in which art was functionally integrated into extrinsic rituals of social reproduction, whether religious or

mythological. Approaching autonomization in these terms allows us to identify the constitutively problematic social status and function of the artwork “as such” as a specific problem of modernity, without necessarily attaching this problem to more grandiose claims about a fall from metaphysical integration to fragmentation, or from non-reified to reified being.

Deterritorialization and Art “As Such”: John Dewey, Ariella Azoulay

A highly pertinent account of art’s autonomization in these terms can be found in another work of philosophical aesthetics written by a contemporary of Lukács and Bakhtin, on the other side of the Atlantic: John Dewey’s *Art as Experience* (1935).⁴⁷ Like Lukács, Dewey laments the modern situation in which “Art is remitted to a separate realm, where it is cut off from that association with the materials and aims of every other form of human effort, undergoing, and achievement” (3). Like Lukács, Dewey contrasts this “museum conception of art” (6), or of art “as such”, with a premodern situation in which aesthetic productions of various kinds were “part of the significant life of an organized community” (7), not works of art but “enhancements of everyday life” that belonged “to display of prowess, the manifestation of group and clan membership, worship of gods, feasting and fasting, fighting, hunting, and all the rhythmic crises that punctuate the stream of living” (7). Dewey again agrees with Lukács in seeing this modern “compartmental conception of fine art” (8) as bound up in the “forces (that) have historically produced so many of the dislocations and divisions of modern life” (6).

⁴⁷ John Dewey, *Art as Experience* (1935).

Yet whereas the Lukács of 1916 interprets these “forces” in terms of a metaphysical fall from immanence into “transcendental homelessness”, Dewey sketches the beginnings of a materialist account of the social construction of art “as such” in the dual imperatives of imperial plunder and capitalist commodification:

Modern industry and commerce have an international scope. The contents of galleries and museums testify to the growth of economic cosmopolitanism. The mobility of trade and of populations, due to the economic system, has weakened or destroyed the connection between works of art and the *genius loci* of which they were once the natural expression. As works of art have lost their indigenous status, they have acquired a new one - that of being specimens of fine art and nothing else. Moreover, works of art are now produced, like other articles, for sale in the market... Objects that were in the past valid and significant because of their place in a community now function in isolation from the conditions of their origin. By that fact they are also set apart from common experience, and serve as insignia of taste and certificates of special culture. (9)

The autonomizing of art for Dewey is a dual process of deterritorialization / reterritorialization: the removal of a given cultural production from the totality of human relations in whose context it takes on a particular meaning is part of the larger process in which it is reterritorialized as a “specimen of fine art and nothing else”. This process is most direct and intuitive in the case of the imperial plunder and museum display of cultural artifacts, in which (say) a tribal mask is relieved of its ceremonial function and meaning, and displayed as an “aesthetic” artifact to be appreciated for its qualities of craftsmanship and form alone. Yet it is also presupposed in - and constitutes the unconscious of - the process of the historical construction of the novel form itself.

Read in such terms, *Theory of the Novel* points to a fundamental commonality between postcolonial and Western works, and between realism and modernism, that has generally been elided in existing discussions of the problem of the artwork’s autonomy. Early postcolonial critiques of the notion of art’s autonomy tended to compartmentalize it, as a characteristically Western ideology that has a largely negative value for theorizing the postcolonial. If Western

high culture seeks to establish the apolitical autonomy of the aesthetic, postcolonial artworks assert the the inseparability of art and politics; if post-Kantian aesthetics consign art to an Ivory Tower above and beyond worldly entanglements, postcolonial art engages directly with history and with the specificities of its local contexts.⁴⁸ Yet recent work by Ariella Azoulay, David Lloyd, Simon Gikandi, Larry Shiner and Clyde Taylor has approached autonomization as a colonial process that produces the very category of the work of art “as such”, a designation to which postcolonial works are subject yet with which they do not fully coincide.⁴⁹ In her 2019 book *Potential Histories: Unlearning Imperialism*, Ariella Azoulay argues that imperial “plunder” is the basis for the establishment of modern art: “Violently separating people from the objects they hold in common, and objects from the communities that create them and give them different types of meaning, is what we now call art... Imperial violence is not secondary to art but constitutive of it” (159). As part of the process of colonial plunder, objects of various kinds and functions were deterritorialized (uprooted from their various functional contexts within particular cultures) and reterritorialized under the putatively transcendental, universal and homogeneous category of art “as such” (put on display and/or commodified as autonomous works of art “as such”, available to the disinterested gaze of the consumer, and to be appreciated for their specifically artistic, or aesthetic value). Azoulay’s account of the constitution of the

⁴⁸ The paradigmatic case here is perhaps Chinua Achebe’s dismissal of *l’art pour l’art*, in essays such as “The Novelist as Teacher” (1965) and “Africa and her Writers” (1973), which I discuss in more detail below (“The Neo-Realist Turn”, pp. 236-248). See Achebe, *Hopes and Impediments* (1988). See also, Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (1998); Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (1993); Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989).

⁴⁹ Ariella Azoulay, *Potential Histories: Unlearning Imperialism* (2019); David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2018); Simon Gikandi, *Slavery and the Culture of Taste* (2011); Larry Shiner, *The Invention of Art: A Cultural History* (2001); Clyde Taylor, *The Mask of Art: Breaking the Aesthetic Contract* (1998).

category of the artwork through imperial plunder is a redescription of the process of autonomization that is conventionally understood, in more affirmative terms, as art's teleological self-realization or liberation from ritual subservience. This process is furthermore often assumed to be exclusive to Western artworks, since the artistic productions of non-Western cultures are in many cases thought to have retained a greater sense of community and functionality.

Yet as Azoulay recognizes, the fact that many non-Western artists have been skeptical of Western aesthetic ideologies that proclaim the autonomous self-sufficiency and formal closure of the artwork, and instead tend to see their works as both directly political and directed to specific audiences, does not mean that the predicament of autonomy is irrelevant or inapplicable to them. "What was at stake for the colonizers was not only the conservation of African art and the legacy of a distant past, but also the imposition of a concept of art that could be practiced and appreciated only through newly established institutions, which reified the detachment of art from its material and political worlds, replacing these with professional institutions and 'experts'" (89). The status of artistic autonomy, which was consciously sought out by a lineage of post-Renaissance Western high art from romanticism to modernism, was imposed upon colonized cultures via plunder and under duress.

The postcolonial refusal of autonomy is therefore overdetermined, a way of responding to a predicament not necessarily of one's choosing, yet to which one is nonetheless subject. There is no autonomy *from* autonomy for the work of art "as such", whether postcolonial or otherwise, since the process of autonomization is the artwork's condition of possibility, its prehistory. An anxiety about the performance of cultural authenticity for Western consumers is one of the dissonances analyzed by Graham Huggan and Sarah Brouillette under the rubric of the "postcolonial exotic", arising from the conflict between the self-understanding of many non-

Western artworks as embedded within or functional to particular cultures, and their positioning within the structures of commodification and deterritorialization that comprise the world republic of letters.⁵⁰ The “global commodification of cultural difference” constantly threatens to convert postcolonial critique back into “complicity” or “staged marginality”, to harness the assertion of alterity to the commercial imperatives of an emergent “alterity industry”.⁵¹ Through such structures of recuperation and instrumentalization, postcolonial assertions of cultural difference - or of autonomy from the ideology of literary autonomy - are compromised, rendered self-defeating. Autonomy can be neither transcended nor instantiated, neither fully realized nor evaded. What is at stake here once again, then, is a conflict between the concept and practice of autonomous art; a conflict that is concealed by the critical tendency to conflate the two, and to reserve autonomy as an accolade awarded to artworks that have successfully assimilated themselves to the protocols of one or another aesthetic ideology. Artworks that refuse or embrace their autonomy are responding to a shared predicament; the very phrase “autonomous art” is an oxymoron.

We can therefore view the predicament of autonomy as a point of contact between Western and non-Western artworks without necessarily collapsing all distinctions between them or assimilating the latter to Eurocentric notions of high art and aesthetic ideology. Just as the deterritorialized laborers of Mumbai and London share a common predicament to the extent that they are both obliged to sell their labor power as a commodity, the artworks of Western and non-Western cultures share the predicament of autonomy to the extent that they participate in the

⁵⁰ Graham Huggan, *The Postcolonial Exotic* (2001); Sarah Brouillette, *Postcolonial Writers in the Global Literary Marketplace* (2007).

⁵¹ Huggan, p. vii

practices, institutions and structures of art “as such” (or, the “world republic of letters”), regardless of their discursive self-positioning in relation to this or that theory of aesthetic autonomy or political instrumentality. To be sure, that which was perpetrated largely by force in the colonial context was achieved less antagonistically in the Western context, via the mediation of the market and through the hegemony of aesthetic ideology, as art made a virtue of necessity by transmuting its loss of function and ritual authority into a purpose and aesthetic *raison d’être*. This follows the larger pattern whereby, as Ranajit Guha has argued, what is achieved in the colonial world through dominance is achieved in the imperial center through hegemony.⁵² Yet the outcome in both cases is the predicament of autonomy. This is the process that Benjamin, in his “Work of Art” essay, refers to as the transmuting of “cult value” into “exhibition value”: the art object, now detached from the sources of its former ritual authority, nonetheless retains the suppressed prehistory of its becoming art in the form of an auratic unconscious.⁵³

As Azoulay points out, this process is ongoing. Yet it is ongoing, I would suggest, less through the kind of extractive relation (ie, looting) that characterizes imperialism, but rather through the kind of sedimented structures that Ann Laura Stoler calls the infrastructure of imperial “duress”, “a past that is imagined to be over but persists, reactivates, and recruits in transfigured forms”.⁵⁴ In order to understand the significance of the problem of autonomy for the postcolonial artwork in general, and for the postcolonial novel in particular, it is clearly insufficient to think exclusively in terms of plunder, in which the artifacts of modes of artistic production that preexist and remain essential unchanged by imperial modernity are then

⁵² Ranajit Guha, *Dominance without Hegemony* (1998).

⁵³ Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008), p. 25.

⁵⁴ Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (2016), p. 33.

extracted and coercively autonomized by their removal from their proper cultural contexts and traditions. Rather, this process is immanent to the very production of the artworks themselves, since the mode of artistic production itself has been reordered along Western lines (autonomized) by the process of cultural commodification and the globalization of circuits of cultural production and circulation. Framed in these terms, the “world republic of letters”, in which the literary productions of various cultures circulate transnationally as works of literature “as such”, is a sedimented imperial structure. And moreover, another such sedimented imperial structure is *the novel form itself*, which as critics such as Edward Said and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o have noted, was imported into and appropriated by non-European cultures as a product of colonialism.

The relations of plunder and/or commodification that comprise the process of deterritorialization, and which have been sedimented within the organizing structures of the world republic of letters, are retained within works of art “as such” in the form of a ritual unconscious, the memory of the functional context from which they are constitutively detached yet which, like a severed limb, survives in spectral form as an absent presence (or a present absence). The memory of the novel’s constitutive autonomization is the wound (or, the “fundamental dissonance”) that it can only reinscribe, the originary unworlding that the novel can only reenact in the compensatory and constitutively inadequate subterfuge of (merely) aesthetic form.

It is precisely this vital historical dimension to Lukács’s account of form’s ungroundedness that accounts for its pertinence to postcolonial works that seek to restore or preserve art’s traditional functions in the face of the forces of autonomization: the “world republic of letters” in which novels no longer function in the manner of traditional storytelling, but circulate as commodities to anonymous and globally distributed consumers, and are thus

assimilated into the structures of literature “as such”. The fundamentally Lukácsian irony of a novel such as Chinua Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), for example, surely lies in the inner tension between its form and its subject matter, or the antagonism between its attempt to perpetuate the communitarian function of traditional art and its ontology *as* a novel.⁵⁵ Whatever the novel’s political or ethnographic significance, and however far it serves to complicate mythical notions of the harmonious collectivity of the “integrated” civilization, the tragic irony of *Things Fall Apart* nonetheless lies in the contrast between the historical civilization that it describes - in which art is functionally integrated into the reproduction and identity of a situated community - and its own status as a novel, and thus a work of art “as such”. The novel’s conspicuously Western literary reference points thus serve to reinforce the irony inherent within its status as a monument to a pre-colonial culture whose destruction is also the novel’s condition of possibility, and which it can therefore only reinscribe at every turn.

A similar irony recurs throughout first-generation postcolonial novels that seek to reappropriate the Western form of the novel, or to assimilate it to the specificity of particular non-Western cultures. To cite another classic example, in Ngũgĩ’s *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), the impersonal, “omniscient” third person narrative periodically switches to a situated perspective, more reminiscent of an oral storyteller.⁵⁶ Whereas the former discloses the interiority of its various individual characters via free indirect discourse, the latter narrates on behalf of a collective “we”, and directly addresses the reader as a member of this collective:

⁵⁵ Chinua Achebe, *Things Fall Apart* (1958).

⁵⁶ As Abdulrazak Gurnah notes in his introduction to the 2012 Penguin Classics edition, “The framing voice is a third person narrator who at times speaks with a clear political awareness of the context of Kenya’s colonial history, and at other times slides quietly into the inclusiveness of the oral story-teller speaking to listeners who are familiar with the main events of the tale”, p. xi.

Most of us from Thabai first saw him at the new Rung'ei Market the day the heavy rain fell. You remember the Wednesday, just before Independence? Wind blew and the rain hit the ground at an angle. Women abandoned their wares in the open and scampered to the shops for shelter, soon crowding together in narrow verandahs. Water dripped down the sack and the pieces of clothing with which they covered their heads; little pools formed on the cement floor. People said the falling water was a blessing for our hard-won freedom.⁵⁷

The novel thus formally figures its hybridizing of African oral storytelling traditions with those of the European novel, or of storytelling as collective ritual and literature “as such”. The collective voice is subsumed as just one component of the novel’s larger fragmentary form, a polyphonic collection of mutually problematizing perspectives rendered in the signature modernist mode of free indirect discourse. The individuating and decentralized perspective of the latter, with its dispersed character-system and polyphonic arrangement of perspectives, is thus placed in dialogical counterpoint with the collectivizing (or, monologic) voice of the situated collective. As we have seen, in Bakhtin’s “Epic and the Novel”, dialogism - and its formal concretization, the novel - is associated with the breakdown of the monologic, epic communities in Europe at the onset of modernity: a development which in the African context is synonymous with the imposition of colonialism and its destruction of traditional, communal ways of life.⁵⁸ In this sense, the autonomy of art in relation to the “oral” community - what Benjamin calls its emancipation from its “parasitic subservience to ritual” - is a historical product of colonial violence.⁵⁹

The tension between modernist and oral narrative perspectives within Ngũgĩ’s narrative therefore stages the novel’s awareness of its own implication within the forces of fragmentation

⁵⁷ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong’o, *A Grain of Wheat* (1967), p. 173. See also, pp. 127, 173, 199, 212.

⁵⁸ Bakhtin, *The Dialogic Imagination*, pp. 3-41.

⁵⁹ Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility”, p. 24.

that are both historically and thematically opposed to the unified voice of the collective. The novel's dialogical form reproduces that fragmentation even as its oral voice appears to strive, against the very form of the novel itself, to overcome it. Ngũgĩ therefore uses dialogical form to stage the problem of the novel's entanglement with both the epistemology and the material structures of the colonizer; something that Ngũgĩ - aware as he is of the novel's bourgeois roots - suspects it of insidiously and inescapably reinscribing. As Ngũgĩ elsewhere observes, "The novel, at least in the form that reached us in Africa, is of bourgeois origins. It arose with the development of the new technology of the printing press and hence commercial publishing and above all with the new climate of thought that the world was knowable through human experience".⁶⁰ In my terms, the notion that the novel's "bourgeois origins" inform its ideological character is a way of making the claim that it carries within itself the unconscious material imprint of the prehistory of its autonomization. The novel, in other words, is an example of the residual structures of "imperial duress", untimely forms through which colonialism lives on into and continues to shape the present.⁶¹

Both Lukács and Bakhtin see the novel neither as a specific kind of form, nor as an infinitely malleable progression of forms within a medium whose "rule is not to have rules", but rather as a kind of logic that may produce a wide range of formal solutions or (re)enactments, but that nonetheless persists within and delimits them.⁶² And this, I propose, is how we ought to think about autonomy in an age of world literature: not as a kind of aspiration, or a quality that a given novel may embrace or refuse, but as the constitutive ontology of the form itself: the

⁶⁰ Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, *Decolonising the Mind* (1986), p. 65.

⁶¹ Ann Laura Stoler, *Duress: Imperial Durabilities in Our Times* (2016).

⁶² Terry Eagleton, *The English Novel: An Introduction* (2004), p. 2.

problem in relation to which the connection between, say, Chinua Achebe (who in “The Novel as Teacher” flatly refuses art’s autonomy) and Vladimir Nabokov (who throughout his writing rather simplistically asserts it) becomes legible. The former’s refusal and the latter’s embrace are responses to a common predicament: the predicament of the work of art “as such”.

Art’s Aesthetic Afterlives: Teju Cole

This entanglement of the colonial production of the category of art “as such” and the historical genesis of the novel form is staged in Teju Cole’s 2023 novel, *Tremor*.⁶³ Chapter five takes the form of the transcript of a lecture, delivered at the Boston Museum of Fine Art by the protagonist Tunde, who like Cole himself is a Nigerian-American photographer who teaches at Harvard (Tunde teaches art history; Cole teaches creative writing, but has a PhD in art history). In it he describes a bronze plaque,

one of thirty two from Benin currently in the collection of this museum. It is on view in a small gallery here which many of you will no doubt have visited. The plaque is estimated to be made between 1530 and 1570 by the Benin guild of bronze casters during the reigns of Oba Esigie and his son and successor Oba Orhogbua. It would have been one of hundreds attached to the pillars of a courtyard in the royal palace. Such images presented Benin’s history to the people of the kingdom. They were the visual recording of its kings and gods. (110)

Tunde here describes the original conditions of what Lukács might call the bronze plaque’s “epic significance”: its function within the context of a meaningful totality, the royal palace, which itself represents the total life of an “integrated” collectivity. As Tunde recounts, the bronze plaque is one of many cultural artifacts that were looted from Benin following an eighteen-day

⁶³ Teju Cole, *Tremor: A Novel* (2023).

attack by the British army in 1897, in which they massacred hundreds of people. The looting that followed constituted “an attempt at cultural obliteration”, in which “The great city was stripped of its material glory, particularly its works of ritual and artistic significance” (108). Some four thousand objects were “expropriated from destroyed Benin and scattered across the world”, only to become “a core component of the ethnographic art that filled the storerooms and displays of museums in places like London, Oxford, Cambridge, Berlin, Vienna, Philadelphia, New York, Edinburgh, Dublin, Vancouver, Basel, Washington, D.C., Glasgow, Cleveland, Liverpool and Boston” (109). Tunde goes on to reflect,

But whatever visual pleasure plaques such as this might offer there is an act of violent displacement behind them that we have a responsibility to consider. There’s a story here that cannot be told, as M. NourbeSe Philip writes of the Zong, and we must tell it. The Benin plaque is no mere work of art but rather the residue of a vast cultural experience that is now decontextualized. (110)

The anecdote is a recounting in miniature of the birth of art “as such” from colonial violence; or, of the material process that is obscured by the metaphysical terminology in which Lukács describes the “loss of epic significance”. The “unconscious” of the artwork here is, then, the entire culture and fabric of meaning that is constitutively absent: the prehistory of deterritorialization and autonomization that had to be undergone by the plaque in order for it to be present and legible to the Western viewer as a work of art “as such”, yet which it retains within it in the form of a dissonance, an out-of-placeness, or an incommensurability with the context and criteria of its display and aesthetic evaluation.

On one hand, then, *Tremor*’s narrative framing of the Benin plaque serves to model a certain narrative affordance of the novel: in restoring the “story that cannot be told” to the plaque it undoes the violent act of decontextualization that produces it as an artwork for the gaze of the Western viewer. In Saidiya Hartman’s terms, Tunde’s lecture is an act of “critical fabulation”,

“a history of an unrecoverable past”, “written with and against the archive”.⁶⁴ As an art historian, Tunde thus satisfies the Jamesonian injunction to “always historicize!”, articulating the unconscious that is sedimented within yet occluded by the false self-evidence of the plaque itself. Its aesthetic qualities only have meaning in relation to the culture from which it has been removed; its display as a work of art is a monument to a constitutive act of violence that it cannot speak of. By incorporating this art historical critique into the novelistic narrative, *Tremor* demonstrates, albeit on a smaller scale, the correspondence between what Jameson wants interpretation to do, and what Lukács wants the novel itself to do: trading decontextualized, aestheticizing description for totalizing narration, and thus re-containing the plaque within the narrative totality in relation to which it becomes historically comprehensible.

But the self-reflexive dimension of the passage lies in the unspoken - because unspeakable - continuity between the plaque and the novel itself, which cannot fully contain the narrative of its own historical emergence, or its own constitutive loss of “epic significance”, a memory that it nonetheless contains within itself *in the form of* an unspeakable absence, or a “normative incompleteness”. This constitutive absence is formally inscribed in the novel through its positioning as a frustrated act of communication. The third person narrative periodically breaks off into a direct address to a “you” who is absent, and who we later learn is a friend, now dead, with whom Tunde shared a correspondence over “almost twenty years” (229). The novel is addressed to a spectral absence, a monument to the constitutive loss through which “The great conversation has become a monologue” (232).

⁶⁴ Saidiya Hartman, “Venus in Two Acts” (2008) p. 12.

The novel, like the plaque, is decentered; neither contains its meaning within itself, but only in relation to a larger totality from which it is constitutively separated. Yet the literal absence of the object of address also stands for a more pervasive and unnameable absence at the novel's core, the separation and loss that is inscribed within works of art "as such" of all kinds, their status as constitutively mutilated, deformed or severed monuments to forms of collective life that have been destroyed, or at least compromised, by "the obliterative arrogance of Western culture" (29). What Hartman has called "the constitutive nature of loss in the making of the African diaspora" is inscribed in the very forms and media of the novel form, and of art and literature "as such".⁶⁵ *Tremor* makes repeated reference to art's origins in collective ritual, and in doing so invites the reader to consider the contrast between such traditional and communally embedded works and the novel itself: a meandering, digressive and largely plotless narrative which exists for nobody and nothing in particular, which contains various arguments and discourses without ever coalescing into one, which is seemingly unwilling or unable to tell us what it is really about or why it exists, and which is similarly unable to reconcile its various disparate component parts into any kind of a narrative unity or centered perspective. The meandering discourse of Cole's novels can be said to perform their "transcendental homelessness", searching for a meaning that they can never realize, unable either to coincide with or to separate themselves from the event of their articulation. "Every image of a human being proposes a question to the viewer: why am I being shown this?", Tunde tells his students (46). This is the question that also hangs over the novel itself - that hangs over any novel - and

⁶⁵ Saidiya Hartman, "The Time of Slavery" (2002), p. 758.

which it is unable (yet nonetheless compelled) to answer. This is the question, in fact, that Cole's novels can only answer by not answering it.

This "residue of a vast cultural experience that is now decontextualized" is a constant undercurrent in *Tremor*, immanent within the kinds of aesthetic experience Tunde values. In "world music" in particular, he perceives a residue of a kind of communal aesthetic experience that survives the Western partitioning of artworks as "specimens of fine art and nothing else". "Every time he hears these sounds he is back in Mali even though he has never been to Mali. He is restored to his place in the web of time and put in contact with his ancestors" (71). Tunde sees the experience of art as preserving forms of sacred and communal experience that have not entirely been obliterated by the post-Enlightenment partitioning of art "as such":

Singing began in ritual with the purpose of demarcating sacred time from ordinary time. It fortified the web of human relationships, strengthening the connections between a human community and the universe in which the community found itself. Then there was an expansion from what people could do with their voices into the larger sense of music that included instruments. To say that ancient people took pleasure in their music is not to say that they made music for the sake of pleasure. Music had a holy purpose much the same as cave paintings or carved figurines and evolved like those visual arts with the needs of human societies. And then in time, in the syncopated time that brings revolution to places when they are ready for it, music came to speak of the deeds of deified ancestors and divine kings and it became one of the means by which narrative privileges won in battle were transferred from one generation to the next. Intimacy and grandeur: both are woven into the prehistory of music, both have survived through its history. All this affects our listening now at the far end of that history. (69)

Tunde's narrative is saturated with a critical awareness of the inscription of historical violence within the forms, structures and automatisms of everyday life, a sense that "We live on the accumulated ruins of experience", and that "All time is now" (234, 9). The aesthetic is one of the means through which Tunde disaffiliates from this dominant culture, a time capsule to another world that "reminds him that life elsewhere is not only abundant but often more deeply abundant.

He already feels this, particularly when he thinks about Yoruba culture or about the music he cherishes so much that at certain moments it strikes him as the “meaning” of life itself” (29). This stands in contrast to “The oblitative arrogance of Western culture” (29), in which the appreciation of non-Western works of art is desacralized into aesthetic judgment, and thus abstracted from any regard for the people and cultures that made them (“What does it mean to care about art but not about the people who made that art?”) (111).

Tunde’s sense of the aesthetic as bearing witness to and preserving pre-modern forms of collectivity can be set in sharp contrast to a cynical postmodern attitude toward aesthetic experience as fundamentally projective or appropriative, rooted in desire or self-interest, or as the cultivation of social distinction through the display of “cultural capital”. Yet at the same time, the narrative also functions to implicitly call into question the tenability of any such distinction. The aesthetic experience through which Tunde imagines himself to stand in a relationship of kinship with Malian culture “even though he has never been to Mali” is ironically decentered by his position as an affluent Harvard professor and cosmopolitan intellectual, an active participant within and beneficiary of the modern structures and institutions from which he claims to disaffiliate. This tension is implied at various points in the novel. At one point Tunde flies to Bamako via Paris for a photography Biennial:

He is supposed to be in Santiago at this moment but an uprising broke out there and Chileans turned out in the streets in their hundreds of thousands to demand a better life. The uprising meant that his planned lecture was postponed. And so at short notice he decided to travel to Bamako. The Biennial is his pretext but long-nursed desire is his reason. (75)

No personal wrongdoing is implied here, but the tension between the artworld and the world of everyday political struggle, and between Tunde’s jet-set cosmopolitanism and the situated collective, is ironically underscored. While stopping off in Paris on his way to the Biennial,

Tunde takes an iPhone snapshot of some African men selling trinkets outside of the Louvre, in an attempt to recreate “an excellent photograph that had been made in precisely such a context by Alessandra Sanguinetti” (75). Whatever his critical self-consciousness about the Western separation of aesthetics and ethics, and though the thought behind the photograph is not entirely apolitical, the men nonetheless also function as aesthetic objects for Tunde; he is drawn to the scene “by the play of scale and visual rhythm” (76). Tunde is surprised when one of the men angrily pursues him and demands that he delete the photos. “He sees these men as his brothers... The man saw nothing but a class enemy” (77). Tunde subsequently reflects, “How is one to live in a way that does not cannibalize the lives of others, that does not reduce them to mascots, objects of fascination, mere terms in the logic of a dominant culture?” (78). Tunde’s only response to such a question seems to be a purely mental position of critical disaffiliation that is entirely consistent with his comfortable, affluent and successful life of professionalized connoisseurship: “‘Taken’ I say when describing other people’s photographs but for mine I default to ‘made’ - perhaps because I can vouch for my own intentions?” (197).

This ironic tension between Tunde’s opinions and the standpoint from which he holds them is subtle enough not to disqualify them altogether; rather, Tunde embodies a dissonance within the novel form in which attitudes and opinions are ironically decentered, offered up as “objects of representation” and thus dialogized, even when they are largely or entirely unobjectionable. Tunde’s wife Sadoko “loves above all his wish to be good. But a wish is not the same as a will and sometimes she is troubled by how unaware he is of his own failings” (64). The novel is underpinned throughout by an ironic tension between Tunde’s ethically unimpeachable attitudes and opinions, and his comfortable life safely ensconced within the structures of privilege from which he takes himself to disaffiliate. At the beginning of the book,

Tunde and Sadoko drive up to Maine to shop for antiques; an exemplary activity of white-coded affluence, signifying both Tunde's fully-fledged membership of the prevailing "culture of taste", and the not entirely incidental connection between his aesthetic sensibilities and his class position ("The plan is to do a small stretch of southern Maine up to Kennebunk, visiting several shops") (5). While thus engaged, Tunde comes across "a section with an assortment of wooden masks and sculptures, three of them recognizably African, the others possibly Pacific, Asian, or Native American. He is immediately drawn to an elegant antelope headdress with a soaring pair of horns, a *ci wara*" (5). When he is informed by the white store owner that the sculpture "might be authentic", Tunde's monologue veers, predictably, into a reflection on "what authenticity might mean":

In the West a love of the 'authentic' means that art collectors prefer their African objects to be alienated so that only what has been extracted from its context becomes real. Better that the artist not be named, better that the artist be long dead. The dispossession of the object's makers mysteriously confers monetary value to the object and the importance of the object is boosted by the story that can be told about its role in the history of modern European art. (7)

Tunde is fully self-conscious of his entanglement with and participation in the larger economic process of decontextualizing, aestheticizing and commodification that he mentally critiques.

Nonetheless, he decides to spend the \$250 it will take to "rescue" the *ci wara*:

He has seen, in the past, a female *ci wara* figure comparable to the one he is looking at now sold at auction for \$400,000. Those zeros, he knows, have everything to do with the trail of magic words that the auction house brushed over the object: 'collected in situ', 'acquired', 'exhibited'. The more extensive this account of ownership the greater the sums that can change hands between sellers and buyers. The *ci wara* he is looking at in Wells is priced at \$250 which seems to settle the question of authenticity: the sculpture has no 'provenance' and thus its value is minimal. He feels he ought to rescue it. He wants to bring it closer to home close to his own home where it can be seen by kinder eyes, by eyes that place authenticity elsewhere. Why should the labor of the contemporary artist who makes a *ci wara* to sell to visitors be less deserving of honor than the 'traditional' artist who makes a *ci wara* to be danced at a harvest festival? But he doesn't want to fool himself. Money is still changing hands. (7)

Tunde's disaffiliation from this economy of value, which ascribes an arbitrary number of "zeros" to an object whose meaning resides in "a vast cultural experience that is now decontextualized", is both endorsed and decentered by its positioning within the narrative. It is precisely the critical self-awareness that allows Tunde to see through the false economy of aesthetic value that allows him to participate in it on favorable terms. The *ci wara* is a bargain, and the relationship between ethical, political and aesthetic values here is decidedly muddled. Regardless of the mental gymnastics with which he rationalizes it, Tunde has achieved his goal of purchasing an item to decorate his house; one which might even, were "provenance" ever to be established, be worth a fortune. Regardless of how Tunde may "vouch for his intentions", his outward actions are functionally indistinguishable from the self-interest of the average ethically indifferent consumer.

Tunde later reflects on *Canopy*, a 1994 installation art piece by the British artist David Ward at the "tercentenary theater" on Harvard campus: "Ward spoke in his lecture of feeling that the invitation put him in the predicament of how to respond to the impressive setting without being 'positioned' by it" (217):

Ward said he found himself presented with two options: to be positioned in the sense of appearing to celebrate the institution or to be positioned by somehow seeming to critique it. He didn't want to be in either of those positions. His wish to refuse being positioned attracted me at first and I identified with his refusal. But after a while I saw things differently. Why would he not wish to critique the institution? 'Seeming to critique', he had said: to seem, to appear. I would like to be unconcerned with the appearance of critiquing the institution. (218)

Again, the sentiment that Tunde expresses here is entirely admirable, but also offered up to the reader as an "object of representation", dialogized by the fact of its own "positioning" within the novel. Tunde reads Ward's use of "appearing to critique" to signal an unwillingness to be

critical, a lack of bravery or integrity. But an alternative reading is surely that by using the qualification “appearing to critique”, Ward is acknowledging that even a critical artwork would in some sense still maintain a relation of complicity with the institution that sponsored it and that it serves to adorn; that such a critique would itself be “positioned”, and thus tinged with bad faith. Even the most critical artwork is capable of being converted - like Clement Greenberg’s Cold War abstract expressionism - into a monument to the liberal permissiveness and free-thinking of the society (or in this case, the institution) that allows it. The passage gestures, self-reflexively, both to the limits of critique, and to the ways in which Tunde is himself positioned: both by the institution in which he works (however critically) and the novel itself, which serves to decenter the views that he expresses regardless of whether Cole himself or the reader agrees with them. “There is”, as Tunde acknowledges and the novel ironically reinscribes, “no view from nowhere” (218).

The question of “positioning” can be taken to refer back to Tunde’s own positioning within the institutional forms and structures of a regime of aesthetics from which he wishes to disaffiliate. Just before he recounts the episode of the plaque in chapter five, Tunde interrupts the lecture because he has temporarily lost vision in one eye. This can be read as a metaphor for the inseparability of blindness and insight in Tunde’s perspective, and indeed in any novelistic discourse. The interruption of Tunde’s lecture points to the way in which Tunde is himself “positioned”, most immediately by the institution that houses his critique, but more pervasively by a larger history that he cannot narrate, the historical conditions of possibility that produce, but cannot be contained within, his discourse. His argument is both correct and decentered by the context of its articulation. Self-critique can, after all, be regarded as an established and perhaps even necessary functional component of the institutional forms and structures in which Tunde

participates, a way of contributing to the perpetuation of the “racial regime of aesthetics” despite one’s best intentions.⁶⁶ The interruption decenters the apparently unmediated objectivity of the lecture as the transcription of Tunde’s monologic discourse, as well as pointing metaphorically to the personal fallibility and tendentiousness of a character who seems, in his rather portentous moral grandstanding, both to actively court and to ironically frustrate the ascription of exemplarity that the narrators of Cole’s previous novels, *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007) and *Open City* (2011), more overtly problematize.

All of Cole’s novels in one way or another concern the “casual complicity” that problematizes both their political and aesthetic commitments.⁶⁷ Cole’s first novel, *Every Day is for the Thief* is a Sebaldian travelog in which a Nigerian-American emigre returns to the Lagos of his youth: “I have taken into myself some of the assumptions of life in a Western democracy - certain ideas about legality, for instance, certain expectations of due process - and in that sense I have returned a stranger” (17). Yet while the novel is concerned with this cultural comparison, its major preoccupation is the complicity between the narrator’s intellectualism and aestheticism, and his snobbish detachment from Nigerian life, which he sees as a “hostile environment for the life of the mind” (42). The sight of a young woman reading a Michael Ondaatje novel on a bus sends him into a lyrical reverie:

What, lady, do you make of Ondaatje’s labyrinthine sentences, his sensuous prose? How does his intense visuality strike you? But is it hard to concentrate on such poetry in Lagos traffic, with the noise of the crowd, and the tout’s body odor wafting over you? I see all of those gathered here, and I believe in you most. (43)

⁶⁶ On the “racial regime of aesthetics” see David Lloyd, *Under Representation: The Racial Regime of Aesthetics* (2018).

⁶⁷ Teju Cole, *Every Day is for the Thief* (2007), p. 7.

Cole's novels stage the ways in which culture and aesthetics can at once be sources of transformative, life-affirming and spiritually elevating experiences of beauty and meaning, and fundamentally compromised by and complicit with the social, cultural and racial inequalities they take themselves to transcend. They place aestheticism and a Bourdieuan anti-aestheticism in counterpoint without finally endorsing or foreclosing either position. In *Every Day is for the Thief*, the gaze of the narrator is simultaneously avowed and disavowed, inhabited and dialogized. The narrator's gaze is the vehicle for the novel's critical insights and meandering essayistic digressions; yet it is also presented as appropriative, aestheticizing and exoticizing, converting the "pungent details" of Lagos life into literary capital on one hand while also sponsoring the writer's snobbish detachment from that life:

It is an appalling way to conduct a society, yes, but I suddenly feel a vague pity for all those writers who have to ply their trade from sleepy American suburbs, writing divorce scenes symbolized by the very slow washing of dishes. (65)

The narrator professes his belief in a "universal culture", in which "Molière's work can appear onstage in Lagos, just as Soyinka's appears in London":

Art can do that. Literature, music, visual arts, theater, film. The most convincing signs of life I see in Nigeria are connected to the practice of the arts. And it is like this. Each time I am sure that, returning to Lagos, I have inadvertently wandered into a region of hell, something else emerges to give me hope. A reader, an orchestra, the friendship of some powerful swimmers against the tide. (87)

Art "as such" is held up as a "universal", and in general as the standard against which the shortcomings of Nigerian life are judged, even though the narrator notes that literacy rates there stand at "57%", that it is "difficult for the average Nigerian to live a middle-class lifestyle", that "a new paperback novel costs fourteen dollars", and that musical instruction is available "only to the wealthiest and most dedicated Nigerians" (91, 86).

When the narrator later on encounters an earnest young law clerk who wishes to befriend him in the hopes of one day having “a chance of going to America”, he has the cultural capital to assimilate him to an obvious literary reference - “He reminds me of Leonard Bast in *Howards End*. The acute awareness of a social gap and the hope, yet, that the gap can be bridged by enthusiasm or application” - yet not the self-awareness not to casually dismiss him (152). The novel points to a fundamental breach between aesthetics and ethics, yet in doing so it does not seek to overcome its own entanglement within such contradictions. The narrator’s erudition and cultural capital, and the complicity and elitism of his aesthetic investments, are inseparable from the novel’s insights, intelligence, pleasures and affordances. In appreciating its ironies the reader is likewise recruited into the order of literariness it serves to problematize; in the very act of apprehending the novel’s self-critique the reader becomes subject to it. The novel thus inhabits its contradictions rather than trying to transcend or reconcile them.

The problem of the breach (even, the opposition) between aesthetics and ethics is likewise central to *Open City*.⁶⁸ Toward the end of that novel, Cole dramatically undercuts the authority of the narrative: Julius, the novel’s first-person narrator, attends a party hosted by Moji, the sister of an old school friend in Nigeria. After an apparently enjoyable evening in which Julius has “the pleasant sensation of flirting with Moji, not with any expectation, but for the pleasure of it”, she tells him, in detail, about an event that Julius appears to have forgotten, repressed or concealed: “she said that, in late 1989, when she was fifteen and I was a year younger, at a party that her brother had hosted at their house in Ikoyi, I had forced myself on her” (240, 244). This event has not previously been alluded to in any way, nor is it narrated,

⁶⁸ Teju Cole, *Open City: A Novel* (2011)

contextualized or even acknowledged in the subsequent narrative, even as Julius ruminates extensively on questions of art and ethics, of whether “writing well could come to stand in place of an ethical life” (144). Like *Tremor*, then, the narrative is revealed to have a meaning in relation to an event that has been excised from it. In doing so, Cole simultaneously points to the moral vacuity or even perniciousness of Julius’s conspicuous erudition and high-cultural cultivation, and slyly frustrates the reader’s anxious desire to regard the African American narrator as morally centering the novel, and thus as serving as the mouthpiece for Cole himself, as a presumed spokesperson for the historical gravity of Black experience as a whole.

If Every Day is for the Thief uses the amorality of the aestheticizing gaze both to authorize and to ironically decenter the critical eye of the outsider, and *Open City* presents the cultivated self-transcendence of aesthetic connoisseurship as continuous with moral evasion, *Tremor* concerns the impossibility of fully unthinking such complicities no matter how self-aware and ethically rigorous one’s perspective. What is at stake here, then, is not just the question of Western liberal hypocrisy, or even of the ideological recruitment, via cultural capital, of a highly self-aware black intellectual into elitist white cultural formations from which he nonetheless remains in significant ways excluded. *Tremor* stages a dissonance that lies at the heart of the novel form itself, which is unable to inhabit a position of moral or political coherence and consistency even, as here, when it makes morally or politically unobjectionable assertions. The novel is entangled within, produced by, a history that is only partially containable or speakable within it, yet which is legible within its “normative incompleteness”, the impossibility of either inhabiting or transcending the narrative “I”, and of either transcending or coinciding with its constructed narrative totality. Even the most sincere, accurate or morally urgent articulations are always-already ironically decentered by the form of the novel itself; the

“totality” that is always-already relinquished is not simply a case of historical objectivity or representational verisimilitude, but the novel’s ability to coincide with itself no matter how encyclopedic or microscopic its perspective.

Tremor employs neither the first person of Cole’s previous two novels nor the third person of the classical realist novel (Lukács’s “epic narration”), but instead uses a polyphonic arrangement of perspectives, or a play of partial and contingent totalizations: switching between a third-person present-tense narrative closely focalized through Tunde and later his wife Sadoko, to a second-person narrative directly addressed to a dead friend, to the purported transcription of Tunde’s direct speech (chapter five), before fragmenting, in chapter six, into a bricolage of first-person oral history-style narratives from Lagos residents, before returning to Tunde’s first-person narration. The novel thus balances the ethical imperative to totalize - to recontextualize, to tell “the story that cannot be told” - with an equally ethically charged resistance to narrative totalization, and this tension can be read in relation to the historical problem of its own autonomy as an artwork. Because while the novel may purport to restore narrative “totality” to the plaque by narrating its conditions of emergence, the novel is likewise in some sense - like Tunde, like Cole, like the world itself - a product of the colonial plunder that produced the artwork, and that produced the fracturing of its perspective: a prehistory that is legible in the novel not through its explicit theorization of the problem of art’s autonomy, but in and as the structure of its silences, elisions and blindspots, its inability to coincide with itself.

This dissonance is the novel’s unconscious registering of its autonomy, the constitutive decentering of meaning by the medium itself and the prehistory sedimented within it. Traditional storytelling, which in Byung-Chul Han’s terms “creates a community by giving it a character”, has become modern novel writing that provides more or less compelling aesthetic experiences

for isolated consumers.⁶⁹ The territorializing ritual of communal storytelling has been deterritorialized (autonomized, decontextualized) and reterritorialized, in the book, as an example of literature “as such”; just as the plaque has been reterritorialized in the museum as an example of “ethnographic art”. Autonomization, in other words, is the process through which storytelling is demoted from metaphysics to mere aesthetics; no longer the totalizing gaze of “epic” omniscience, a story is now something constructed by a professional writer, just one arbitrary partition of the sensible among others. This process of deterritorialization produces the novel’s partial and situated perspective, just as it in some sense produces Tunde’s individuated perspective (and behind him, Cole’s), as an affluent, institutionally credentialled and internationally mobile “Afropolitan” intellectual. The staged incommensurability between the extant impulse to totalize and the decentering of narrative totality by the form of the novel is thus what we might identify as *Tremor*’s central problematic, its structural irony, or its (uninhabitable, and hence endlessly displaced) ethical, moral and political core.

⁶⁹ Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration* (2024), p. 56.

CHAPTER FOUR

Untimely Forms

Prelude: Realism Under Erasure

I'm waiting for a voice. A voice that isn't mine. An old voice, novelistic and solid.¹

For readers versed in the conventional modernist narrative of the novel's historical development, and raised on a diet of formal experimentation and metafictional irony, the neorealist style of Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie's critically acclaimed novel *Americanah* (2013) is liable to produce an impression of historical regression. Compared to the work of formally ambitious contemporary writers such as (say) J.M. Coetzee, Percival Everett, Jon Fosse, Dasa Drndic, Laszlo Krasznahorkai, Gerald Murnane or Can Xue - let alone avant-garde figures of the previous generation like Thomas Bernhard, Marguerite Duras, Agota Kristof, Theresa Hak Kyung Cha or Clarice Lispector - to read *Americanah*'s opening pages is as if to step into a literary time-capsule, transporting us back to the age of Jane Austen, Charles Dickens and William Makepeace Thackeray:

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavors including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge,

¹ Alejandro Zambra, *Ways of Going Home* (2013), p. 39.

the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty. (1)

At once neo-Victorian and neoclassical, oratorical and conspicuously literary, the stately undulations of Adichie's finely wrought rhetoric overlay her contemporary scene with a retro veneer, like an iPhone snap retrofitted with a vintage filter. A distant echo of the famous opening sentences of Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* (1859) sounds within the passage's stately repetitions, while its languid oratorical modulations faintly recall the faux-ceremonious overture to Thackeray's *Vanity Fair* (1848). Whereas contemporary fiction in the experimental tradition of modernism and postmodernism tends to overtly transgress, defamiliarize, deconstruct or otherwise perform its critical distance from realist conventions, the straightforward authority and self-assurance of Adichie's narrative voice seems by contrast to announce her as a contemporary inheritor of the high Victorian tradition.

If the languid dilations of the prose convey a serene narrative authority, the passage's focalization and use of free indirect discourse furthermore serve to suggest an identification between this elevated literary voice and the perspective of Ifemelu. This identification is made all the more complete by the absence of the sorts of obvious cues or idiomatic inflections that are often used to differentiate the voice of a narrated character from that of the narrator, and thereby to establish the terms of their relation; for example, by signaling a difference between the literary English of a third-person narrative and the non-standard English of a narrated character.² Here,

² The classic example of such a cue being the tactical malapropism in the opening line of James Joyce's story, "The Dead" (1914): "Lily, the caretaker's daughter, was literally run off her feet", which signals a difference (and therefore a relation) between the literary diction of the third person narrative and the grammatically incorrect demotic usage (the non-literal "literally") of the narrated character (*Dubliners*, p. 137). Of course, the claim that the passage is "focalized through Ifemelu" is on some level unverifiable. It is a habitual decoding of recognizable narrative conventions rather than a statement of fact, even if here

by contrast, the reader not only intuitively understands the passage to be written from Ifemelu's point of view, but also understands her to be highly literate and at ease within the passage's elevated prose, just as she professes to be at ease within the socially elevated environment that the passage describes. The self-assurance of the narrative, the protagonist and the narrated environment (Princeton's "abiding air of earned grace") thus seem to cohere in perfect symmetry: if Ifemelu is installed as the privileged point of view of the narrative, this structural privilege is ballasted by the weight of both the literary tradition that speaks through her and the socially elevated milieu in which she finds herself (and which, the passage insists, she "likes"). Three forms of distinction - generic (the high realist mode), structural (the privileged position of the protagonist), and social (the affluent milieu of Princeton) - thus cohere to produce an aesthetic of neoclassical unity and balance.

Yet this balance is established only to be immediately undermined since, as the last sentence of the passage reveals, Ifemelu's apparent "certainty" is a pretense. And this also throws the rhetorically simulated authority of the narrative mode itself into question. There is nothing very mysterious about how Adichie achieves this authoritative effect, since the passage is tightly organized throughout by the highly recognisable trope of anaphora: through the repetition of "smelled", "She liked", and "someone", clausal repetition within sentences ("the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops"), and the modulated repetition of sentence forms ("Philadelphia... New

the case can be substantiated by the fact that the second person terms ("Ifemelu", "she" "her") can be substituted for first-person equivalents ("I", "me", "my") without changing the passage's legibility. Timothy Bewes is surely right when he observes that the "identifiability" of a passage's focalization "can only be insisted upon in the abstract" (*Free Indirect*, p. 36). There is nothing in the passage to guarantee such an identification, and this is why the identification is conventional. Adichie is invoking conventions that comprise the work's legibility, but conventions are contestable by their very nature, their arbitrary character always open to exposure or defamiliarization.

Haven... Baltimore..."). Like all rhetorical tropes, anaphora is a technology of persuasion, traditionally used by both poets and politicians to convey authority and self-assurance. Yet precisely to the degree that its tropological character is recognizable anaphora is ironically self-negating, like a bad wig. If Ifemelu likes Princeton because it allows her to "pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty", this pretense is reproduced in and as the style of Adichie's prose. The stately neoclassical rhetoric of Adichie's meandering sentences mimics the easy self-assurance (the "abiding air of earned grace") of Princeton as a bastion of white socio-economic privilege. The opening invocation of "Princeton, in the summer" is a sly reference to pastoral convention ("Princeton, in the summer!", Keats might have begun), a lyrical paean to an imperial order in the perennial meridian of its hegemony. The archaism and repetitiousness of Adichie's prose serves to aestheticize Princeton's ambient class-privilege into a timelessly lyrical state of "grace": uncontaminated by history, and atop a hierarchy as natural, unchanging and self-evident as the cycle of the seasons.

There is, then, an ironic tension between the stylistic grandeur of the passage and its focalization through Ifemelu, who is suggested to be ventriloquizing a narrative authority predicated on a particular subject-position that she cannot in fact truly inhabit. And this both foregrounds and complicates the question of where the authority of the narrative voice originates, or to whom it is attributable. On one hand, the passage introduces an Austen-esque narrative voice and point of view - knowing and acerbic; measured and precise; moralistic yet unruffled; by turns earnest and gently ironic, yet always calmly authoritative - that serves as the vehicle for the novel's critical commentary on US racial capitalism. This voice is jointly attributable (due to the novel's ongoing use of free indirect discourse) to the two figures primarily responsible for

that critique: Ifemelu (the protagonist, and author of a political blog that is reproduced within the body of the narrative) and Adichie (the implied narrator, and author of the novel). Yet at the same time, it also channels the self-satisfaction of white high society and the literary works that have traditionally given voice to the former's inflated sense of self. The ostentatious literariness of the language is therefore both the source of the passage's rhetorically simulated authority and the object of its implied distrust. And this ambivalence hints at deeper tensions between the novel's critical perspective and the social structures that condition it, and that it ironically replicates.

It is no coincidence, after all, that what is being described here as a bastion of white privilege is also the location *par excellence* of the postwar institutionalization, canonization and increasingly, following the emergence of the MFA program, the production of literature "as such": the university. Adichie herself is a Johns Hopkins MFA graduate, and likewise Ifemelu is a writer whose blog, critiquing the deleterious effects of US racism, has landed her a prestigious fellowship at Princeton. As such, she can be read as personifying the process by which successive waves of anti-establishment literary and political cultures - from the modernist avant-garde to anti-colonial and civil rights movements - were, over the course of the latter twentieth century, domesticated and institutionalized as forms of "cultural capital" distributed within the university, and thereby integrated into the existing hierarchies of a superficially pluralistic society in which the distribution of wealth and social privilege remains both gravely unequal and egregiously racialized. Literature, in other words, becomes a currency which circulates via

institutions (such as Princeton University) which, whatever their critical function, also reflect and serve to produce the social hierarchies that Ifemelu's blog decries.³

So if the passage's initial impression of unproblematic narrative authority is undercut by the suggestion of its ironic ventriloquy, the text nonetheless also problematizes any easy self-ascription of critical autonomy in relation to the literary forms and institutions of white literary privilege that it would appear to satirize. The dialogical merging of voices instead stages the problem of the complex historical entanglement of the novel's own critical perspective with that which it purports to critique. The passage's ironic ventriloquy (or what Bakhtin would call its "double-voicedness") serves to performatively invoke the tension between Ifemelu's subject position as a black Nigerian-American woman (an "Americanah"), the conventions of realist form and high-literary style, and the larger historical institution of literature. The passage thus introduces in miniature one of the novel's central preoccupations: its ironic relation to the generic and discursive forms that constitute it, yet with which it does not or cannot fully coincide.

The opening passage's particular form of self-reflexivity thus serves to position the novel in an indeterminate - or as Bakhtin would have it, a dialogical - relation to its own discursive mode, balanced (and thus unresolved) between affirmation and self-negation. If the passage

³ For influential accounts of the institutionalization of the modernist avant-garde in the university during the second half of the twentieth century, see in particular Guillory, *Cultural Capital* (1993); McGurl, *The Program Era* (2009); Jameson, "Modernism as Ideology" in *A Singular Modernity* (2002), pp. 139-210; and Sinfield, "Reinventing Modernism", in *Literature, Politics and Culture in Postwar Britain* (1997), pp. 207-229. For accounts of the university's role in institutionalizing and domesticating the subversive energies of the civil rights and identity-political movements of the 1960s and 70s into a benign and academicized "racial liberalism", see Jodi Melamed, *Represent and Destroy* (2011) and Roderick Ferguson, *The Reorder of Things* (2012). For critiques that characterize postcolonial studies *tout court* as an institutionalized, commodified and politically complicit culturalism, see Aijaz Ahmad, *In Theory* (1992), Arif Dirlik, "The Postcolonial Aura" (1997), Timothy Brennan, *Wars of Position* (2006), and Neil Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011). For a classic account of literary education as an instrument of colonial hegemony, see Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest* (1989).

contains an element of self-parody that signals a critical relation to its own discourse, this is nonetheless far from the overt intertextual pastiche of postmodern works such as William Gaddis' *The Recognitions* (1955), John Barthes' *The Sot-Weed Factor* (1960) or J.M. Coetzee's *Foe* (1986). Adichie's ironic self-consciousness does not equate to anything so easily classifiable or self-evident as a metafictional deconstruction, experimental dismantling or straight-up satire of the realist mode itself. The novel not only continues in this mode but moreover, as we shall see, seeks implicitly to justify its own realist form on political grounds, in contradistinction to both modernist interiority and postmodern metafiction. At the same time, though, Adichie is unable to lose sight of the problematic relation between literary conventions and the social structures in relation to which both Ifemelu and the novel itself are ambivalently positioned. As a realist *bildungsroman* that sets out to critique racial capitalism, *Americanah* is underpinned by a central irony: the social structures that it opposes are constitutive of its form, not only in the narrower sense of genre (the *bildungsroman* as the "symbolic form" of modernity) but also in the larger sense of its ontology and social positionality as a novel, and thus as a work of art "as such".⁴

Americanah's relationship to its formal and generic components therefore cannot be characterized straightforwardly as either one of triumphant appropriation ("writing back to Empire" through the mimicry or subversive appropriation of its discourse) or of melancholy self-effacement (exposing the impossibility of authentic speech in the language and discursive forms of the colonizer).⁵ Realist narrative conventions, which are gently ironized here through the

⁴ Franco Moretti, *The Way of the World: The Bildungsroman in European Culture* (1987), p. 5.

⁵ For canonical articulations of these positions within postcolonial studies see (on "writing back to empire") Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin, *The Empire Writes Back: Theory and Practice in Post-Colonial Literatures* (1989) and Homi Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (1993), and (on self-

suggestion that they are rooted in white socio-economic privilege, are nonetheless also the imperfect means through which *Americanah* will pursue its sincere critique of US racial capitalism. The form's affordances and disaffordances are inextricably entangled, and the novel itself is a hybrid, carving out a compromised position between irony and sincerity, complicity and critique. *Americanah* thus positions itself in a dialogical (or what, following José Esteban Muñoz, we might characterize as a "disidentificatory") relation to a narrative mode with which it cannot fully coincide, and a voice that can never truly be its own, but that it nonetheless continues to employ, and even to affirm.⁶ This is neither naively referential realism, modernist anti-referential autonomy nor ironic metafiction, but a post-postmodernist neorealism "under erasure": a form of storytelling that stages the novel's constitutively ironic predicament not (in classic postmodernist fashion) as an affective disposition or an expression of epistemological skepticism, but rather *as an event of form*. And this formal dissonance - a pervasive yet largely concealed incommensurability arising from the novel's ambivalent self-positioning in relation to the discourse that constitutes it - makes it representative of one of the central tendencies within contemporary global Anglophone fiction.

effacement) Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" (1988) and "Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism" (1985).

⁶ José Esteban Muñoz, *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999). "Disidentification" for Muñoz involves staking out a tertiary subject-position in relation to dominant ideology, neither that of the "Good Subject" (who "chooses the path of identification with discursive and ideological forms") or of "Bad Subjects" who "resist and attempt to reject the images and identificatory sites offered by dominant ideology and proceed to rebel, to 'counteridentify' and turn against this symbolic system." Disidentification "is the third mode of dealing with dominant ideology, one that neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against a dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation), this 'working on and against' is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within", p. 11. *Americanah* can be said to stake out a comparable position in relation to received literary forms and conventions. If the "Good Subject" in this comparison is the naively or uncritically generic novel, and the "Bad Subject" is the modernist work that disrupts or refuses conventions, a work such as *Americanah* "disidentifies" with the conventions it nonetheless continues to use, dialogizing them "from within".

The Neo-Realist Turn

Literary yet popular, self-aware yet traditional, complex yet accessible, self-reflexive yet representational, this is the “neorealist” mode whose resurgence, in the work of such critically lauded and commercially successful authors as Adichie, Arundhati Roy, Kiran Desai, Amitav Ghosh, Chris Abani, Jonathan Franzen, Jeffrey Eugenides, Zadie Smith, Hari Kunzru, Rachel Kushner and Elena Ferrante, is one of the most remarked-upon developments within twenty-first century Global Anglophone fiction. Long castigated by both modernists and poststructuralists as either a “totalitarian ideology of the referent”,⁷ or as simply the bland set of nineteenth century bourgeois conventions in opposition to which interesting writing defined itself, realism has since risen phoenix-like from the flames of postmodernism to a chorus of both champions (who celebrate its unflinching engagement with reality, its politically invigorating capacity to represent social totality, its critical mediation of historical experience, its democratizing anti-elitism and its restoration of literature’s public function) and detractors (who point to its commercialism, its formally encoded liberal humanism, its theoretical naivete, its fraudulent contrivances, its middlebrow banality and its kitsch antiquarianism).⁸

Adichie’s critical writings and statements tend to position her as a no-nonsense realist, and as an opponent of modernism and postmodernism. The role of literature, as Adichie defines

⁷ Roland Barthes, *The Rustle of Language* (1984), p. 15.

⁸ For recent celebrations of novelistic realism centering on its ability to depict social totality, see in particular Kornbluh (2019), Cheah (2016), Ganguly (2016), Toscano and Kinkle (2015) and WReC (2015). For a conception of realism as the critical “mediation” (as opposed to the naive representation) of historical experience, see Nathan Hensley (2017). For a defense based on its anti-elitism, see Franzen, “Mr. Difficult” and “Why Bother?”, collected in *How To Be Alone* (2003). For some representative criticisms of neo-realism based on its middlebrow banality, see Ben Marcus’s 2005 response to Franzen, “Why Experimental Literature Threatens to Destroy...” and the *N+1 Magazine* editorial, “World Lite” (2013). On its liberal humanism, see Zadie Smith, “Two Paths for the Novel” (2009); on its antiquarianism, see Mark Fisher, *Ghosts of My Life* (2014); on its fraudulence and naivete see Josipovici, *What Ever Happened to Modernism?* (2010) and David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (2010).

it in a 2012 “defense of realist fiction”, is “to instruct and delight” (a formulation taken from Horace’s “Ars Poetica”, written around 19 B.C):

Of course one must use the word ‘real’ with some reservation. The world of realist literature is not the same as the real world, but it is close enough, aligned enough, to the real world to be able to illuminate it. And it is books of that sort that I would like to make a case for today, books that have often brought to my mind the words of the ancient Latin Poet, Horace: the role of literature is to instruct and delight. Realist fiction is not merely the recording of the real, as it were, it is more than that, it seeks to infuse the real with meaning, which perhaps is why the artist works with a frown. As events unfold, we do not always know what they mean. But in telling the story of what happened, meaning emerges and we are able to make connections with emotive significance. Realist fiction is, above all, the process of turning fact into truth.⁹

Adichie presents herself here as serenely unburdened by the existential and vocational self-scrutiny that a certain set of twentieth century critical values has taught us to expect (even, to demand) of the serious writer; the sort of value system that allows a neo-modernist writer such as Tom McCarthy to casually differentiate between “The type (of novel) that matters...: the committed, engaged, self-aware novel that wrestles with the contradictions of its own condition”, and “The middlebrow novel..., the type that doesn’t acknowledge or address this situation, but just ambles along happily believing that a naive, uncritical realism could ever work in the first place, let alone now”.¹⁰ As we have already seen, such serenity is not necessarily born out in Adichie’s novels, which exhibit a tendency simultaneously to endorse and to ironically deconstruct the genres and conventions they mobilize. Yet Adichie does so without any of the metafictional posturing or performative anxiety that often accompany such gestures. This sense of vocational security and self-assurance is rare in Western writers of comparable artistic

⁹ “To Instruct and Delight: A Case for Realist Literature”, Commonwealth Lecture, March 16 2012. Recording online: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vmsYJDP8g2U&t=1s>.

¹⁰ “Tom McCarthy by Fredric Tuten”, *Bomb Magazine*, Spring 2015
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2015/03/18/tom-mccarthy/>.

standing, even among Adichie's fellow neorealists. A contemporary neorealist writer such as Zadie Smith¹¹ has a tendency to self-scrutinize the tension between the modernist values that she has endorsed as a critic and the more conventionally realist style of her novels, while, as Nicholas Dames and Lee Konstantinou argue, Jonathan Franzen's novels can be read as anxious self-justifications, dramatized arguments for why their own apparently middlebrow aesthetics are in fact even more self-conscious than those of postmodernism.¹² Adichie by contrast seems entirely content to endorse critical values that position her on the "middlebrow" side of McCarthy's divide.

It does not seem particularly to bother Adichie, for example, that the "meaning" that "emerges" in her fiction may be a construction; nor does she seem overly concerned with the distinction between fact and fiction, which is entirely elided here ("in telling the story of what happened, meaning emerges"). A century's worth of literary-philosophical debate (from, say, Viktor Shklovsky's "Art as Device" to Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*) is swept aside with the breezy assertion that "realist literature is not the same as the real world, but it is close enough".¹³ In its easy vocational self-assurance, its conservative appeal to the authority of the ancients, its

¹¹ See in particular, "Two Paths for the Novel" (2009), which favorably contrasts the neo-modernism of McCarthy's *Remainder* (2005) to the "lyrical realism" of Joseph O'Neill's *Netherland* (2008). Of the latter tradition, Smith sheepishly admits, "I have written in this tradition myself, and cautiously hope for its survival". Indeed, in his 2017 essay "Neorealist Fiction", Lee Konstantinou reads "Two Paths for the Novel" as "a rejection of (Smith's) own achievement in her 2005 novel *On Beauty*", a novel that can itself be read as repudiating what James Wood (2000) criticized as the "hysterical realism" of *White Teeth* (2000) (Konstantinou, p. 110; Wood, "Human, All Too Inhuman"). If Wood criticizes *White Teeth* for its anti-humanist evacuation of characterological interiority, *On Beauty* (2005) can be read as an implied argument for its own lyrical realism and aesthetic humanism, in opposition to the postmodernist anti-humanism of its protagonist, Howard Belsey (an anti-humanist art theorist whose intellectual positions and tastes bear a passing resemblance to those of Tom McCarthy). Smith would subsequently depart sharply from realism with the formally experimental *NW* (2012), before returning (however ambivalently) to more conventional forms with her more recent novels *Swing Time* (2016) and *The Fraud* (2023).

¹² Dames, "The Theory Generation" (2012); Konstantinou, "Neorealist Fiction" (2017).

¹³ Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Device" (2017), in *Theory of Prose* (1991), pp. 1-15.

common-sense faith in literature's transhistorical self-evidence, and its implied dismissal of the historical specificity of the modern work of literature "as such", such a claim serves by extension to tell us that literary theory, and the modernist works that it primarily serves to explicate (which rather famously neither instruct nor delight) are a distraction from the real work of literature, which has remained essentially unchanged throughout history. It therefore also serves to dismiss the entire predicament of literary autonomy as I have defined it.

Yet what from a perspective such as McCarthy's looks like naivete on Adichie's part can more productively be read in relation to a postcolonial and specifically African tradition, epitomized in the writings of Adichie's major literary influence, the fellow Nigerian writer Chinua Achebe.¹⁴ In a series of essays, speeches and lectures stretching from the 1965 manifesto, "The Novelist as Teacher", to "Africa and her Writers" (1973), "Thoughts on the African Novel" (1973) and "The Writer and his Community" (1984), Achebe aims to establish the specificity of the African novelist, as distinct from his Western counterparts. If the European writer or artist "lives on the fringes of society" and adopts an attitude of "revolt" against the latter, his African counterpart relates to his audience "as a kind of teacher" (40-41). If the Western writer rejects any responsibility for or role in the moral or pedagogical reproduction of his society, the African writer "cannot expect to be excused from the task of reeducation and regeneration" in the wake

¹⁴ Adichie has from the outset of her career positioned herself as Achebe's successor. The first words of her first novel, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), are "Things began to fall apart" (p. 3), a reference to Achebe's most famous novel, *Things Fall Apart* (1958). The connections between their work are sufficiently established that there is a burgeoning critical industry of "Adichebean" criticism. For a survey, see Daria Tunca, "Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie as Chinua Achebe's (Unruly) Literary Daughter: The Past, Present, and Future of 'Adichebean' Criticism", *Research in African Literatures* Vol. 49, No. 4, "Arrow of God at Fifty" (Winter 2018), pp. 107-126.

of colonialism (45). If the Western artist pursues a kind of “pure” art detached from any extraneous social purpose, African art can instead be described as “applied art”, an art for which art and education need not (indeed, cannot) be “mutually exclusive” (45). The common thread running through these essays, then, is a thoroughgoing rejection of what Achebe sees as the Eurocentric notion of artistic autonomy, which in his terms means *l’art pour l’art*. Achebe’s disdain for such notions is absolute; he begins the 1973 essay, “Africa and her Writers” by recalling the occasion on which he began a public lecture at Harvard University with the declaration that “Art for art’s sake is just another deodorized piece of dog shit” (617). Contrary to such decadent Western notions, art for Achebe “is and always was in the services of man” (617).¹⁵

Achebe’s position represents an assertion of autonomy on behalf of the African author. Yet it is an insistence of one (cultural) kind of autonomy that is founded on a refusal of another (aesthetic) one. By refusing Western notions of art’s autonomy, Achebe declares a break between the modernist and the postcolonial novel, based not primarily on form but on function: art’s social embeddedness and communal authority versus art’s autonomy. In *The World Republic of Letters*, Achebe accordingly serves as one of the key examples of the territorializing function of postcolonial realism, which Casanova opposes to the deterritorialized autonomy of Western modernism. In adopting a socially pedagogical role as the “bard and respiratory of Nigerian history”, Achebe represents the absolutized heteronomy that counterbalances the absolutized autonomy of Samuel Beckett, the two polarities of Casanova’s core-periphery hierarchy of literary prestige.¹⁶

¹⁵ Achebe, “Africa and her Writers”, *The Massachusetts Review*, 1973-07, Vol.14 (3), pp. 617-629.

¹⁶ *World Republic of Letters*, p. 196.

If Adichie articulates a sense of the novel's continued vocation both to "instruct and delight" and to "infuse the real with meaning", such a statement suggests an Achebean faith in the continued existence of a shared set of cultural values and meanings that it is the novel's duty to articulate and perpetuate, rather than contest or defamiliarize. These are the collectively binding structures of meaning and value whose absence or inauthenticity is the premise of modernist literary practice and theory, from Walter Benjamin's "The Storyteller" and Georg Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* onwards. Yet rather than being archaic, such attitudes can be taken to position Adichie as a part of broader movements that have tended to provincialize or to decenter the hegemony of Western modernist values predicated on the autonomy of literature. The globalization and diversification of literary studies has involved the increased study and canonization of authors, from Toni Morrison and Leslie Marmon Silko to Achebe and Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, who tend to reject or at least problematize the Western notion of art's autonomy, and who regard themselves as fulfilling a social function in relation to a particular nation or social grouping.¹⁷ And indeed, such social purposivity has been theorized as the key differentiator between the autonomous, canonical literature which purports to transcend the subject-position of

¹⁷ Morrison has famously stated that she writes "for Black people" <https://www.theguardian.com/books/2015/apr/25/toni-morrison-books-interview-god-help-the-child>. Perhaps her most famous and condensed statement on the collectivizing and fundamentally public function of black art is "Rootedness: The Ancestor as Foundation" (1983). For Silko's sense of her own literary practice as rooted in the traditional cosmologies of the Laguna nation and the public role of the tribal storyteller, see *Yellow Woman and a Beauty of the Spirit* (1997) and *Storyteller* (1981). Several of the essays in which Achebe rejects the Western concept of *l'art pour l'art* are collected in *Hopes and Impediments* (1988). Ngũgĩ famously frames his rejection of English-language composition, his turn away from modernist aesthetics of *A Grain of Wheat* (1967) and *Petals of Blood* (1977), his embrace of communal and culture-specific forms such as the Gikuyu theater, and his incorporation of tribal mythology into later novels such as *Devil on the Cross* (1980) and *Matigari* (1986), as a counter-imperial gesture. See Ngũgĩ, *Decolonizing the Mind* (1986). For a reflection on the commonalities between African American and African literary practices that places them in opposition to Western notions of aesthetic autonomy, see Leon Botstein, "Things Fall Together: A Conversation With Chinua Achebe and Toni Morrison" (2001).

those who produce it, and the “minoritized” literature that represents a particular political constituency, whether based on nation, class, race, gender, sexuality, or subculture.¹⁸ The critique of art’s autonomy has a long history in the various literatures whose increased inclusion within the previous literary canon is the background to contemporary discussions around postcolonial and world literature. In African American studies, such conversations go back at least as far as W.E.B. Du Bois’ assertion, in “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926), that “all art is propaganda”, through to the debate among Richard Wright, James Baldwin, Irving Howe and Ralph Ellison on “protest literature”, and discussions concerning the “black aesthetic” in the 1960s and 70s.¹⁹ The African American writer Larry Neal, in his 1968 manifesto for the “Black Arts Movement” declares Black art’s independence from the Western “separation of aesthetics and ethics” as epitomized in the ideology of *l’art pour l’art*: “It is a profound ethical sense that makes a Black artist question a society in which art is one thing and the actions of men another. The Black Arts Movement believes that your ethics and your aesthetics are one. That the contradictions between ethics and aesthetics in western society is symptomatic of a dying culture”.²⁰

Such influences are not, then, merely extrinsic to Western literary culture. Yet particularly in the wake of the alleged decline of postmodernism, such attitudes have moved from the margins back toward the center. No longer “anti-aesthetic” values that the minoritized assert in opposition to the institutionalized high-modernist aestheticism of the mainstream, the

¹⁸ See for example, Taylor, *The Mask of Art* (1998); Chuh, *The Difference Aesthetics Makes* (2019).

¹⁹ Du Bois, “Criteria of Negro Art” (1926); Wright, “Blueprint for Negro Writing” (1937); Baldwin, “Everybody’s Protest Novel” (1955); Howe, “Black Boys and Native Sons” (1963); Ellison, “The World and the Jug” (1964); Addison Gayle, *The Black Aesthetic* (1971).

²⁰ Larry Neal, “The Black Arts Movement” (1968), pp. 30-31.

rejection or problematizing of literary autonomy has been central to the emergence of a range of globalized mainstream and critically consecrated neorealisms. And theoretically self-conscious writers working within rather than against the grain of the cultural dominant such as Jonathan Franzen, Rachel Kushner and Jeffrey Eugenides have adopted aspects of this minoritarian critique of autonomy as an exit strategy from postmodernism. Jonathan Franzen's critical essays of the 1990s, for example, repeatedly articulate his anxiety at the novel's slide into obsolescence, exacerbated by the postmodernist fetishizing of "difficulty" and the rise of electronic media, which in Franzen's view has usurped the novel's position as a popular cultural form.²¹ In "I'll Be Doing More of the Same", his contribution to a 1996 "forum on the future of literary art and fiction", Franzen reflects on what he sees as the novel's loss of a "general readership":

For much of this century, the United States had a robust national literature whose audience could with only slight exaggeration be called a general one. There existed such a thing as a novel that Americans who considered themselves civilized found it necessary to have read. For writers, the perception that there was such a thing as a national culture and that a novel could matter to it entailed some responsibility to address that culture. And the fact that a significant portion of the population was pursuing culture by buying novels made it possible for ambitious young novelists to imagine writing as a lifelong vocation.²²

This nostalgically idealized national community and the "lifelong" literary "vocation" that it allegedly nurtured were, of course, bought at the price of the constitutive exclusion of all but a relatively small, majority-white "bourgeois sociolect" from the means of literary production and reception. The greater access of previously marginalized subjects and communities to cultural representation is seemingly only legible to Franzen as a tale of decline and fragmentation, and of

²¹ These essays anticipate and lay the theoretical groundwork for Franzen's turn from the formal ambition of *The Twenty-Seventh City* (1988) and *Strong Motion* (1992) to the more traditional realism of *The Corrections* (2001) and all of his subsequent work.

²² Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of the Same" (1996), pp. 35-36.

the eclipse of the novel's alleged "general readership". Following the interruption of the hegemony of the white, straight, middle-class male novelist and the diversification of literary production and reception, the novelist is left with three "channels in which to develop": literary "tribalism" ("the hyphenated American readership", ie, novels that allegedly appeal primarily to a particular sub-national grouping or culture), "production for and by the academy" (modernism and postmodernism) and "the commercial, literary fiction" (accessible yet ambitious neorealism aimed at a mass audience).²³ Under such circumstances, the novel for Franzen must "retrench" and affirm the traditional pleasures and affordances of the form, which in his view peaked in the nineteenth century:

The fact that critics and analytically minded fiction writers have lately discovered a 'crisis' of form may not mean that printed fiction has exhausted itself, but simply that an era of (critically privileged) formal innovation is coming to an end, and that the time has come for form's dialectical counterparts, content and context, to return as the vectors of the new... When the times get really, really awful, you retrench; you reexamine old content in new contexts; you try to preserve; you seem obsolete. Think of Mandelstam, Akhmatova, and Brodsky continuing, in the belly of the Soviet beast, to write of nature and the human heart. The day comes when the truly subversive literature is in some measure conservative. Maybe it's time for us to ask ourselves whether apocalypse might be a self-indulgence.²⁴

In his 2002 essay, "Mr Difficult", Franzen further develops the rationale for his turn away from the avant-garde and toward a more formally conservative neorealism by proposing a distinction between "two wildly different models of how fiction relates to its audience". Within the "Status model", in which "the best novels are great works of art", any consideration of the reader's

²³ Though he is not my primary concern here I will note that Franzen takes it as self-evident that works by "hyphenated American" authors, which focus on the experiences of racialized minorities, are of interest only to their author's particular identity groups, whereas the novels of a Norman Mailer, Saul Bellow or John Updike, which are no less focused on the experiences of white men, address themselves to the interests of a "general readership". This is either incoherent or racist.

²⁴ Franzen, "I'll Be Doing More of the Same", p. 36.

enjoyment is secondary to the author's disinterested pursuit of artistic excellence. Yet within the "Contract model",

a novel represents a compact between the writer and the reader, with the writer providing words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience. Writing thus entails a balancing of self-expression and communication within a group, whether the group consists of *Finnegans Wake* enthusiasts or fans of Barbara Cartland. Every writer is first a member of a community of readers, and the deepest purpose of reading and writing fiction is to sustain a sense of connectedness, to resist existential loneliness; and so a novel deserves a reader's attention only as long as the author sustains the reader's trust.²⁵

The Contract model, as Franzen articulates it here, in fact entails a thoroughgoing rejection of the logic of art's autonomy and its various symptoms: of the problem of representation, ie, the artwork's formal autonomy (since the writer does not represent the real but instead provides "words out of which the reader creates a pleasurable experience"); of postmodern irony (since it is the author's job to "sustain the reader's trust", not to show the reader that his trust is naive or arbitrary by exposing the unreliability of all narrative); of the writer's autonomy (since he is contractually obliged to cater to the reader's desires by skillfully manipulating the narrative conventions within which those desires are sedimented); of the artist's autonomy (since the writer is "first a member of a community of readers" rather than a disinterested producer of art "as such"), and of art's institutional autonomy (since art is re-functionalized as a means of "communication within a group").

In all of these senses, then, white writers like Franzen can be said to aspire to the sort of position of heteronomy and communal vocation that is seen as more readily available to minoritized writers such as Achebe, Morrison and Silko. For Adam Kelly, this turn from autonomy to heteronomy, from formal experiment to convention, and from individual expression

²⁵ Franzen, "Mr Difficult: William Gaddis and the Problem of Hard-to-Read Books", *The New Yorker*, 30 September 2002.

to collectivizing representation, are the major characteristics of the contemporary rise of “formally conventional fiction”. Such fiction offers a “conservative vision” in the sense that it seeks, in the face of neoliberal individualism and privatization, “to conserve what is commonly valuable and widely sharable in history and form, and in the history of forms” (57).²⁶ This taps into a broader sense of disenchantment with the modernist ideology of constant revolution, with its unspoken continuities with the imperatives of the capitalist mode of production itself. Yet it also recalls the thrust of older defenses of realism. For Georg Lukács, the realist novel is conservative in a literal sense: it retains and preserves traditional artistic functions that are threatened existentially by the capitalist mode of production, and the signs of whose destruction are visible in modernist works such as James Joyce’s *Ulysses* (1922) and Franz Kafka’s *The Metamorphosis* (1915).

The contemporary return to such positions can be read in terms of what Anna Kornbluh, in a recent defense of realism, calls a turn from a modernist-poststructuralist “anarcho-vitalism”, which allegedly regards all forms as coercive constraints, to a Marxist-structuralist “political formalism” that regards forms (whether literary or social) as inherently collectivizing and enabling. Kornbluh takes these positions on literary aesthetics to correlate, respectively, with an anti-collective politics of individualist non-conformism (anarcho-vitalism), and a politics of organization, solidarity and “collective building” (political formalism). Novelistic realism, the literary arm of political formalism, is not the more or less accurate representation of the real, but a practice of speculative world-building. The formalist critique of realism, which deconstructs

²⁶ Adam Kelly, “Formally Conventional Fiction”, in Rachel Greenwald-Smith ed. *American Literature in Transition, 2000-2010* (2017), ch.3, pp. 46-60.

the latter's referential pretensions by exposing the anti-referential autonomy of all literary forms, is therefore a red herring:

Novels know that the worlds they build are artificial, artifactual, designed, and this is how they know that the same is true of any world; in their self-concept they effectuate political formalism. We owe it to them to persuasively advocate for the making of new worlds as the very work of literature. If we could more robustly fathom the literary as figurative, as spatially inventive world-mapping but also world-making, as mathematically projective model-ing, as critical in its very negation of the already made, its very exceeding of what exists, as utopian in its very exertion to build something else, we might activate literature's contributions to the most important Marxist formalist project, building new formations against rapaciously imperialist capitalism.²⁷

Like Franzen, Kornbluh's theory evinces a desire to move the literary imagination from the margins back to the center of the culture, and thus to restore the social authority of the artwork that in Lukács's account is shattered with the transition from the epic to the novel. Yet unlike in Lukács, Adorno, Benjamin or Jameson, no historical account of the novel's constitutive loss of normative force is offered here.²⁸ Art for Kornbluh has lost none of the collectivizing and world-building power of the epic; critics and readers have simply failed, for whatever reason, to "robustly fathom" it. What appears at face value as an affirmation of the formal autonomy of the novel - its transcendental world-building power - is in fact an exhortation to collectively unthink the illusion of art's social autonomy; to restore to the novel the power that the epic gained from its heteronomy, as the means through which the collective life of a people is given form. No longer merely aesthetic, the novel is returned - to the extent that we are willing to believe (as

²⁷ Anna Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019) p. 55.

²⁸ Kornbluh appropriatively misreads Lukács's *Theory of the Novel* as a proto-constructivist celebration of the novel's speculative world-building vocation; thus removing, with surgical precision, the part of Lukács's argument that contradicts hers (ie, the account of the novel's constitutive loss of normative force). See *The Order of Forms*, pp. 46-49.

Kornbluh appears to) that literary world-building is the same as material world-building - to the domain of social metaphysics.

While not all critics share Kornbluh's messianic sense of the revolutionary world-building power of conventional literary fiction, her neo-Lukácsian rehabilitation of realism is evidence of a broader cultural movement away from a generation's worth of critique that largely regarded literary conventions as banal or politically insidious, toward approaches that celebrate both the formal "affordances" and the social utility of more conventional, traditional and/or commercial forms.²⁹ And this new literary conservatism can be interpreted as a collective attempt to unthink the problem of art and literature's autonomy. Genres, as Mark McGurl puts it, are not just commercial formulas, but can also be regarded as forms of imaginative "commons", "natural resources to which everyone in a given community has or should have free access".³⁰ Genres, in other words, are the sedimented remains of literature's traditional collectivizing functions, which are renounced by modernist and postmodernist notions of formal autonomy, originality and individualized expression. In an age of universal commodification, in which "all fiction is genre fiction", very much including that which identifies itself in opposition to the generic, genres paradoxically return as a symbol of the forms of collectivity that precede or survive within the world of the commodity (14-15). Under such circumstances, genres "serve to remind us that the task of social reproduction is larger than capitalism. It is not only the making and maintaining of labor power, but also of livable human lives and, if possible, joyous ones" (180). Read in these terms, the turn from postmodernism to neorealism is not just a surrender of

²⁹ On "affordances", see Caroline Levine, *Forms: Whole, Rhythm, Network, Hierarchy* (2015); on the turn from a politics of form to one of literature's social utility, see Rita Felski, *The Uses of Literature* (2008).

³⁰ Mark McGurl, *Everything and Less: Fiction in the Age of Amazon* (2021), p. 183.

art's critical autonomy, but can be read more positively as an attempt to reclaim that which has not been subsumed by capitalism; or that which has not, after all, been permanently renounced by art's autonomization.

***Americanah* and the (Dis)Affordances of Form**

I suggest that *Americanah* should be read at the confluence of this set of discourses: as dramatizing the conflicted position of a postcolonial writer who seeks out a position of critical autonomy *from* Westernized notions of aesthetic autonomy, but does so in historical circumstances in which her ability to do so has been compromised. In both its global scale, its overt political interventionism and its formal heterogeneity, *Americanah* represents the latest stage in a process of expansion that characterizes Adichie's three novels to date. Her debut, *Purple Hibiscus* (2003), is ostensibly a relatively concentrated lyrical realist novel of middle-class subject formation that redeploys (and in doing so, reinvents) the classical European *bildungsroman* form against the backdrop of the political and ideological upheavals of postcolonial Nigeria. *Half Of A Yellow Sun* (2006) is a more ambitious, panoramic multi-character historical novel, set in and around the Biafran War, which marries high realism and expansive social commentary with a much more overt metafictional self-consciousness, alongside more sustained strategies of formal ambiguity and self-reflexivity.

Americanah on one level continues this progression from cynosure to panorama, from the local to the national to the global, and toward work of ever greater formal ambition, self-reflexivity and narrative range. As such, it marks Adichie's personal graduation from the nationally oriented problematic of the older African post-colonial realist generation of Chinua

Achebe, Ngũgĩ wa Thiong'o, Ayi Kwei Armah and Nuruddin Farrah, to the transnational problematic of a younger "Afropolitan" generation, including Chris Abani, NoViolet Bulawayo, Teju Cole, Dinaw Mengestu and Taiye Selasi, who have attempted to reinvent the inherited form(s) of the realist novel in (or, more problematically, to reconcile it to) the altered circumstances of a contemporary age of global flows, interconnections and processes of cultural cross-pollination.³¹

The generation of Achebe and co was frequently preoccupied with appropriating the tools of the colonizer in order to fashion an autonomous national (and, perhaps still more problematically, African) literary tradition, and consequently labored under the political imperative to produce expressions and representations of cultural specificity. Yet the younger, internationally mobile "Afropolitan" generation confronts more pervasive forces of cultural hybridization and de-differentiation, a world of transversal flows of culture, people, capital, data and images in which forms, boundaries and limits of all kinds can sometimes seem like "chimeras" (to use Aarthe Vadde's term), relics of a bygone age.³² This transnational conjuncture has seemed to call for new narrative practices of connection and transfusion, or for what Jahan Ramazani calls a new "transnational poetics" in which practices of "modernist bricolage" fuse with postcolonial hybrid identities, and an expansion of the narrative view beyond the autonomous limits of the bounded nation-state toward the seemingly limitless horizon of the global.³³

³¹ For a field-defining survey of the "Afropolitan" novel, see Yogita Goyal, "We Need New Diasporas" (2017).

³² Aarthe Vadde, *Chimeras of Form: Modernist Internationalism Beyond Europe, 1914-2016* (2016).

³³ Ramazani, "Modernist Bricolage, Postcolonial Hybridity" in *A Transnational Poetics* (2009), pp. 95-116.

Yet if *Americanah* in this sense signals a broadening of perspective from the national to the global, this centrifugal movement comes into tension with the novel's countervailing movement toward formal and generic circumscription. Rather than setting its sights outward in maximalist fashion by stretching the form of the realist novel to attempt to encompass (or in Jameson's terms, "cognitively map") the world-system as a totality, *Americanah* takes as its model and point of departure the form of a conventional love story: a marriage plot that mediates expansive questions of global migration, cultural hybridity, radicalization, economic exploitation and social and political systems through a self-consciously generic story of individual subject formation. *Americanah* is on one level a romantic *bildungsroman* that tells the story of the personal, social and aesthetic education of high school sweethearts Ifemelu and Obinze, from their adolescence in Lagos, through their migration to the US (Ifemelu) and England (Obinze), through to their return and final reconciliation in Lagos. What initially looks like a three-part expansion actually turns out to be simultaneously an expansion and a contraction: from a nationally circumscribed novel of individual subject formation (*Purple Hibiscus*) to a panoramic novel of collective, national subject-formation (*Half of a Yellow Sun*), to a global novel of individual subject formation (*Americanah*). Whereas *Half of a Yellow Sun* tells the story of a national community via metonym and synecdoche, *Americanah* is seemingly unable to replicate such a strategy on a global scale. Rather than using a dispersed character-system to tell the story of globalization, then, it tells the story of the formation of a particular kind of individualized cosmopolitan consciousness. In doing so, *Americanah* substitutes national allegory for

transnational hybridity, and the collectively oriented narrative of national community for an individualized and class-specific “cosmopolitics”.³⁴

What looks at first like a contradiction between the unmappable scale of the global and the closure of the marriage plot is therefore really a continuity, since the centripetal movement from the collective to the individual registers a dual crisis, of form and of the novel’s sense of its own political constituency, *arising from* the expansion from the national to the transnational. One way of approaching this, then, would be to critique *Americanah* as an example of “Afropolitanism” as an insularly middle-class cultural formation, forsaking the collective struggles of the nation for representations of the narrow concerns of a transnational elite.³⁵ Yet what is striking about *Americanah* is the way in which it amplifies the problem of its compromised authority rather than attempting to overcome it. Whereas *Half of a Yellow Sun* self-consciously positions Adichie as Achebe’s successor, and as the epic narrator of the history of the nation, *Americanah* retreats, in the face of the world’s unnarratable vastness, into the formula par excellence of the sub-literary: the romance plot, the genre that in Mark McGurl’s terms, “draws our attention to... the genericity of the genre system in general”.³⁶ *Americanah* thus responds to a threat to its normative justification by trading a historically masculinized and respectable narrative mode for a feminized and critically derided genre. Yet as Janice Radway has argued, the romance genre can also, less disparagingly, be taken to represent “the ritualistic repetition of a single, immutable cultural myth”. Popular romances thus “resemble the myths of

³⁴ See Pheng Cheah and Bruce Robbins (ed.), *Cosmopolitics: Thinking and Feeling Beyond the Nation* (1998).

³⁵ For a trenchant critique of the tendency within postcolonial theory to elevate a post-national politics of cosmopolitan hybridity over a nation-based politics of collective solidarity, see Timothy Brennan, “Cosmo-Theory”, in *Wars of Position* (2006), pp. 205-232.

³⁶ McGurl, *Everything and Less* (2021), p. 172.

oral cultures in the sense that they exist to relate a story already familiar to the people who choose to read them".³⁷ Genre wards off the crisis of autonomy by recourse to a compensatory collectivity. The very formal conventionality of the romance genre thus allows Adichie to maintain a sense of the novel's proximity to an audience and its meanings and expectations. She thus uses the romance in part to maintain an Achebean sense of the novel as "applied" rather than "pure" art, while pursuing that functionality on transnational rather than national, and feminized rather than masculinized terms.³⁸

The novel is structured by a romance narrative between Ifemelu and Obinze, which begins during their coming of age in Nigeria, before being interrupted by their respective migrations (a 15-year stint in the US for Ifemelu, a brief and unhappy sojourn in London for Obinze), then reanimated upon Ifemelu's eventual return to Nigeria. Through this formal design Adichie sets the centripetal logic of the marriage plot - with its reterritorializing movement towards ideological assimilation, formal closure and the reestablishment of social stability - against the centrifugal logic of globalization, with its deterritorializing flows, hybridizations and lines of flight. If on one hand the romance arc can be read as a feminist and postcolonial rewriting of the "Mills and Boon" formula, at the same time it is, to invoke Sianne Ngai's analysis of the term, a kind of gimmick; a self-consciously contrived solution to the problem of containing the unmappable scale of the global within the bounds of novelistic form.³⁹ Yet in its

³⁷ Janice Radway, *Reading the Romance: Women, Patriarchy, and Popular Literature* (1984), p. 198.

³⁸ Achebe, "The Novelist as Teacher" (1965), *Hopes and Impediments: Selected Essays* (1988), p. 45.

³⁹ See Ngai, *Theory of the Gimmick* (2019). Adichie has described *Americanah* as an "anti-Mills and Boon": "It took me a while to realize I really didn't like the Mills and Boon format, where the man decides. It's sort of the destiny of the relationship is in the hands of the man. And it's okay as well if they meet and don't like each other, then he grabs her at some point and she melts. You know that idea that a woman can't own her sexuality, can't own her choices? So this is the anti-Mills and Boon in many ways. The women in my world don't have to wait because they're women." "Podcast #75: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie and Zadie Smith on Race, Writing, and Relationships", *New York Times Public Library Podcast*

very artifice the romance arc serves to openly exhibit and acknowledge the arbitrariness of narrative totalities - what, with Ngai, we might think of as the constitutive proximity of any narrative device to the gimmick - and thus to foreground the problem of narrative closure that many realist novels attempt to evade or conceal. If the novel for Lukács “overcomes its ‘bad infinity’ by recourse to the biographical form”, by funneling the *bildungsroman* form into the self-conscious genericity of the marriage plot Adichie chooses to amplify this disjuncture rather attempting to suppress it.⁴⁰

This foregrounding of its own simultaneous proximity to and distance from recognizable formal conventions points to an ambivalence that operates at several levels within *Americanah*. In the most obvious sense, and as many critics have emphasized, *Americanah* is a novel that offers a stringent critique of US racial capitalism, focalized through the perspective of Ifemelu. Caroline Levine argues that Ifemelu’s function is to mobilize “a time-honored defamiliarizing strategy: the perspective of the outsider”.⁴¹ As an outsider from whiteness on account of her blackness, and from US black culture on account of her Africanness, Ifemelu offers an ideal focalizing gaze that exposes the strange workings of “America’s tribalisms - race, ideology, and region”.⁴² In doing so, Levine argues, Ifemelu personifies the larger historical function of the realist novel itself as a form that is able to “work against the inevitable perceptual blunting of habit - thereby jolting us into a new alertness to a world we thought we knew” (603). In Levine’s reading, *Americanah* thus performs the “crucial political work” of defamiliarizing the forms,

Series, August 25 2015 <https://www.nypl.org/blog/2015/08/25/podcast-chimamanda-ngozi-adichie-zadie-smith>.

⁴⁰ *Theory of the Novel*, p. 81.

⁴¹ Caroline Levine, “‘The Strange Familiar’: Structure, Infrastructure, and Adichie’s *Americanah*”, *Modern Fiction Studies*, Vol. 61, No. 4 (Winter 2015), pp. 587-605.

⁴² *Americanah*, p. 167.

structures and infrastructures of racism to which “we” (her reading seems to assume that we are white and American) may otherwise simply become habituated (602). In drawing the reader’s attention to the structural forms of racial capitalism, the novel achieves a critical autonomy from those structural forms.

While this reading is true enough as far as it goes, *Americanah* is at the same time notable for the way in which it simultaneously defamiliarizes *the means of* critical defamiliarization, thereby both asserting and deconstructing its own position of critical autonomy. As well as asserting its critical autonomy in relation to racial capitalism, the novel repeatedly draws attention to the problematic generic autonomy of the various forms that constitute it, and their entanglement with their object of critique. The opening passage’s simultaneous assertion and deconstruction of its own narrative authority thus stages in miniature one of the novel’s pervasive narrative dynamics: its simultaneous affirmation of, and ironic distance from, the multiple generic forms and narrative logics that constitute it. As well as being a cosmopolitan narrative depicting transnational flows and processes of cultural hybridization, *Americanah* is itself a formal hybrid: a “Mills and Boon”-inspired romance that enacts the dissolution and problematic reconstitution of genre. A global neo-realist feat of “cognitive mapping” that traces connections and disjunctions from Lagos to New York to London. A *bildungsroman* that explores the tension between the form’s historical connection to the nation-state and the problematically post-national contemporary conjuncture. A *kunstlerroman* that represents the political, sentimental and aesthetic education of a fictionalized authorial surrogate. A social realist account of diaspora experience and the intersections of race, class and gender in the US and UK. An embedded blog on US racial politics that problematizes the distinction between third-person narration and parabasis. And a metafiction that confronts the complicities and exclusions of literary aesthetics.

Through this assemblage of overlapping narrative logics *Americanah* draws attention to its own status as a hybrid, an object that has been contingently and syncretically assembled out of found and appropriated forms. This self-consciously assembled character can be read in negative relation to the well-wrought formal unity of a novel of national experience like Achebe's *Things Fall Apart* (1958), with its "mastery of form and language",⁴³ and its "image of a coherent social structure forming the institutional fabric of a universe of meanings and values".⁴⁴ Indeed, *Americanah* stages its own problematic relation to the conditions of possibility of such collectivizing narration through its focalization. The first 454 pages of the narrative alternate between Ifemelu's and Obinze's respective narratives, a contrapuntal strategy that positions their eventual reunion as the formal resolution to the novel's internal divisions. Ifemelu's narrative is focalized as an embedded flashback, narrated in free indirect discourse from her perspective as she has her hair braided in a salon in preparation for her return to Nigeria. Through this modernist technique, the novel narrates the entire backstory of her and Obinze's life to date, up until the diegetic "now" of the narration, which is only reached upon her return to Nigeria. The return to Nigeria thus unifies the novel's disparate temporalities and prepares the ground for the formal closure of Ifemelu and Obinze's final reconciliation.

Braiding, then, is on one level a metaphor for the novel's slowly weaving back together its disparate generic logics and temporalities into a reconstructed formal unity, associated with Ifemelu's reterritorializing return to the nation-state, to more traditional styles and forms, and the final reunion with Obinze as a consummation of the novel's implicit formalizing teleology. On

⁴³ Kwame Anthony Appiah. "The Achievement of Chinua Achebe", *New York Review of Books*, May 22, 2017.

⁴⁴ F. Abiola Irele, "The Crisis of Cultural Memory in Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*" (2000), p. 1.

another level, of course, the hair braiding conceit is simply a joke: Adichie, who herself often wears her hair in braids, is suggesting that in “the six hours that it would take to braid her hair” Ifemelu could narrate her entire life story (19). Yet the internal focalizing of the flashback also serves to accentuate the distance between the novel and oral narrative as a symptom of Ifemelu’s sense of alienation in America. Rather than telling her story to one of the other women in the salon, Ifemelu sits in awkward silence, punctuated only by the occasional passive-aggressive interaction. Adichie thus uses this structure to point to the absence of community that is both Ifemelu’s and the novel’s predicament. Rather than serving to “create a community by giving it an identity”, storytelling has been alienated, internalized and privatized, banished to the autonomous domain of literature “as such”.⁴⁵

This condition of narrative alienation and dispersal would appear to be resolved by Ifemelu’s return to Nigeria, which prepares for Ifemelu and Obinze’s reunion as the novel’s final restoration of formal unity. The novel structurally replicates the form of the quest narrative, in which the hero’s return both completes the narrative arc and represents the restoration of social equilibrium. Yet this formal structure deconstructs itself. The Nigeria to which Ifemelu returns, the Obinze to whom she is reconciled, and the “she” that returns to them, have all been transformed in the interim: “Here, she felt, anything could happen, a ripe tomato could burst out of solid stone. And so she had the dizzying feeling of falling, falling into the new person she had become, into the strange familiar. Had it always been like this or had it changed so much in her absence?” (475). Life in Lagos is not so much a contrast to the alienation of American life as a different form of alienation (“It’s such a transactional city”, she said. “Depressingly

⁴⁵ Byung-Chul Han, *The Crisis of Narration* (2024), p. 56.

transactional. Even relationships, they're all transactional" p. 530). After briefly and acrimoniously working for an online women's magazine, Ifemelu picks up from where she left in America by starting another blog, *The Small Redemptions of Lagos*. The contrast between American and Nigerian life has been deconstructed by the same forces of globalization that have transformed Ifemelu into a transatlantic hybrid. And if the ending fulfills the telos of the marriage plot, it actually represents the end of Obinze's marriage. *Americanah* thus subverts the ur-plot of the quest narrative, Homer's *The Odyssey* (c.8th B.C.), in which Odysseus returns home and restores domestic order by banishing the suitors. In all of these senses, then, Ifemelu's return is as much a continuation of the quest narrative as its cessation.

There is likewise more than a hint of bathos in the novel's hyper-generic ending. The last line ("‘Ceiling,’ she said, finally. ‘Come in’") is a performative resolution: Obinze and Ifemelu have concluded their respective quest narratives, Obinze has finally mustered the courage to leave his wife, and Ifemelu closes the narrative by inviting him over the threshold. The perfect symmetry of this ending gestures toward its contrivance, suggestive less of the high literature with which Ifemelu has been surrounded in Princeton than of the "exaggerated histrionics and... improbable plots" of the "Nollywood" films that she earlier disparages (588, 16). "Ceiling" is Ifemelu's nickname for Obinze, their youthful code-word for sex:

afterwards she said, 'My eyes were open but I did not see the ceiling. This never happened before'. Other girls would have pretended that they had never let another boy touch them, but not her, never her. There was a vivid honesty about her. She began to call what they did together ceiling. (24)

Yet the architectural nickname also gestures self-consciously to Obinze's plot function, as a formalizing device that allows the novel to contain its disparate components by subordinating them to the teleology of the couple's final homecoming and reconciliation. The ending of this

“Afropolitan” quest narrative is not a metaphor for a restored social totality or organic collectivity, but comes in the form of a Hollywood narrative gimmick that provides resolution only in the form of private romantic satisfaction.

If the novel’s focalization gestures to the difference between the individuating form of novelistic narrative and the collectivizing function of oral narrative, this problem can also be said to lie behind the novel’s generic polyphony. In moving from the nation-state to the world, *Americanah* trades the legitimating context of one “universe of meanings and values” (however problematic) for the surrogate totalities of various self-consciously generic forms, and the communities of taste whose expectations and meanings they serve to mediate. On one level, then, *Americanah* wards off the problem of “bad infinity” by recourse to genre, and hence to the Contract fiction’s “balancing (of) self-expression and communication within a group”. Yet this retreat into genre is counterbalanced by an ethical imperative to engage social problems - racial and gender oppression, global inequality - that are incompletely assimilable to those generic forms. *Americanah*’s multiple overlapping forms - the lyrical realist *bildungsroman*, the critical realist representation of racial capitalism, the blog, the *kunstlerroman*, the social satire, the diaspora memoir, the observational comedy, the metafiction - thus serve to defamiliarize (or, to dialogize) one another. In placing a polyphonic assemblage of generic logics in counterpoint, Adichie neither naively submits to nor successfully transcends the limits of genre, but stages the ways in which their affordances and inclusions are inextricable from their constitutive exclusions and foreclosures.

As I have argued, Adichie’s sense of vocational security and self-justification as a novelist is rooted in an Achebean sense of the essential continuity between novel writing and more communitarian and socially embedded forms of artistic production. Postcolonial theory

from Achebe, Frantz Fanon and Amilcar Cabral to Timothy Brennan, Fredric Jameson, Homi Bhabha and Pheng Cheah has positioned the question of the postcolonial artist's functional subordination to the collective in terms of the development of "national culture" in the wake of decolonization.⁴⁶ Such a position of vocational security, to the extent that it exists, issues from a conviction that artistic production is not merely aesthetic; that it has a role in the articulation and perpetuation of larger collective structures of meaning and value.

As we have already seen, in Pascale Casanova's terms, deterritorialization - or the substitution of a global for a national perspective - is associated with art's repudiation of the collective, of realist representation, and of heteronomy, and its assertion of aesthetic autonomy. Yet in *Americanah*, as in other works of "Afropolitan" diasporic fiction such as NoViolet Bulawayo's *We Need New Names* (2013), we see a very different dynamic at play, in which autonomy is not asserted, but rather encountered in the form of the potential loss of the novel's legitimating conditions. In the last few pages of *We Need New Names*, Darling - the novel's narrator, who has spent the past 287 pages telling the story of her impoverished upbringing in Robert Mugabe's Zimbabwe, and subsequent migration to the US - calls home to speak to an old friend, Chipo. Darling raises the issue of "What they have done to our country. All of the suffering", which she has seen "on BBC". Chipo responds,

But you are not the one suffering. You think watching on BBC means you know what is going on? No, you don't my friend, it's the wound that knows the texture of the pain; it's us who stayed here feeling the real suffering, so it's us who have a right to even say anything about that or anything and anybody, she says.⁴⁷

⁴⁶ See Fanon, "On National Culture", in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1961); Cabral, "National Liberation and Culture" (1970); Jameson, "Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism" (1986); Brennan, "The National Longing for Form" in *Salman Rushdie and the Third World: Myths of the Nation* (1989); Bhabha (ed.), *Nation and Narration* (1990); Cheah, *Spectral Nationality* (2003).

⁴⁷ NoViolet Bulawayo, *We Need New Names* (2013), p. 287.

The novel retrospectively detonates its own conditions of legitimacy. Yet in doing so it articulates the anxiety that has underpinned its ongoing self-reflexive dialogue with the ethical tenability of its own representations of Zimbabwean society. As Sarah Brouillette argues, *We Need New Names* “assumes that its readers, probably unusually wealthy and highly educated, will be unlike its characters, who are forced to sell images of their own suffering in order to receive charity” (18). With its hard-hitting representations of suffering and poverty, *We Need New Names* has been cited as an example of works that “pander to Western readers drawn to stories of ‘poverty porn’ about ‘darkest Africa’; they produce extroverted or ‘self-anthropologizing’ works that assume a non-African readership” (134). But as Brouillette argues,

We Need New Names is actually less an instance of poverty porn than it is about the conditions of poverty porn’s production. It takes as one of its assumptions the prurient and in this case also humanitarian or activist gaze of the reader-consumer from the developed world. Through Darling, we see what it is to be looked upon and gawked at in sympathy, prurient fascination, scorn, outrage, and more, and we notice how her situation mirrors that of the Zimbabwean author interested in making a living by writing. (134)

The conditions of possibility of Darling’s entry into the “world republic of letters” - her cultural capital, her transnational migrancy (in Bulawayo’s case, her MFA from Cornell) - are the conditions of impossibility of her speaking credibly on behalf of the collective. Entry into the literary “as such” comes at the price of distance from the collective that legitimates the narrative traditions on which Afropolitan novelists like Adichie and Bulawayo tend to draw.⁴⁸ Literary autonomy does not liberate the work from the imperative to provide representations of collective life so much as it involves the work’s assimilation to the structures of production, distribution

⁴⁸ In the interview conducted for the “Reading Group Guide” that appends the US edition of *We Need New Names*, Bulawayo notes that her “aesthetic and themes were all inspired by Africa and its modes of storytelling, including the oral tradition” (p. 10).

and reception that threaten to render those representations structurally “self-anthropologizing”, without normative force.

This is not only a problem for African diasporic novelists, but exemplary of the modality in which autonomy emerges in contemporary novels that seek to transcend their formal closure, their political irrelevance, their triviality as works of mere literature or art “as such”. The Mexican-American novelist Valeria Luiselli gives voice to this predicament in her novel *Lost Children Archive* (2019), which emerges from work that she herself did as a legal translator for undocumented migrants, and that she recounts in her non-fiction book, *Tell Me How It Ends* (2017). Luiselli’s narrator is a journalist who is making a radio documentary about the plight of undocumented child migrants from Latin America:

I wonder how I’d distribute all the concerns I have.

Political concern: How can a radio documentary be useful in helping more undocumented children find asylum? Aesthetic problem: On the other hand, why should a sound piece, or any other form of storytelling, for that matter, be a means to a specific end? I should know, by now, that instrumentalism, applied to any art form, is a way of guaranteeing shitty results: light pedagogic material, moralistic young-adult novels, boring art in general. Professional hesitance: But then again, isn’t art for art’s sake so often an absolutely ridiculous display of intellectual arrogance? Ethical concern: And why would I even think that I can or should make art with someone else’s suffering? Pragmatic concern: Shouldn’t I simply document, like the serious journalist I was when I first started working in radio and sound production? Realistic concern: Maybe it’s better to keep the children’s stories as far away from the media as possible, anyway, because the more attention a potentially controversial issue receives in the media, the more susceptible it is to becoming politicized, and in these times, a politicized issue is no longer a matter that urgently calls for committed debate in the public arena but rather a bargaining chip that parties use frivolously in order to move their own agendas forward. Constant concerns: Cultural appropriation, pissing all over someone else’s toilet seat, who am I to tell this story, micromanaging identity politics, heavy-handedness, am I too angry, am I mentally colonized by Western-Saxon-white categories, what’s the correct use of personal pronouns, go light on the adjectives, and oh, who gives a fuck how very whimsical phrasal verbs are?⁴⁹

⁴⁹ Valeria Luiselli, *Lost Children Archive* (2019), p.79.

As in Bulawayo's case, the circumstances that put Luiselli's narrator in a position to be able to make her documentary seem to disqualify her from doing so in good faith, and as the passage's consideration of the problem of art and instrumentalism makes clear, this is also the predicament of the novel that we are reading. "Instrumentalism" and "art for art's sake" seem equally unsatisfactory. The way in which the artwork is able to justify itself aesthetically - which points toward art for art's sake - seems to stand in tension with its political motives, which point toward "boring art in general". Yet to strip itself of aesthetic justification, to write "light pedagogic material, moralistic young-adult novels", is no solution either, since the work's distance from the conditions of its political effectiveness is the precondition of its autonomization, its entry into the "world republic of letters". To recall Blanchot's words, "as soon as art measures itself against action, immediate and pressing action can only put it in the wrong".⁵⁰ The autonomized artwork is seemingly condemned either to subordinate politics to aesthetics, or to offer up political representations as objects of aesthetic consumption for the "gaze of the reader-consumer from the developed world".

For critics like Nicholas Brown and Walter Benn Michaels, the artwork justifies itself by asserting its formal autonomy. But formal autonomy is the very problem from which contemporary writers like Bulawayo, Luiselli and Adichie are trying to escape. The assertion of the artwork's autonomy - a merely aesthetic solution to the problem of the mereness of the aesthetic - serves to mire the work ever deeper in its predicament. Autonomy thus emerges in contemporary fiction as a condition that can neither be occupied nor successfully transcended. And this predicament manifests itself in the work's immanent encounter with, its compulsive

⁵⁰ *The Space of Literature* (1955), p. 213.

staging of, the arbitrariness and partiality of any narrative totality. The arbitrariness of genres and forms in relation to the real is encountered to the extent that they are separated from the collective structures of meaning and value in whose context they emerged, and that they formerly served to reproduce and perpetuate. Under such circumstances autonomy emerges not as an aspiration but as a predicament, in which the representational imperative comes into conflict with the inadequacy of its own means, or in which form's autonomy is encountered in and as the impossibility of the desire to transcend it. For globally minded neorealist writers such as Adichie, Bulawayo, Luiselli, Arundhati Roy, Chris Abani, Zadie Smith, Roberto Bolano, Teju Cole, Mohsin Hamid or Yaa Gyasi, citizenship of the world does not presuppose the renunciation of social engagement in favor of an abstract formalism. Literature "as such" is not the condition to which they aspire (aesthetic autonomy), but the fate (the merely aesthetic) to which they suspect their work may be condemned.

This tension between aesthetics and politics emerges in a novel such as *Americanah* in the form of its simultaneous affirmation and deconstruction of the forms that it employs. The movement from the national to the transnational, we might say, brings the extra-aesthetic criteria that "Afropolitan" writers such as Adichie and Bulawayo inherit from the previous generation of African postcolonial writers into confrontation with the transnational novel's deterritorialized condition as a mere work of art "as such", that addresses nobody in particular, and does so without easy recourse to extra-aesthetic authority or to a position of collective representation. Detached from the conditions of the artwork's extra-aesthetic authority, Adichie is brought into confrontation with the merely aesthetic nature of the deterritorialized artwork, and with the danger of being harmlessly assimilated into what *Americanah* presents as the implicitly racist structures of merely aesthetic legitimacy constitutive of the institution and values of literature "as

such". *Americanah* thus mediates the problem of its own justification and authority through the question of its status and function as a work of art as such, and of its proximity to, yet difference from, the forms of discourse - above all, the generic and the directly political - in contradistinction to which the literary "as such" defines itself. *Americanah*, in other words, stages the problem of its autonomy through the problem of its simultaneous internality and externality to Western high-literary values that privilege indirectness, irony and mediation: the values of modernist and postmodernist formal autonomy.

Americanah features a series of set-piece literary discussions that on one level serve to dramatize its own critical distance from postmodern "irony". Indeed, it is scarcely an exaggeration to say that the concept of literature that Franzen calls "Status" fiction - autonomous art produced by and for the academy, detached from the emotional life of ordinary people - is a constant antagonist throughout the novel, the object of a series of staged polemics. The elevated literary tastes of Ifemelu's boyfriend Blaine, an African American Yale professor, are presented (focalized through the perspective of Ifemelu) as the correlative to his slightly aloof intellectualism, and thus as a snobbish, aspirationally tinged, and implicitly gendered display of cultural capital:

Ifemelu opened her novel, Jean Toomer's *Cane*, and skimmed a few pages. She had been meaning to read it for a while now, and imagined she would like it since Blaine did not. A precious performance, Blaine had called it, in that gently forbearing tone he used when they talked about novels, as though he was sure that she, with a little more time and a little more wisdom, would come to accept that the novels he liked were superior, novels written by young and youngish men and packed with things, a fascinating, confounding accumulation of brands and music and comic books and icons, with emotions skimmed over, and each sentence stylishly aware of its own stylishness. She had read many of them, because he recommended them, but they were like cotton candy that so easily evaporated from her tongue's memory. (14)

(Later Blaine will dismiss “two novels (Ifemelu) loved, by Ann Petry and Gayl Jones”, because “‘They don’t push the boundaries’”) (387). Several pages later, when Obinze encounters a young journalist called Yemi at a party in Lagos and tries and fails to engage him in a conversation about literature, academic literary studies is presented as a way of separating the colonized middle classes from demotic culture and assimilating them into Westernized notions of literature “as such”, continuous with colonial strategies of “divide and rule”:

Yemi had studied English at university and Obinze asked him what books he liked, keen to talk about something interesting at last, but he soon realized that, for Yemi, a book did not qualify as literature unless it had polysyllabic words and incomprehensible passages. ‘The problem is that the novel is too simple, the man does not even use any big words,’ Yemi said.” (38)

As an intellectually aspirational middle-class adolescent, Obinze himself is described as “besotted” with American literature (84). Yet later on, while living in misery in London having been unable to follow Ifemelu to America, Obinze returns to contemporary American novels in search of personal connection and a sense of collectivity, the traditional consolations of communitarian art:

because he hoped to find a resonance, a shaping of his longings, a sense of the America that he had imagined himself a part of. He wanted to know about day-to-day life in America, what people ate and what consumed them, what shamed them and what attracted them, but he read novel after novel and was disappointed: nothing was grave, nothing serious, nothing urgent, and most dissolved into ironic nothingness. (317)

Ifemelu and Obinze’s frustrations with “stylish”, “incomprehensible” and “ironic”

(post)modernist fiction have a distinctly Achebean ring to them, and it seems reasonable to infer that they are likewise endorsed by Adichie herself.⁵¹ In “To Instruct and Delight”, Adichie states

⁵¹ These are just a few of the novel’s many attacks on the literary academy and its critical values: “I know this woman in grad school, a friend of a friend, and just listening to her talk is scary. The semiotic dialectics of intertextual modernity. Which makes no sense at all. Sometimes I feel that they live in a

that she writes “Because I love the near-mystical sense of creating characters who sometimes speak to me. Because I love the possibility of touching another human being with my work” (1), the very values that Ifemelu and Obinze seek but fail to find in contemporary US novels. Such scenes thus serve what Lee Konstantinou regards as a classic “post-ironic” function: “Whether they’re neo-Victorians or middlebrow realists, writers such as (Jonathan) Franzen make traditional fictional forms into anti-postmodern statements. To be recognized as anti-postmodern statements, such novels dramatize the rejection of postmodernism and postmodern irony within their fictive worlds”.⁵² As Blaine’s best friend Amraminta says to Ifemelu, “Have you heard his friends talk? Nothing is just what it is. Everything has to mean something else. It’s ridiculous” (385).

This dramatization happens in a double sense in *Americanah*, both through the explicit anti-ironic or anti-postmodern statements that the characters make, and through the novel’s lack of any discernible ironic distance from those statements. The reader is encouraged to regard Ifemelu (and to a lesser extent, Obinze) as inhabiting the novel’s moral center, and their literary opinions as articulating the novel’s own implied self-positioning. For example, when Ifemelu briefly encounters a white American woman named Kelsey in a hair salon, waiting to have her hair braided in cornrows in preparation for her holiday to Africa, Kelsey serves a transparently rhetorical function:

‘I’ve been reading books to get ready. Everybody recommended *Things Fall Apart*, which I read in high school. It’s very good but sort of quaint, right? I mean like it didn’t help me understand modern Africa. I’ve just read this great book, *A Bend in the River*. It made me truly understand how modern Africa works.’
Ifemelu made a sound, halfway between a snort and a hum, but said nothing.

parallel universe of academia speaking academese instead of English and they don’t really know what’s happening in the real world”, p. 220.

⁵² Konstantinou, “Four Faces of Post-Irony” (2017), p. 96.

‘It’s just so honest, the most honest book I’ve read about Africa,’ Kelsey said. Ifemelu shifted. Kelsey’s knowing tone grated. Her headache was getting worse. She did not think the novel was about Africa at all. It was about Europe, or the longing for Europe, about the battered self-image of an Indian man born in Africa, who felt so wounded, so diminished, by not having been born European, a member of a race which he had elevated for their ability to create, that he turned his imagined personal insufficiencies into an impatient contempt for Africa; in his knowing haughty attitude to the African, he could become, even if only fleetingly, a European. She leaned back on her seat and said this in measured tones. Kelsey looked startled; she had not expected a minilecture. Then, she said kindly, ‘Oh, well, I see why you would read the novel like that.’

‘And I see why you would read it like you did,’ Ifemelu said. (233/4)

There is little reason to read this as anything other than a “mini lecture” offered by Adichie herself through the mouthpiece of Ifemelu, presenting a predictable counterpoint between the outsider’s deeply pessimistic presentation of Africa in *A Bend in the River* (1979), spiritual heir to the “imperial vision” of Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* (1899), and Achebe’s *Things Fall Apart* (1958), which eschews the Naipaulian aestheticization of “transcendental homelessness” and instead narrates the history of colonialism from the perspective of the colonized.⁵³

Taken together, such scenes serve to oppose irony, as an intellectualized literary affectation, to both Ifemelu’s and the novel’s straight talking, which subordinates the pursuit of literary capital to the imperative to “speak truth to power”. The novel, in other words, rejects a set of literary values oriented around the relativizing, ironizing or dialogizing of social and political values, and instead orients itself, in characteristically “post-ironic” fashion, toward the

⁵³ Achebe himself criticized Naipaul as “the case of a brilliant writer who sold himself to the West”, Chinua Achebe and Bernth Lindfors, ed., *Conversations With Chinua Achebe* (1997), pp. 90-91. In *Home and Exile* (2000) Achebe describes Naipaul’s depiction of Africa in *A Bend in the River* as “downright outrageous” (p. 87). For a critique of Naipaul’s melancholic cultivation of “transcendental homelessness” see Rob Nixon, *London Calling: V.S. Naipaul, Postcolonial Mandarin* (1992). For a more sympathetic account, see Timothy Bewes, “The Shame of Belatedness: Late Style in Naipaul”, in *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (2011).

monologic articulation of “single-entendre principles”.⁵⁴ This descent into monologism should not, however, be taken to represent an opposition between a straightforwardly didactic Achebean conception of the novel as social pedagogy and a Western notion of the novel as art. Rather, the division itself is symptomatic of the unraveling of the Achebean conception of literature under the pressure of its compromised conditions of possibility. As Simon Gikandi argues, the African novel for Achebe is a form that seeks to appropriate the tools of the colonizer and to repurpose them, in the service of “the (nationalist) desire to negate the colonial episteme and replace it by a new, African narrative and, by extension, order of knowledge” (30). The African novel is not didactic, then, but rather both syncretic and synthetic, seeking to “mediate” both “the multiple identities - Igbo, Nigerian, African, and black - that define the African subject” (9), and “the imaginative ethos, the different structures of the African and colonial traditions, and their corollary ‘referential bounds’” (30).⁵⁵ This is the strategy that Adichie pursues in *Half of a Yellow Sun*, in which the novel’s dialogical mediation of various positionalities, perspectives and social types within its expansive character-system both narrates and formally allegorizes the problematic construction of the postcolonial nation-state.

On one level, then, *Americanah* stages the dissolution of the African novel’s mediatory capacity under the pressure of deterritorialization and racialization. No longer able to give meaning and form to the shared life of a people through collectivizing narration, the novel stages its own inevitable descent into genre on one hand, and political polemic on the other. The most

⁵⁴ As David Foster Wallace’s writes, in a passage frequently cited in discussions of “post-irony” and “new sincerity”: “The next real literary ‘rebels’ in this country might well emerge as some weird bunch of anti-rebels, born oglers who dare somehow to back away from ironic watching, who have the childish gall actually to endorse and instantiate single-entendre principles”. “*E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction*” (1993), p. 192, cited in Konstantinou (2016), p. ix.

⁵⁵ Simon Gikandi, “Chinua Achebe and the Post-colonial Esthetic: Writing, Identity, and National Formation” (1991).

obvious way that it does the latter is by incorporating lengthy posts from Ifemelu's anonymously authored blog, "Raceteenth, or Various Observations About American Blacks (Those Formerly Known as Negroes) by a Non-American Black", in which she launches a scathing critique of US racial capitalism, often by documenting everyday microaggressions. Yet the blog simply literalizes a crisis of narrative form that comes about as a result of its transplanting from the context of the postcolonial nation-state, in which the novelist can imagine herself to speak on behalf of a collective, to that of US racial capitalism, in which the novelist, like the blogger, is a mere producer of content for nobody in particular.

The problem of literary mediation is raised in a later (monological) dialogue, when Ifemelu is discussing literature with Blaine's intimidatingly savvy and cultured sister Shan and a group of her African American writer friends. The opposition between the values of literature "as such" and the moral imperative to bear witness to the realities of race in America is presented as a product of the racial exclusions of modernist and postmodernist literary aesthetics:

'So I put it in the book and my editor wants to change it because he says it's not *subtle*. Like life is always fucking subtle. And then I write about my mom being bitter at work, because she felt she'd hit a ceiling and they wouldn't let her get further because she was black, and my editor says, 'Can we have more nuance?' Did your mom have a bad rapport with someone at work, maybe? Or had she already been diagnosed with cancer? He thinks we should complicate it, so it's not race alone. And I say, But it *was* race. She was bitter because she thought if everything was the same, except for her race, she would have been made vice president. And she talked about it a lot until she died. But somehow my mom's experience is suddenly unnuanced. 'Nuance' means keep people comfortable so everyone is free to think of themselves as individuals and everyone got where they are because of their achievement.'

'Maybe you should turn it into a novel,' Maribelle said.

'Are you kidding me?' Shan asked, slightly drunk, slightly dramatic, and now sitting yoga-style on the floor. 'You can't write an honest novel about race in this country. If you write about how people are really affected by race, it'll be too obvious. Black writers who do literary fiction in this country, all three of them, not the ten thousand who write those bullshit ghetto books with the bright covers, have two choices: they can do precious or they can do pretentious. When you do neither, nobody knows what to do with you. So if you're going to write about race, you have to make sure it's so lyrical and subtle that

the reader who doesn't read between the lines won't even know it's about race. You know, a Proustian meditation, all watery and fuzzy, that at the end just leaves you feeling watery and fuzzy.' (417)

Modernist and postmodernist literary values such as “subtlety”, “nuance”, “irony”, “stylishness”, “lyricism” and “interiority”, it is implied, serve to elevate political evasiveness into literary ideology. The literary “as such”, in other words, is continuous with the structures of white privilege, serving to constitutively exclude from its discourse the articulation of the blunt and non-literary realities of “how people are really affected by race” that nonetheless sustain the social hierarchies at whose apex the literary resides.

As well as offering a monologized critique of the complicity of modernist aesthetics with the fetishizing of nuance and the mystification of racial injustice, then, the passage offers an implicit rationale for the novel's inclusion of political blogposts written by Ifemelu, that detail her own experience of everyday racism in the US. The blog-posts merely literalize the tendency of the book to use characters to “dramatize (its) rejection of postmodernism and postmodern irony”, or simply to state its own polemical arguments. The blog can thus be read as the extension and literalizing of the novel's use of monologism as a post-ironic strategy, in which the novel drops the fictional mask to address its political concerns directly rather than through the mediations of fictional narrative. This continuity is gestured toward repeatedly. After her interaction in the salon with Kelsey, Ifemelu reflects that “She could have blogged about Kelsey too, this girl who believed she was somehow miraculously neutral in the way she read books, while other people read emotionally”, words that render the framing of the passage as narrative rather than blog incidental (234). On page 227, there is a seamless transition from a narrative passage that narrates an example of racism (Ifemelu's nephew, Dike, is told by his white summer camp leader that he is not allowed sunscreen because he “didn't need it”) to a blog post

concerning “American tribalism”, staging the essential continuity between the two. Such a strategy can be read as of a piece with the larger trend that David Shields describes, in *Reality Hunger* (2010), toward works that reject the artificial contrivances and evasions of traditional literary aesthetics, above all those of the realist novel, and are instead “breaking ever larger chunks of ‘reality’ into their work”.⁵⁶ Or in terms of Lee Konstantinou’s categories (which I discuss in the conclusion), it represents the dissolution of “storytelling neorealism” into “affective neorealism”: a disaffiliation from the mediations of fiction and conventional literary form, and an aspiration to directly articulate subjective experience in its unvarnished immediacy.

This disaffiliation from literary form is not compartmentalized within the blog, but extends into the novel’s exposure of what we might call the fundamentally rhetorical structure of realist narration. Ifemelu, as both a semi-autobiographical authorial proxy and the character through whom the novel’s realist gaze is most frequently focalized, has an immediately discernible tendency to view US society as a series of category types. Adichie uses Ifemelu’s perspective to model a form of symptomatic reading, wherein the world becomes legible as a series of examples of more general social categories and processes:

The man standing closest to her was eating an ice cream cone; she had always found it a little irresponsible, the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men, especially the eating of ice cream cones by grown-up American men in public. He turned to her and said, ‘About time’, when the train finally creaked in, with the familiarity strangers adopt with each other after sharing in the disappointment of a public service. She smiled at him. The graying hair on the back of his head was swept forward, a comical arrangement to disguise a bald spot. He had to be an academic, but not in the humanities or he would be more self-conscious. A firm science like chemistry, maybe. Before, she would have said ‘I know’, that peculiar American expression that professed agreement rather than knowledge, and then she would have started a conversation with him, to see if he would say something she could use in her blog. (4)

⁵⁶ Shields, *Reality Hunger* (2010), p. 4.

Every detail of this description is a transparently rhetorical example, a motivated signifier, a type. The passage thus condenses a process that characterizes the narrative more broadly, which offers a critical commentary on American society, focalized through the perspective of Ifemelu, largely by constructing a series of exemplary narrative incidents on which Adichie wants to pass comment, and which serve as pretexts for the introduction of various social categories, character-types, or typical forms of interaction (perhaps most frequently, particular categories of racial microaggression). In doing so, the novel can be taken to defamiliarize the rhetorical structure of the realist novel in general, in which (as Roland Barthes famously argues), there is no such thing as an “insignificant notation”, in which even the most apparently incidental “concrete details” are always-already assimilated to a narrative purpose and meaning (even if that purpose is to signify the supposed absence of signification).⁵⁷

As in the use of the romance plot, then, Adichie chooses to amplify the novel’s formal problems rather than attempting to assimilate them to the machinery of the well-made realist novel. For Levine, the blog “deliberately (defamiliarizes) American habits of responding to race, describing each as strange and artificial” (594). While this is of course true, the blog posts also serve to defamiliarize the novelistic narrative, in one sense pointing to its limits and in another sense exposing its inner logic. In Ulka Anjaria’s reading, “The blog posts suggest that a temporary suspension of the literary might help the reader grasp the undetermined and at times unsavory realities of race. *Americanah* blocks any attempt to aestheticize the global racial divide into something like the ‘heartfelt’ (Jaggi) African novel”.⁵⁸ I would take this observation further. If the blog-posts represent a logical continuation of the novel’s anti-literary monologic strategies,

⁵⁷ See Roland Barthes, “The Reality Effect” (1969), in *The Rustle of Language* (1989), pp. 142, 147.

⁵⁸ Ulka Anjaria, “The Realist Impulse and the Future of Postcoloniality” (2016), p. 285.

in doing so they serve to highlight a logical tension between the experience of racism and the form of the conventional realist novel, and indeed the literary “as such”. Racialization renders the separation of aesthetics from ethics and politics, and hence the autonomy of literature “as such”, impossible. As the structural parallel between the transparent monologism of the third-person narrative and the first-person pontification of the blog implies, race is so pervasive to the life that Ifemelu leads and observes in America that any notion of value-free, impersonal narration - and thus of literary mediation, disinterest, objectivity, indirectness, dialogism, or autonomy - becomes manifestly disingenuous (or even, implicitly racist). The novel cannot *not* be a direct commentary on race because race is what structures Ifemelu’s everyday life. And the narration of this experience cannot not be polemical, because to narrate race from a perspective of suprapersonal disinterest is simply to dissemble the value judgment that is presupposed in the very identification of a particular incident *as* an example of racism. A representation of Ifemelu’s life in America, or the representation of American racial capitalism more broadly from the perspective of the racialized, cannot *not* be polemical. To focus the narrative on something other than race would be disingenuous or irrelevant, yet to pretend that the representation of race can be detached from polemic is equally disingenuous. A position of authorial impersonality or disinterest, it is implied, is available only to those who are able to move through life unimpeded by race, and thus structurally unavailable to the racialized. The result is the degeneration of narration into polemic, and of the novel into the blog.

Yet in another sense, race is an extreme example of a more general narrative problematic, since it serves to render explicit what we might call an aporia of intentionality in the novel that appeals to narrative impersonality serve merely to conceal. Race causes this structure of impersonal narration to deconstruct itself. Because every incident in the novel’s opening pages is

so transparently an example of racialization, the fragility of the distinction between narration and pontification in the novel - the ruse of narrative impersonality, or what we might call the fundamentally rhetorical structure of novelistic mediation per se - is inevitably brought into view. And I would furthermore relate this problem to the novel's loss of its conditions of legitimacy. The rhetorical structure of narration emerges as a problem to the extent that the writer loses the ability to conceive of herself as merely the mouthpiece for an external authority, whether that is the heavenly muse, an "integrated civilization", a community of readers, a set of generic conventions, or a nation. Alienated from the values of the collective that she addresses, Ifemelu is forced into the position of the kind of modernist artist, who "lives on the fringes of society" and adopts an attitude of "revolt" against its forms and values, from which Achebe wants to differentiate the African novelist. The same critical detachment that makes Ifemelu an ideal vehicle for the novel's defamiliarizing of US society thus inevitably turns back upon the novel itself. Her story is privatized, driven back into the biographical form, even as it attempts to transcend that form by engaging general social problems. Detached from a constituency from whom it derives its authority, narrative is deauthorized, reduced to either polemic, genre, or (like the blog) so much clickable content.

In one sense, then, the "epic" third-person omniscient narrative perspective that Adichie adopts in a novel like *Half of a Yellow Sun* is structurally problematized not just by the prevalence of racism within African immigrant experience, but by the novel's relocation from the center to the margins of social life. But it would be better still to say that the structural problems that are already present in national novels such as *Half of a Yellow Sun* and *Things Fall Apart* are radicalized in a transnational novel such as *Americanah*. In Peter Boxall's reading, *Half of a Yellow Sun* stages the impossibility of its own collectivizing ambitions: "The political

work of the novel is done, I think, not in the assertion of an authentically African voice, but in the metafictional gap between the novel that Adichie writes and that unwritten history which it harbors”⁵⁹. Likewise, as I have already suggested we can read *Things Fall Apart* as underpinned by the ironic gap between the world that it represents - in which “storytelling... is itself a kind of ritual, fully integrated into the communal life of the people” - and the world of the novel that it itself inhabits.⁶⁰ *Things Fall Apart* is an allegory of novelization, of art’s becoming autonomous through colonization and capitalist deterritorialization. Insofar as Achebe wants to overcome the merely novelistic, to regain the status of a communally integrated ritual that gives form to the shared life of a people, there is a sense in which the African novel as he theorizes it is condemned to perform its own impossibility. It is this fundamental incommensurability between the novel’s constitutive status as a mere work of art, and its equally constitutive desire to transcend that status, that I have theorized throughout this dissertation as the predicament of autonomy. And this predicament therefore constitutes the principle of continuity, as well as difference, between the first-generation postcolonial novel and the deterritorialized novels of the more recent “Afropolitan” diaspora.

If on one hand *Americanah*’s exposure of the exclusions and evasions of the literary seems to provide it with a sense of anti-aesthetic vocation and justification, then, it also seems to occasion its loss of its own sense of literary self-justification, its reduction to the status of mere rhetoric or pontification. By choosing as her authorial proxy and mouthpiece not a literary writer

⁵⁹ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction: A Critical Introduction* (2013), p. 180.

⁶⁰ Jonathan Greenberg, “Okonkwo and the Storyteller: Death, Accident, and Meaning in Chinua Achebe and Walter Benjamin” (2007), p. 428.

(as in the convention of the *kunstlerroman*), but a mere blogger, Adichie dramatizes the loss of authority that accompanies her own loss of a political constituency:

All those readers, growing month by month, linking and cross-posting, knowing so much more than she did; they had always frightened and exhilarated her... Readers like Sapphic-Derrida, who reeled off statistics and used words like 'reify' in their comments, made Ifemelu nervous, eager to be fresh and to impress, so that she began, over time, to feel like a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use. Sometimes making fragile links to race. Sometimes not believing herself. The more she wrote, the less sure she became. Each post scraped off yet one more scale of self until she felt naked and false. (6)

If *Americanah* is on one hand an "anti-Mills and Boon", it is also an anti-*kunstlerroman*.

Ifemelu's aesthetic education is not the prelude to her becoming the author of the novel that we read, but of the blog to which it constantly stages its own proximity. The blog literalizes the breakdown of novelistic mediation, the descent into mere polemic, that emerges as an outcome of the novelist's separation from a constituency. Unable to regard herself as a credible spokesperson for a collective, Ifemelu becomes a self-interested and anxiously self-scrutinizing actor, "a vulture hacking into the carcasses of people's stories for something she could use". To the extent that it lacks a representative function or authoritative relation to a political constituency, then, the blog faces a version of the same crisis of legitimacy that affects the autonomized artwork. Ifemelu can thus be said to occupy a position comparable to that of Adichie as a "global" novelist: one whose novels do not address a territorially situated community from a position of authority, but instead circulate globally as mere "content" to be anonymously and impersonally consumed; to be picked up or put down at will; to be studied, revered, loaned out, annotated, critiqued, half-read, skimmed, sneered at, defaced, misconstrued or disregarded.

While in one sense the novel uses Ifemelu's blog to literalize the monologic and anti-aesthetic strategies through which it strives to achieve political relevance by separating itself from the formal autonomy of the work of art "as such", then, there is also another sense in which it uses Ifemelu and her blog to allegorize the circular problem of its own normative justification and authority as an autonomous work of art "as such". Insofar as it is detached from any possibility of collective political action Ifemelu's blog also risks becoming an aesthetic object by another name, a problem that is highlighted by the very enthusiasm with which it is embraced by the white literary establishment. The only discernible political effect Ifemelu's blog has in the novel is to win her a Princeton fellowship, and thus to facilitate her own personal assimilation into the structures of literary prestige it critiques. Like the artwork, the blog functions as a laundering technology in which the personal experiences of racism that Ifemelu recounts, and that she shares in a spirit of exasperated critique oscillating between gallows humor and despair, are automatically converted back into capital (both financial and cultural) for Ifemelu, and thereby invested back into the system that produced them. The technologically mediated and commodified speech-act through which Ifemelu protests the racism that precludes her assimilation into US society is thus fundamentally ironic, a performative contradiction. The blog is structurally self-negating; its success is its failure. In the act of critiquing the system through one of its administered media the normative grounds for such a critique automatically consume themselves, and the author is herself assimilated into (and rewarded by) the larger racialized structure of entrepreneurial action that is the object of her critique. Detached from a position of heteronomy to a people, writing threatens to become mere content production, a pastiche of itself. The novel and the blog are subject to the same fate, suspended between the literary and the non-literary, the merely political and the merely aesthetic.

In all of these senses, then, *Americanah* responds to the formal challenges arising from the substitution of the national for the global by staging the problem of the novel's simultaneous necessity and inadequacy, by foregrounding rather than concealing its internal contradictions. The novel thus stages a twofold crisis of legitimacy: disaffiliating from the values of literature "as such", it finds a new sense of vocation in the direct and unadorned expression of the truth of racialized experience; yet this plunges it into a new crisis of legitimacy, since in shedding itself of aesthetic justification it seems to conform all the more seamlessly to the entrepreneurial imperatives of racial capitalism, to become simply another form of anonymous, consumable content. Ifemelu's blog posts are anecdotal fragments that form no narrative totality. Rather than critique the structural, institutional and historical forms of racial capitalism they merely describe some of its surface manifestations:

She had written a post about inner cities - 'Why Are the Dankest, Drabbest Parts of American Cities Full of American Blacks?' - and he told her to include details about government policy and redistricting. She did, but after rereading it, she took down the post.

'I don't want to explain, I want to observe,' she said. (387)

We may infer that it is in part this resistance to narrative totalization - itself a version of the modernist dictum, "show don't tell" - that renders Ifemelu's blog so finally unthreatening, so readily assimilable to the structures of the white literary establishment. The novel's deconstruction of literary autonomy - its staged descent from narration into polemic - turns into a new form of heteronomy, yet not one that serves to position Ifemelu as the spokesperson for a community, but rather to individuate her as a mere entrepreneur of the self, and to afford her a temporary and precarious foothold within the structures of white privilege.

(Self) Critical Realism

All of these strands within the narrative point to a tendency to defamiliarize the means of both literary and non-literary representation, deconstructing the various forms that Adichie employs by gesturing ironically to their limits, or to the problem of their “political unconscious”. Yet there is another sense in which Adichie counterbalances this defamiliarizing tendency with another one that points in the opposite direction, using literary mediation to defamiliarize the immediacy of subjective experience. If the rejection of literary mediation offers no solution to the predicament of autonomy, there is another sense in which *Americanah* re-mediate the immediacy of Ifemelu’s blog-posts by reassimilating them to a narrative totality. The novel refuses to fully collapse narration into first-person expression, and in doing so it is able to partially transcend the limitations of the first person.

If conventions are deconstructed, then, the novel nonetheless also demonstrates a commitment to the political affordances of realist narration, and this can be demonstrated by returning once more to the opening passage (quoted at the beginning of this chapter, reproduced here for reference):

Princeton, in the summer, smelled of nothing, and although Ifemelu liked the tranquil greenness of the many trees, the clean streets and stately homes, the delicately overpriced shops, and the quiet, abiding air of earned grace, it was this, the lack of a smell, that most appealed to her, perhaps because the other American cities she knew well had all smelled distinctly. Philadelphia had the musty scent of history. New Haven smelled of neglect. Baltimore smelled of brine, and Brooklyn of sun-warmed garbage. But Princeton had no smell. She liked taking deep breaths here. She liked watching the locals who drove with pointed courtesy and parked their latest-model cars outside the organic grocery store on Nassau Street or outside the sushi restaurants or outside the ice cream shop that had fifty different flavors including red pepper or outside the post office where effusive staff bounded out to greet them at the entrance. She liked the campus, grave with knowledge, the Gothic buildings with their vine-laced walls, and the way everything transformed, in the half-light of night, into a ghostly scene. She liked, most of all, that in this place of

affluent ease, she could pretend to be someone else, someone specially admitted into a hallowed American club, someone adorned with certainty. (1)

I have already argued that this passage deconstructs the authority of its own narrative voice. Yet there is another sense in which it serves to affirm the very realist conventions that it defamiliarizes. One way of getting at the political stakes of Adichie's unembarrassed use of storytelling conventions, both here and throughout the novel, is to read the passage in relation to that which it does *not* contain: an account of the sensory immediacy of Ifemelu's experience. Along these lines, Ifemelu's sense of displacement might be read here as inverting the representational logic of modernist "shock", long since institutionalized as the contemporary MFA mantra of "show don't tell".⁶¹ If Ifemelu wants her blog to observe rather than to explain, the focalization of her observations through the impersonality and abstraction of third-person realist narration here serves the opposite function. Whereas modernist "stream of consciousness" registers the shock of modernity by both representing and formally replicating the experience of the urban *flâneur* cognitively overwhelmed by his insertion into the new urban crowds of cities such as Paris in the later nineteenth century, Adichie's account of Princeton's manicured unreality pointedly refuses any such formal imitation. It instead appeals to a shared narrative understanding and a collective sense of history to recontextualize the ambient phantasmagoria of white privilege, representing the phenomenological appearance of commodity fetishism without attempting to reproduce it mimetically, within the formal structure of the narrative itself.⁶²

⁶¹ Mark McGurl, *The Program Era: Postwar Fiction and the Rise of Creative Writing* (2009), p. 23.

⁶² What Adichie does try to replicate within the structure of the narrative is a certain voice and subject-position; yet she refuses to collapse the distance between narration and narrated object. Indeed, in employing a highly recognizable rhetorical trope (anaphora) she radicalizes the distance of her writing from the sort of mimetic reproduction of the experience of urban cognition conveyed by modernist techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness.

This strategy comes into focus through the passage's treatment of its organizing motif, which (not coincidentally) is an affective experience ("smell"). Although the passage is written in free indirect discourse focalized through Ifemelu's perspective, unlike high-modernist "stream of consciousness" it nonetheless remains crucially detached from the affective immediacy of her embodied experience. Far from defamiliarizing forms and meanings in pursuit of "the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known",⁶³ Adichie's self-consciously conventional realism serves instead to emphasize the extent to which objects of sense-perception - in this case, smells - become narratable through their formalization into conventional objects of knowledge: either via their mediation through conceptual abstractions such as "history" and "neglect", or by their assimilation into narratives of causation through connection to historical referents ("of brine", "of sun-warmed garbage"). Smells, that is to say, are also signifiers, and signifiers are inherently conventional: iterable, portable across contexts, and suffused with a collective history of usage that serves to condition and delimit their meaning in any given context of utterance.

The conventionality of signifiers, then, is precisely what positions them within history, the collective history of their prior use. Of course, it is precisely this collective history - the metalanguage of sedimented, second-order meanings that Barthes calls "mythology" - that modernist iconoclasm wants to vanquish in order to pursue the Promethean dream of seeing the world anew.⁶⁴ Yet as Georg Lukács never tired of pointing out in his attacks on modernism, this

⁶³ The modernist mantra of "show don't tell" is a derivation of Viktor Shklosky's famous claim, in "Art as Device" (1917), that "Art exists that one may recover the sensation of life; it exists to make one feel things, to make the stone stony. The purpose of art is to impart the sensation of things as they are perceived and not as they are known." Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, p. 6.

⁶⁴ Roland Barthes, "Myth Today", *Mythologies* (1957), pp. 109-159.

refusal of conventionality (and so, of meaning) also entails a denial of history; hence Lukács's oft-repeated claim that, "When followed through logically, Expressionism repudiated any connection with reality and declared a subjectivist war on reality and all its works".⁶⁵ Realism's generic orientation toward inherently conventional values such as meaning, knowledge, storytelling and named emotions over and against the modernist anti-conventional values of meaninglessness, unmediated experience, formal experimentation and unnamable bodily affect, is accordingly both affirmed and, more subtly, politicized, both here and throughout *Americanah*. The significations that objects always-already carry within realist narratives such as this one are for Adichie not evidence of the mode's mindless conventionality, but instead serve - like "history", "neglect", "brine" and "sun-warmed garbage" - to convey the accumulated weight of history secreted within phenomena of sense perception, and in doing so refer the reader to the underlying social processes that both produce them and give them their intelligible meaning.

This sense of a fundamentally *narratable* world - one that is always-already saturated with meaning - is demonstrated, albeit negatively, through Ifemelu's attraction to the fact that Princeton "smells of nothing". This observation connects on a personal level to her sense of Princeton as a blank slate, somewhere in which she can escape from the historically accumulated significations of her own identity and "pretend to be someone else". If the realist novel (according to Barthes' modernist-affiliated critique) dreams, self-defeatingly, of the unintended "concrete detail" that will suspend the regime of signification - that will expel "the signified from the sign" and therefore mean nothing other than what it is - Princeton's lack of smell seems to function here as a placeholder for a similar desire on the part of Ifemelu, connoting a more

⁶⁵ Lukács, "Realism in the Balance", p. 40.

general suspension of the weight of history, and hence of the historically accumulated meanings that comprise her own identity. Princeton's lack of smell therefore also connects to a more general atmosphere of ahistorical unreality, in which "gothic" buildings, "latest-model cars" and signifiers of multiculturalism ("sushi restaurants") are (dis)placed in "ghostly" juxtaposition, like the "fifty different flavors" in the ice cream shop. What is jarring is not the sheer fact of this (relatively minimal) diversity, but rather that in Princeton, as an enclave of near-uniform and predominantly white affluence, these signifiers are detached from their cultural conditions of production. Princeton therefore appears here as an embodiment of the phantasmagoric logic of the commodity fetish, in which the products of various forms of labor (or in this case, of various geographically and chronologically diverse cultures) present themselves as a collection of deterritorialized commodities and styles; that is, as so many flavors of ice cream. As such, Princeton seems to afford a suspension of the weight of history and meaning that is for Ifemelu palpable in the very sensory atmosphere of larger, more racially and economically diverse cities.

Like the modernist autonomous artwork and the capitalist commodity, then, the everyday experience of white privilege serves to obfuscate the process of its own social production, or the sheer fact of its own embeddedness in history. And the affordance of realist form here is accordingly not its verisimilitude, in the sense of its faithfulness to the texture of the everyday, but rather its formal mediation of experience: the critical distance from the phenomenological immediacy of modernist shock inherent within the self-consciously stylized, rhetorical formality of Adichie's narrative. Whereas modernism rejects outworn conventions of realism in order to directly convey the shock of displacement through techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness, here the conventions of realist style, and the distance it imposes between discourse and its objects, are instrumental in reassimilating this impression of unreality into a

sequential narrative. Were Adichie, in modernist style, to fragment her prose in an attempt to convey more directly the synchronic and affective immediacy of Ifemelu's subjective experience, she would have relinquished the very critical distance from its narrated object that in this case constitutes the affordance of realist form, an affordance inseparable from its reliance upon conventions. Because narrative by definition abstracts from the sensuous uniqueness of a given object by assimilating it into a chronological sequence, and because the conventionality of Adichie's prose insists upon maintaining this distance between narration and experience, Princeton's opacity becomes legible to Ifemelu, and to the realist narrative that she serves to focalize, as a product of history. Such a perspective therefore aligns Ifemelu, as a narrator, with that afforded by Lukács to the realist novel as a form: Ifemelu, as an outsider and a racialized other who occupies a subordinate position within a social structure, cannot *not* see Princeton in its historical perspective; indeed, all she has to do is take a train journey (as she subsequently does) to Trenton - as she is required to do to find the nearest "African hair braiding salon" - in order to be confronted with the constitutively excluded premises of Princeton's air of "affluent ease": "It would look, she was sure, like all of the other African hair braiding salons she had known: they were in the part of the city that had graffiti, dank buildings, and no white people" (10).

Ifemelu as a point of narrative focalization therefore embodies the form of historical insight afforded by the very conventionality of realist narrative; that is, by its embrace rather than rejection of storytelling as a collective mode of knowledge. But she does so not through the immediacy of her perspective, but through the way in which the narrative maintains a critical distance from it, and in doing so mediates it. Realism for Lukács, and here for Adichie, counters the "illusions" of reification by reading the apparently disembodied signifiers of a commodified

capitalist modernity precisely *as* components of a larger narrative; the narrative, that is, of the development of racial capitalism as a historical totality. It is precisely by abstracting from the sensuous particularity of its objects - an abstraction intolerable to a certain kind of modernist sensibility - that realism achieves its critical distance from the sheer givenness of the world.

By extension, then, Princeton's historically constructed illusion of ahistorical unreality - the object, here, of the historicizing and narrativizing imagination of realism - can be logically aligned with Lukács's insistence that the modernist denial of history presupposes a privileged blindness to its own historical determinants, and its own objective positioning within a historically developing social totality. Modernism for Lukács, in its rejection of storytelling and conventional meaning, approaches the world as a static spectacle and in doing so simply succumbs to and reproduces the logic of commodity reification. This is precisely the perspective that Adichie's narrative refuses in its embrace of storytelling convention. And in the context of *Americanah*, this implicit critique of the modernist resistance to narrative carries an additional racial connotation. Princeton's olfactory neutrality, that is to say, also functions here as the signifier of the "unmarked" position of whiteness within a racialized structure of signification; a position it can only occupy through its self-production via concrete structures and hierarchies, such as Princeton University, which actively debar access to the mass of racially marked and impoverished others, many of whom live in cities like Philadelphia, New Haven, Baltimore and Brooklyn. Whiteness - like the commodity, and like the modernist autonomous artwork for Lukács - is inseparable from the various historical processes that produce it and that it renders invisible.

Of course, this critical distance and narrative objectivity is precisely what is deconstructed in the formal strategies that I have analyzed here: the blog, the use of monologism,

and the novel's exposure of the rhetorical structure of narrative impersonality. *Americanah* can thus be said to use the capaciousness of its realist form to hold a contradictory range of aesthetic orientations and values in polyphonic counterpoint: the critical realist impulse, that defamiliarizes the false immediacy of phenomenological experience, is counterposed by a defamiliarizing of the means of that critique. The novel stages a simultaneous critique of the means of narrative mediation and a re-mediation of that critique that problematically asserts the affordances of narrative mediation; an assertion of the critical potentialities of literary form is problematically sutured to a disaffiliation from the literary as such. The novel is a polyphonic assemblage of different genres and different implied attitudes towards those genres. Yet at the same time, this polyphonic indirectness comes into conflict with the novel's stated commitment to an anti-literary directness that rejects the mediations of high-literary aesthetics to "speak truth to power". To the extent that the novel's third person perspective re-mediate Ifemelu's direct expression within a polyphonic narrative totality it risks reassimilating it to the very order of literariness, mediacy, indirectness (the values of the literary "as such") that the novel in another sense both critiques and aspires to reject.

The novel does not resolve these tensions, despite the contrived resolution of its self-consciously clichéd romantic ending. One could instead say, with a critic like Nicholas Brown, that in holding its various internal contradictions in a relation of unresolved formal tension, *Americanah* achieves an irreducible and non-paraphrasable formal autonomy (a "purposiveness without purpose") that allows it to express the contradictions of its own predicament without reducing it to the false directness of the monologic statement; that in other words, *Americanah* elevates the seemingly insoluble antinomies of literary autonomy and political directness, distance and immediacy, rhetoric and impersonality, dialogism and monologism, irony and

sincerity into a principle of formal autonomy. In a similar vein, one could suggest, instead using Timothy Bewes' terminology, that *Americanah* disrupts from within (by polemically exaggerating, defamiliarizing, dialogizing) the logic of "instantiation" that the blog and Ifemelu's narrative serve to encapsulate, thus performing the "absolute dialogicality" that is the specificity of novelistic discourse.⁶⁶

Yet while these are both in my view viable ways of describing *Americanah*'s formal strategies, *Americanah* would also seem to frustrate attempts to identify its autonomy or dialogism with a particular political value. The irony here is that in dialogizing its own critique of racial capitalism *Americanah* betrays the very directness whose simultaneous necessity and impossibility it stages, since in doing so it turns its contradictions back into an autonomous form, an instance of literary irony, an object of merely aesthetic contemplation. In achieving formal autonomy, we might say, *Americanah* accedes to the literary criteria whose imbrication with the larger structures of racial capitalism it sets out to critique. If *Americanah*'s failure as literature "as such" is presented in the novel as a necessary precondition of its success as politics, *Americanah* succeeds as literature to the degree that it fails as politics; its extra-aesthetic ambitions collapse back into a merely aesthetic formal autonomy, the very literary criteria that have since been rewarded by its positively rapturous celebration by the white literary establishment. In achieving autonomy from capital on Brown's terms, then, *Americanah* participates in a "racial regime of aesthetics" in which its critique of race is, precisely through being staged novelistically, reassimilated to a literary discourse of "nuance" and "irony". *Americanah* does not achieve autonomy so much as it surrenders to it.

⁶⁶ Brown, *Autonomy* (2019); Bewes, *Free Indirect* (2023), p. 14.

CONCLUSION

Storytelling, Autofiction, Metaculture

I have argued throughout this dissertation that autonomy cannot be transcended by the novel form because it is constitutive *of* the novel form. Yet nor can autonomy be achieved or instantiated through a particular kind of formal response to the problem of autonomy. Nicholas Brown is right when he claims that “art as such does not preexist capitalism and will not survive it”.¹ Yet Brown lapses into a neo-Greenbergian aestheticism when he proposes that the *assertion* of formal autonomy is a solution to the problem of the work of art “as such”: such a solution is only possible with the abolition of the commodity form, and the structure of social relations it dictates. The artwork ceases to be autonomous when it ceases to be an artwork, not when it fails to satisfy certain culturally specific artistic criteria. Autonomy is the default condition of the artwork under capitalism, not the unique quality of the artwork that declares itself to be autonomous from capitalism.

How does this argument respond to current discussions that posit an end to postmodernism and a movement away from literary theories and styles that posit the closed anti-referential autonomy of the artwork? In chapter two I have argued that autonomy cannot be periodized to coincide with either modernism or postmodernism. Autonomy is neither an outcome nor a casualty of art’s “real subsumption” by the commodity. Rather, art is suspended perennially in a state of merely “formal subsumption”, and hence “trapped in a definitely

¹ *Autonomy*, pp. 88-89.

problematic relation to the production of capitalist value”.² Postmodern metafiction and theories that posit the impossibility of representation serve to amplify problems that traverse the novel form throughout its history, and that are already legible in early novels such as *Don Quixote* (1615), *A Tale of a Tub* (1704) and *Tristram Shandy* (1759). The narrator of *Tristram Shandy* interjects to reflect upon the impossibility of that novel’s purported aim, relating his “life and opinions”:

Could a historiographer drive on his history, as a muleteer drives on his mule, - straight forward;...he might venture to foretell you to an hour when he should get to his journey’s end; - but the thing is, morally speaking, impossible: For, if he is a man of the least spirit he will have fifty deviations from a straight line to make with this or that party as he goes along, which he can in no ways avoid...

In short, there is no end of it; - for my part, I declare I have been at it these six weeks, making all the speed I possibly could, - and am not yet born: - I have just been able, and that’s all, to tell you when it happened, but not how;...³

As we have seen, for Lukács and Bakhtin, the emergence of such uncertainties is what separates the novel from the epic, or the autonomous work of art “as such” from the work of art in the age of its ritual embeddedness. What is new, in the case of the autonomous artwork, is not that such choices and hierarchies exist, but rather that they become a *problem*: “morally speaking, impossible”. During the epoch of art’s autonomy, the *a priori* principles of legitimate exclusion that underpin stylistic choices and representational hierarchies are called into question. Not only do artists and critics now have to construct criteria to legitimate whatever hierarchies they use; moreover, both the aesthetic instantiation of such hierarchies and the construction of criteria to legitimate them become transparently political acts.

² Brouillette, “On Art and Value”, *ibid.*

³ Laurence Sterne, *The Life and Opinions of Tristram Shandy, Gentleman* (1759), p. 65.

“In short, there is no end of it”: this is the predicament that Lukács is expressing with his account of the “bad infinity” that perennially haunts the novel form. It is the predicament that Walter Benjamin alludes to when he observes that “as soon as the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applied to artistic production, the whole social function of art is revolutionized. Instead of being founded on ritual, it is based on a different practice: politics”.⁴ It is also the difference between the “representative regime” and the “aesthetic regime” as those terms are theorized by Rancière. The narrative hierarchies of the autonomous artwork are no longer legitimated in advance by a “distribution of the sensible” constituted by hierarchies that determine appropriate (and inappropriate) objects of representation and the forms that correspond to them; for example, the one that places the white male at the center of the universe as the developmental “present” of a universal narrative of human progress. In the aesthetic regime anything and anyone is available as a potential object of representation, which means that there is no *a priori* principle of legitimate exclusion: any such choice is a political act. Nothing is unrepresentable, which from another point of view means that everything is: the relation between a given object of representation and a given form - the choice of what to represent and what to exclude, what to narrate and what to presuppose, what to augment and what to diminish - is arbitrary, tendentious. The novel must choose its own way of partitioning the real without any final authority to which to appeal. It is thus constantly driven to invent such authority in the form of political attachments, claims to group representation, theories of mimesis, or aesthetic ideologies.

Autonomy, then, is not just a problem that has periodically affected the novel throughout its history; the novel is this problem. Autonomy is inherently both tragic - entailing the

⁴ Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technical Reproducibility and Other Writings on Media* (2008), p. 25.

impossibility of reference or self-expression, and the melancholic memorialization of capitalism's destruction of traditional forms of sociality - and comic, entailing the bathetic reduction of art's lofty claims to unproblematic collective authority, omniscience, unmediated representation or aesthetic transcendence. The novel form requires us to inhabit and subsist within its contradictions, not to seek any kind of theoretical resolution to them. Autonomy is the novel's "powerful powerlessness", the performative contradiction that constitutes the form's signature (dis)affordance, the dysfunctionality that is the form's way of functioning.

Yet this is not to suggest that the novel form is static and unchanging, any more than any other persistent modern social construction, such as capitalism, the proletariat or the nation-state, is static and unchanging. If the history of the novel is from one point of view a history of situated, conjuncturally specific responses to the predicament of autonomy, I have argued that autonomy nonetheless has a specific relevance - accounting in part for its notable critical reemergence - in an age of "world literature". The transnational circulation of texts redoubles and radicalizes the process of deterritorialization and autonomization that in accounts by critics such as Ariella Azoulay, Pierre Bourdieu, Pacale Casanova, Simon Gikandi, David Lloyd, Clyde Taylor and Larry Shiner is generative of the modern social construction of art "as such" (or of what Lloyd calls the "racial regime of aesthetics"): the removal of a range of culturally particular objects from their context within the lifeworld of particular living communities, and their aestheticization as objects that should be considered according to their self-contained "aesthetic", "literary" or "novelistic" criteria.

This argument thus places itself in opposition both to those that declare autonomy to be a thing of the past, and those that declare autonomy to be a characteristic of a particular kind of contemporary artwork. And it also complicates arguments that associate contemporary literature

with a departure from the anti-referential autonomy of modernism and postmodernism. As I have suggested in the introduction, a growing critical mass of recent scholarship has located the *zeitgeist* of an otherwise heterogenous contemporary “Global Anglophone” fiction in its broad movement away from the referential skepticism, political quietism and metafictional irony of postmodernism, and toward a greater “worldliness”, “reality hunger”, “neorealism”, “immediacy”, “post-irony” or “New Sincerity”. Artistically ambitious contemporary novelists such as Rachel Kushner, Zadie Smith, Jonathan Franzen, Hilary Mantel and Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie have returned more or less unapologetically to the conventional forms, such as realism and historical fiction, that were frequently the objects of postmodern pastiche and metafictional defamiliarization.⁵ The recent explosion of autofiction and genre-fluid creative nonfiction by writers such as W.G. Sebald, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Sheila Heti, Rachel Cusk and Teju Cole has been said to represent an attempt to break through the artifice of traditional novelistic conventions in the pursuit of more direct communion with the “lure and blur of the real”.⁶ The growing critical embrace of “literary genre fiction” by the likes of Cormac McCarthy, Kazuo Ishiguro, Colson Whitehead, Hari Kunzru, Ling Ma and Emily St John Mandel likewise reveals a more pragmatic and flexible approach to questions of form and representational verisimilitude, and a more open and collaborative attitude toward the desires and expectations of both the individual reader and the capitalist marketplace.⁷

⁵ Peter Boxall, *Twenty-First Century Fiction* (2013); Lee Konstantinou, “Neorealist Fiction” (2017).

⁶ David Shields, *Reality Hunger* (2010); Lee Konstantinou, “Neorealist Fiction” (2017); Anna Kornbluh, *Immediacy, Or, The Style of Too-Late Capitalism* (2024).

⁷ Dan Sinykin, *Big Fiction* (2024); Mark McGurl, “The Novel’s Forking Path”, *Public Books* (2015) <https://www.publicbooks.org/the-novels-forking-path/>, *Everything and Less* (2021).

Taken together, these stylistic trends in recent literary production can be taken both as a movement away from postmodernism, and away from a persistent binary construction which counterposes a naively referential realism to a self-consciously autonomous modernism and postmodernism. Yet it is precisely this desire to transcend or depart from autonomy that constitutes the continued centrality of autonomy to the novel after postmodernism. I will conclude this dissertation by outlining three narrative logics that characterize the contemporary novel, all of which we have already encountered in the work of Teju Cole and Chimimanda Ngozie Adichie: storytelling, autofiction and metaculture. Each of them stages a particular kind of response to (or, a proposed exit from) the predicament of autonomy: the exit through form, the exit from form, and the exit through self-critique. And in doing so, each of them performatively contradicts itself and thus performs its specifically novelistic (dys)functionality.

Storytelling, autofiction and metaculture are not exactly genres, though each entails a loose relation to certain generic features. I would broadly define genres as relatively autonomous literary subcultures held together by the production, circulation and reception of works that employ common tropes, styles, techniques, narrative conventions or structures in connection to a common subject matter. I instead use storytelling, autofiction and metaculture to refer to three narrative *logics* that emerge within different genres (and indeed, that may coexist within the same novel): formalization (storytelling), deformation (autofiction) and self-critique (metaculture). Within the contemporary conjuncture, these logics have taken on a particular overdetermined significance as a means of responding to the predicament of art's autonomy: self-affirmation (storytelling), self-negation (autofiction) and self-critique (metaculture); or, the affirmation of form, the refusal of form, and the self-reflexive critique of form. These logics can and do overlap and combine within a single work, while no single work fully embodies any of

them, since none of them is instantiable in pure form. Every novel contains aspects of storytelling, autofiction and metaculture; the categories simply reflect which of them is predominant in a given instance. Likewise, they are obviously not exhaustive: one could think of various other categories, genres, modes or forms operative within contemporary fiction (crime, satire, romance, the historical novel, the political novel, the novel of ideas). My argument here is that these modes are important for characterizing the specificity of contemporary fiction because each of them constitutes a particular kind of response to the predicament of autonomy, a predicament that cannot simply be refused or transcended since it is constitutive of the novel as a form.

Two Neorealisms: Storytelling and Autofiction

My use of “storytelling” and “autofiction” derives from the two respective exit strategies from the predicament of the novel’s formal autonomy that Lee Konstantinou has identified in his recent work on “neorealism” and “post-irony”.⁸ “Neorealism”, for Konstantinou, refers to “new modes of realism that don’t so much overthrow postmodernism as make an uneasy peace with it”. If postmodernists in Konstantinou’s account set out to reveal the anti-referential autonomy of narrative forms and signifying systems - and thus to denaturalize the “referential illusion” of realism by exposing its arbitrariness and artifice - neorealist writers “recognize the contingency of the language game of realism, but play the game without (or with less) anxiety”.⁹

⁸ See Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016); “Four Faces of Post-Irony” (2017); “Neorealist Fiction” (2017).

⁹ Konstantinou, “Neorealist Fiction”, p. 110.

Yet how is such a reconciliation possible without a regression to a naive mimeticism, the “totalitarian ideology of the referent” that modernism and its theoretical aftermath sought to deconstruct and dismantle? Konstantinou identifies two contemporary responses to this question, or two paths for the neorealist novel: the “storytelling neorealism” of authors like Adichie, Franzen, Eugenides and Claire Messud, which pursues realism as a “genre”, and the “affective neorealism” (or, autofiction) of writers such as Karl Ove Knausgaard, Sheila Heti, Tao Lin and Teju Cole, which pursues realism as an “epistemic project”. Rather than the naive or unselfconscious return to outmoded nineteenth-century forms, these parallel branches of neorealism represent two contrasting responses to the predicament of autonomy, which is to say, the predicament of the novel form as theorized by Lukács: the exit *through* form, and the exit *from* form.

If “storytelling neorealists” revive realism as “genre” through recourse (“without (or with less) anxiety”) to the kind of well-made stories and recognisable narrative conventions that postmodern metafiction sets out to deconstruct and discredit, “affective neorealists”, by contrast, reject realism as “genre” in favor of realism as an “epistemic project” (111). Refusing generic conventions of classical realism such as plot, fiction and conventional literary style, “affective neorealism” seeks to gain un- (or, less) mediated access to the real substratum of lived experience that is obscured by the arbitrary machinations of realism as “genre”. In practice, this tends to mean exhaustively transcribing the writer’s everyday life, embodied experience, personal pathologies and idiosyncrasies, in all of their unadorned banality and detail.

For Konstantinou, “affective neorealism” amounts to a radicalizing of the postmodern novel’s hostility to artifice in the service of circumventing its critique of representation. Proustian chroniclers of memory and lived experience, affective neorealists long to regain lost

time: to shatter the barrier between the world and the text, life and form. They therefore reject both the conventionalism of literary realism and the modernist novel's fetishizing of formal "impersonality", seeking instead to recreate the affective immediacy of the real by restoring to literary representation all of that whose constitutive exclusion produces the fraudulent formal coherence of "great" literature, whether realist (with its autonomous subjects, its major and minor characters, its epic ambitions toward narrative totalization), or modernist (with its macho celebration of formal revolution and rupture, and its impersonal monuments to the anti-referential autonomy of form).¹⁰ This typically involves an explicitly anti-elitist democratizing of the material that is deemed fit for literary representation, taking aim at the canonical and the traditional on behalf of the unexceptional, the minor and the abject.¹¹ As the 2022 Nobel Laureate and paradigmatic affective neorealist Annie Ernaux writes in her novel *Happening* (2001), "I believe that any experience, whatever its nature, has the inalienable right to be chronicled. There is no such thing as a lesser truth. Moreover, if I failed to go through with this

¹⁰ In *Heroines* (2012), Kate Zambreno connects T.S. Eliot's "theories of depersonalization" ("impersonality", the "object correlative") with his statement that "I distrust the feminine in literature": "(Eliot's) theories of depersonalization form the foundation of the theoretical school we call New Criticism, still the fundamental ideology governing how we read and talk about writing. One cannot portray emotions in EXCESS (in literature or in life). This is a judgment not only of a work of literature but also of propriety, how one should behave. One must discipline one's text, one's self" (p. 36). The very notion of form is, in such an account, an implicitly masculinist, disciplinary imposition on the (implicitly feminine) embodied spontaneity of affect.

¹¹ "I write from the realms of the ugly, for the ugly, the old, the bull dykes, the frigid, the unfucked, the unfuckable, the hysterics, the freaks, all those excluded from the great meat market of human flesh", begins Virginie Despentes' *King Kong Theory* (2006), p. 3. The "great meat market of human flesh" refers here to the disciplinary hetero-patriarchal sexual economy in which women are divided into the desirable and the undesirable, but it is also an alternative description of the classic bourgeois marriage plot: a technology of social stratification which constitutes itself formally through its filtering of the marriageable from the unmarriedable, the major from the minor character, those who speak and those spoken for, the subject from the object of history, etc. Despentes's twin violations of conventional literary form and the niceties of literary style are thus combined in the performative iconoclasm of this opening salvo, which at once positions itself on the side of those excluded from the hetero-patriarchal sexual economy, and of that which is constitutively excluded from the subject matter appropriate to the literary "as such". The male gaze and the narrative gaze of the traditional novel are thus equated and refused in the same gesture.

undertaking, I would be guilty of silencing the lives of women and condoning a world governed by male supremacy”.¹²

If “affective neorealism” thus comprises an assault on the autonomy of form in the name of all that it constitutively excludes, “storytelling neorealism” makes the opposite wager: reviving realism as “genre” through its apparently earnest (or in Konstantinou’s terms, “post-ironic”) use of the realist novel’s traditional repertoire of forms, codes and contrivances (well-made stories, third-person omniscient narration, recognisable narrative conventions). Contrary to the caricature of realism as the naively referential foil to the self-conscious autonomy of postmodern metafiction, storytelling neorealists fully understand realism to comprise an arbitrary “language game”. In one sense, then, storytelling neorealists embrace form in all of its anti-referential autonomy. Yet this is a far cry from the modernist pursuit of formal autonomy through the rejection of realism and the pursuit of hitherto unrealized possibilities of artistic expression. Storytelling neorealism is instead unapologetically conventional and generic, seeking to affirm what existing forms make possible rather than to lament that which they exclude or foreclose.

Where storytelling neorealists differ from postmodernists and modernists, then, is not in their attitude toward form, but rather in their attitude toward their audience (or, which amounts to the same thing, in their sense of their own social function). Side-stepping the debate as to the referential or non-referential character of novelistic discourse - bracketing, therefore, the problem of the artwork’s formal autonomy - storytelling neorealists turn their attention from what artworks *are* to what they *do*: to the forms of collectivity they afford, the attachments they

¹² Annie Ernaux, *Happening* (2000), p. 44.

inspire, the social functions they perform regardless of their referential truth-content. And with this switch in focus, the problem of reference - or, the problem of the conventionality of conventions - ceases to carry the weight it does for both modernists and postmodernists. Stories matter for “storytelling neorealists” not because they are true in the referential sense of reflecting, capturing or archiving the world as it already exists, but as socially constructed forms that impose meanings and thus render the world intelligible *in terms of* the common values of a particular group, culture or community, values that the story serves to modify, to transmit and to affirm. Storytelling neorealists thus relinquish their social autonomy, and in doing so seek to circumvent or partially deactivate the problem of their formal autonomy.

If affective neorealism represents an assault on the realist novel’s generic autonomy, then, storytelling neorealism is unapologetic in its use of genre conventions, seeking to affirm what existing forms make possible rather than to lament that which they exclude or foreclose. If storytelling neorealists assert the value of realism’s excess of form as a way of imposing structure and meaning on the ostensibly formless flow of experience, affective neorealists assert the value of all that resists or exceeds formalization, that refuses to be corralled into a narrative hierarchy or structure of signification. In the terms popularized by Caroline Levine’s *Forms* (2015), we can say that storytelling neorealism affirms forms’s affordances (that which they do or enable) while affective neorealism points to forms’s disaffordances (that which they foreclose or constitutively exclude). Or in Anna Kornbluh’s terms, storytelling neorealism is the mode that affirms the values of “political formalism”, while affective neorealism is the literary expression of “anarcho-vitalism”.¹³ Storytelling neorealism and affective neorealism thus form a dialectic,

¹³ Kornbluh, *The Order of Forms* (2019). In *Immediacy* (2024) Kornbluh develops the opposition between “political formalism” and “anarcho-vitalism” into a distinction between “mediacy” and “immediacy”, as

each the other's determinate negation. If the former sacrifices its faithfulness to the real in favor of the pleasures and uses of storytelling, the latter dismantles all such generic satisfactions, and indeed artifice of all kinds, in the very single-mindedness of its archival mania (what Ben Lerner, in his review of Knausgaard's *My Struggle*, calls its pursuit of "the possibility of total recall, a past citable in all its moments").¹⁴

Yet as we have seen, both of these forms performatively deconstruct themselves in and through their self-negating orientation away from autonomy, or their constitutively unrealizable will to transcend their ontology *as* novels. Adichie's deployal of "storytelling neorealist" conventions is anything but unproblematic: *Americanah* does not work by naively or simplistically rehabilitating such conventions so much as it stages a dialectic between its various generic modes and everything that refuses to be assimilated to them, between form(s) and their various constitutive outsides. Likewise, while Cole's novels are paradigmatic of "affective neorealism" to the extent that they reject the formal conventions of the "storytelling neorealist" novel almost wholesale, they cannot be assimilated to a naive ideology of "immediacy" or a desire to "escape linguistic and conceptual mediation and thereby gain access to the real itself".¹⁵ *Tremor*, as we have seen, stages mediation at something like its degree zero, performing the impossibility of inhabiting even the most earnest and sincerely held beliefs within the novel form. And this frustrated, decentered or dialogized - in short, mediated - immediacy is a broader characteristic of "affective neorealism", or what is more frequently called "autofiction". A critic

represented respectively by third-person omniscient narration and autofiction. See ch. 4, "Writing", pp. 65-112.

¹⁴ Ben Lerner, "Each Cornflake" (2014), *London Review of Books* <https://www.lrb.co.uk/the-paper/v36/n10/ben-lerner/each-cornflake>.

¹⁵ Konstantinou, "Neorealist Fiction", p. 111.

such as Kornbluh, seeing in autofiction the absence of the characteristic mediations of the traditional novel, incoherently takes this to signal an absence of formal mediation as such (“instead of focalizations, third person narrativity, or free indirect discourse, there is a voice and nothing more”).¹⁶ Kornbluh takes autofiction to task for assuming that mediation can be transcended, pointing to the basic Hegelian principle that denies “that there can be anything like ‘unmediated immediacy’, an intuitive apprehension of pure being”.¹⁷ In doing so, she unwittingly articulates autofiction’s (dis)affordance. Autofiction is the form that stages the essential mediatedness of every immediacy (expression, the self, memory, the first person, voice), the constitutively unrealizable dream of transcending the autonomy of form, or “the refusal of the immanence of being to enter into empirical life”.¹⁸

Neat as they are in theory, then, the problem with these two proposed solutions to the predicament of autonomy is that they are unrealizable *by* novels, by virtue of their social ontology *as* novels. And this is where I part ways with both Konstantinou and Kornbluh, whose respective taxonomies are underdeveloped to the extent that they neglect to root them in any coherent historical theory of the novel form and its limits. By positing a distinction between two neorealisms oriented around story and affect, Konstantinou is highlighting what I take to be a real ambiguity hardwired into the concept and practice of realism: that it is both a “genre” and an “epistemic project”, which is to say, both a kind of form and a desire to escape or transcend formal mediation¹⁹. The source for Konstantinou’s analysis of this tension, as well as the origin of his division of realism into “story” and “affect”, is Fredric Jameson’s *The Antinomies of*

¹⁶ *Immediacy*, p. 66.

¹⁷ *Immediacy*, p. 154.

¹⁸ Lukács, *Theory of the Novel*, p. 71; cited in Kornbluh (2024), p. 67.

¹⁹ Konstantinou, “Neorealist Fiction”, p. 111.

Realism (2012). For Jameson, “realism” names the dialectical tension between two mutually problematizing “narrative impulses” - “story” and “affect” - the first of which is formalizing (toward story, narration and a diachronic temporality of “past-present-future”) and the latter of which is de-formalizing (toward “affect”, description, and a synchronic temporality of “the present of consciousness”).²⁰ If the former composes events and phenomena into meaningful patterns, spatio-temporal hierarchies and “molar” unities (plot, character, the subject, named emotions), the latter represents the irruption into such hierarchies of the synchronic, non-formalizable or “molecular” real: the pre-verbal intensities of embodied experience (the “chromaticism of the body”), the paratactic flow of matter, the non-signifying force of the unconscious, the remainder (or, the “noise”) constitutively excluded from all bounded structures, signifying systems and forms. If “story” is territorializing, then, “affect” names the deterritorializing excess presupposed by any process of territorialization. “Story” is the map, the abstract system of hierarchies that renders a territory thinkable and navigable; “affect” is the real terrain whose constitutive exclusion is the former’s condition of possibility.

For Jameson these are the “antinomies of realism”, which is to say that they are *constitutive*: problematically coexisting within any given realist work by definition. Realism thus has no positive generic definition, but inheres instead in the irresolvable tension between story and affect, narration and description, the diachronic and the synchronic, deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the bounded form and its constitutive outside (“modernism”, as Konstantinou reminds us, “is a name, for Jameson, for the breakdown of this literary dialectic”).²¹ Yet in Konstantinou’s analysis, Jameson’s dialectical antinomies are neatly corralled into two distinct

²⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Antinomies of Realism* (2012), ch.1 and 2, pp. 15-44.

²¹ “Neorealist Fiction”, p. 111.

neorealist genres. “Story” and “affect”, that is to say, are no longer antinomies at all, but simply options: distinctive paths for the (neorealist) novel predicated on different conceptions of realism (as “genre” or “epistemic project”). In doing so, it eliminates the tension *within* the novels between their proposed solutions to the problem of autonomy (ie, the novel’s theory of itself) and everything that prevents them, as novels, from being able to realize it. It thus erases the encounter between conscious intention and the *material unconscious of the form itself* that, I have argued here, constitutes the dynamic of novelistic formalization. Thus as we have seen in *Tremor* and *Americanah*, in both affective and storytelling neorealism we find a particular working through of the predicament of autonomy, where a proposed solution to the problem - immediacy, totality - is counterbalanced by everything within the logic of the medium that opposes its realization.

When we regard such responses to the predicament of autonomy as either successful or unsuccessful we miss in them what is specifically novelistic, which is the way in which they stage their own simultaneous necessity and impossibility. Autofiction tells us about subjectivity precisely by not telling us about it; by staging its infinite deferral. As Karl Ove Knausgaard puts it in *My Struggle* (in a statement that is itself mediated, dialogized and hence rendered an “object of representation”):

You know too little and it doesn’t exist. You know too much and it doesn’t exist. Writing is drawing the essence of what we know out of the shadows. That is what writing is about. Not what happens there, not what actions are played out there, but the *there* itself. There, that is writing’s location and aim. But how to get there?²²

²² Karl Ove Knausgaard, *My Struggle: Book One* (2012), p. 190.

As the title might suggest, *My Struggle* endlessly stages the impossibility of “getting there”, the way in which “the *there* itself” is deferred by the means through which it is sought. Like all writers of autofiction, Knausgaard takes us “there” precisely by not taking us there, by staging - whether deliberately or inadvertently, earnestly or ironically - the irreducible connection between the desire for immediacy, transparency, presence and self-coincidence, and everything within the logic of the novel that defers it. Likewise, as we have seen, storytelling neorealism tells us about society by failing to tell us about it, by staging the irreducible relation between the act of formalization and its constitutive outside, the way that the novel achieves what adequacy is available to it through the situated performance of its own inadequacy.

Storytelling and autofiction are thus “post-ironic” in the sense that they depart from what Konstantinou describes as the characteristically postmodern “ethos of irony”, an attitude of knowing distance or performative disaffiliation that “invites us to seek disjunctions, contradictions, or mismatches within what we (or our interlocutors) most cherish”.²³ But it is this very departure from irony as ethos that returns them to a more profound irony, the irony of the novel form itself, as theorized by Lukács: irony as an event of formalization. In doing so they perform the truth of Percival Everett’s paradox, that “real irony is far more sincere than earnestness”.²⁴ Realism did not become obsolete because it became impossible or inadequate to represent a more complex modern world, or because it was rendered passé with the advent of modernism. The formal strategies to which we give the names realism, modernism and

²³ Lee Konstantinou, *Cool Characters: Irony and American Fiction* (2016), p. xi.

²⁴ “Coming Home from Irony: An Interview with Percival Everett, Author of *So Much Blue*” by Yogita Goyal, *LA Review of Books*, August 23, 2017
<https://lareviewofbooks.org/article/coming-home-from-irony-an-interview-with-percival-everett-author-of-so-much-blue/>.

postmodernism remain perennially available to be mobilized and reinvented in different contexts because their impossibility is their condition of possibility, because they function precisely by malfunctioning.

Metacultural Melancholy

I will conclude by briefly accounting one further development within contemporary fiction's ongoing response to the predicament of autonomy, which we might describe as a broad turn from metafiction to "metaculture". Critics including Steven Connor, Linda Hutcheon, Brian McHale and Patricia Waugh characterize postmodern metafiction via a related set of concerns: the typically ontological preoccupation with the process of fictionalization and the formal autonomy of the literary text; the politicized critique of the distinction between literary and historical narrative forms; the concern to reveal the historical contingency of meaning, knowledge and social hierarchies; a critique or rejection of the concepts of the artwork, the author, and the autonomy of art; the celebration of the liberation of textuality from mimesis; and the assertion of the radical potential of the free play of the signifier.²⁵ The contemporary turn to metaculture consists in a broad movement away from these concerns toward a more sociological and ethical set of preoccupations, centered on the precarious social status and function - and hence the question of the continued existence and tenability - of art, literature and culture "as such".

²⁵ See Steven Connor, *Postmodernist Culture: An Introduction to Theories of the Contemporary* (1997); Linda Hutcheon, *Narcissistic Narrative: The Metafictional Paradox* (1980) and *The Politics of Postmodernism* (1989); Brian McHale, *Postmodernist Fiction* (1987); Patricia Waugh, *Metafiction: The Theory and Practice of Self-Conscious Fiction* (1984).

“*Must I write?*”, begins Gerald Murnane’s 2009 novel *Barley Patch*, with a near-audible sigh of exhaustion.²⁶ Over half a century after Samuel Beckett concluded his *Trilogy* (1953) with the iconic “I can’t go on, I’ll go on”, by now the exhaustion that Murnane’s narrator expresses is not just that of the novel form, but that of the question itself.²⁷ Anxiety about literature’s continued possibility or social relevance has long since risen from the unconscious to the ego of contemporary high culture; mutating, from modernism’s “unnamable” pathology, into contemporary fiction’s specific form of “enlightened false consciousness”;²⁸ and hence from the status of an underlying predicament to that of a well-worn generic lament: a prime and recognizable signifier of late-modernist “cultural capital”. If, as a contemporary novelist, you do not ostentatiously question the fundamental validity of what you are doing, chances are you are not doing it properly.

As we have already seen, post-Hegelian theorists such as Georg Lukács, Maurice Blanchot and Theodor W. Adorno share the notion that the persistent questioning of why and for whom one writes is not only latent within, but constitutes the specificity of the novel as a modern form: from François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes to Laurence Sterne and Denis Diderot, and from Herman Melville and Fyodor Dostoevsky to Franz Kafka and Samuel Beckett. Yet the predicament of contemporary metaculture involves, among other things, the domestication of this question through over-familiarity. Why even write “must I write?” when the question itself has been so exhaustively written to death? Why go through the charade of wrestling with the novel’s ineradicable contradictions when even the high-modernist credo of “fail again, fail

²⁶ Gerald Murnane, *Barley Patch* (2009), p. 3.

²⁷ Samuel Beckett, *The Unnameable* (1953), in Samuel Beckett, *The Beckett Trilogy* (1976), p. 382.

²⁸ Peter Sloterdijk, *Critique of Cynical Reason* (1983), p. 5.

better” has been recuperated as a management theory slogan? And why even try to write one’s way through the question of literature’s vexed conditions of possibility when the vocabulary for discussing them is no longer drawn from literature, but rather from a hyper-professionalized critical theory industry that has long-since acceded to its own modernist moment of self-reflexivity, preoccupied with the implications of its own suspiciously zealous institutionalization within the neoliberal academy?

If, according to one broad school of thought, high modernism tended to internalize its own contradictions and work through them formally - as Adorno’s “immanent problems of form”, Blanchot’s “torn intimacy” of the work, or Lukács’s “fundamental dissonance” - the contemporary novel of meta-cultural melancholy has been more inclined to give the problem a name, along with the ability to walk and talk.²⁹ Indeed, seemingly everywhere we turn within contemporary literary fiction we encounter proxy figures and situations (what T.S. Eliot used to call “objective correlatives”) suggesting the novel’s acknowledgment of its own cultural belatedness, redundancy or complicity. These range from the earnestly anguished to the smugly ironic. Tom McCarthy’s *Satin Island* (2015) is narrated by U, a “corporate anthropologist” whose job is to “purvey cultural insight” to his bosses at The Company, “feeding vanguard theory, almost always from the left side of the spectrum, back into the corporate machine”.³⁰ In Jonathan Franzen’s *The Corrections* (2001) an unemployed gender studies professor sells off his collection of Frankfurt School critical theory at the Strand Bookstore, for a little less than the cost of a fillet of Atlantic salmon at a supermarket called “The Nightmare of Consumption”.

²⁹ Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 6; Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, p. 12; Lukacs, *Theory of the Novel*, p. 62.

³⁰ Tom McCarthy, *Satin Island* (2015), p. 33.

James Kelman's *A Disaffection* (1989) is the monologue of a disillusioned schoolteacher who is "sickened" by his own status as a "tool of a dictatorship government", and whose quixotic attempts to create a strange new form of music, using the pair of old pipes that he finds abandoned around the back of the Cultural Center where he goes to drink with his colleagues, constitutes a pathetic parody of aesthetic resistance.³¹

Marilynne Robinson's *Housekeeping* (1980) uses an anti-*bildung* structure in which its narrator's flight and eventual disappearance appears to allegorize the seemingly imminent eclipse of the space of the novel itself, as a residual enclave of aesthetic rapture, disinterest and licensed eccentricity, in the face of the progressive encroachments of bureaucratic rationality and corporate culture. And in David Markson's *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988) the narrator is seemingly the last person left alive, abandoned to a state of unexplained but apparently post-apocalyptic isolation. David Foster Wallace reads Markson's novel as literalizing the solipsistic implications of the early Wittgenstein's philosophy of language.³² But we may just as well read it as figuring the world's final abandoning of the entire modernist concept of literature, as personified by Markson's unnamed narrator, to its ultimately inconsequential and self-directed foibles: hopelessly scrawling and leaving "signs in the streets", long after the streets have been deserted by anyone who might care to actually read them. Literature continues to stalk the earth like the perennial undead, but life, it seems, has long since moved elsewhere. This circumstance is not lost on Enrique Vila-Matas, whose *Dublinesque* (2010) is the account of a former publisher who travels to Dublin for "Bloomsday" to stage a funeral for the death of the "Gutenberg Age", and whose *Montano* (2002) documents the attempts of its narrator to

³¹ James Kelman, *A Disaffection* (1989), p. 67.

³² David Foster Wallace, "Afterword" to *Wittgenstein's Mistress* (1988).

overcome the novel's own self-diagnosed pathology: "Montano's malady", or "literature sickness".³³

One could easily go on, citing an international roster of figures such as Thomas Bernhard, Elfriede Jelinek, Dag Solstad, Peter Handke, W.G. Sebald, David Foster Wallace, Zadie Smith, Jose Saramago, Imre Kertesz, Roberto Bolano, Sergio Pitlor, Teju Cole, Cormac McCarthy, Ben Lerner, David Shields, Jonathan Littell, Michel Houellebecq, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Laszlo Krasznahorkai, Eduard Lévay, Lars Iyer and Gabriel Josipovici. And lest we too hastily dismiss this as simply the grandiose posturing or sublimated self-congratulation of cloistered Western elites, postcolonial fiction has hardly been immune from the compulsion to interrogate its own problematic premises, entanglements and liabilities. Three of the most celebrated of J.M. Coetzee's novels - the thematically connected trilogy of *Waiting for the Barbarians* (1980), *Age of Iron* (1990) and *Disgrace* (1999) - all center on the confusions of a more or less well-meaning if hypocritical liberal humanist who is forced to confront the continuities between his own high-literary values and the enabling structures of colonialism and apartheid. Nadine Gordimer's *Burger's Daughter* (1979), through its counterpointing of first and third person narrative perspectives, puts into play the tension between the novel's (inward-looking) aspirations to literary autonomy and its (outward-looking) political conscience that is the recurrent preoccupation of her theoretical essays during the apartheid period. This anxiety toward the literary is also writ large across Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket* (2001), which concerns a retired proofreader, Aubrey Tearle, whose obsession with linguistic propriety is

³³ See Danny Byrne, "Enrique Vila-Matas' *A Brief History of Portable Literature* and *The Illogic of Kassel*", *Music & Literature* (2015) <https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2015/6/11/enrique-vila-matas-a-brief-history-of-portable-literature-and-the-illogic-of-kassel>.

presented as inseparable from his passive complicity with apartheid.³⁴ And indeed, for all of its political and ethnographic significance, and despite the professed didactic aims of the author, what we might call the specifically novelistic irony of the paradigmatic African postcolonial novel, Chinua Achebe's *Things Fall Apart*, hinges on the inner tension between its form and its subject matter. The novel's conspicuously Western literary reference points serve to reinforce the tragic irony inherent within its status as a monument to a pre-colonial culture whose destruction is also the novel's condition of possibility, and which it can therefore only reinscribe at every turn.

This contemporary self-critical trend can be read as a melancholy variant on the novelistic genre that Francis Mulhern calls "meta-cultural discourse".³⁵ But as I have already argued, we can trace the thread of reflection on literature's continued possibility back to at least the turn of the nineteenth century, when Hegel precipitously announced, at the beginning of his *Lectures on Aesthetics*, that "art, considered in its highest vocation, remains for us a thing of the past". The turn towards metaculture is a return to questions that have haunted the novel form since its inception. The quintessential writers of contemporary metaculture are perhaps Coetzee and Kazuo Ishiguro, who are not coincidentally perhaps the two most lauded and studied contemporary Anglophone novelists. Like Teju Cole, Coetzee's works counterpose a belief in the redemptive and elevating power of art with a ruthless critique of the complicities and contradictions of this belief, yet without attempting to resolve this contradiction into any kind of banal assertion of art's "unemphatic alterity to capitalism".³⁶ Ishiguro is likewise characterized

³⁴ See Danny Byrne, "Ivan Vladislavic's *The Restless Supermarket*", *Music & Literature* (2014) <https://www.musicandliterature.org/reviews/2014/2/18/ivan-vladislavis-the-restless-supermarket>.

³⁵ Francis Mulhern, *Culture/Metaculture* (2000).

³⁶ Nicholas Brown, *Autonomy*, p. 88.

by the earnestness with which he stages the problem of the possible bad faith of the entire undertaking of art “as such”. Art in *Never Let Me Go* (2005) is functional to the upbringing and socialization of a group of artificially cloned “donors”, serving to placate and prepare them for the eventual task of harvesting their organs. And *An Artist of the Floating World* (1986) and *The Remains of the Day* (1989) both feature a narrator figure - a proxy for the writer himself - who is confronted by the fundamental complicity of his values and actions with authoritarian regimes.

Coetzee and Ishiguro are representative “metacultural” writers not because they assert their autonomy, but because of the way in which they ruthlessly and obsessively critique literary autonomy while nonetheless retaining a residual faith in it, however impossible or fatally compromised. In *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), Neil Lazarus argues for the continued critical autonomy of “late modernist” novels such as Ishiguro’s *The Unconsoled* (1995) and Coetzee’s *Waiting for the Barbarians*, pointing to their use of “irrealist” techniques that affect the reader with a generalized sense of “disconsolation”.³⁷ For Lazarus, this heightens our sensitivity to, and thus (in some largely unspecified way) our ability to resist the depredations of capitalist globalization. Coetzee and Ishiguro are thus read as continuing the modernist project of Franz Kafka and others, which for Lazarus is reducible to a neo-Adornian gesture of “saying ‘no’ to modernity”. In the recent work of WReC this argument is extrapolated into the basis for a general theory of a global “late modernism”.³⁸

Such an assessment of Coetzee and Ishiguro brings us back to the distinction that has run through this dissertation, between autonomy as an assertion, and autonomy as a predicament. Lazarus and WReC’s theory of “late modernism” ultimately amounts to a fairly straightforward

³⁷ Lazarus, *The Postcolonial Unconscious* (2011), pp. 31-32.

³⁸ WReC, *Combined and Uneven Development* (2015), p. 19.

autonomy-claim, routed through what in my view is a fatally reductive reading of both Adorno and the novelists in question. Indeed, it is little wonder that Lazarus and WReC tend to employ a sociologically focused strategy of “distant reading”, since closer attention to Ishiguro and Coetzee’s novels would quite quickly reveal the inadequacy of the “saying ‘no’ to modernity” slogan. This is not to say that both Ishiguro and Coetzee are not socially critical in many of their thematic concerns, or even that the formal strategies in their work are not in some highly problematized sense construable as attempts to carve out a position of critical autonomy in relation to the forces of capitalist globalization. Indeed, they are both of these things. But if this constitutes a way of saying “no” to capitalism and/or modernity, there is equally an obvious sense in which writing a critically lauded, award-winning late modernist novel is rather a good way of saying “yes” to both. We trivialize the work of Coetzee and Ishiguro if we do not recognize that it is simultaneously critical of society *and* critical of its own capacity for meaningful critique; that it is inseparably both an affirmation of autonomy *and* a self-reflexive critique of the conditions of possibility of that autonomy; and that it is both an attempt to occupy normative positions in relation to moral and ethical issues and a confrontation with what it suspects to be the inevitable contingency and bad faith of those positions.

The “disconsolation” to be found in such novels inheres not in their formal “registering” of the shocks and upheavals of capitalism, nor in their assertion of a position of critical autonomy in relation to capitalism. Their relationship to capital is instead mediated through the problem of their own non-transcendable autonomy; they “register” capitalism insofar as capitalism is their historical condition of (im)possibility, the precondition of their autonomization. The narrator of *The Unconsoled* is Ryder, a world-renowned piano virtuoso who arrives at a strange Central European City to take part in a performance of avant-garde music that

seems to double as an obscure humanitarian or communitarian mission: “‘Look,’ I had been saying to her, my voice still calm, ‘the fact is, people need me. I arrive in a place and more often than not find terrible problems. Deep-seated, seemingly intractable problems, and people are so grateful I’ve come’” (37). Ishiguro stages a comic incommensurability between the autonomous, avant-garde character of the music that Ryder is to perform (but never does), and the communitarian function that seems to be expected of it. In the words of Christoff, a formerly celebrated local conductor more recently fallen into disrepute,

The modern forms, they’re so complex now. Kazan, Mullery, Yoshimoto. Even for a trained musician such as myself, it’s hard now, very hard. The likes of von Winterstein, the Countess, what chance do they have? They’re completely out of their depth. To them it’s just crashing noise, a whirl of strange rhythms. Perhaps they’ve convinced themselves over the years they can hear something there, certain emotions, meanings. But the truth is, they’ve found nothing at all. They’re out of their depth, they’ll never understand how modern music works. Once it was simply Mozart, Bach, Tchaikovsky. Even the man in the street could make a reasoned guess about that sort of music. But the modern forms! How can people like this, untrained, provincial people, how can they ever understand such things, however great a sense of duty they feel towards the community. It’s hopeless, Mr Ryder. They can’t distinguish a crushed cadence from a struck motif. (186)

For Sarah Brouillette, “*The Unconsoled* is about ‘affirmative culture,’ to use Herbert Marcuse’s phrase: art is avidly consumed by an appreciative audience of people who appear to be in no way actually changed by it”.³⁹ Ishiguro, in Christine Smallwood’s words, is “a canny destroyer of the pieties that cling to art. One by one his books dismantle the idea that art consoles, that art contains truths, that art expresses the soul”.⁴⁰ *The Unconsoled* is representative of a broad orientation of the contemporary novel insofar as it stages the tension, and possibly the

³⁹ Sarah Brouillette, “Tragedy Mistaken for Management Theory: On Kazuo Ishiguro and the Nobel Prize in Literature”, *Jacobin Magazine*, 8 October 2017 <https://www.versobooks.com/blogs/news/3430-tragedy-mistaken-for-management-theory-on-kazuo-ishiguro-and-the-nobel-prize-in-literature>.

⁴⁰ Christine Smallwood, “The Test of Time: Ishiguro’s Novel of Remembering”, *Harper’s Magazine*, April 2015 <https://harpers.org/archive/2015/04/the-test-of-time/>.

contradiction, between its aesthetic and extra-aesthetic justification; the possibility that the formal autonomy that justifies it *as* an artwork may be precisely that which renders it socially irrelevant or redundant. Yet *The Unconsoled* is also representative in the way that it provides no consolation or resolution, the way in which it requires us to inhabit its contradictions, blindspots and aporias, and in the way in which it seeks (and perhaps, achieves) its justification through the manner in which it performs its own lack of one.

CODA

“Periscopic” Form: Jon Fosse, Thomas Bernhard, W.G. Sebald

Truth is always wrong, even if it is one hundred percent truth. Every error is pure truth.⁴¹

What remains, though, of the high modernist will to autonomy, the kind of novel that seeks to elevate the form by pursuing unrealized possibilities of linguistic art unshackled from the constraints of representation? Do such novels pursue aesthetic autonomy as an ideology, or encounter it as a predicament? Let us take, as an *au courant* example, the 2023 Nobel laureate Jon Fosse’s recent *Septology* (2022), lauded as “a new approach to writing fiction, different from what (Fosse) has written before and - it is strange to say, as the novel enters its fifth century - different from what has been written before”.⁴² *Septology*’s most conspicuously “avant-garde” feature is that each of its seven books is written in a single present-tense run-on sentence, though this in and of itself is hardly without precedent; from recent works such as Lucy Ellman’s *Ducks, Newburyport* (2019), Mike McCormack’s *Solar Bones* (2016), Laszlo Krasznahorkai’s *The Last Wolf* (2009) and Mattias Enard’s *Zone* (2008), all the way back to modernists such as James Joyce and Samuel Beckett, William Faulkner and Marcel Proust.

Far from being *sui generis*, in its form, style, tone and set of philosophical preoccupations *Septology* takes its place within a fairly recognizable European late-modernist tradition stretching from Samuel Beckett, Wittold Gombrowicz, Clarice Lispector, Hermann Broch, Claude Simon, Ingeborg Bachmann and Thomas Bernhard to Laszlo Krasznahorkai, W.G.

⁴¹ Thomas Bernhard, *Gathering Evidence: A Memoir* (1985), p. 305.

⁴² Wyatt Mason, “Seven Steps to Heaven: Jon Fosse Makes the Novel New” (2021), *Harper’s Magazine*, August 2021 <https://harpers.org/archive/2021/08/jon-fosse-septology/>.

Sebald, Peter Handke, James Kelman, Bohumil Hrabal, Imre Kertesz, Wolfgang Hilbig, Hermann Burger, Antonio Lobo Antunes, Fleur Jaeggy, Rafael Chirbes and Mircea Cartarescu (albeit a tradition that is, with one or two exceptions, largely ignored by the Anglophone literary academy). This is not at all to accuse Fosse of being derivative, or to downplay the novel's originality. Merve Emre is not wrong when she observes, in a recent *New Yorker* profile of Fosse, that "none of the comparisons to other writers seems right". ("Bernhard? Too aggressive. Beckett? Too controlling. Ibsen? 'He is the most destructive writer I know,' Fosse claims").⁴³ This is true enough, even if one struggles to think of a significant writer of whom it would not be. Nonetheless, *Septology's* formal radicalism (such as it is) is better regarded as a by-product of Fosse's larger concerns than as the work's *raison d'être*. Indeed, generally speaking *Septology* operates not by rejecting or surpassing the categories of conventional novelistic narration, but by continuing to use them while suspending their truth-status.

The novel appears to be narrated by Asle, an aging abstract painter, widower and recovered alcoholic who has converted to Catholicism, and it relates what we take to be his memories. Each of its seven books begins with the same words, "And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines that cross in the middle", before recounting a series of seemingly recollected events occurring over the course of a single day (occasionally interspersed with what appear to be flashbacks), and ending with a prayer. Yet even such a minimal summary assimilates *Septology* to an order of representation, legibility and paraphrasability that it both problematizes and functions to defamiliarize. To describe *Septology* in terms of abstract, distinct and iterable categories such as character, setting, perspective and subject matter is to reify what

⁴³ Merve Emre, "Jon Fosse's Search for Peace", *The New Yorker*, Nov. 13, 2022
<https://www.newyorker.com/culture/the-new-yorker-interview/jon-fosses-search-for-peace>.

is in fact an immanent and irreducible configuration of textual relations, component parts that only have meaning in context, and in relation to one another:

And I see myself standing and looking at the picture with the two lines that cross in the middle, one purple line, one brown line, it's a painting wider than it is high and I see that I've painted the lines slowly, the paint is thick, two long wide lines, and they've dripped, where the brown and the purple line cross the colors blend beautifully and drip and I'm thinking this isn't a picture but suddenly the picture is the way it's supposed to be, it's done, there's nothing more to do on it, I think, it's time to put it away, I don't want to stand here at the easel any more, I don't want to look at the picture any more, I think, and I think today's Monday and I think I have to put this picture away with the other ones I'm working on but am not done with, the canvases on stretchers leaning on the wall between the bedroom door and the hall door under the hook with the brown leather shoulderbag on it, the bag where I keep my sketch pad and pencil, and then I look at the two stacks of finished paintings propped up against the wall next to the kitchen door...⁴⁴

In general narratological terms, we might say that the basic function of an opening passage is to establish the terms of a “narrative contract” between a text and its reader.⁴⁵ By announcing to the reader how the text will handle various recognizable features of novelistic discourse (character, point of view, focalization, location, setting, voice, genre, and so on), the introduction activates a set of unspoken rules, expectations and assumptions (conscious or otherwise) that orient the reader by positioning this particular novel in relation to other novels. The novel is thus grounded within a particular language game, or a regime of legibility: by interpreting clues or “narrative codes” that imply that certain rules will (or will not) be observed, the reader emerges from an initial uncertainty into a more or less flexible set of assumptions about what will follow.⁴⁶ Yet while such coordinates are by no means absent in *Septology*'s opening passage, the latter functions by signaling to the reader that they are, and will continue to be, a problem; that the connections and rules of legibility that render questions such as “who is speaking?”, “when and

⁴⁴ Jon Fosse, *Septology* (2019), trans. Damion Searls, p. 12.

⁴⁵ See Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (1975), “Narrative Contracts”, pp. 192-202.

⁴⁶ For a foundational discussion and typology of five “narrative codes”, see Roland Barthes, *S/Z* (1970).

where are these events taking place?” and even “what is taking place and to whom?” answerable cannot simply be assumed.

The narrative as a whole lacks any stable location, focalization or diegetic present. Though presented as if it were the interior monologue of the character (Asle) who participates in the novel’s narrated events, this narrative perspective is itself focalized through a narrated act of narration (“I see myself”). Yet we have no information about the diegetic status of the latter, such as when, where or even whether it takes place, or if it should be considered part of the novel’s narrated events. This framing means that the question of “who is speaking?” is not straightforwardly answerable; the perspective of the narrative is fractured, split between two mutually problematizing subject-positions. The novel’s narrated events are focalized through the Asle who exists within the diegetic “now” of the narrative, yet this perspective is itself mediated through the perspective of Asle the narrator. The logical hierarchy between these two perspectives is, furthermore, reversible. On one hand the first person perspective of Asle the narrator is a passive frame with no content, a purportedly transparent window through which we access the thoughts of the diegetic Asle. Yet the latter is logically effaced by the former, since we have no access to the thoughts of the narrated Asle that is not mediated through the perspective of Asle the narrator.

Via this framing, then, *Septology* suspends the truth-status of its narrated events: in place of either the “this happened” of the third-person narrator, or the “this happened to me” of the first-person narrator, we are presented with an equivocation. There is no guarantee either that the narrative refers to events that exist independently of the narrated act of narration, or that the narrated act of narration exists independently of the narration. And the absence of such hierarchies and guarantees has the effect of deconstructing the narrative from within, divesting it

of the authority of a narrative “I” to underwrite its claims to truth or even legibility. Is Asle, in the diegetic “now” of the narrative, writing, speaking, or thinking these words? Or is “Asle” simply another word, endowed with no greater authority than any other? Is the “I” who occupies the discursive position of the speaker here Asle, Fosse, or simply the impersonal confluence of this set of grammatical relations? Does this “I” precede and originate the narrative, or emerge from it?

The narrative thus simultaneously reveals and conceals, placing its own truth-status - as well as that of the events it relates, and the subjective interiority it purports to disclose - in suspension. In the very gesture whereby it grants us access to a series of narrated events it simultaneously defers that access by insisting upon the opacity of the various narrative frames that mediate it. *Septology* can thus be regarded as a variant of what W.G. Sebald has called the “periscopic form” used in works such as Thomas Bernhard’s *Old Masters* (1985), Rachel Cusk’s *Outline* (2014), *Transit* (2016) and *Kudos* (2018), and, perhaps most famously, Sebald’s own *Austerlitz* (2001). As Sebald put it in an interview around the time of *Austerlitz*’s publication, Bernhard “only tells you in his books what he has heard from others. So he invented, as it were, a kind of periscopic form of narrative. You’re always sure that what he tells you is related, at one remove, at two removes, at two or three”.⁴⁷

Old Masters is a typically Bernhardian set-up: the narrator, Atzbacher, recounts a meeting with an aging musicologist named Reger, in the Kunsthistorische Museum in Vienna, on a bench positioned in front of Tintoretto’s “Portrait of a White Bearded Man” (1545), the spot where Reger has gone to sit and ruminate every day since the death of his wife. The novel

⁴⁷ Michael Silverblatt, “KCRW interview with W.G. Sebald”, 6 December 2001, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVssOL6olQ4>.

consists almost entirely of Reger's ranting monologue, though the latter is never voiced directly, but is instead focalized through the perspective of Atzbacher, who reports it to us (purportedly) verbatim. Atzbacher's perspective is, furthermore, itself focalized through a narrated act of narration:

Although I had arranged to meet Reger at the Kunsthistorisches Museum at half-past eleven, I arrived at the agreed spot at half-past ten in order, as I had for some time decided to do, to observe him, for once, from the most ideal angle possible and undisturbed, Atzbacher writes.⁴⁸

Like "I see myself", "Atzbacher writes" functions to suspend the referential illusion, replacing the directness of a traditional narrator - who simply (whether reliably or unreliably) tells us "this happened" - with a periscopic arrangement of perspectives. The novel is a self-portrait of Atzbacher, by way of a portrait of Reger, by way of Reger's ruminations on a portrait. Like all of his novels, *Old Masters* is, furthermore, in some sense a refracted self-portrait of Thomas Bernhard: a staging of his views and obsessions, mediated through a chain of alter-egos.⁴⁹ The novel thus refuses to inhabit any stable perspective, but instead employs a periscopic arrangement of perspectives that functions simultaneously to construct and to deconstruct its object of representation, its author, and the ongoing denunciation of postwar Austrian society that spans Bernhard's *oeuvre*.

There is nothing either grammatically or stylistically to separate the voices of Atzbacher or Reger: both are written in Bernhard's unmistakable compulsively repetitious style, uniform

⁴⁸ Thomas Bernhard, *Old Masters: A Comedy* (1985), p. 1.

⁴⁹ There is no unmediated expression in Bernhard, and thus no firm distinction between his own voice and the voices of his characters. On the rare occasions when Bernhard purports to write in his own voice, without the mediation of fictional characters - in the memoirs *Gathering Evidence* (1985) and *My Prizes: An Accounting* (2010) - his style and concerns are indistinguishable from those of his novels. Yet in *Gathering Evidence*, Bernhard claims that his entire style is an imitation of that of his uncle, a failed novelist. Even Bernhard's own voice is positioned as an act of ventriloquism, and thus deferred across a periscopic arrangement of perspectives.

across all of his novels, which seems to suck all voices and perspectives into its vortex. This style combines the personal and the impersonal, on one hand maniacally impassioned yet also driven by a seemingly autonomous logic that disperses the subjectivity of its narrator into its own recursively impersonal and relentless syntax. This dynamic, in which the subjectivity of the narrator is decentered by the means of its own expression, is encapsulated in Bernhard's signature comic mode of self-contradiction, where a character begins by passionately expressing a sentiment that he then, having succumbed to the seemingly autonomous logic of the rant, is driven to contradict shortly afterwards.⁵⁰ Bernhard's style thus continuously stages the subjective uninhabitability of the narrative "I", or what Giorgio Agamben calls "the constitutive desubjectification in every subjectification".⁵¹

This simultaneous constitution and decentering of subjectivity by the language that gives it expression mirrors at a smaller scale the larger formal logic of the "periscopic" narrative frame, which disperses subjectivity across an assemblage of perspectival relations. Bernhard's words are mediated by Reger, who is mediated by Atzbacher. Or alternatively, Reger's words are mediated by Atzbacher, who is mediated by Bernhard: the hierarchy is reversible. The words belong neither entirely to Bernhard, to Atzbacher or to Reger, but rather emerge from the assemblage of their arranged perspectives. And this perspectival dispersal is what typifies periscopic narratives. By inserting multiple narrative frames (or, "removes"), periscopic narratives function to divest their language of subjective affiliation and ownership, and hence of

⁵⁰ *Old Masters* contains one of the lengthiest and funniest of these Bernhardian reversals: a rant about the writer Adalbert Stifter morphs into an even more furious rant about Martin Heidegger, Reger's loathing for whom is only expressible in comparison to Stifter, who thus becomes the object of his outlandish praise (see *Old Masters*, pp. 34-46).

⁵¹ Agamben, *Remnants of Auschwitz* (1998), p. 123.

the authority of the subjectively inhabited utterance. The authority of language either to express the interiority, continuity and transparency of the self (as in the conventional first person) or to disclose objective states of affairs (as in the conventional third person), is thus not so much denied or evacuated as suspended.

Periscopic narratives differ from more traditional metafictional techniques such as *mis-en-abyme* or unreliable narrators, in the crucial sense that they formally imitate unmediated representation (a contradiction in terms, but this is the point) while logically decentering it. In Akira Kurosawa's 1950 film *Rashomon*, to cite a classic example of a metafictional frame narrative, the story of a murder is recounted via the differing accounts of three unreliable witnesses, in a way that emphasizes the inaccessibility of the event, and thus the way in which truth is always-already subjectively constructed. Likewise, an unreliable narrative such as Vladimir Nabokov's *Lolita* (1955) constantly calls attention to the unbridgeable gap between the discourse of the novel and the absent events that it supposedly relates. Indeed, this gap is a structural principle. *Lolita*, the object of Humbert Humbert's obsession and thus of the narrative itself, is constitutively absent. The first-person confessional form of the novel serves to absolutize the perspective of Humbert Humbert while denying Lolita a voice, thereby formally redoubling the objectification that drives the plot, in which she is treated as an object of solipsistic sexual gratification. Lolita is, moreover, quite literally dead by the time Humbert begins his confession.

Periscopic narratives, by contrast, present the object or event itself, in a way that purports to be direct and unmediated, while nonetheless using narrative frames that logically suspend its truth-status. Sebald's *Austerlitz* (2001), for example, tells the story of a character named Jacques Austerlitz, though not by narrating his story in the first person, the third person or via free

indirect discourse. *Austerlitz* instead recounts a series of lengthy confessional monologues delivered by Austerlitz himself over the course of a series of conversations with a narrator figure who closely resembles Sebald. On one hand, then, the novel trades the self-evidently mediating apparatus of traditional narration for the apparently direct transcription of Austerlitz's speech. The novel thus formally imitates the indexicality of mechanical reproduction technologies, such as the film, photograph or sound recording, that bypass the subjective mediation of a narrator by reproducing the material trace of their referent (in this case, Austerlitz himself). Indeed, such a comparison is encouraged by Sebald's use, here as in all of his novels, of accompanying photographs that purport to corroborate the historical veracity of the narrative.

Yet this apparent directness is logically decentered by the periscopic frame, in which the entire narrative is reported to us in the first person by a diegetically embedded narrator who is nonetheless completely passive, remaining silent during a series of interactions that he purports merely to transcribe. We might call the resulting effect that of a *mediated transparency*: the speech of a protagonist is presented as if directly, yet it is focalized through the perspective of a narrator who, though largely invisible, nonetheless mediates (and thus potentially edits, rewrites, inflects, appropriates, misremembers) it, to an extent that is impossible to ascertain.

An interpretative dilemma is thus inscribed within the novel's form, since each of the two narrative perspectives (Austerlitz's and the narrator's) can potentially be collapsed into the other. Is the narrator a mere mouthpiece for Austerlitz, or vice versa? After all, the voice and characteristic inflections of Austerlitz are utterly indistinguishable from those of the first-person narrative in which he is embedded. On one hand the narrative frame is overwhelmed by Austerlitz's monologue to the extent that the focalization often seems arbitrary, a mere grammatical technicality: the narrator largely disappears behind the effect of a camera-like and

disembodied objectivity, the text presented as a transcription device in which the unmediated real (the event of Austerlitz's self-disclosure) is archived. Yet the opposite reading is no less possible: that Austerlitz himself is just a narrative conceit, a vehicle for the monologue of the narrator, who is himself surely a flimsy disguise for Sebald. Three potential monologues (those of Austerlitz, the narrator, and Sebald) are thus simultaneously implied and logically decentered, in a way that defers the truth-status of the text itself across the periscopic frame. Mimesis thus takes place under erasure: the real is simultaneously disclosed and decentered, transcribed and deferred, present and absent.

In *Septology*, this effect of mediated transparency is compounded by the fact that the periscopic frame is provided by two ambiguously distinct temporal iterations of the same character. What is at stake, then, is not just Asle's transparency either to another character or to the reader, but rather his transparency to and continuity with himself. If Bernhard refracts ownership of the language of *Old Masters* across three distinct perspectives, Asle's perspective is refracted from within. The structure of interpersonal mediation is suggested to also operate internally, intrapersonally. Asle himself is thus not a traditional character so much as a textual assemblage, the aggregate of a series of periscopically nested perspectives, discourses and positionalities. And the text itself is positioned as Asle's attempt to narrate these disparate elements into an aesthetic whole, to unify "I", "see" and "myself".

Septology's form thus serves to foreground the heterogeneous and ongoing process of mediation that constitutes the self-production of a subject, as suggested by the novel's epigraph: "I is another" (also the title of Books III-V). And this process of intrasubjective mediation is also continuous with a metafictional foregrounding of the contingency of the connections that comprise a novelistic narrative. By deconstructing the narrative "I" and its centered perspective,

Fosse's narrative framing unsettles the contractual relation between a narrator figure invested with the authority to say "this happened", and the reader, who assumes (unless told otherwise) that the normal rules of storytelling will apply, and that the narrated events will conform to the laws operative in the real world, as a condition of their legibility. In de-automating this set of unspoken assumptions and guarantees, *Septology* foregrounds the medium-specific opacities that more traditional novels, through the use of conventions derived from oral storytelling, function to conceal: the contingency of its own (or any novel's) claim to legibility, the constructedness and discontinuity of any narrative "I", and the mediatedness and hence indeterminacy of its relation to the reader.

Septology's deconstruction of narrative perspective thus extends to a more general problematizing of the conventional connections that render novels legible. There is, for example, no clear and linear temporal relationship between the narrated act of narration, the embedded monologue of the narrated Asle, and the narrated events that comprise the plot. We begin, in the passage cited above, in what appears to be a stable diegetic location: it is Monday, and Asle is at home, looking at one of his paintings. The narrative consists of what appears to be Asle's continuous internal monologue as he stands before his painting. This monologue proceeds via a series of internal connections: from Asle's reflections on this particular painting, on to more general questions about painting and color, on to his neighbor, an aging farmer named Asleik, to whom he gives a painting each Christmas as a present for Asleik's sister, and on again to Asle's own wife and sister, Ales and Alida, both of whom "died too young" (15). During these ruminations, Asle thinks, "there may actually be too many paintings here for a show but I'll take them all to the Beyer Gallery anyway" (15). Very shortly afterwards, we emerge from these ruminations into what appears to be another diegetic present:

and I see myself walking over to my car where it's parked in front of The Beyer Gallery, I'm there in my long black coat with my brown leather bag over my shoulder, I've just been to The Coffeehouse... (15)

The connection between the two diegetic presents - the scene in front of the painting, and the scene in front of the Beyer Gallery - is indeterminate. Though Asle's interior monologue has been continuous and uninterrupted, the narrative itself has seemingly performed a spatial and temporal leap. Asle, it is implied, has now driven to the Beyer Gallery, presumably stopping off at the Coffeehouse en route. Yet there is no way of synching the time of this implied diegetic sequence of events with the time of the narration that appears to mediate them, and this disrupts one of the basic assumed relations that serves to guarantee a novel's legibility. When we read Clarissa Dalloway or Leopold Bloom's "stream of consciousness" as they walk around London or Dublin we assume there to be a continuity between the temporality of their physical actions and that of their narrated thoughts: both take place within the diegetic present, and indeed, both Dalloway and Bloom are continually responding to and commenting on external stimuli that serve to further establish this connection.⁵² Here, however, there is no such connection and no such stable diegetic present: the discontinuity of Asle's narrated actions is logically incommensurable with the continuity of his narrated thoughts, which evince no stable connection to any diegetic scene. The conventional temporal and spatial relations that guarantee the legibility of novelistic narratives (even modernist ones) are suspended.

Yet another reading is also possible: that this is a flashback to a previous visit to the Beyer Gallery, which would further complicate the novel's temporality by positioning all of the narrated events as the monologue of the Asle who remains standing, as it were, in front of the

⁵² Virginia Woolf, *Mrs Dalloway* (1925); James Joyce, *Ulysses* (1922).

painting. There is thus an indeterminate connection between the narrated act of narration (“I see myself”) and the narrated monologue. The framing is such that the “I” in the “I see myself” here could refer to the narrated Asle, or to the Asle who focalizes the narrative as a whole. It could be a flashback embedded within the narrative, the new diegetic present of the narrative, or neither: these may all be the disconnected thoughts of an Asle who exists only in the present of the narrated act of narration, yet who imitates, via free indirect discourse, the thoughts of the narrated Asle. Shortly afterwards, while the diegetic Asle is driving back home from the Beyer Gallery, there is another perspectival leap:

and I realize I’m driving right past the building where Asle lives, in Sailor’s Cove, right at the edge of the sea, there’s a little wharf in front of it, I think, and I see Asle lying there on his sofa and he’s shaking, his whole body’s shivering, and Asle can’t this shaking stop? and he’s thinking he slept on the couch last night because he couldn’t get up and get undressed and go lie down in bed, and the dog, he could even, Bragi, the dog, couldn’t go outside, and he’s still drunk, he thinks, really drunk, and he needs to stop shaking so badly... (16)

By this point the reader is presented with a periscopic arrangement of perspectives: A narrator figure, whom we take to be Asle, is disclosing what we take to be his thoughts or memories (“I see myself”), which currently consist of a narrated Asle who is driving his car, and this narrated Asle is imagining the interior monologue of another narrated Asle, who is lying drunk on his sofa. The drunken Asle and the painter Asle, it will subsequently emerge, are different characters with the same name (though the former is also a painter, and the latter is a recovered alcoholic). Yet the hierarchy of these narrated perspectives is unclear, since each of them is focalized through at least one other, and the overall focalization - the scene of the original “And I see myself” - is unaccounted for. Is Asle’s account of the thoughts of the drunken Asle a hallucination? And if so, whose hallucination? Does it have a truth-value equal to that of the narrator Asle’s account of the thoughts of Asle the painter? Are there any stable hierarchies to

distinguish what is real from what is imagined, and by whom? The conventional hierarchy between the story and its narration has been unsettled, along with the internal hierarchies between the various narrative perspectives. The diegetic present of the narrative does not logically precede and therefore ground the various narrative frames, but rather functions as one element within a “rhizomatic” system of relations without stable hierarchies: a non-paraphrasable configuration of perspectives whose individual truth-status is indeterminate, that exists as the heterogeneous totality of its connections and disconnections.⁵³

This contractual grounding having been problematized, the connections between the other components of the narrative too begin to seem uncertain. There is no guarantee, for example, that *Septology*’s seven books should be read as one continuous narrative, rather than as seven independent variations on a theme, seven interrelated visions, or seven prayers. The narrative, furthermore, contains chronological ambiguities: for example, though the events that we take to comprise the diegetic “now” of the story seem to take place over seven days (one for each book), at various points the narrator “sees” what appear to be much younger versions of Asle and his late wife, Ales. But again, the diegetic status of these characters is uncertain: are they part of the narrated story, or part of the vision (“I see myself”) that comprises its scene of narration? Are they hallucinations attributable either to the narrated version of Asle, or to the version of Asle who (we assume) is having the vision? Or are they characters who really do

⁵³ In *A Thousand Plateaus* (1980), Deleuze and Guattari use the “tree-root” and the “rhizome” to describe two kinds of system, the former governed by a top-down hierarchy of command which “plots a point, fixes an order”, the latter governed by non-hierarchical connection and multiplicity, in which “any point... can be connected to any other, and must be” (p. 7). These models correspond to two conceptions of the book: the “root-book” (“the classical book, as noble, signifying, and subjective organic interiority... (that) imitates the world, as art imitates nature”) (pp. 4-5), and the book as “assemblage”, or, a “collective assemblage of enunciation” which is “unattributable” in the sense that it cannot be traced back to the unified intentions of an author, but rather emerges in and as the multiple and non-linear interanimations of its various component parts (p. 7). See “Introduction: Rhizome”, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, pp. 3-26.

appear, as it were, in the story, and thus compromise the rules of linear chronology to which we habitually assume stories will conform?

Likewise, the narrative largely concerns Asle's encounter with another painter, also named Asle, who is suffering from alcohol withdrawal. Asle takes him to a detox clinic, where he later dies. Indistinguishable typographically, the two Asles are apparently indistinguishable visually, "he with his long grey hair and grey stubble, me with my long grey hair and grey stubble, in our long black coats, each with our hair tied back in a ponytail, I think" (52). The relationship between the two is never resolved: is Asle a doppelganger, alter-ego, a vision, a ghost, a hallucination, or simply a character with whom Asle happens to share a name, visual appearance and many biographical details?⁵⁴ Does the very assumption that there is a final answer to any of these questions rest upon a false continuity between the world and the text, or appeal to a final authority that is constitutively absent from the novel form itself?

One might object that such observations are problematized by the fact that *Septology* (like *Old Masters*, like *Austerlitz*) is a translation. But it makes little difference, for the purposes of my argument, whether the barriers to legibility (what Sebald calls "removes") that I have identified here are modified by the text's translation into English. Some of these textual features (the use of the present tense to remove narrative hierarchies) are potentially language-specific, but others (the presence of the narrative frame, the chronological ambiguity, the use of multiple characters with the same name) are far less so. More importantly though, translation is a form of

⁵⁴ The novel contains another pair of doppelgangers: in Book II, Asle encounters a woman named Guro, of whom he has no recollection, but who claims to have had an affair with him some years previously. She later dies in a fire. Then in the final book, we encounter another Guro who "talks and walks and is in every way like the Guro who died in the fire in *The Lane*", and who at the novel's conclusion suddenly tries to initiate sex with Asle, prompting what seems to be a temporary psychic unraveling (p. 664). Again, the resemblance between these two women, as well as the nature of their relation either to Asle or to one another, is left unexplained.

mediation, and mediation is precisely what this set of narrative strategies serves to foreground. I would argue, moreover, that the textual construction that I call Fosse (but whom I could just as well call Damion Searls, or Fosse/Searls) is not just arbitrarily inserting, but rather drawing attention to medium-specific barriers to the text's meaning, foregrounding the problematic legibility that more conventional works try to conceal, rendering visible the contingency of the connections that most novels assume as a matter of course.

In a sense, then, periscopic texts such as *Septology*, *Austerlitz* and *Old Masters* are “born translated”, though in the opposite sense to the works of “world literature” that Rebecca Walkowitz analyzes in her 2015 book of the same name.⁵⁵ Whereas such works attempt to minimize mediation to allow for rapid translation across languages, a periscopic novel such as *Septology* renders visible the multiple and continuous translations (or, mediations) that are immanent to the novel, regardless of language. The translated text is, according to such a logic, not the debased copy of a purely transparent original, but the novel *par excellence*. *Septology*, like every novel, is a translation regardless of whether it is ever literally translated: what is unusual here is not that such mediations exist, but that the text makes them visible.

And yet, for all of these visible impediments to transparency, and for all that they can be extrapolated into a critique of the legibility of the novel form as such, *Septology*'s legibility as a conventional narrative does in fact remain largely intact. The novel thus proceeds by way of a managed (and for the reader, manageable) uncertainty. This is figuration with blurred edges rather than fully fledged abstraction; reality viewed through a glass darkly, not autonomous invention. For all that the novel's formal strategies defamiliarize the connections between its

⁵⁵ Rebecca Walkowitz, *Born Translated: The Contemporary Novel in an Age of World Literature* (2015).

various narrative components, and thereby reveal them to be contingent, they are not simply *random*. Like Ishiguro's *The Unconsoled*, *Septology* problematizes without ever fully dissolving the relations that comprise the traditional realist work's legibility, while at the same time narrating a continuous dramatic sequence of events. Fosse, of course, is also a celebrated playwright. And from *Melancholy I-II* (1995-1996) to *Morning and Evening* (2000), *Aliss at the Fire* (2004), *Trilogy* (2007-2014), *Septology* (2022) and *A Shining* (2023), the consistent presence of a dramatic plot, however minimal and formally mediated, is one of the characteristics that distinguish his novels from those of Bernhard or Sebald, in whose works such action is largely absent.⁵⁶

A neglect for standard punctuation aside, then, *Septology* functions not by way of any radical anti-narrative innovation, but rather by casting doubt upon, or removing the self-evidence of, the mechanics of its own underlying realist architecture. And this formal strategy connects to a much larger set of questions - concerning the fragile necessity of faith (religious or otherwise) and the contingency of meaning, identity and memory in a disenchanted world - that is less an innovation than a return to foundational concerns of a novelistic tradition that runs from Miguel de Cervantes and Fyodor Dostoevsky to Frantz Kafka and Samuel Beckett, and on to contemporaries such as J.M. Coetzee and Gabriel Josipovici. Whatever *Septology*'s merits, then, - which in my and many other critics' estimation are considerable - they surely do not primarily lie in its formal radicalism, or the pursuit of novelty for its own sake. A neo-Bernhardian monologue, whose central character is an aging artist working in an obsolete medium, the

⁵⁶ In Sebald, the only dramatic action is provided by the narrator's search for information about historical phenomena, and the physical movements that accompany it. Without exception, Bernhard novels comprise the ranting monologue of a Bernhard-like character, mediated through a perisopic narrative frame.

novel's late-modernist style, along with its rustic setting and notable absence of contemporary technology, instead contributes to a feeling of belatedness, even self-conscious archaism.

Far from ever-newness, in fact, an atmosphere of untimely stasis, or perhaps of what Sianne Ngai calls “stuplimity”, pervades the text.⁵⁷ Like Bela Tarr's “slow cinema”,⁵⁸ Fosse's “slow prose” - with its seemingly undifferentiated concern for the quotidian - stages a form of resistance, on behalf of the phenomenal world, to narrative momentum.⁵⁹ Repetition, meanwhile, is built into *Septology*'s form: each book begins as a variant on the same narrative formula, before ending by morphing into perhaps the oldest literary formula of all, the prayer. Far from seeking out new horizons, *Septology* imagines the novel form as a kind of repetition compulsion, a quasi-spiritual ritual.

Frost (1963); *Gargoyles* (1967); *The Lime Works* (1973); *Correction* (1975); *Yes* (1978); *Concrete* (1982); *Wittgenstein's Nephew* (1982); *The Loser* (1983); *Woodcutters* (1984); *Old Masters* (1985); *Extinction* (1986): the same novel endlessly rewritten, so many variations on the theme of its impossibility. The periscopic nesting of narrative perspectives even extends to the framing of the novel itself, which is often an account of the protagonist's failure to write their *magnum opus*.⁶⁰ The novel that we read is an *ersatz*, the tawdry monument to an authentic

⁵⁷ Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (2005), “Stuplimity”, ch.6, pp. 248-297.

⁵⁸ On the phenomenon of “slow cinema” in Bela Tarr and others, see Lutz Koepnick, *The Long Take: Art Cinema and the Wondrous* (2017).

⁵⁹ Fosse: “For many years I worked intensely on plays. My way of writing plays is about restriction, to achieve concentration and intensity. A play doesn't necessarily need a lot of exterior drama, but it needs a strong inner tension, to be charged. Slow prose is the negation of the fast play. Prose takes much longer to write than drama, and requires more peace within me and within my daily life.” Cecily Seiness, “A Conversation With Jon Fosse”, *Music & Literature*, October 10 2019 <https://www.musicandliterature.org/features/2019/10/4/a-conversation-with-jon-fosse>.

⁶⁰ In *The Lime Works* (1970), Konrad has spent years trying and failing to write the ultimate treatise on hearing; in *Correction* (1975), the narrator reads out a “corrected” version of a manuscript written by Roithamer, itself an account of the obsessive corrections he makes to an impossible architectural project, “the cone”; in *Concrete* (1982), Rudolf is trying and failing to write a biography of the composer, Mendelssohn Bartholdy; in *The Loser* (1983), Wertheimer spends years trying and failing to write a

original that can never be realized, only deferred; that exists only in and as the event of its self-negation. Bernhard's career is one long compulsive repetition, literature as a tragi-comic *fort-da* game. Yet this is not simply a personal pathology. Repetition is built into the form of the periscopic narrative insofar as it foregrounds barriers, disconnections and seams, obtrusive frames that cannot be sutured into a formal unity: the "I" of the centered subject, the consummated expression of interiority or representation of society, the achieved communication or translation of meaning across subjective, linguistic and perspectival barriers. What periscopic forms serve to foreground, then, is the self-perpetuating and thus compulsively repetitive nature of the novel form itself, which throughout its history constitutes not a progression toward some goal of achieved expression or representation, but the repetitious staging of the failure of the self to coincide with itself, of the narrative to transcend its own internal divisions, or of form to encompass (without falsifying, diminishing, reifying) the world outside of the text.

Periscopic narratives thus foreground the autonomy of form, not in the aestheticist sense of literature's irreducible specificity or "purposiveness without purpose", but as a constitutive predicament of the novel form itself: a condition that cannot be transcended, that is inimical to progress, and that threatens to render the entire representational endeavor an automatically self-contradicting absurdity. And this is perhaps what lends periscopic narratives their untimely contemporaneity within a literary culture still seeking a coherent self-definition in the wake of the demise of postmodernism. Postmodern metafiction frequently aims to emphasize the gap that separates the world and the text, and thus to puncture the self-evidence of the ideological self-

philosophical manuscript entitled "About Glenn Gould"; *Woodcutters* (1984) ends with the narrator resolving to write what may or may not be the text that we have just read; in *Old Masters* (1985), Reger makes reference to an unfinished manuscript on which Atzbacher has spent years working.

understanding of bourgeois society by revealing the arbitrariness of its narrative forms and conventions. Periscopic narratives, by contrast, dramatize the self-defeating yet necessary attempts of the novel to overcome its constitutive formal autonomy, to reconnect with the world outside of the text. And this repetitious drama - whereby a narrative form occludes the very thing to which it nonetheless strives to give access - is played out on multiple levels: the failure of the self to coincide with the means of its self-expression, of the text to unify its disparate components, of the subject to assimilate its memories into a coherent self, or of subjectivity, experience, memory, affect or meaning to translate across media, across subjective positionalities, and across forms.

Periscopic narratives can thus be read as performatively enacting the “experience of failed transcendence” that for Simon Critchley and Tom McCarthy (following Maurice Blanchot) is the basis of aesthetic experience.⁶¹ By awkwardly, and even comically foregrounding the obtrusive parts that refuse to coalesce into a seamless totality - the clunky, even gimmicky repetitions and interruptions (“he said, Glenn said, I thought”) that jam the the novel’s narrative mechanisms and prevent them from running smoothly - such narratives insist over and over again upon the failure of a given frame to transcend itself, of the narrative as a whole to transcend its internal divisions. Take the following passage of dialogue from Fosse’s 2004 novel, *Aliss at the Fire* (another periscopic narrative), which turns the subjective uninhabitability of even the simplest of utterances into a form of deadpan comedy:

What are you thinking about, Signe says
No nothing special Asle says
No, Signe says
I guess I, Asle says

⁶¹ International Necronautical Society, “New York Declaration on Inauthenticity” (2007) <https://tc3-production.s3.amazonaws.com/upload/52228de602e3e620b1000205/sfinsnydeclaration.pdf>.

Yes I, he says
and he stands there and he looks at her
I, he says
I, I, yes well, I'll just, he says
You, Signe says
Yes, Asle says
You'll, Signe says
I, Asle says
I guess I'll go out onto the fjord for a while, he says
Today too, Signe says
I think so, Asle says.⁶²

Asle and Signe perform in miniature the periscopic narrative's inability to coincide with itself, the constitutive self-alienation that makes even the most perfunctory passage of dialogue liable to break down into a series of non-synthesizable components, inoperative sounds floating free of their referents, language literalized to the point of absurdity. By thus performatively malfunctioning, periscopic narratives foreground the constitutive dysfunctionality of the novel form as such, which most novels attempt to conceal beneath the smooth operations of their arbitrary narrative conventions.

Etiolated, stuttering, dissonant, misassembled: periscopic narratives can be read as performatively enacting what David Kurnick calls "the marginality of the aesthetic in modernity", or what Sianne Ngai, following Theodor W. Adorno, calls modern art's "situation of restricted agency".⁶³ A diagnosis of the constitutively minoritized condition of the work of art "as such" underpins all of the "minor" aesthetic categories that Sianne Ngai so brilliantly analyzes across *Ugly Feelings* (2005), *Our Aesthetic Categories* (2012) and *Theory of the Gimmick* (2020): the gimmick, the stuplime, the zany, the cute and (most pertinently perhaps to the novel form) the merely interesting. As I have argued, what Ngai's work as a whole responds

⁶² Jon Fosse, *Aliss at the Fire* (2014), p. 8.

⁶³ Kurnick, *Empty Houses*, p. 25; Ngai, *Ugly Feelings*, p. 2.

to is the constitutive contradiction of the autonomous artwork identified in the work of Adorno: that when art is separated from the rest of society as an autonomous pursuit serving no external purpose it is not only absolutized (as in the tradition of aestheticism that stretches from Immanuel Kant to contemporary critics, like Nicholas Brown and Walter Benn Michaels, who celebrate the *sui generis* power of the aesthetic to fight the depredations of capitalism) but diminished, rendered an absurdity.

Ngai's conception of the artwork's "powerful powerlessness" provides a far more fitting framework through which to approach periscopic narratives such as *Septology* than received critical approaches that figure them (whether approvingly or dismissively) as monuments to the mastery of the great white male virtuoso, or avant-garde-ist expressions of art's unbridled powers of creation. Rather than a retreat from the world into the consolatory perfection of achieved formal mastery, periscopic narratives are better approached as staging an ethically tinged ambivalence toward the entire artistic undertaking. As Reger/Atzbacher/Bernhard puts it,

Art is the most sublime and most revolting thing simultaneously, he said. But we must make ourselves believe that there is high art, he said, otherwise we should despair. Even though we know that all art ends in gaucherie and in ludicrousness and in the refuse of history, we must, *with downright self-assurance*, believe in high and in the highest art, he said. We realize what it is, a bungled, failed art, but we need not always hold this realization before us, because in that case we should inevitably perish, he said.⁶⁴

Even when the novel comes closest to stating its own underlying philosophy it does so through a narrative frame that pushes that statement to the brink of absurdity: what could be more ridiculous, more pompously self-aggrandizing, than to claim that if we did not "believe in high and in the highest art" we "should inevitably perish"? Such exaggeration perhaps functions to

⁶⁴ *Old Masters*, p. 37.

suggest the essential mediatedness of belief itself, the fear that any belief, any value, no matter how trenchantly expressed, may really be a chimera, or a self-serving delusion.

It is only appropriate, then, that the novel's self-justification is expressed in the form of its self-negation, because this is the periscopic narrative's defining formal principle. As with Ngai's "minor" aesthetic categories, as self-conscious examples of "bungled, failed art" periscopic narratives foreground and even explicitly acknowledge their "marginality", which is to say, the constitutively reduced status of the work of art as such. Yet they express this reduced status by performing their failure to transcend it. To uncritically turn art into an end in itself - to pursue the disinterested mastery of form in all of its autonomy - is neither to transcend nor to escape the predicament of autonomy, but to succumb to it completely: to accede to the work's social irrelevance, and thus to its merely decorative triviality. Yet at the same time, to abandon the values of art "as such" in the doomed pursuit of social relevance is to evacuate the only remaining *raison d'être* and criteria of value available to the autonomized work of art. Art's autonomy can neither be transcended nor instantiated. The periscopic narrative expresses this predicament through the "absolute infinite negativity" inscribed within its form, performing the impossibility of its being either fully what it is or fully other than what it is.⁶⁵ "Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber", writes Adorno at the beginning of his *Aesthetic Theory* (2). Periscopic narratives turn this uncertainty into a principle of form, while frequently addressing it as the novel's explicit subject matter.

⁶⁵ Søren Kierkegaard, *The Concept of Irony, with Continual Reference to Socrates* (1990), cited in de Man, "The Concept of Irony" (1996), p. 166.

Septology stages its ambivalent commitment to art by formally triangulating the artistic vocation (its own and Asle's), the experience of religious transcendence, and alcoholic intoxication. Without faith in the reality of the divine, there is little to separate these categories of experience: faith becomes perhaps the highest form of aesthetic experience, or the ultimate intoxication. And likewise, faith (religious or otherwise) may ultimately be all that sutures the formal components whose connections *Septology* serves, through its narrative framing, to unsettle. At the novel's conclusion, Asle's monologue unravels into a temporally disordered montage of disconnected flashbacks and images, before being reoriented into a legible temporal sequence when Asle reaches for his rosary beads and begins his nightly prayer:

and I breathe evenly in and evenly out and I say inside myself kyrie and I breathe out and eleison and I breathe in and christe and I breath out and eleison and I move my thumb up to the first bead and I say inside myself Our Father Who art in heaven... (666)

The prayer provides the narrative scaffolding that brings each of Asle's seven monologues to a close, and likewise his submission to a higher authority here seems to cease his psychic unraveling, and the unraveling of the novel's disconnected parts. Does our experience of the novel as a unified totality and not a series of impersonal signifiers - of the self as a continuous individual rather than a succession of individuals - not depend on such an act of submission? Indeed, the experience of aesthetic unity and order that we get from reading a novel - whether imagined as the Kantian experience of the artwork's "purposiveness without purpose", as the bodily "tingling" that Tom McCarthy's "reenactor" compulsively tries to recreate in *Remainder* (2005), or as the "aesthetic bliss" that for Nabokov is the essence of literature - has often enough been characterized as a surrogate for religious experience.⁶⁶ Yet on the other hand, it may be

⁶⁶ Tom McCarthy, *Remainder* (2005); Vladimir Nabokov, "Postscript" to *Lolita* (1955).

mere intoxication, whether collective (as for Fredric Jameson and Herbert Marcuse) - a ritual in which unsolved social contradictions are symbolically resolved within the harmless domain of the aesthetic - or individual (as for Sigmund Freud and Georges Bataille) - sublimating a repressed desire to escape from subjectivity, to dissolve into the “oceanic” feeling of the undifferentiated collective.⁶⁷ Either way, there is surely a sense in which literature, religion and alcohol all constitute forms of compulsive repetition, or addictions: the self-defeating and hence self-renewing pursuit of an experience constitutively inadequate to itself. This latter clause would, indeed, serve as a reasonable one-sentence summary of the predicament of the novel form according to Georg Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*.

As such, in both form and content *Septology* foregrounds the repetition compulsion that underpins, yet generally goes unacknowledged in, the novel form’s more conventional instances. Far from being an avant-garde conquest of the future, periscopic forms such as *Old Masters*, *Austerlitz* and *Septology* are monuments to the novel form’s untimeliness: its constitutive belatedness, its recursive seriality. Inimical to progress, bound to a material form and medium with which it can nonetheless never fully coincide, and in perennial pursuit of a goal that it can never realize, the novel is condemned endlessly to reenact its own constitutive predicament. And it is in this sense that the novel is, as Rachel Kushner puts it, “stiff, fairly unchanging, and conservative as a form”.⁶⁸ Indeed: even Fosse’s defamiliarizing of the novel’s realist machinery, and the anxieties that underpin it, are as old as François Rabelais and Miguel de Cervantes,

⁶⁷ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (1981); Marcuse, “The Affirmative Character of Culture” (1936); Sigmund Freud, *Society and its Discontents* (1929); Georges Bataille, *Erotism: Death and Sensuality* (1957).

⁶⁸ “Rachel Kushner by Hari Kunzru” (2013), *Bomb Magazine*
<https://bombmagazine.org/articles/2013/04/01/rachel-kushner/>.

Jonathan Swift and Laurence Sterne. *Septology* thus generates its own formal singularity not through *ex nihilo* invention or avant-garde innovation but through its encounter with - and its rendering visible of - the novel form's constitutive limits. And as such it serves as a final exemplar of the untimeliness of the contemporary novel, which this dissertation has set out to theorize.

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