

Edited by
Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall

Georg Lukács: The Fundamental Dissonance of Existence

New Essays on Social, Political
and Aesthetic Theory



Georg Lukács:
The Fundamental
Dissonance of Existence

Continuum Literary Studies Series

Also available in the series:

- Active Reading* by Ben Knights and Chris Thurgar-Dawson
Adapting Detective Fiction by Neil McCaw
Beckett's Books by Matthew Feldman
Beckett and Phenomenology edited by Matthew Feldman and Ulrika Maude
Beckett and Decay by Katherine White
Beckett and Death edited by Steve Barfield, Matthew Feldman and Philip Tew
Canonizing Hypertext by Astrid Ensslin
Character and Satire in Postwar Fiction by Ian Gregson
Coleridge and German Philosophy by Paul Hamilton
Contemporary Fiction and Christianity by Andrew Tate
English Fiction in the 1930s by Chris Hopkins
Ecstasy and Understanding edited by Adrian Grafe
Fictions of Globalization by James Annesley
Joyce and Company by David Pierce
London Narratives by Lawrence Phillips
Masculinity in Fiction and Film by Brian Baker
Modernism and the Post-Colonial by Peter Childs
Milton, Evil and Literary History by Claire Colebrook
Novels of the Contemporary Extreme edited by Alain-Phillippe Durand and Naomi Mandel
Postmodern Fiction and the Break-Up of Fiction by Hywel Dix
Post-War British Women Novelists and the Canon by Nick Turner
Seeking Meaning for Goethe's Faust by J. M. van der Laan
Sexuality and the Erotic in the Fiction of Joseph Conrad by Jeremy Hawthorn
Such Deliberate Disguises: The Art of Phillip Larkin by Richard Palmer
The Imagination of Evil by Mary Evans
The Palimpsest by Sarah Dillon
The Measureless Past of Joyce, Deleuze and Derrida by Ruben Borg
Women's Fiction 1945–2000 by Deborah Philips

Georg Lukács:
The Fundamental
Dissonance of Existence

Aesthetics, Politics, Literature

Edited by
Timothy Bewes
and
Timothy Hall



Continuum International Publishing Group

The Tower Building
11 York Road
London SE1 7NX

80 Maiden Lane
Suite 704
New York, NY 10038

www.continuumbooks.com

© Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall 2011

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or any information storage or retrieval system, without prior permission in writing from the publishers.

British Library Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

EISBN: 978-1-4411-8728-4

Library of Congress Cataloguing-in-Publication Data

A catalog record for this book is available from the Library of Congress.

Typeset by Newgen Imaging Systems Pvt Ltd, Chennai, India

In memory of Frances Stracey
1963–2009

Even ideas that were at one time firmly established have a history of their truth and not a mere afterlife; they do not remain inherently indifferent to what befalls them.

—Theodor W. Adorno, *Hegel: Three Studies*

Contents

<i>Acknowledgements</i>	ix
<i>Abbreviations</i>	x
Introduction: Fundamental Dissonance <i>Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall</i>	1
Part I: Paradoxes of Form	
Chapter 1: Temporalized Invariance: Lukács and the Work of Form <i>Yoon Sun Lee</i>	17
Chapter 2: How to Escape from Literature? Lukács, Cinema and <i>The Theory of the Novel</i> <i>Timothy Bewes</i>	36
Chapter 3: Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel <i>David Cunningham</i>	49
Chapter 4: Typing Class: Classification and Redemption in Lukács's Political and Literary Theory <i>Patrick Eiden-Offe</i>	65
Part II: Life, History, Social Theory	
Chapter 5: Lukács <i>sans</i> Proletariat, or Can <i>History and Class Consciousness</i> Be Rehistoricized? <i>Neil Larsen</i>	81
Chapter 6: Rethinking Reification <i>Andrew Feenberg</i>	101
Chapter 7: Justice and the Good Life in Lukács's <i>History and Class Consciousness</i> <i>Timothy Hall</i>	121

Chapter 8: Capitalist Life in Lukács <i>Stewart Martin</i>	138
Part III: Aesthetic Reframings	
Chapter 9: Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Writing <i>Georg Lukács</i>	157
Chapter 10: The Historical and Political Context of Lukács's 'Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Writing' <i>Andrew Hemingway</i>	164
Chapter 11: 'Fascinating Delusive Light': Georg Lukács and Franz Kafka <i>Michael Löwy</i>	178
Chapter 12: The Historical Novel After Lukács <i>John Marx</i>	188
Chapter 13: Realism, Totality and the Militant <i>Citoyen</i> : Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art? <i>Gail Day</i>	203
<i>Appendix:</i> An Entire Epoch of Inhumanity <i>Georg Lukács</i>	221
<i>Contributors</i>	227
<i>Index</i>	231

Acknowledgements

The idea for this book was initiated by three events: a panel discussion entitled 'Revisiting Lukács's *Theory of the Novel*' at *Theories of the Novel Now*, a conference organized by *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* in Providence, Rhode Island, November 2007; a symposium entitled *Looking for Lukács*, organized by Jeremy Gilbert and Timothy Hall, held at the University of East London, June 2008; and a panel entitled 'Reclaiming Modernism for Lukács' organized by Timothy Bewes at the Modernist Studies Association conference in Nashville, Tennessee, November 2008. Each of these has been represented in some form in these pages. We are grateful to the participants in and fellow-organizers of these events, including Jonathan Arac, Nancy Armstrong, David Cunningham, Jed Esty, Andy Fisher, Jeremy Gilbert, Andrew Hemingway, Yoon Sun Lee, Stewart Martin, John Marx, Ellen Rooney and Bill Solomon. The Marxist Literary Group conference at St Francis Xavier University, Nova Scotia, in June 2010 proved to be an occasion to rehearse some of the ideas in the introduction, and Timothy Bewes would like to thank the organizers and fellow attendees, especially Mathias Nilges. In addition, we would like to thank Sarah Osment for editorial assistance; Zachary Sng for his advice and translation of Lukács's preface to *Probleme des Realismus, III*; Andrew Feenberg for encouraging this project in its early stages; Kevin McLaughlin and Marilyn Netter in the English Department at Brown University; Michalis Skomvoulis; the Research Committee of the School of Humanities and the Social Sciences, University of East London; Merl Storr for compiling the index; Anna Fleming and Colleen Coalter at Continuum; and our contributors for meeting our deadlines and writing such provocative essays. We also extend our thanks to the following artists discussed in Chapter 13 for allowing us to illustrate their work: Allan Sekula, Petr Bystrov on behalf of the Radek Community, Chto Delat, and Freee.

Abbreviations

The following abbreviations are used for German editions of works by Lukács cited in the text:

- GK *Geschichte und Klassenbewußtsein – Studien über marxistische Dialektik* (1968). Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand.
- V ‘Vorwort,’ *Probleme des Realismus III, Werke* [6] (1965). Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand.
- W *Werke* (1962–1974). 17 volumes (volume number indicated in square brackets). Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand.
- WR *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (1958). Hamburg: Claassen.

The following abbreviations are used for standard English translations of Lukács’s works:

- DHC *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (2000), trans. E. Leslie. London: Verso.
- EE ‘An Entire Epoch of Humanity’ (Foreword to Volume 6 of Lukács’s *Werke*) (2010), trans. Z. Sng. Included as an appendix to the present volume.
- ER *Essays on Realism* (1981), trans. D. Fernbach, ed. R. Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- GR *German Realists in the Nineteenth Century* (1993), trans. J. Gaines and P. Keast. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- HCC *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics* (1971), trans. R. Livingstone. London: Merlin.
- HN *The Historical Novel* (1983), trans. H. and S. Mitchell. Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press.
- LR *The Lukács Reader* (1995), ed. A. Kadarkay. Oxford: Blackwell.
- MCR *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963), trans. J. and N. Mander. London: Merlin.
- PR *Political Writings, 1919–1929: The Question of Parliamentarianism and Other Essays* (1972), trans. M. McColgan, ed. R. Livingstone. London: New Left Books.

- SER *Studies in European Realism* (2002), trans. E. Bone. New York: Howard Fertig.
- SF *Soul and Form* (2010), trans. A. Bostock, ed. J. Sanders and K. Terezakis, with an introduction by J. Butler. New York: Columbia University Press.
- TAC ‘Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema’ (2001), trans. J. Blankenship, *Polygraph* 13, 13–18.
- TN *The Theory of the Novel: A Historico-Philosophical Essay on the Forms of Great Epic Literature* (1971), trans. A. Bostock. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- WC *Writer and Critic* (1978), trans. and ed. A. D. Kahn. London: Merlin.
- YH *The Young Hegel: Studies in the Relations Between Dialectics and Economics* (1976), trans. R. Livingstone. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

The following abbreviations refer to frequently cited works by other authors:

- AP Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin and Theodor Adorno (1977), *Aesthetics and Politics*. London: NLB.
- PN J. M. Bernstein (1984), *The Philosophy of the Novel: Lukács, Marxism and the Dialectics of Form*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- RNL Axel Honneth (2008), *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.
- TLSD Moishe Postone (1996), *Time, Labor and Social Domination*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Introduction

Fundamental Dissonance

Timothy Bewes and Timothy Hall

Is a new reading of Georg Lukács possible? Perhaps a more pertinent question would be: is a new reading of Lukács necessary? After all, this is a thinker whose preoccupations, and solutions, seem firmly grounded in the debates and energies of the twentieth century. Much of what he is thought to stand for has come to seem discredited, even to those for whom Marxist principles of analysis are a matter of ongoing reflection and debate. Obvious candidates for the withdrawal of credit include Lukács's aesthetic defences of realism against modernism; the early political accommodation he arrived at with Stalinism; and his unwavering philosophical commitment to the 'proletariat' as the unified subject/object of history.

It is quite usual for readers and advocates of Lukács's work to defend the apparently failed notion of proletarian 'class consciousness' using Lukács's own concept of 'imputedness'; to insist, as Lukács did himself – most directly in his *Defence of History and Class Consciousness* from 1925 or 1926 – that the proletariat is not a historical formation; that, as Lukács puts it at the end of the essay on 'Class Consciousness', the only 'objectivity' to the notion of class consciousness consists in its 'objective *possibility*' (HCC 79). What even sympathetic readers tend to skirt over, with some embarrassment, are the texts (for example, the 1938 essay 'Realism in the Balance') in which a certain indisputably historical formation is defended with deadpan phrases such as 'the consolidation of the victory of the proletariat' (AP 52). Theodor Adorno's verdict, delivered twenty years later, that Lukács's early work 'set a standard for philosophical aesthetics which has been retained ever since', seems impossible to entertain without its corollary a few sentences later: that Lukács's writing from the 1920s onwards succumbs, despite the 'obviously unimpaired talents' of its author, to 'the unrelieved sterility of Soviet claptrap' (AP 151).

This conjoined historical judgement is one that this book will attempt, at the very least, to complicate. In the opening pages of his three-essay study of Hegel, Adorno dismissed what he referred to as the 'loathsome' question asked by Benedetto Croce: 'What is living and what is dead of the philosophy of Hegel?'¹ For Adorno, such a question, predicated on static notions of the present,

history and knowledge, functions to preclude the more incisive question of what the present might mean ‘in the face of Hegel’ (1993, p. 1). The ‘timeliness’ of Hegel, he says in a paradoxical formulation, should be looked for not in his relevance, but in his obsolescence, the very source of his oppositional force (ibid., 55). The awkward fact, however, is that even Adorno allows Croce’s loathsome question to stand with respect to Lukács. This book attempts to widen the principles of Adorno’s reading of Hegel in order to ask: how can we understand the present in the face of Lukács?

In a 1992 interview, when asked about the influence of Lukács on his own work, including during the period of his collaboration with Louis Althusser, Étienne Balibar recalled recently rereading ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, the central essay in *History and Class Consciousness*: ‘I wanted to determine exactly who for the first time had spoken of a “subject of history”’. And after having looked for that in all possible places, from Hegel himself to Marx, and also later writers, I came to the conclusion that this formulation had been invented by nobody else but Lukács himself in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein* (Corredor, 1997, p. 115).

As the attention paid to it by a number of contributors in this volume attests, the question of the ‘subject of history’ is perhaps the most controversial and debated of all of Lukács’s ideas. The concept first appears in *History and Class Consciousness*, the inaugural work of Lukács’s Marxist period, where Lukács names the proletariat as the class which, ‘on the basis of its life-experience’, is able to discover itself as both subject and object of history at the very moment at which – to quote Marx – it ‘proclaims the dissolution of the existing world order’ (HCC 149; Marx, 1992, p. 256). In so doing, the proletariat understands its exploitation as the objective principle of the old world and, in overturning it, establishes its subjective liberation as the objective principle of the new; thus, in a brilliant theoretical coup, the subject/object dichotomy is for the first time brought into alliance. In the Althusserian account, however, this theme is exemplary of the ‘humanist’ and ‘historicist’ tenor of Lukács’s thinking (Althusser and Balibar, 2009, pp. 132–3). Lukács’s conception of the proletariat, writes Althusser in *For Marx*, is a ‘religious’ one, in which this ‘universal’ class figures as the means of a restitution of the ‘loss of man’ in ‘revolt against its own loss’ (2005, pp. 221–2n; see HCC 20).

For Balibar, speaking retrospectively in 1992, Lukács’s *History and Class Consciousness* and Althusser’s *For Marx* are comparable volumes – collections of essays ‘with a deep philosophical commitment and at the same time a direct connection with current political events as well as a very important aesthetic dimension’. Yet the juxtaposition of the two books dramatizes a decisive division within twentieth-century Marxism: ‘What Althusser does in *For Marx* . . . is put an end to the discussion of the “subject of history” by introducing a concept of ideology which transforms the very notion of subject into a typical feature of bourgeois ideology. . . . I think that this is an absolutely decisive comparison and confrontation in the history of twentieth-century Marxism’ (116).

As Balibar describes it, Lukács's 'humanist' interpretation of Marxism was quickly displaced, in his own thinking, by the 'structuralist' interpretation being developed by Althusser's group at the *École Normale Supérieure*:

We all read now the whole history of the great German idealistic tradition, starting with Kant and continuing with Fichte, Hegel, and Marx himself – who of course is a typical German idealist in that respect – as a history of the successive elaborations of the 'subject of history,' which becomes identified with 'mankind' in the philosophy of Kant, with the '*Weltgeist*' in the philosophy of Hegel, with the 'proletariat' in Marx, etc. But, in fact, that is a retrospective projection. I do not say that there is nothing in these philosophies that has anything to do with the concept, but the expression, the formula, I think, was coined by Lukács. Words are decisive in philosophy, because philosophy is a practice of writing. (113)

When asked, in 1992, whether the implication of what he was saying is that Lukács's Marxism 'has come to an end', Balibar replies, 'Yes, I am saying that, yes' (116–17).

It is not the intention of the present volume to defend (nor even to dispute the charge of) Lukács's 'humanism'. Nevertheless, in the two decades since Balibar was speaking, a broader perspective upon Lukács's work and legacy than is evident here has become possible, not only because of the theoretical complication of the opposition (humanist/post-humanist) Balibar invokes, but also due to transformations in the geopolitical and ideological context in which we now read his work. The objective of this book is to look at Lukács's career as a whole; to consider the works explicitly devoted to questions of aesthetics and literary method alongside those rooted in social-political concerns; to read the early ('pre-Marxist') and later writings together, and to do so from the perspective of a world in which changes in commodity culture and artistic practices, a proliferation of images and technology in daily life, and transformations in the situation and conditions of labour and in relations of production have created a new context in which to consider the central categories of Lukács's thought.

One upshot of this approach is that the hypothesis of the 'break', 'rupture' or epistemic 'shift' in Lukács's intellectual and political trajectory is put into question. If the early and late Lukács are read in dialogue, rather than in opposition, it is no longer so obvious that the 'humanist' and 'historicist' tendencies generally attributed to Lukács's Marxist turn are necessary to – or even present as a unifying principle of – Lukács's thought. What happens, for example, to the theme of the 'subject of history' when read against the reflections on form in *Soul and Form* – a work that, as Judith Butler has written in an introduction to a new edition of the book, 'has no inkling of the formalisms, historicisms, or Marxisms to come' (SF 5)? 'Words are decisive', as Balibar has it; but when Lukács attributes a 'historical' existence to the proletariat as a class, as he seems to at certain moments in *History and Class Consciousness*, how confident should

we be about the ontological or teleological nature of this proposition? Is there a historical or Hegelian subject in Lukács's theory of history? Under what conditions might it be possible to dispense with the 'Hegelian' dimensions of Lukács's Marxism? Under what conditions might it be possible to hold on to them?

On one reading of Lukács, there is little to suggest that the uncovering of the 'standpoint of the proletariat' – the well-known phrase from *History and Class Consciousness* – coincides with the 'end of history'; rather the opposite. Lukács's understanding of the political subject is as a historical radicalization of Kant's autonomous subject. Instead of the dichotomy established by Kant in the *Groundwork* of the *Metaphysics of Morals*, in which either the subject acts through nature (autonomy), or nature acts through us (heteronomy) (Kant, 1948, pp. 111–12), Lukács offers an alternative, historical and crucially *dynamic* model: either history acts through the subject (capitalism), or the subject acts through history (socialism).² The 'imputedness' of class consciousness, for example, owes as much to Kant's order of aesthetic judgement as to the 'teleological' or 'historicist' thinking of Hegel.³

On another reading, the 'proletariat' in *History and Class Consciousness*, far from introducing a new category or conceptualization into political thought, might be read as extending Lukács's earlier understanding of form and aesthetics into revolutionary politics. For Lukács in *Soul and Form*, form is 'that unity which can combine within itself the largest number of divergent forces' (SF 39). Consciousness itself is populated by forms, and has no reality outside form. 'The task of form,' points out Butler, 'of literary form, but also of "form" in some loosely Platonic sense, is to rationalize the accidental in every life. Forms do not exist unless men make them, and those who do make these extraordinarily capacious forms find that every aspect of life, however accidental, becomes necessary and essential' (SF 8).

To 'rationalize', says Butler; but a more Lukácsian term to describe the same process, perhaps, would be that of 'overcoming' the accidental in the passage to necessity, a process at the end of which, says Lukács, 'everything, as in music, is only what it means and means only what it is' (SF 39). 'Away with everything accidental!' he enjoins in the same essay. This formula also describes the task of the proletariat, as it is conceived in *History and Class Consciousness*: 'If from the vantage point of a particular class the totality of existing society is not visible; if a class thinks the thoughts imputable to it and which bear upon its interests right through to their logical conclusion and yet fails to strike at the heart of that totality, then such a class is doomed to play only a subordinate role. It can never influence the course of history in either a conservative or progressive direction. . . . [Such classes] may win a few battles but they are doomed to ultimate defeat' (52). The task of the revolutionary party, according to Lukács, is to muster sufficient energy and will to make what is merely possible *inevitable* – which means nothing more than to bring it to the state of *having taken place*. The party (or the proletariat), like the artist, or indeed history itself, establishes

historical necessity in place of the accidental. ‘A real solution can only come from form,’ says Lukács in the essay on Rudolf Kassner. To connect this utterance with what, in 1917, Lukács will discover to be the solution to the problems that, ‘until then, had seemed to me insoluble’ (TN 11–12) – that is to say, historical materialism – is irresistible. Questions remain, however: Is Lukács’s political theory vitiated by its provenance in his early thinking about aesthetic form? What residues of the old solution remain active in, and constitutive of, the new one? Does the ‘imputedness’ of the proletariat undermine the *political* force of class consciousness, as Lukács himself apparently came to believe?

In ‘Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel’, David Cunningham considers some of these questions, arguing, on the basis of the role of abstraction in Lukács’s *Theory of the Novel*, that Lukács’s earlier work, far from falling prey to a Hegelian idealism, rather grasps, in terms that it had not yet conceptualized, the logic of capital itself. One of the costs of Lukács’s translation of his youthful Hegelianism into the terms of revolutionary politics, according to Cunningham, is precisely his ‘Hegelian’ understanding of the ‘real abstraction’ of modern social relations. The translation needs to be supplemented, then, by a re-translation of Lukács’s later analysis of realist fictional modes back into the Hegelian and (so Cunningham argues) Marxian register of the ‘real idealism’ of capital.

Certainly, to bring moments from different periods in Lukács’s thought together in this way is to read Lukács against the chronological tendencies of his own thinking. As Yoon Sun Lee points out in ‘Temporalized Invariance’, the essay that opens this book, Lukács’s thought around form evinces a progressively greater commitment to temporal, chronological categories; the later Lukács ‘temporalizes’ his own thinking about form to such an extent that the kind of ‘spatial dialectic’ that one might try to establish for the reading of Lukács’s work becomes a profoundly counterintuitive exercise.⁴ The effect of Lee’s essay, however, is precisely to restore such a spatial dialectic to Lukács’s own thinking. She is concerned with a central ambiguity in Lukács’s understanding of form, an ambiguity that is most clearly evident in the contrast between two formulations of the relation of form to time, in *Soul and Form* and *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* respectively: does form exist outside time, interrupting it and halting it, thereby (in some sense) falsifying it; or does it amount, rather, to a way of temporalizing invariability itself? The question, and Lee’s own conceptual innovation of ‘temporalized invariability’, suggest a new way of reading the trajectory of Lukács’s work. Indeed, in the light of Lee’s essay, many of the intellectual shifts that Lukács made in his career appear dramatized by this distinction, which implies not only two conceptions of form, but also two conceptions of time.

In ‘How to Escape from Literature? Lukács, Cinema and *The Theory of the Novel*’, Timothy Bewes argues that there is a liberatory potential at the heart of Lukács’s early analysis of the novel, but that in order to preserve it, it is necessary to discard the historical ontology put forward in the work itself: the link

between the ‘absolute sinfulness’ of the novel and a particular historico-philosophical moment. Bewes reads *The Theory of the Novel* alongside a little-known article by Lukács from 1913 entitled ‘Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema’, where the very terms with which Lukács will theorize both the utopian ‘new world’ of literature and the vanished form of the epic appear ascribed to cinema. The essay on cinema enables us to reconceptualize Lukács’s category of ‘absolute sinfulness’ as a technical, rather than moral, category, and the proposed ‘new world’ as no longer predicated on a historical transformation, but as a task of criticism for which cinema provides the clearest model: the discovery of a common ontology of the object and the work.

History itself has had an effect on the viability and integrity of Lukácsian categories, most notably on the ‘problem of the subject’, and the related concept of experience. These terms have come under persistent philosophical interrogation in recent years from a number of quarters.⁵ In this context, it is no longer so easy to dismiss Lukács’s conception of the proletariat as a materialization – or ‘enthronement’ – of an idealist identity-subject (Habermas, 1984, pp. 364–5). Nor does it suffice to reject any discussion of subjective experience as intrinsically ‘bourgeois’, as if subjecthood were wholly a construct of ideology. But what is the precise character of Lukács’s conception, and what political resources does it release?

In ‘Lukács *sans* Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* be Re-historicized?’ Neil Larsen alludes to the modern near-consensus that Lukács’s proletariat ‘did not, has not, will not’ and indeed ‘could not’ enter history as its empirical subject/object. On the basis of the evaporation of the revolutionary potential of the proletariat, he proposes a rethinking of historical subjectivity taking form around the idea of the social. Unlike other contemporary theoretical positions that might be seen to derive more directly from Lukács, Larsen does not identify an alternative, identity-based subject of history. Rather, drawing on the work of Moishe Postone, the *Wertkritik* school and Norbert Trenkle, he looks to the third section of Lukács’s essay on reification to identify a subject/object of history that would be faithful both to the principle of the immanent critique of reification – the ‘core’, insists Larsen, ‘of Marx’s own critical theory’ – as well as to the contemporary reality of a society mediated by ‘real abstraction’. Larsen’s solution is found in Lukács’s own notion of ‘crisis as catastrophe’, and in ‘the very *possibility* of the social in the face of the catastrophe of capitalism’. This proposition successfully rids itself, according to Larsen, of the traditional Marxist ‘fetish-categories’ of labour and class struggle, even while it leaves the mechanism of a liberation from reified consciousness crucially unformulated.

Another prevalent criticism of Lukács is that his conception of class is simply monolithic. According to this view, history, for Lukács, is a product of the struggle between homogeneous classes that function as historical demiurges. For thinkers like Louis Althusser, Nicos Poulantzas and even Michel Foucault, the struggle of history was conducted, rather, by complex fractured ideologies

consisting of temporary and shifting alliances. In 'Typing Class: Classification and Redemption in Lukács's Political and Literary Theory', Patrick Eiden-Offe revisits this issue by reading Lukács's concept of class through Weber's concept of 'ideal' type, thereby displacing the notion of class consciousness as a 'typical' or 'average' mentality. Playing on the multiple meanings of 'type' and 'typical', Eiden-Offe brings Lukács's theoretical approach to class and class consciousness into explicit dialogue with his theory of literature. One of the implications of this reading is that Lukács's conception of realism is revealed as a theory of 'imputedness', quite as much as the theory of reification and the proletariat.

In 'Rethinking Reification', Andrew Feenberg discusses Axel Honneth's recent attempt to reinvent the concept of reification as a 'social pathology', predicated upon the failure of recognition. At least one reason why Honneth's attempt fails, according to Feenberg, is his neglect of that which is fundamental to Lukács's concept of reification: its focus on social processes and, in Feenberg's words, the 'predominance of rational structures that distort and oppress the human lives they contain'. Honneth turns reification into an individual pathology, associated with the failure to recognize the other; Feenberg, by contrast, holds to the role of reification itself in 'distorting' and 'oppressing' the lives that it affects. Lukács's understanding of reification as bound up with the 'dialectic of structure and agency', rather than with psychological attitudes, is mobilized as a vital corrective to Honneth's work, which forecloses any theoretical account of collective activity as an action 'from the middle' – as neither subjective nor objective in genesis.

In 'Justice and the Good Life in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*', Timothy Hall argues that the uniqueness and enduring relevance of Lukács's great essay on reification lie in the manner in which it combines a concern for social justice with the question of the meaningful good life. As Hall notes, the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history is charged not simply with realizing the claim to social justice, but with making life meaningful under conditions of modernity. He elaborates this claim by retracing significant turns in Lukács's argument, in particular, the generalization of Marx's concept of the commodity form. Lukács's emphasis on the new, Hall contends, makes ontological novelty, rather than identity, the central idea in the Reification essay. By contrast, Stewart Martin finds in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* an early formulation of the 'total reification' thesis, according to which capitalism subsumes life without remainder, and life itself undergoes a fundamental transformation. While classical Marxism took as axiomatic the inability of capitalism to subsume life, the great audacity of Lukács's work on reification was to contemplate for the first time the possibility of a totalization of the commodity form. Martin approaches Lukács's essay in the light of contemporary discourses of biopower and biopolitics; thus, as Martin demonstrates, the problematic of 'capitalist life' introduces yet another new frame through which to assess the entire trajectory of Lukács's work, from the early essay 'The Metaphysics of

Tragedy' (SF) to late works such as *The Destruction of Reason* and *The Ontology of Social Being*.

* * *

At the end of the 1920s, at the height of the controversy over *History and Class Consciousness*, Lukács began a turn that would prove decisive for his influence on Western literary criticism, and for the nature of the role that Marxist theory would play in debates in the West in particular. We offer a translation, for the first time in English, of what is arguably the inaugural work of this shift towards questions of aesthetics in Lukács's work, his 1926 essay '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' – an essay that anticipates in fascinating ways Lukács's own separation of the political significance of artworks from their content in his theory of realism. As Arpad Kadarkay points out in his biography of Lukács, the essay on art for art's sake is a covertly personal work, as much anticipating its author's own imminent turn to aesthetic questions as reflecting on the political 'despair' of aristocratic writers of the nineteenth century (1991, p. 283). Andrew Hemingway provides an introduction to and historical contextualization of the essay, illuminating the circumstances of its publication and considering the ways in which Lukács's apparent sympathy for the most significant nineteenth-century representatives of *l'art pour l'art* reflects the political pressures that Lukács himself was experiencing during the 1920s and 1930s.

In "Fascinating Delusive Light": Georg Lukács and Franz Kafka', Michael Löwy offers a reconsideration of Lukács's relation to Kafka in the light of a late 'change of heart' towards the writer, evident in a preface written in 1964 for Volume 6 of Lukács's *Collected Works*. The full text of this preface, again translated for the first time, appears here in an appendix. Löwy's analysis also forces a new assessment of *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, the work on which we had been dependent until now for Lukács's view of Kafka. *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* is a book whose reception in the anglophone world has not been helped by a substandard translation, or by the insufficient attention paid to the context and moment of its production. Löwy's essay thus introduces a revision not only in our understanding of Lukács's relation to Kafka, but in the significance of this middle period work by Lukács.

In 'The Historical Novel after Lukács', John Marx rereads Lukács's *The Historical Novel* in the light of what Marx argues is a lost or forgotten preoccupation of the novel, one that Lukács discovers in his reading of Walter Scott, but doesn't develop. Scholarship dealing with the eighteenth- and nineteenth-century novel has been dominated by the narrative that links the novel inseparably to the rise of the individual. The other story, equally important in Lukács, but less overt, is the novel's great facility of narrating 'bonding, packing and grouping'. This dimension of Lukács's analysis, observes Marx, is the one that speaks most directly to the current global conjuncture, featuring as it does

‘characters who live to bridge populations, to forge cosmopolitan friendships, to fall in love with enemies of their home nations and to collaborate with strangers of all sorts’. Marx demonstrates how this logic works in Scott, before tracing the same narrative at work in three radically different, much later novelists: Charles Dickens, Virginia Woolf and Amitav Ghosh. Thus, like Löwy, Marx opens up a new reading of a central text by Lukács, while significantly revising our understanding of how it might come to be used in a political and cultural context other than Lukács’s own.

Finally, in ‘Realism, Totality, and the Militant *Citoyen*: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do with Contemporary Art?’ Gail Day explores the recent emergence of an explicitly political art practice, most notably in the work of Allan Sekula and the Russian-based collectives Chto Delat and Radek. This realist and political turn in contemporary art, Day suggests, lends a surprising relevance to Lukács’s widely disparaged defences of realism. In showing the confluence of Lukács’s aesthetic theory with contemporary art practice, Day uncovers new possibilities in both. The central category of totality is carefully analysed, and contrasted with the ‘God’s eye view’ that it is often mistaken for. There is a simplicity to Lukács’s concept, insists Day, which demands nothing more than that we think the interrelation of seemingly discrete phenomena. The same impulse can be discerned in contemporary realist techniques, which attempt to dramatize and ultimately transfigure the current phase of (global) capital accumulation. Such work, she maintains, presents new opportunities for emancipatory struggle across the political and aesthetic divide.

* * *

The title of this book, and its point of departure, derives from a formula that Lukács offers in *The Theory of the Novel*: ‘Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence.’ The full passage reads as follows:

For crime and madness are objectifications of transcendental homelessness – the homelessness of an action in the human order of social relations, the homelessness of a soul in the ideal order of a supra-personal system of values. Every form is the resolution of a fundamental dissonance of existence; every form restores the absurd to its proper place as the vehicle, the necessary condition of meaning. (61–2)

For the early Lukács, what is ‘fundamental’ is not unity, for all his imaginary evocation of a world in which ‘the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars’ (TN 29), but dissonance. Every form, every product of man, every intellectual concept, every effort of comprehension, as well as every act and every expression, testifies to a struggle taking place in the grip of fundamental disunity. The implications of the passage are not limited to art or literature. Indeed, they should be extended to Lukács’s political writings of the

1920s and beyond, in particular, to the practical and philosophical investment of those works in certain key conceptual forms.

If the capitalist system is a 'totality', for example, this is not an ontological proposition, but one that implies the great struggle involved in the emergence of all forms. Capitalism itself is a form. Comprehension, likewise, exists not as the penetration *through* form, but as the evolution *of* a form. The 'totality' of the capitalist system is not something to escape from, but to aspire to; totality consists of nothing other than the *principle* of capitalism's comprehensibility. Like the category of the proletariat, totality is 'imputed'; it is an axiom of thought, rather than a product of it.

The attempt to overcome reification, Lukács writes in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', entails annulling the 'indifference of form towards content'. Lukács there undertakes a search for a conception of form 'whose basis and validity no longer rest on that pure rationality and that freedom from every definition of content' (HCC 126). He considers the claims of cognitive, moral and aesthetic form in turn, rejecting each while adapting his own conception in accordance with them. As in *Soul and Form* and *The Theory of the Novel*, the conception of form that emerges is one that is open to contingency, to the point at which contingency becomes its constitutive principle. For Lukács, to think contingency is the very meaning of praxis: 'It is only in history, in the historical process, in the uninterrupted outpouring of what is qualitatively new that the requisite paradigmatic order can be found in the realm of things' (HCC 144). The primary task is to avoid a situation in which history is subordinated to one part of the philosophical system, as it is, Lukács contends, in Hegel's thought; the form conferred on history must be recognized as originating in history itself. In Merleau-Ponty's later formulation, it is we who 'confer' meaning on history, but not before history suggests the significance that we give to it (Merleau-Ponty, 2002, p. 522).

There is no better illustration of the continuity of Lukács's thought on the matter of totality than his famous exchange with Ernst Bloch at the end of the 1930s. The topic of discussion is Expressionism, Lukács's disdain for which is symptomatic, according to Bloch, of his inability to accommodate 'any art which strives to exploit the *real* fissures in surface inter-relations and to discover the new in their crevices' (AP 22). Bloch attempts to dislodge Lukács's commitment to realism with a rhetorical question: 'What if Lukács's reality – a coherent, infinitely mediated totality – is not so objective after all? What if his conception of reality has failed to liberate itself completely from Classical systems? What if authentic reality is also discontinuity?' (AP 22). The question at issue, as Lukács summarizes it in his response, is an ontological one: 'Does the "closed integration", the "totality" of the capitalist system, of bourgeois society, with its unity of economics and ideology, really form an objective whole, independent of consciousness?' (31) To pose the question in such terms, however, is to attribute a unity to the real that precedes its current 'disintegration'; such a prediscursive unity is not consistent with Lukácsian thought. This difference is the major issue

dividing Lukács from Bloch. For Lukács the answer is yes – not because he fails to acknowledge the ‘disunity’ of modern existence, but because totality is not a category that describes a ‘state of affairs’. Disunity is nothing more than a given, the result of an unmediated or empirical experience of life (AP 39). Totality, on the other hand, is a principle, as stated most concisely by Karl Marx: ‘the relations of production of every society form a whole’ (AP 31; see Marx, 1963, p. 110). For Bloch, by contrast, the question is asked, and answerable, only at the level of content. Reality is a ‘state of affairs’, and ‘totality’ is not a principle but a descriptive term, to be accepted or rejected as such. Bloch’s answer, accordingly, is no, because he approaches capitalism as a system existing objectively, outside, say, the questions that we ask of it, and for which ‘totality’ is *no longer* applicable.

The principle of totality by which Lukács proceeds is more necessary than ever at the present time. During the preparation of this volume, public opinion has been perpetuating a discourse that is oblivious to the principle of totality, and inhabited rather by the reified terms of fragmented consciousness. Thus, the world financial system is supposedly ‘recovering’ from a collapse in the markets that is widely attributed to the ‘excesses’, both structural and ethical, of global capitalism. This discourse, and the terms ‘crisis’, ‘collapse’, ‘stability’, ‘excesses’ that are currently in play as explanatory ones, demand Lukács’s critical lucidity: his insistence that neither stability nor crisis, neither excess nor normality, has any truth in itself, abstracted from the totality in which such terms must be understood together. Both stability and crisis exist only as unmediated phenomena, manifestations at the level of consciousness:

[I]n periods when capitalism functions in a so-called normal manner, and its various processes appear autonomous, people living within capitalist society think and experience it as unitary, whereas in periods of crisis, when the autonomous elements are drawn together into unity, they experience it as disintegration. With the general crisis of the capitalist system, the experience of disintegration becomes firmly entrenched over long periods of time in broad sectors of the population which normally experience the various manifestations of capitalism in a very immediate way. (AP 32)

What we experience at the level of the individual consciousness as ‘disintegration’ is precisely the totality, the integration, of the capitalist system. Perhaps the most important lesson of Lukács’s work for the present time is the principle that he held to more consistently than any other: the rejection of individual consciousness as having any bearing whatsoever on the possibility of a true understanding of the totality. It is in this sense that the present is to be regarded ‘in the face of’ Lukács (rather than, say, through his eyes). With Lukács, the subsumption of life by capital may be seen not as a catastrophic hypothesis but as a contribution, on the part of capital itself, to the critique of reification; form comes to be seen no longer as an impediment to content, but as the obligation

of every critical procedure; and dissonance stands revealed not as a reversion from, or a degradation in, the possibility of unity, but as its very foundation.

Notes

- ¹ Adorno, 1993, p. 1; see Croce, 1915.
- ² See also, in this regard, Cornelius Castoriadis's discussion of autonomy and praxis in Castoriadis (1987) pp. 107–10.
- ³ Kant writes: 'All that is postulated [in a judgment of taste] is the *possibility* of a judgment that is aesthetic and yet can be considered valid for everyone. The judgment of taste itself does not *postulate* everyone's agreement . . . ; it merely *requires* this agreement from everyone, as an instance of the rule, an instance regarding which it expects confirmation not from concepts but from the agreement of others. . . . Hence the universal voice is only an idea. . . .' (1987, §8, p. 60). Likewise, for Lukács, the substance of proletarian class consciousness, in advance of the revolution that will bring it into being, is only 'imputed'. Both aesthetic judgements and class consciousness look towards a moment of confirmation or deliverance that exists only theoretically – exists, that is to say, in the realm of imputation alone.
- ⁴ On the proposition of a 'spatial' rather than 'temporal' dialectic, see Jameson (2009), esp. pp. 66–70.
- ⁵ Of particular importance here is the recent renewal of interest in Kantian and post-Kantian idealism in social and political thought, which has criticized standard metaphysical readings of *Geist* and made possible nonmetaphysical readings of Hegelian Marxism. See, for example, Pippin (1991), Williams (1992), Neuhaus (2000) and Pinkard (2003). While none of these authors engages directly with the Hegelian-Marxist tradition, their interpretations of Hegel problematize standard dismissals of the latter on the grounds of his humanism.

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1993), *Hegel: Three Studies*, trans. S. W. NicholSEN. Cambridge, MA: MIT press.
- Althusser, L. (2005), *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster. London: Verso.
- Althusser, L., and E. Balibar (2009), *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster. London: Verso.
- Castoriadis, C. (1987), *The Imaginary Institution of Society*, trans. K. Blamey. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Corredor, E. L. (1997), 'Interview with Etienne Balibar', in *Lukács After Communism: Interviews with Contemporary Intellectuals*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, pp. 113–126.
- Croce, B. (1915), *What Is Living and What Is Dead of the Philosophy of Hegel*, trans. D. Ainslie. London: Macmillan.
- Habermas, J. (1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1*, trans. T McCarthy. London: Heinemann.

- Jameson, F. (2009), 'The Three Names of the Dialectic', in *Valences of the Dialectic*, London and New York: Verso, pp. 3–70.
- Kadarkay, A. (1991), *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kant, I. (1948), *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals*, trans. H. J. Paton. London: Hutchinson.
- (1987), *Critique of Judgment*, trans. W. S. Pluhar. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett.
- Marx, K. (1963), *The Poverty of Philosophy: Answer to the 'Philosophy of Poverty' by M. Proudhon*. New York: International Publishers.
- (1992), *Early Writings*, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (2002), *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. C. Smith. London and New York: Routledge.
- Neuhouser, F. (2000), *The Foundations of Hegel's Social Theory: Actualizing Freedom*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Pippin, R. B. (1991), *Modernism as a Philosophical Problem*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell.
- Pinkard, T. (2003), *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Williams, R. R. (1992), *Recognition: Fichte and Hegel on the Other*. Albany, NY: State University of New York Press.

Part I

Paradoxes of Form

Chapter 1

Temporalized Invariance: Lukács and the Work of Form

Yoon Sun Lee

The concept of form never disappears from Lukács's writing. In *Soul and Form* (1910) Lukács describes his own impassioned experiences of form as that which calls the critic into being. 'Form is his great experience' (SF 23). Nearly 40 years later, in *Studies in European Realism* (1948), Lukács is, if anything, even more urgently concerned with 'effective artistic forms' (SER 18). But now aesthetic forms provide the conditions of social, rather than private, experience and action. They condition social experience by intricately mediating our sense of the possible; and they accomplish that mediation by manipulating what Lukács has come to see as constitutive of form: time.

Lukács remains remarkably true to the calling of the critic, which he defines in *Soul and Form* as giving expression to the experience of what form reveals: 'conceptuality as sensed experience, as immediate reality . . . the world-view in its undisguised purity as an event of the soul, as the motive force of life' (SF 22). Thirty years later, Lukács still seeks to describe the worldview, the idea whose lived experience the artistically achieved form permits. But there occurs a subtle underlying change in his conception of form.¹ This essay traces an important shift in how Lukács understands form's relation to time. In his early writings, Lukács thinks of form as that which must exclude or stop the flow of time in order to make essence manifest. Against the inconclusive, continuous mixture of what he calls 'life', in which 'everything flows, everything merges into another thing', the form of tragedy, for example, seizes unchanging essence to give it a 'hard and ruthless outline' (SF 176–77). By thinking of form as the antithesis of temporal flow, Lukács places himself in a modernist line of thought according to which, in Catherine Gallagher's account, the attainment of form depends on stopping time, evacuating it or outpacing it.² Given Lukács's notorious hostility to modernist aesthetics, this in itself is noteworthy. But as early as *Soul and Form*, Lukács makes no secret of his discomfort with this concept of form, even while he adheres to it. As Judith Butler insightfully points out: '[w]hile Lukács can live with the "thousand instants" . . . at this point in his career, it is less clear how long such a provisional gathering of life's disparate

moments would prove bearable for him' (SF 14). Form that consists in a moment or a collection of moments cannot defend itself against the greater and more constant force of life's temporal flow.

I will argue that Lukács, from the 1930s onward, overcomes this problem of the moment not by turning away from aesthetic form but by incorporating time within his idea of form. Lukács does more than simply look outward from the aesthetic form to the 'enclosing totality' of 'the social whole', in Butler's words (SF 14).³ He comes to conceive of form temporally, and of time formally. When he takes up the critical task of defending realism, he finds adequate form to inhere not in the single moment but in the quality of the relations between moments of a single whole.

Rather than looking to the referent directly, to the social whole represented in Lukács's thought, I will focus on a particular type of relation internal to narrative structure: recurrence or repetition. Lukács seems to find in this relation a key to what he calls 'the problem of the objectivity of artistic form' (WC 57). Recurrence gives aesthetic form its objectivity, its distinctive stand-alone character. The phenomenon of recurrence also marks the point at which aesthetic experience and historical understanding intersect. In his essay 'Art and Objective Truth' (1954), Lukács argues that the objectivity of the work of art lies in a 're-experienceable' quality: 'the area of life it represents . . . becomes comprehensible from within and from without, re-experienceable . . . it appears as a totality' (WC 38). Re-experience refers both to the represented content – through art we re-experience what we may have already lived blindly – and to the work of art as such. Not only can we experience the work of art multiple times (something that Lukács stresses in this essay as a crucial dimension of its objectivity), but even within the experience of a single work of art we are likely to encounter the same thing multiple times. What doesn't change emerges over time, perceived against the ground of what does change, in a temporal process full of qualitative richness. By the thirties, Lukács sees form as constituted through just such a temporalized invariance. The dialectic of form and repetition in his discussions of Tolstoy, for example, seems to illustrate a thesis recently put forward by the art historian T. J. Clark: 'Form is controlled repetition' (Clark, 2008, p. 7). Like Clark, Lukács distinguishes between uncontrolled proliferation and a repetition that generates meaning, a sense of totality. Lukács also wants to differentiate the meaningful repetitions found in the experience of an aesthetic form from what he calls the average, or the melting down of multiple instances into one static, composite image. Aesthetic forms, including the particular form that he calls the type, depend on temporal extension, on the relation between moments, and on the restoration of time's 'qualitative, variable, flowing nature': precisely that which is eliminated in a reified world (HCC 90).

In Lukács's later discussions of realism, the genre of narrative becomes exemplary because of the possibilities for recurrence and repetition that it embodies. As Fredric Jameson has argued, his work offers 'a continuous . . . meditation on narrative, on its basic structures' (Jameson, 1971, p. 163). This is

not accidental, but rather a development of Lukács's intuition in *Soul and Form* that 'the forms of poetry are temporal' – an intuition that Lukács there had left suspended, undeveloped (SF 123). Lukács later conceives of narrative in a way that goes beyond 'storytelling and dramatization of its content' (Jameson, 1971, p. 196). The imitation of action is certainly important. But Lukács uses narrative to think in a more abstract way about the problem of the objectivity of form. It's the internal ordering or the disposition of the plot over time that seems most vital to this objectivity; in other words, it's not only a question of *what* to tell, but *when*, and, most importantly, when to tell it again. Narrative makes possible not only hypotaxis – hierarchical ordering – but a kind of parataxis that is critical to Lukács's concept of realism: the 'again and again', the overlapping, often-deferred linkage and repetition of moments.⁴ Narrative functions most importantly as a medium of connection, as a ground of comparison, relation, and repetition and thus as a test-case of temporalized form, of form that actively gives shape to time.

What Lukács values in narrative is an ordering of moments that allows this paratactic relation to remain visible as a background and yet overlays it with meaningful temporal patterns. Modernist narrative fails to achieve form, for example, because it appears to consist in a mere 'sequence of unrelated experiential fragments' (SER 26). What he finds lacking is a perspicuous relation between its parts. Realist narratives, by contrast, offer 'a carefully plotted sequence. . . . Every person or event, emerging momentarily from the stream and vanishing again, is given a specific weight, a definite position, in the pattern of the whole' (SER 18).⁵ Here Lukács seems torn between describing plot as a static structure, an architectural balancing-act, and seeing it as a temporal experience with a certain directionality. On one hand, no element in a well-composed form is 'transferable' or transposable; on the other, duration is as important as position, maybe even more so (SER 43).⁶ Often, Lukács's praise for realist narrative comes down to appreciation of a particular rhythm or tempo that makes perspicuous relations of similarity as well as of contiguity. The events in Balzac's *Père Goriot*, for example, are in themselves 'scarcely credible', and they 'follow upon each other in an avalanche that appears incredible' (WC 49–50). 'And yet precisely through this improbable rush of events, the novel provides the effect of a terrifyingly accurate and typical picture of bourgeois society' (ibid.). It is as if, told at one tempo, a story is incredible; related at a different tempo the form becomes realistic, allowing us to glimpse the hidden similarities between superficially different events and moments. It is through their orchestration of time that forms generate a sense of the real. Timing is everything.

What is the nature of the time that plays such a vital role in the experience of form? How does it connect aesthetic experience and history? In the essays written after the 1930s, Lukács understands time in narrative not as a referential illusion produced by its structure but as an interaction between represented time and the aesthetic experience of duration.⁷ Lukács continues tenaciously to

regard form as an experience, and to provide vivid accounts of the micro-history of aesthetic experience. In 'Art and Objective Truth' he stresses 'the immersion of the recipient in the action of the work of art' as a 'necessary illusion': the reader 'surrenders' himself to the 'apparently circumscribed world in the work of art' for the duration of reading (WC 36). Something happens once; later, it happens again. We see what endures, what changes. Time is here both an empty backdrop, a negative space that separates events and occurrences from each other, and also that which links them together, establishes the relation, intensifies meaning (Clark, 2008, p. 7). These two aspects cannot be separated. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács had described only the latter function of time. In the context of novelistic subjectivity, of memory and anticipation, time 'brings order into the chaos of men's lives and gives it the semblance of a spontaneously flowering, organic entity' (TN 125). In his later work on the realist novel, Lukács suggests that this effect should be understood not as an alternative to reified time but as dependent on its operation. In order for there to be meaningful recurrence in narrative, there has to be a sense of time grounding the story in which each hour or day is the same as the next. The abstract time of clock and calendar, of evenly spaced succession, is necessary for narrative cognition; it has to be there for us simply to grasp the story.⁸ It is only against and through this abstract time that 'condensation', 'intensification' and typicality – in short, the effects of form – can be perceived (WC 51). Narrative time cancels and retains the reified time of the everyday. As a 'process in which from the outset the order . . . is sensed and emerges' (WC 40), narrative form builds into this abstract, empty time an 'aspiration towards totality' (HCC 198).

There may appear to be something ironic in this hidden dependence of aesthetic form on the 'everyday life' that Lukács so frequently condemns. The 'daily life of bourgeois society' is the realm of reification, 'sordid', 'trivial, mean, haphazard', a 'dismal greyness', a 'suffocating narrowness' (HN 193). The everyday is where nothing is either questioned or open to change. 'In such a "finished" world all manifestations of the average human being are increasingly transformed into a tedious, endlessly repeated routine' (HN 182). In other words, what the everyday presents is 'banality, aridity and emptiness . . . the sordid prose of bourgeois life' (HN 149). But its empty temporal duration, full of gaps and repetitions, is necessary for realist form to emerge with its peculiar intensity.⁹ This reified time also links aesthetic form to history in a complex way. It reflects not only the objective characteristics of the capitalist era but the subjective process of discovering the real only through repeated, successive encounters rather than through some other qualitatively distinct form of illumination.¹⁰ As J. M. Bernstein has argued, Lukács's criticism relies on two senses of form: 'form denotes meaningful coherence, what informs, gives order and meaning to experience', but also 'those features of a discourse or domain which remain stable through variations of content' (PN 103). Lukács finds in realist narrative a deliberate conflation of these two understandings of form. Realist form creates a sense of 'meaningful coherence' precisely by reiterating certain

features of itself, by showing what remains stable or invariable over time. By building in recurrence, Tolstoy's novels, for example, show what is stable in the social domain.

But there is a critical difference between what merely endures or reappears in a reified world and what is real. In considering Tolstoy's case, Lukács focuses on the recurrence of what he calls 'extreme possibilities.' Simply put, these possibilities indicate the most radical trajectory of action that characters might follow as a consequence of how and where they stand in a society full of contradictions. That these possibilities are never fully realized nor simply abandoned but repeated over and over shows the fractures and the latencies in the social order as well as in the novel form itself. Any given moment is shown to be potentially 'the focus of the deepest and the most widely ramified mediation, the focus of decision and the birth of the new', as Lukács puts it in 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (HCC 203–4). Apart from the work's ability to evoke a one-time sense of completeness and coherence entirely through its own aesthetic power, then, the realist narrative possesses an 'active social function' that relies on its incorporation of reified time in the form of recurrence (HCC 198, WC 40). As Bernstein notes, action reveals itself in narrative as the synthesis of past and future, or of given conditions and anticipated effects – which exist within what he calls 'the public structure of engagements' (PN 103). The form of narrative models for us in a dynamic way 'the social parameters within which all action occurs' (*ibid.*). By showing how these structures and parameters remain stable in a reified world, realist narrative can indicate where praxis is most necessary and how action might be justified. Ideally, the novel would create the sense of a recalcitrant, solidly resistant and yet changeable world – a world that coheres to the extent that, if one part were to be affected, other changes would follow. Such a sense of coherence and interrelatedness, Lukács suggests, can only be created at the formal level by carefully regulating, for instance, the time between events, and the relations between disparate moments. At its most politically valuable, realist form doesn't show us a picture of history being made or already made; rather, its capacity to embody recurrence, reiteration and repetition gives us a concretely apprehensible concept of history open to action, waiting to be made.

As Lukács elaborates it, the particular sense of life-likeness created through the realist novel's orchestration of recurrence revises the critical concept of verisimilitude by bringing to light the social mediation inherent in that idea. In 'Art and Objective Truth', Lukács cites Aristotle's claim that history 'reports what actually happened', and poetry 'what could happen' (WC 45). But Lukács doesn't simply assume that the universal will be recognized as such; rather, he describes a certain dialectic that occurs deep within the reader's sense of what is probable: 'the reader does not consciously compare an individual experience with an isolated detail of the work of art but surrenders himself to the general effect of the work of art on the basis of his own assembled general experience' (WC 36–7). This recalibrating of probability works, Lukács suggests, both

retrospectively and prospectively as an effect of the reader's absorption into the time of the form. And this recalibration becomes a dialectical hinge. To a striking degree Lukács has moved away from conceiving of form as the exclusion of time; now aesthetic form mediates action by orchestrating a certain attitude towards probability as something not abstract but historical and socially constructed. Form reworks this awareness of probability by giving shape not primarily to single moments but to sequences and recurrences. My chapter traces in more detail this shift in Lukács's thought.

Form as Moment

Lukács's early essays in *Soul and Form* present form as the triumph over possibility. Form is that moment in which every possibility has been fulfilled, eliminated or both: 'free play with possibilities of every kind' is, simply, 'anarchy' (SF 17). 'In form alone ("the only possible thing" is the shortest definition of form known to me) does every antithesis, every trend, become music and necessity', he writes (SF 38–9). There can be no such thing as an open form; a form that leaves spaces within it has failed to become a form. And the same goes for redundancy. This is how the young Lukács describes Balzac's lack of form in *The Theory of the Novel*: 'None of the parts, seen from the viewpoint of the whole, possesses an organic necessity of existence; if it were not there at all, the whole would not suffer; conversely, any number of new parts might be added and no evidence of inner completeness would prove them superfluous' (TN 109). This way of thinking demonstrates what Gallagher has called, after David Carroll, an 'oculocentric bias': a 'desire to see, in a single, instantaneous act of perception', a form (Gallagher, 2000, p. 230; see also Carroll, especially pp. 140–60). Form stipulates, according to Lukács, that 'each of [a work's] parts must be visibly ordered from one single point' (SF 21). Lukács in these early writings assumes a principle of total, simultaneous visibility. Curiously, though, given form's emphatic presence or fullness, one of Lukács's most powerful metaphors for this phenomenon is silence:

This is the most profound meaning of form: to lead to a great moment of silence, to mould the directionless, precipitous, many-coloured stream of life as though all its haste were only for the sake of such moments . . . a silence, with a rustling, a noise, a music, a universal singing all round it: that is form. (SF 135)

But why is the moment of form silent? Lukács's dream of form arises from his dissatisfaction with the 'immateriality of transient moods' (SF 126). But how can form as moment be more *material* than mood? He admires the way that tragedy, for instance, blasts a moment out of this immaterial flux, this constant vanishing: 'such a moment is a beginning and an end . . . nothing can connect

it with ordinary life.’ He praises ‘the timelessness of this moment which yet is the whole of life’ (SF 181). But can something that is without time possess materiality? Is the concept of form as moment really an answer to the problem of transience?

In *Soul and Form*, Lukács already explores the contradictions that are inherent in the experience of form as moment: ‘Form means getting the better of sentimentality’, he writes; ‘in form there is no more longing’ (SF 123). But paradoxically form only creates longing in us: ‘Our relationship to a composition – to something that has already taken form – is . . . that profound sense of union which yet is eternally a being-separate, a standing-outside. It is a state of longing’ (SF 112).¹¹ Georg Simmel, Lukács’s early mentor, would explain away this paradox entirely, asserting as irreconcilable antitheses ‘form’ and ‘life’. In his essay ‘The Transcendent Character of Life’, Simmel argues that form derives its meaning from its disjunctive relation to life, which is by definition ongoing:

Form tears the bit of matter away from the continuity of the next-to-one-another and the after-one-another and gives it a meaning of its own. . . . What is decisive is the for-itself, in-itself character of individual form in its contrast to the all-embracing continuous stream of life, which not only dissolves all form-giving boundaries but even prevents them from coming into being. (Simmel, 1972, pp. 366–7)

Simmel identifies this struggle ‘against the principle of form’ as the defining characteristic of ‘modern culture’:

life streams on without interruption; its restless rhythm opposes the fixed duration of any particular form. . . . [L]ife is always in a latent opposition to the form. . . . [L]ife perceives ‘the form as such’ as something which has been forced upon it. It would like to puncture not only this or that form, but form as such, and to absorb the form in its immediacy. (376–7)

Lukács gives his version of a ‘truly Simmelian philosophy’ (Lukács, 1986, p. 14) in his ‘History of the Development of the Modern Drama’: ‘every individual thing, once it has entered life, has a life of its own that is independent of its originator and of any goal. . . . [W]hat is important here is the category of existence, mere existence as a force’ (quoted in Márkus, 1983, pp. 7–8). Though his later theory of reification will present this problem as a social illusion, Lukács here seems to be thinking about durability as a problem for a philosophy of form. Thinking of form as inhering in a moment fails to address the problem of how forms actually exist.

Lukács confronts a further problem in these early essays: because form is thought of as singular, unique, analogous to a point in space, it faces the same dilemma as does any single, concrete action. Lukács writes that ‘every

deed . . . is limiting; no action can be performed without renouncing something, and he who performs an action can never possess universality' (SF 68). If we extrapolate from what he says, then any created form remains haunted by the possibilities it has eliminated. Rather than pretending to be 'the only possible thing', a created form would need to acknowledge its tense, competitive relationship with the other possible things that it did not become. Lukács does in fact gesture, even in these early essays, towards a different model of form based on rhythm rather than silence. The concept of rhythm offers Lukács a way to describe the tense relationship between disparate moments, as well as similar ones.

In *Soul and Form*, Lukács finds this model in a surprising place: in what he calls the ethics of ordinary bourgeois life. In his essay on Theodor Storm, 'The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art's Sake', Lukács quietly solves the problem of form's relation to life by considering the formal properties of a way of life. He defines bourgeois ethics as something that gives durable form through the repetition of certain acts over intervals of time. For the true bourgeois, 'his . . . profession is not an occupation but a life-form, something which . . . determines the tempo, the rhythm . . . of his life' (SF 75). Rhythm makes time perceptible through the recurrence of pattern, and Lukács's use of the metaphor suggests his openness to a diachronic conception of form. What gives the bourgeois way of life its form is

the primacy of ethics in life: life dominated by something that recurs systematically and regularly, something that happens again and again in obedience to a law, something that must be done without concern for desire or pleasure . . . the rule of order over mood, of the permanent over the momentary, of quiet work [ordinary, prosaic work] over genius. (SF 75)

What Lukács seems to find almost heroic about this way of life, besides the formality of its recurrences, is a certain lived experience of heteronomy: he refers to the tension between work and desire, between law and mood. In his critique of 'the Romantic philosophy of life', which precedes the Storm essay in *Soul and Form*, Lukács notes that the Romantic poets never confronted the 'tremendous tension that exists between poetry and life', never tackled 'heterogeneous things' or distances, and thus failed to create 'real, authentic' art (SF 68). The crucial step that Lukács takes in the Storm essay is this one: he thinks of form as arising not through a singular act of 'limitation and significance' but through repeated, regular and identical acts of self-limitation – which may not really be deeds at all in the sense that they change nothing in the outside world. There are 'no events in' Storm's world; deeds there play 'a small and insignificant part' (SF 84). A routine is followed even in the face of crisis: 'Everyday life flows quietly on until, suddenly, doom strikes, but even then the same life goes on, and nothing happens' (SF 88). It is startling to realize that Lukács is praising this uneventfulness with a mixture of nostalgia and envy. But significantly,

Lukács describes this material, temporally extensive form in a way that anticipates his later, well-known defence of narrative: ‘the ethical part of the soul . . . lies in determining certain fixed points for life. This strength . . . creates distinction between things; creates a hierarchy of things . . . gives solid form to the soul’s contents’ (SF 171). In the later essay, ‘Narrate or Describe?’ Lukács asserts the superiority of narration, which ‘establishes proportions, [while] description merely levels’ (WC 127). Narration creates a ‘necessary distance, which permits the selection of the essential. . . Only in this perspective can characters assume definite outline’ (WC 129–30). Not the ‘episodic’, then, but the constant return to ‘certain fixed points’ creates meaningful form, ‘solid form’, ‘definite outline’ – even, we might say, a range of qualitative density. If nothing is repeated, everything bears an equal value. It is the constant return of certain points that endows them with greater weight, clarity or value. What the ethics of everyday bourgeois life models is a concept of form as achieved through repetition, not through momentary intensity or the interruption of temporal flow.

Recurrence

The ethics of regularity seem to belong, in that early essay, to a bygone period and an obsolete class culture. ‘In the works of these last great poets of the unbroken, old bourgeoisie, a strong light with strong shadows is cast upon the most ordinary events of bourgeois life’ (SF 81). But recurrence and return acquire their greatest significance as formal elements when Lukács takes up the task of elaborating a historical materialist theory of literary realism. Recurrence is closely linked to typicality, the key concept in Lukács’s definition of realism. The form that realist representation tries to achieve hinges on what Lukács calls ‘the type, a peculiar synthesis which organically binds together the general and the particular both as characters and situations. What makes a type a type . . . is that in it all the humanly and socially essential determinants are present in their highest level of development’ (SER 6). One might assume that types are defined qualitatively or even aesthetically, that these are characters and situations that express their historical era with unusual force or eloquence. But types are also bound up with matters of quantity and measure: ‘because the characters are typical in the most profound sense of the word, they must of necessity meet the most important objects of their sphere of life more than once in the course of their typical career’ (SER 153). A particular concept of recurrence is built into his idea of realism as the necessary corrective to ‘an excessive cult of the momentary mood’, but it plays a slippery role (SER 153). On the one hand, recurrence is the implied opposite of abstraction. The individual character or characteristic that occurs only once, or is seen only once in a story or in a population, is abstract: ‘individual, non-recurring traits . . . are also extremely abstract, for this very reason of non-recurrence’ (SER 8). The same is true for any moment, and anything that is observed in a single moment. ‘Because it is the ultimate in

uniqueness, as Hegel recognized, the “here and now” is absolutely abstract’ (WC 171). Typicality, then, is simply that which happens repeatedly – for example, the kind of situation or person that you encounter all the time.

But that isn’t quite the case, or rather, isn’t quite enough. At the same time Lukács begins to vilify the everyday, and to criticize what he calls ‘the average’. The average, which an unsuspecting reader might equate with the typical, is actually its opposite. True typicality consists in the ‘extreme expression of clearly revealed social determinants’ (SER 170). In the average, however, ‘the social contradictions which objectively determine [a character’s] existence . . . mutually blunt each other and seem to level each other out to a superficial equilibrium’ (SER 169–70). Because the social contradictions in question are presumably the same, the difference seems to lie in the manner of presentation. If social contradictions appear not as a single figure or in a single action but spread out over time, as a sequence of linked, repeated moments, we approach the form of typicality. Lukács praises the way in which Tolstoy’s stories, while remaining within ‘the limits of the common and average’, reveal ‘life as a whole’ not by inventing fantastic actions but by slowing down time, by telling the story ‘minute by minute . . . step by step, minute by minute’ (SER 172).¹²

In a revealing metaphor, Lukács condemns the ‘average’ as a mere ‘still life’, or as a ‘slice of life’ without motion. In Flaubert, he writes, ‘the “average” is a dead synthesis of the process of social development. . . . Plot dissolves, being replaced by a mere sequence of static scenes’ (SER 168, WC 164–5). In such a ‘still life’, men, things or moments ‘exist side by side . . . they do not interpenetrate or reciprocally affect each other’ (WC 139). Zola, too, is guilty of offering merely ‘a series of static pictures, of still lives connected only through the relation of objects arrayed beside the other . . . never following one from the other, certainly never one out of the other’ (WC 144). Lukács is describing the absence of causality, of action and consequence in Zola’s fiction. But he’s also noting something more subtle about the relation between recurrence and form. If there’s an imagined totality in which to locate recurrence, then recurrence is semantically generative; if there’s none, then recurrence becomes mere seriality, the bare registration of succession and resemblance.¹³ In ‘Narrate or Describe?’ Lukács refers to the latter method of presentation as producing a mere ‘succession [of events] . . . as isolated and unrelated to each other as pictures in a museum’ (WC 134). Lukács often contrasts this particular image of a static array, things arranged side by side, with a concept of narrative in which objects dynamically arise out of one another. Yet there seems to be a certain sleight-of-hand in this manoeuvre. In the case of “still life” or seriality, the allusion to a spectator suggests an alienated relation to what’s being observed, while in the case of narrative, Lukács erases the figure of the spectator entirely. But in both cases the reader or spectator constructs meaningful connections between sequentially presented objects.

Actually, Lukács would like to have it both ways. The totality in question can refer either to the social totality or to aesthetic form. Narratives also generate

meaningful recurrence through a device that Lukács calls ‘illumination through contrast’ or ‘parallels and contrasts’ (WC 166, 161). Again, the ‘extreme intensification’ required for characters and situations to qualify as ‘typical’ is generated through recurrence, but this recurrence is more like noticing similarities between pictures that you see hung next to one another in a museum. Lukács argues that narratives need to set up ‘parallels and contrasts’ between more and less typical characters; we perceive that two characters share this but not that quality, for example. The example he gives in the ‘Intellectual Physiognomy’ essay is, curiously enough, the character series Hamlet-Laertes-Fortinbras. (The choice of Hamlet has a particular significance; Lukács often thinks of this character in the context of Goethe’s discussion of drama and novel in *Wilhelm Meister*, where Hamlet represents the quintessential novelistic foot-dragging hero, who ‘should hold back the progress and development of the whole’ (SER 179–80).¹⁴ Through this association, Hamlet stands for narrative duration or even retardation.) In the local context, Shakespeare’s play stands for the aesthetic totality that allows for meaningful comparison of side-by-side objects even when they fail to affect each other directly at the level of plot. We notice that Hamlet lacks qualities that Fortinbras has. Other qualities that recur or fail to recur in other characters contribute to our sense of him as larger than life, or, in other words, typical.

Why are multiple instances and multiple iterations necessary, however? What’s striking about this concept of recurrence is the way in which it bridges the gap between literary representation and historical truth. The concept of recurrence allows Lukács to invoke the idea of universal form as an extension, not a refutation, of empirical repetition. The idea of recurrence has often been implicit in that of universality: Aristotle’s account of the poetry-history distinction, a crucial precursor of Lukács’s idea of typicality, asserts that history tells what happened one time, singular events that happened to singular persons, while poetry represents what may happen. Shelley’s version of this, in his ‘Defence of Poetry’, is even closer to Lukács’s way of thinking: a ‘story’, as opposed to a poem, tells ‘a certain combination of events which can never again recur’, while a poem is ‘universal’, dealing with eternal possibilities.¹⁵ Both think of history as that which can only happen one time. If the opposition is to be maintained, poetry should present that which either does or could recur innumerable times. Stated that way, the difference between the possible and the necessary is blurred. This synthesis of poetry and history, this blurring of story and poem, is what Lukács calls realism: it’s a representation of what’s universal in history – of possibilities that can recur. But realism doesn’t mean stepping outside of time altogether; as Lukács defines it, it has to rely on a particular concept of time as an empty, uniformly subdivided container – Benjamin’s ‘homogeneous, empty time.’¹⁶ It’s only possible for repeated moments and encounters to build up intensity if the dead spaces between them are likewise grasped. Likewise, it’s only possible to make those comparisons, to establish that satisfying extremity of the ‘typical’ character or

situation, if there's a neutral ground of comparison that subtends the multiple instances.¹⁷

The temporality of realist narrative revises the account of time Lukács gave in *The Theory of the Novel*:

The unrestricted, uninterrupted flow of time is the unifying principle of the homogeneity that rubs the sharp edges off each heterogeneous fragment and establishes a relationship . . . between them . . . characters having no apparent meaning appear, establish relations with one another, break them off, disappear again without any meaning having been revealed. But . . . however accidental the appearance of a character may be . . . it emerges from an existent, experienced continuity, and the atmosphere of thus being borne upon the unique and unrepeatable stream of life cancels out the accidental nature of their experiences and the isolated nature of the events recounted. The life totality which carries all men here becomes a living and dynamic thing . . . a concrete and organic continuum. (TN 125)

According to *The Theory of the Novel*, time becomes in retrospect the ground of authentic experience; all the heterogeneous objects and components of experience are recognized as constituting a unified form insofar as they were in, and part of, time. Time is substantive, material, a 'unique and unrepeatable stream', even if it is only understood to be such in retrospect. But in Lukács's later defence of realism, time is conceived as an abstract emptiness that inserts distance, disparity and unrelatedness between things. According to this model, then, time cannot be experienced. But without this abstract dimension of recounting, we could not perceive recurrence or meaningful relatedness; typicality and hence form could not be achieved. Lukács insists that it is not sufficient to present one instance or moment, no matter how exemplary or intense it might be. Intensity is achieved with reference to repetition, and is mediated through irrelevance and delay. Despite his distaste for the 'banality, aridity, and emptiness . . . the sordid prose of bourgeois life', the everyday in an important sense provides the ground of narrative's superiority as form.

Extreme Possibilities

Recurrence as it happens in ordinary, empty time plays an important epistemological role in Lukács's defence of realism. Paraphrasing Marx and Engels, Lukács writes, 'reality has various levels . . . the ephemeral reality of the superfluous, never recurring, momentary; and there are the more profound elements and tendencies of reality which recur in accordance with definite laws' (WC 76). Recurrence demonstrates social and historical laws and enables us to recognize the truth of art's reflection. But recurrence plays a far more subtle role in Lukács's account of the objectivity of aesthetic form, as well as its

political efficacy. In Tolstoy's realism, Lukács singles out the recurrence of what he calls 'extreme possibilities' (SER 178), actions or tendencies within the story that are never actualized – that which repeatedly does not happen. This repeated figuring of possibility gestures towards an understanding of aesthetic form quite close to the thinking of Ernst Bloch. By working on and through our sense of what could happen, rather than what does happen, Tolstoy's narratives blur the distinction between these two categories.

Lukács describes Tolstoy's 'method' as based on a shapely, objective, continuous nonrealization. Tolstoy creates characters, he argues, 'based on the mere possibility of an extreme attitude, an extreme passion, an extreme fate' (SER 178). These possibilities are concrete and objective: they demonstrate to the fullest extent the contradictions of the societies that the characters inhabit. This is emphasized in the curious absence of emotion, desire or anticipation in Lukács's account of 'extreme possibilities'. His description of Tolstoy's novels makes it seem as though the characters become aware of and engage with these possibilities on a purely intellectual level, as a matter of thought rather than of feeling: "Extreme possibilities" crop up and are earnestly considered . . . but before the decisive step is taken, contrary tendencies appear' (SER 178).¹⁸ Rather than freeing characters to act or to feel, these recurrent possibilities seem almost to inhibit or restrain action, to impel characters towards a limit again and again.

In this discussion of extreme possibility, there is an echo of the 'bourgeois way of life'. In *Soul and Form*, Lukács understood 'the primacy of ethics' as the patterning of life 'by something that recurs systematically and regularly, something that happens again and again . . . without concern for desire or pleasure'. The recurrence of unrealized possibility in Tolstoy's narratives retains something of the same stern indifference to vagaries of will and emotion. What matters is the way in which these possibilities confront the characters and the reader as both objectively existing and unrealized. The sense of objective form, of *formedness*, still arises from the negation of subjective mood. However, this negation is accomplished not by the repetition of actions but by the recurrence of possibilities.

The point of extreme possibilities is to remain unrealized. It is not the fulfilment but the temporal succession of these moments of possibility that lends realist narrative its distinctive form; novels and stories hinge on their emergence, disappearance and reappearance within the stream of everyday life. 'This produces a ceaseless movement in which all the important determinants of their life find expression . . . but which very rarely leads to a really dramatic crisis, to a clean break with the previous phrase. *The lifelike quality, the inner richness of the characters rests on the fact that such extreme possibilities arise again and again . . .*' (SER 178, my emphasis). The recurrence of these possibilities is crucially double-sided. On the one hand, it shows their objective reality or legitimacy, but on the other hand, it demonstrates their impossibility. In *Anna Karenina*, for instance, Tolstoy shows us that 'neither a break with the system of private

property nor a transformation into a ruthless exploiter . . . are within the range of Levin's social and human possibilities' (SER 181). And yet they *are* within his range, *as possibilities* that 'remain mere possibilities and are not transformed into deeds, into realities.'

Narrative form allows the negativity of possibility to be concretely grasped as well, through the mechanisms of deferral and delay. Tolstoy shows the power of everyday life to 'shatter' even 'lofty' moments when possibility is sensed, to push them into an ever-receding future. Extreme possibilities are thus involved in a complex dialectic with everyday life. The point is that, like the "loftiest" feelings and resolutions' through which they sometimes manifest themselves, extreme possibilities never last, no matter how much we might wish it:

he brings such 'loftiness' into contact and contrast with everyday life and causes it to be shattered by its hard little facts. . . . [T]his tragic highlight must necessarily be followed by the real tragi-comedy, i.e. the continuation of their old life, the reversion to the rule of their former, not at all 'lofty,' but quite genuine feelings and the return to their normal level of life. (SER 193)

But continuation, reversion and return are necessary to the survival of these extreme possibilities, which would otherwise be extinguished in fulfilment. Here, the role of the novelistic hero is taken not by a character who holds things back, but by systematic recurrence without necessary causality, the 'next to one another' and 'after-one-another' that we know as the everyday. What Lukács emphasizes about these moments of unrealized possibility is a pure seriality of relation: 'Tolstoy's plots revolve around the "extreme possibilities" of the characters, possibilities which never become reality but which come to the surface again and again' (SER 185).¹⁹ In *Soul and Form*, Lukács had written of the moment that its 'timelessness . . . is the whole of life'; moments of form and moments as form have no before and no after: they 'exist in parallel rather than in series' (SF 181). Here we have come full circle: form inheres in the serial, open-ended demonstration of possibility.

A brief comparison with Bloch's *Principle of Hope* shows what's distinctive about Lukács's discussion of serial possibility. Like Bloch, Lukács seems to perceive possibility as an unstable and dynamic emptiness. Bloch argues that 'Man is not solid', that, as an instance of 'animated, utopianly open matter', he is a 'fermenting Being . . . a new hollow space has only just developed' (Bloch, 1986, pp. 195, 202).²⁰ But Bloch sees this space, whether in consciousness, in a text or in history, purely as a prefiguration of the new, the Not-yet-come. Its meaning and shape can be found only by looking to the future, not to the past – certainly not to past occurrences of the same thing. In inspiration or creation, 'the Novum of the time content . . . [forces] its way into thought' (124). Aesthetic form is oriented 'towards the contents of a future which had not yet appeared' (98). The exact shape or disposition of these empty spaces is relatively unimportant. In *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács had described in Blochian

terms the 'totality of being' as a condition in which 'forms are not a constraint but only the becoming conscious, the coming to the surface of everything that had been lying dormant as a vague longing in the innermost depths of that which had to be given form' (TN 34). But as a critic of realism, Lukács tends to think of possibility in terms of the counterfactual rather than the coming, or the Not-yet-conscious, in Bloch's formulation. For Lukács, objective possibility is what is not, and yet keeps showing itself in a rhythm of nonfulfilment. This sense of the recurrence of possibility as a concrete formal pattern distinguishes his thinking from that of Bloch. Lukács's essays on realism seem to insist on the objective patterning of form as a crucial mediation of the principle of hope. While Bloch seems to think of possibility as something buried within forms that will eventually explode the integrity of a given form, transform consciousness and lead to the absolutely new, Lukács understands possibility as something integral to form's arrangements. Form orchestrates possibility in a deliberate, concrete way.

This understanding of form and its relation to 'the material of life' provides an answer to modernist arguments about the 'discontinuity' of life, its 'fissures' and 'crevices' (AP 22). Bloch, for example, defends 'art which strives to exploit the real fissures in surface interrelations and to discover the new in their crevices' (AP 22). Lukács suggests that aesthetic form, in its truest narrative incarnation, incorporates these gaps and openings within its total representational scope and shows the pattern of their recurrence as possibilities. But these fissures are not the real ones. Forms create an abstract, distanced sense of what is socially possible. They represent a schematic mapping of possibilities, a topography of discontinuity rather than a photographic reproduction of social contradictions. But since realist form has to keep possibility open and alive, rather than cancelling every possibility, it has to be experienced as a duration. It can't simply show a static image.

Lukács does take seriously Bloch's idea of the artwork as 'the notation of latency' (Bloch, 1986, p. 98). For Bloch, it's one metaphor among many, but for Lukács the notation of latency is a crucial element of narrative form: realist narratives hold the possible open and apart, parcelling it into discrete, serially related instances. Form does more than reflect possibility; compositionally speaking, recurrence can actively create a sense of something like a submerged form, through multiple short-lived glimpses. If artfully repeated, transient appearances of possibility give rise to a conviction that there's a full dimension of possibility – more than can attain visibility in any given instance. Through clocking the partial, small-scale revelations of extreme possibility, Tolstoy accomplishes one of realism's most important tasks: to create a generalizable sense of 'forces as yet submerged beneath the surface' (AP 48). In Tolstoy, 'the plot is always dissected into small, apparently insignificant sections which follow each other minute by minute . . . intensity can be conveyed only step by step, minute by minute, in a ceaseless play of moods in which the dramatic fluctuations of the contradictions of life ripple under the motionless surface of the

commonplace' (SER 172). Narrative recurrence, properly managed, generates this feeling of buried tendencies gradually and partially coming to light. It also fulfils the realist's other main task: 'the realist . . . must focus on those elements which endure over long periods' (SER 47). The recurrence of possibility is both a historical necessity and an indispensable compositional device.

In Lukács's criticism, then, recurrence does not seem to refer to the literal repetition of identical or near-identical cases. Mere literal repetition of an act or a statement in a narrative would be meaningless, at best an illustration of the 'tedious endlessly repeated routine' of bourgeois everyday life (SER 182). Recurrence works most fruitfully in Lukács's criticism as an indirect trope for recursive or self-mediating form: by repeatedly looking back at a form through itself over the course of its duration, we see what changes, what appears, what's no longer or only partially there – or even what may never arrive. In other words, a temporal dimension of the experience of form gets taken up into the idea of form itself.

In his later writings, Lukács understands form not as moment-like, but as a 'changeful texture'. Lukács uses this striking phrase to describe what Tolstoy's narratives represent so well: 'the changeful texture of the external and internal, great and little moments that make up life' (SER 153). Note that moments have become simply units of time rather than free-standing images of the whole; the form is found in their dynamic interrelation. In his very late 'Remarks on the Theory of Literary History' (1968), Lukács expands this complex metaphor:

form arranges the material of life into a self-contained whole, and . . . prescribes its tempo, rhythm, fluctuations, density and fluidity, hardness and softness; it accents what is felt to be important, eliminates what is less important; it places things either in the foreground or the background and organizes them into groups within this pattern. (Lukács, 1986, p. 11)

Lukács no longer sees form as a 'fixed duration' inimical to any rhythm. Instead, he mixes material with temporal, musical with pictorial and tactile metaphors. Like that which it represents, form needs to be at times more solid, and at other times more porous, varying its 'rhythm' of 'density and fluidity, hardness and softness' not at random but by careful design. Most importantly, form has to have temporal breadth and extension, and it has to structure itself around distance, absence and diminishment. Form creates emptiness through elimination; its placements and groupings of things change over time. But the empty spaces are not static in this understanding of form; rather they can be seen as the notation of what Lukács calls possibility.

Lukács's value as a critic lies in how he articulates the relation between aesthetic form and history; this essay has argued that this relation is far from a simple one. While Lukács himself seems to invite an oversimplified interpretation, as when he asserts the need to '[hold] the mirror up to nature', his actual accounts of the experience of form suggest a far more intricate dialectic between the 'purely literary, formal, aesthetic aspects' of literature and the

history whose openness it shapes and realizes (SER 11, 18). Realist form does not offer a reflection that can be captured in a single glance. Rather, it temporalizes invariance through a structure of what Lukács calls ‘polyphony’ in which ‘everything is linked up with everything else’ through meaningful recurrence (SER 145). In this way, by gradually and incrementally uncovering what does happen and what could happen as equally real, the great realist novel mediates a period’s understanding of possibility. Lukács’s understanding of the relation between aesthetic form and history is very close to the position that Jacques Rancière attributes to Aristotle: ‘The *Poetics* declares that the arrangement of a poem’s actions is not equivalent to the fabrication of a simulacrum. It is a play of knowledge that is carried out in a determined space-time. To pretend is not to put forth illusions but to elaborate intelligible structures’ (Rancière, 2009, p. 36). In his best moments as a critic, Lukács describes the experience of dwelling within and moving through these intelligible structures.

Notes

- ¹ See Judith Butler’s introduction to *Soul and Form* (pp. 1–15), in which she makes a compelling case for considering Lukács as a critic of form. Critics who stress the unity of Lukács’s work include Márkus, 1983, Jameson, 1971 and Carroll, 1982.
- ² T. E. Hulme, for example, explains in similar terms how the need for durable form arises out of the messy, constantly shifting character of outward reality. See Hulme, 2007, p. 27. See also Williams, 2002.
- ³ I do not agree that Lukács believes that ‘every detail will be compelled to bespeak the social whole.’ This would describe the aesthetic of a forced naturalism; Lukács is interested, as I will argue here, in the overall movements of recurrence and repetition in the text, as well as in the larger synthesis of the type – rather than the detail.
- ⁴ See Nadal-Melsió, 2006, on hypotaxis and narrative.
- ⁵ See Gallagher, 2000, on Shelley’s discussion of relative degrees of form (p. 234).
- ⁶ Lukács is paraphrasing Benjamin’s discussion of allegory.
- ⁷ See Carroll’s discussion of TN, as well as his critique of de Man’s reading of Lukács (Carroll, 1982, pp. 88–118).
- ⁸ As J. M. Bernstein points out in his excellent discussion, ‘the standpoint of the Kantian philosophy and the standpoint of the novel [as Lukács conceives of it in TN] are almost formally identical’ (Bernstein, 1984, p. 123).
- ⁹ When Lukács considers the everyday in terms of its formal properties – ‘rhythm, repetition . . . non-cumulation, seriality’, as Michael Sheringham has recently described it (Sheringham, 2006, p. 14) – the everyday seems to exemplify the principle of immanence as ongoingness, the idea of meaningful as well as meaningless seriality. The idea of culture may be one way to resolve this problem; see Márkus, and Féher, both in Heller, 1983.
- ¹⁰ This seems to be what Lukács means when he describes art as ‘the reflection of life in its total motion’ (WC 39) – the motion includes the process of noticing change and stability, and coming to understand these.

- ¹¹ This description can be compared with Benjamin's well-known definition of aura in 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction' as 'the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it may be' (Benjamin, 1969, p. 222).
- ¹² This is the dimension of narrative that Genette calls the iterative: the ratio between the number of times that something happens and the number of times that it is told. Lukács's interest in this is apparent from, for example, his opening discussion of *Anna Karenina* in 'Narrate or Describe?' That the same event is told twice seems particularly important in establishing the superior ability of narrative to create the phenomenon of proportional, differentiated significance.
- ¹³ This is what I take Bloch to be referring to in his response to Lukács: 'Lukács's thought takes for granted a closed and integrated reality . . .' (AP 22).
- ¹⁴ Lukács also takes up this discussion in HN in the chapter, 'Historical Novel and Historical Drama', pp. 138 ff.
- ¹⁵ See Gallagher's discussion of this passage: Gallagher, 2000, p. 233.
- ¹⁶ See Anderson, 1983.
- ¹⁷ See Cheah, 1999.
- ¹⁸ See Timothy Bewes's discussion of the ethical dimension of the novel as consisting in the possibility of its enunciation, in 'The Novel as an Absence: Lukács and the Event of Postmodern Fiction', pp. 5–20.
- ¹⁹ It's tempting to allegorize this account as the repetition-compulsion of narrative itself; it would be interesting to place it in dialogue with Peter Brooks's *Reading for the Plot*.
- ²⁰ I am indebted to Douglas Mao for this reference.

Works Cited

- Anderson, B. (1983), *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*. London and New York: Verso.
- Benjamin, W. (1969), *Illuminations*, ed. H. Arendt, trans. H. Zohn. New York: Schocken.
- Bewes, T. (2004), 'The novel as an absence: Lukács and the event of postmodern fiction', *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, 38, (1) (Fall 2004), 5–20.
- Bloch, E. (1986), *Principle of Hope*, trans. N. Plaice et al. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Brooks, P. (1992), *Reading for the Plot*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Carroll, D. (1982), *The Subject in Question*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Cheah, P. (1999), 'Grounds of comparison', *Diacritics*, 29, (4), 3–18.
- Clark, T. J. (2008), 'More theses on Feuerbach', *Representations*, 104, 4–7.
- Féher, F. (1983), 'Lukács in Weimar', in A. Heller (ed.), *Lukács Reappraised*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Gallagher, C. (2000), 'Formalism and time', *Modern Language Quarterly*, 61, 229–51.
- Genette, G. (1980), *Narrative Discourse: An Essay in Method*, trans. J. Lewin. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hulme, T. E. (2007), 'Modern art and its philosophy', in M. Whitworth (ed.), *Modernism*. Oxford: Blackwell.
- Jameson, F. (1971), *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

- Lukács, G. (1986), *Selected Correspondence, 1902–1920*, trans. and ed. J. Marcus and Z. Tár. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Márkus, G. (1983), 'Life and the soul: the young Lukács and the problem of culture', in A. Heller (ed.), *Lukács Reappraised*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Nadal-Melsió, S. (2006), 'Georg Lukács: magus realismus?' *Diacritics*, 34, (2), 52–84.
- Rancière, J. (2009), *The Politics of Aesthetics: The Distribution of the Sensible*, trans. G. Rockhill. London: Continuum.
- Sheringham, M. (2006), *Everyday Life: Theories and Practices from Surrealism to the Present*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Simmel, G. (1972), *On Individuality and Social Forms: Selected Writings*, D. N. Levine. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Williams, L. (2002), *Modernism and the Ideology of History: Literature, Politics, and the Past*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Chapter 2

How to Escape from Literature? Lukács, Cinema and *The Theory of the Novel*

Timothy Bewes

There are many reasons, including historical ones, why Georg Lukács might have begun again to be of interest to literary critics. Since the end of the Soviet period the debates over realism have seemed less politically intractable than they once did; it is no longer so easy to discredit the Lukácsian position, articulated in such works as *The Historical Novel* and *Studies in European Realism*, simply by its association with certain narrowly conceived political commitments. With the recent deflation of ‘postmodernism’ as a literary and aesthetic style – a development that has seen, among other aesthetic responses, a return to realist fictional modes – Lukács’s writings once more seem relevant as a guide to the formal qualities of the novel as such, outside any merely temporary fluctuations in its form.

Such ‘historical’ reasoning is predicated upon a consideration of the work in relative separation from the historical moment that produced it and from the moment in which it is read, a separation that is dramatized, bridged and yet maintained by the question of the work’s ‘relevance’. Another approach, the one I shall adopt in this essay, is to conceive of the work’s ‘historical’ dimension as continuing beyond its own context and moment into the questions that *we* ask of *it*; to understand that history has an effect on the work’s very essence; to sever any attachment, therefore, to questions predicated on fluctuations in the work’s ‘relevance’, on the grounds that such questions posit an axiomatic removal of the work from history, an ontological reduction of the work (and, correspondingly, of ‘history’) as such. Following this approach, it ought to be possible to wrest a reading of Lukács out of the very critical and theoretical tendencies that contributed to the waning of his influence. With the progressive erosion of the link between form and ideology – a link that was frequently associated with Lukács’s own thought – the possibility emerges of liberating even the work of Lukács’s ‘vulgar-materialist’ period, as Adorno called it, from the ways in which it circumscribed itself politically (AP 153). Is there now an opportunity, then, to extract the kernel of Lukácsian method from the external forces and political pressures that caused it to frame itself ideologically?

If so, recent contributions and debates on literary method indicate that there is some way still to go, for, in spite of this arguably more spacious ideological climate, Lukács continues to be regarded totemically by many literary critics and cultural theorists, for whom he is exemplary of a ‘dogmatic’ or ‘ideological’ tendency in twentieth-century criticism that is decidedly obsolete. Christopher Nealon, writing in an issue of the journal *Representations* devoted to ‘The Way We Read Now’, inherits such a view apparently from Fredric Jameson’s *The Political Unconscious*, where, in opposition to Louis Althusser, Lukács serves as ‘a central example of the way in which the cultural text is taken as an essentially allegorical model of society as a whole, its tokens and elements . . . being read as “typifications” of elements on other levels, and in particular as figures for the various social classes and class fractions . . .’ (Jameson, 1981, p. 33). For Lukács, writes Nealon, ‘the industrial working class was the engine of historical change, and the realist novel was the expression of its emergence, since, regardless of the political orientation of realist novel-writers themselves, the codes of realism demanded an expanded social palette’ (Nealon, 2009, p. 25). A ‘post-Lukácsian’ understanding, he continues, is one that accepts formal ‘heterogeneity’ and even failure as ‘expressive of the pending problem of there being no obvious successor to the working classes as the engine of history’. Nealon’s argumentation here is familiar; the question of Lukács’s continuing relevance frequently hangs on this historical ‘failure’ of the proletariat to discover its epochal role. The tradition of criticism that Nealon finds most conducive, by contrast, is a ‘friendly reading’, modeled on Althusser’s reading of Marx’s *Capital*, and represented within Jameson’s work by his ‘untimely defenses’ of writers such as Jean-Paul Sartre and Theodor Adorno, undertaken at the very historical moments ‘when those thinkers seem discredited or superseded’ (ibid.).

Nealon’s argument with Lukács is an argument against reading literary texts ‘theoretically’ – as the vehicle or container of an ‘activist’ truth content that must be ‘super-added’ to the work (43). By contrast, the approach argued for in Nealon’s essay is a sympathetic one, a presupposition of which is that literary texts are ‘written out of histories of struggle, of liberation, of toil’ (43). Any referral of the text to what it ‘knows’, on one hand, and ‘does not know’ on the other – or, in aesthetic terms, to how it succeeds and how it fails – is abrogated in favour of its consideration as a document. The ‘matter’ of literature is to be understood not simply by reference to its conditions of production but in its actuality as the residue or product of ‘a human struggle to be free’ (44).

A precedent for this approach may certainly be found in Althusser’s opening chapter to *Reading Capital*, where he describes Marx’s reading of classical political economy as the discovery of a method that does not merely differentiate evaluatively between what is ‘seen’ and what is ‘missed’ in the works of, say, Adam Smith and David Ricardo, but, rather, grasps ‘the necessary invisible connexion between the field of the visible and the field of the invisible, as a necessary effect of the structure of the visible field’ (Althusser and Balibar,

2009, p. 20). Althusser's discovery, which retains its audacity even now, is the possibility of abandoning, methodologically, a position circumscribed by the 'grid' of one's own discourse, one's own subjectivity, one's perspective. What is established by historical materialism – the method invented by Marx in the course of his reading of political economy – is the possibility of dealing with the text 'in its pure state' (22), without subsuming it beneath a 'standard' or a perspective that exists outside it.

However, what seems astonishing in Nealon's otherwise engaging survey of recent and current critical positions is that this approach to reading is, *precisely in this elucidation*, withheld from Lukács himself. Lukács remains an emblem, implicitly distinguished as an author in control of his material, rather than one whose texts were also produced in a context 'of struggle, of liberation, of toil'; an author for whom Althusser's 'first' reading, the 'generalizing' or empiricist 'myth' of reading, framed by the discourse of a 'constitutive subject', is held to be sufficient (2009, pp. 4, 29). In this exceptional treatment, Nealon is perhaps only following Althusser himself, whose few references to Lukács dismiss his efforts on the grounds of 'historicism' and 'guilty Hegelianism' (2005, p. 114n).

This chapter, by contrast, will attempt to extend Nealon's (and Althusser's) prescriptions for how we might read – prescriptions that, for Nealon, signal our contemporary distance from Lukács – to the figure of Lukács himself. The challenge is to avoid differentiating between an early, pre-ideological Lukács, who 'sees' clearly, and a later Lukács who 'fails' to see – or vice versa, between an early Lukács still caught in Kantian idealism, and a later, Leninist Lukács who sublates his idealism in the turn to Bolshevism. Better would be to grasp the *necessity* of the connection between these stages in his thinking; to see the trajectory from the pre-Marxist romantic idealist to the Moscow *apparatchik* in terms of a relation between two 'fields' of visibility, each of which is able to see only on condition of a non-seeing that is immanent to it.

The initial focus will be on the promise of immanence in Lukács's earliest writings, a promise that has since been widely rejected on the grounds of its idealism and utopianism, including by Lukács himself. However, immanence, by definition, can only *exist* as a promise; that is to say (to use Nealon's words), a 'struggle', a process. In this mode, then, we might approach the two well-known passages that frame Lukács's early work, *The Theory of the Novel*: the evocative description of the world of the epic in the opening pages, and the anticipation of a 'new world' that we find at the end of the book. Both are moments consumed by the possibility of reconciling the sensory and the intellectual qualities of literature. In such passages, Lukács imagines the possibility of a literature with the capacity to return us to – or to create – a world in which events are still possible; of literature as the place in which the event takes place.¹

In the first few sentences of *The Theory of the Novel*, the world that Lukács is describing – the world of epic narrative – is one in which art, or literature, has the same status as the events it narrates, in which sensible and intelligible are inseparable and indistinguishable:

Happy are those ages when the starry sky is the map of all possible paths – ages whose paths are illuminated by the light of the stars. Everything in such ages is new and yet familiar, full of adventure and yet their own. The world is wide and yet it is like a home, for the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars; the world and the self, the light and the fire, are sharply distinct, yet they never become permanent strangers to one another, for fire is the soul of all light and all fire clothes itself in light. (34)

It is precisely the loss of this world that is registered, for Lukács, by the form of the novel. Thus, the lugubrious formulations that he developed in the course of the book in order to describe the novel – an ‘expression of . . . transcendental homelessness’ (41), ‘the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God’ (88), ‘the form of the epoch of absolute sinfulness’ (152) – must be understood against the background of this simultaneously euphoric and melancholy opening.

A hundred pages later, after nine chapters that leave us in no doubt about the lack of any foreseeable literary development beyond the world of the novel, Lukács returns to the more optimistic, utopian mode of the opening. In the final paragraphs Lukács imagines the literature of a new world, ‘remote from any struggle against what actually exists’ (152). This new form, foreshadowed in the works of Dostoevsky, will by implication redeem the world from the state of ‘absolute sinfulness’ to which the diagnosis in the preceding pages has condemned it.

What does Lukács mean with the phrase ‘absolute sinfulness’? As J. M. Bernstein points out, the phrase refers not to the form of the novel itself, but to the state of the world – ‘the epoch’ – of which the novel is the corresponding literary form (PN 269). However, if we read Lukács ‘symptomatically’, comparing the text not with our own assessment of the world, but with itself – ‘its non-vision with its vision’ (22) – there will be no need to attribute moral implications to the phrase. ‘Absolute sinfulness’ is an idealist formulation, derived from (and credited to) Fichte, but it need not be referred to Fichte’s usage, nor even to the contemporary moment of Lukács’s text. Absolute sinfulness should be considered, rather, in relation to the ‘new world’ that, according to *The Theory of the Novel*, we are able to glimpse by way of the novel, albeit only in a ‘polemical, nostalgic and abstract’ form. These two orders differ, spatially and temporally, insofar as one is able to cast a yearning glance towards the other. ‘Absolute sinfulness’ is defined by that glance, which is not reciprocated. The ethical ‘normativity’ that Lukács finds in the novel is a technical quality that may best be summed up with the word ‘perspective’ – meaning a differential relation between subject and object, presence and absence, foreground and background, protagonist and setting. The irruption of perspective, tied to the perceiving individual and his or her removal from the world, is precisely what defines the novel form. In the world of the novel, writes Lukács, an ‘unbridgeable chasm’ separates ‘cognition and action’, ‘soul and created structure’, ‘self

and world'. These terms underpin the decisive difference between 'essence' and 'substance' (34). The novel is the form of 'absolute sinfulness' not because of any moral or historical decline, but simply because of this principle of interiority, the principle that creates and maintains the 'chasm' between self and world, condemning the novel to abstraction, reflexivity, pontification, irony or utopianism. 'In the created reality of the novel,' writes Lukács, 'all that becomes visible is the distance separating the systematization from concrete life: a systematization which emphasizes the conventionality of the objective world and the interiority of the subjective one' (70).

The novel, in other words, is a mode of reading, one that is close to the 'empiricist' or 'religious' myth of reading ascribed by Althusser to Marx in his 'early' phase, before the methodological insights that emerged with the great project of *Capital*. Lukács's strongest articulation of the implications of the structural role of perspective in the novel form comes in a fascinating parenthetical interpolation – the framing of which belies its significance for Lukács's ideas about the ethical organization of the novel: 'The "should be" kills life, and every concept expresses a "should-be" of its object; that is why thought can never arrive at a real definition of life. . . .' (48). Perspective, distance, is constitutive of the novel. By implication, in the anticipated, dreamed-of new world, perspective – that is to say, subjective viewpoint – will be the first element to disappear. Such a world, writes Lukács in the last paragraphs of *The Theory of the Novel*, will be one of 'pure soul-reality', a world where 'man exists as man, neither as a social being nor as an isolated, unique, pure and therefore abstract interiority' (152).

What Lukács is talking about – indeed, what all his early thought is convulsed by – is the possibility of a world in which life and form are undifferentiated. His own formulation to describe this world, as anticipated in the works of Dostoevsky – a world 'remote from any struggle against what actually exists' – preserves the crucial ambiguity of whether what is envisaged is a new world or a new literature.

In his 1962 afterword to the book, Lukács condemned these final pages of *The Theory of the Novel* for what he called their 'primitive utopianism', and the work in which they appear for its 'ethically-tinged pessimism *vis à vis* the present'. In the later text, Lukács is writing from a quite different perspective, one that has resigned itself to the inevitability of perspective. One of the considerations of this chapter, however, is whether a route towards Lukács's 'new world' other than the one that Lukács himself found to be unrealizable might be established. Rather than the evolution of a new literary form, a proposition that would lead to a disenchanting Lukács, in the 1930s and 1940s, abandoning the search for a form 'remote from any struggle against what actually exists' in the turn towards realism, I will suggest that the first step towards a new world lies in abolishing the *perspectival* relationship to the old one. Could a methodological overcoming of the problem of 'perspective' bring us to where Lukács, in those final pages of *The Theory of the Novel*, dreams of being? And if so, what hints

might there be, elsewhere in Lukács's writing, that the idealist and historicist ontology frequently attributed to *The Theory of the Novel* is not as central to his own early thought as later thinkers, including Lukács himself, have assumed? Can we save the principle of immanence that runs through Lukács's early work by removing the historical ontology that Lukács later projected onto it?

* * *

Several years before writing *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács produced an essay on cinematic form that, quite aside from its own merits, now appears extraordinarily precocious in light of later attempts to theorize cinema by figures such as André Bazin, Pier Paolo Pasolini, Robert Bresson and Gilles Deleuze.²

In that essay, entitled 'Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema', Lukács attempts to describe the 'new beauty' of the cinema, a beauty that one is tempted to evaluate according to existing aesthetic categories, but that in fact demands 'its own aesthetic evaluation and determination'. Lukács offers the following remarkable observation, in which cinema is not only contrasted to other forms, but is considered as a 'world' in which such contrasts are no longer necessary or possible: 'The world of the "cinema" is . . . a world without background or perspective, without any difference in weight or quality, as only the present gives things fate and weight, light and lightness' (TAC 14). Unlike in the theatre – Lukács's main point of comparison – in the cinema 'there are only movements and actions of people – but *no people*.' Whereas every element in the theater – costumes, scenery, milieu, actors, sound, lighting – is a 'mere compromise' for what is absent, cinema's essence is 'movement in itself, an eternal variability, the never-resting change of things' (15). Cinema thus achieves a certain 'immediacy', a certain collapse of perspective, since there is no absence that is made present by cinema, and no presence that takes the place of an absence. Cinema cancels out the distinction between absence and presence – the very principle of representation – as well as the distinction between possibility and actuality.

Lukács's logic here anticipates André Bazin's thesis in 'The Ontology of the Photographic Image', another work in which 'sinfulness' has a technical rather than moral value. For Bazin, perspective is 'the original sin of Western painting', from which photography 'redeems it' (12). The ontology shared by the photographic image and the object, a continuity deriving from the mechanical quality of the process of reproduction, functions to remove the 'shadow of doubt' that the presence of a human hand casts over the painted image. 'All the arts are based on the presence of man,' writes Bazin, 'only photography derives an advantage from his absence.' It is to this mechanical or 'objective' element that we should attribute the 'irrational power of the photograph to bear away our faith' (Bazin, 1967, p. 14).

For Lukács too, the point is not that cinema has perfected representation, but that it bypasses it altogether. 'There arises in the cinema a new homogeneous

and harmonious, coherent and changing world, one that corresponds to the fairy tale and dream in literature and life,' he writes (15). Cinema is not amenable to the perspective of the critic, the perspective of judgement. 'The "cinema" presents mere action but no motive or meaning,' writes Lukács. 'Its characters have mere movement, but *no souls*, and what occurs is simply an occurrence, but not fate' (TAC 15). Cinema transcends the 'concept', that entity that the novel expands into an order of ethical significance: the 'should-be'. In cinema, says Lukács, 'everything is true and real, is equally true and equally real.'

My concern is not whether the qualities that Lukács attributes to early cinema really existed there, nor whether the possibilities of the cinematic image were betrayed by the advent of sound, or by the control that capitalism has since managed to secure over the medium – questions that have been encouraged by Benjamin's 'Work of Art' essay and the debates surrounding it. What is of interest, rather, is that the qualities Lukács associates with cinema are those that, a year or two later, he comes to think of as having belonged to the world of the epic: immanence, immediacy, an ontological continuity between the work and the world. Both of these early texts by Lukács understand the principle of immanence to involve a binding together of 'form' with 'the historical moment' (TN 152). Thus, the idealization of immanence as a spectre of mere 'possibility', retreating perpetually into the future, or alternatively lost in some vanished world, is a further symptom of the 'divided reality' of the 'present', and is belied by the principle itself.

The question posed by Lukács in both texts is: how do we escape from conceptual or ethical perspective, from symbolism, from a sense of destiny, from subjective reflection and intention – that is to say, from literature? In a 1931 essay entitled 'Little History of Photography', Walter Benjamin asks the same question of photography. By way of an answer, Benjamin cites the work of the early French photographer Eugène Atget, whose photographs of the façades of Parisian brothels, abandoned eating tables and courtyards emptied of people effected 'a salutary estrangement between man and his surroundings' (519). Atget, Benjamin writes, 'looked for what was unremarked, forgotten, cast adrift'; his photographs 'suck the aura out of reality like water from a sinking ship'. Benjamin defines aura in terms of perspective: as 'a strange weave of space and time: the unique appearance or semblance of distance, no matter how close it may be' (518). Atget's work, then, succeeds in removing everything 'novelistic' from the image: everything that enables perspective, that encourages an ethical reflection. Indeed, what distinguishes Atget from his 'imitators' (Benjamin mentions a fashion in 'avant-garde periodicals' for photographs captioned 'Westminster', 'Lille', 'Antwerp' or 'Breslau', but which show only details: a piece of balustrade, a treetop, a lamp-post with the name of the town inscribed on a life-buoy) is the *literariness* of the latter: such images, weighted with unspoken significance, are 'nothing but a literary refinement of motifs that Atget discovered.'

For Benjamin, the quality that is unique to photography, but that, paradoxically, 'goes beyond testimony to the photographer's art' – testifying to its escape

from the 'literary' – is what he calls the 'optical unconscious' (510–12). 'No matter how artful the photographer,' he explains, 'no matter how carefully posed his subject, the beholder [of the photograph] feels an irresistible urge to search for the tiny spark of contingency, of the here and now, with which reality has (so to speak) seared the subject, to find the inconspicuous spot where in the immediacy of that long forgotten moment the future nests so eloquently that we, looking back, may rediscover it' (510). This element – the optical unconscious – cannot be circumscribed by artistic intention; in fact, its definition is that which cannot be circumscribed by artistic intention. Benjamin goes so far as to describe it as nothing less than a 'new way of seeing' (519), liberated from the partiality and perspective of human perception.

Almost 20 years earlier, in 'Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema', Lukács attributed the same liberation to 'cinema': not an aesthetic practice within cinema – an imagined, possible or real use of the medium – but to cinema itself, its actuality. Shortly afterwards, in *The Theory of the Novel*, he frames the question of how to escape from literature in more chronological terms. At either extremity of that work, the answer to the problem of the novel is located in two historically defined moments: the world of the epic invoked in the opening pages, and the 'great unity' of ethical and aesthetic content to be forged in the (not necessarily near) future, as described in the final paragraphs. Strictly speaking, it is this chronological framing, rather than the answer itself, that invites the charges of 'nostalgia' and 'utopianism'.

Every indication in the main body of *The Theory of the Novel*, by contrast, is that the real answer to the problems troubling Lukács will be found not 'historically' – in a recovered epic, or in a new literary form or 'new world' as such – but in a new critical method; or, at least, that the 'new form' in question might be attained by a critical reframing or reconceptualization of the relation between work and world. Such a reframing would begin from the principle that particular forms cannot be separated from the 'transcendental topography' of the mind that makes them 'possible and indeed necessary' (TN 31–2). In a crucial passage early in *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács writes that what we forget when we look longingly to the Greeks is that 'the value of [such] moments is in their very transience'; that 'what [we] seek to escape from . . . constitutes [our] own depth and greatness' (31). Even on the penultimate page of the work (that is to say, at its most proleptic), Lukács insists that art can never 'depict' the new world, since to do so would be to foreclose it by re-establishing a perspectival relationship to it: 'The great epic is a form bound to the historical moment, and any attempt to depict the utopian as existent can only end in destroying the form, not in creating reality' (152). If the new world is inimical to representation – if it cannot come into existence separately from its presentation in a literary form – it must be the case that the new world is achievable precisely as a mode of reading, one that 'binds' the work to the world in a relationship that is far more intimate than that of depiction or representation. The question of how to escape from 'literature', then, would be answered methodologically, with an

approach to the reading of novels, say, that refuses to allow any defining quality to the elements that we might term ‘novelistic’; that looks to the novel rather in the light of the sensory qualities that are in play *even in the degree to which it seems to vacate sensuality*. The liberation effected by cinema, according to the Lukács of ‘Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema’, would thus be seen to be equally present in literature, not as a stylistic or expressive *practice* of writing, but in its mere actuality as a form immanently constituted by sensation.

I will offer an example from a Joseph Conrad story entitled ‘The Return’ (1898). One day the bourgeois Alvan Hervey comes home from work to find a note from his wife saying she is leaving him. Until that moment, the life that Alvan shares with his wife has been one characterized by conventionality and ethical complacency – what Lukács describes as the world of ‘absolute sinfulness’; a world organized by the sovereignty of perspective – in short, the world of the novel. Conrad condemns this world with no less force than Lukács: ‘They moved in their enlarged world amongst perfectly delightful men and women who feared emotion, enthusiasm, or failure, more than fire, war or mortal disease; who tolerated only the commonest formulas of commonest thoughts, and recognized only profitable facts’ (5). The shock that affects Alvan on reading his wife’s letter shatters his perspective; the experience is intellectually disorienting and physically exhilarating.

Something unknown, withering and poisonous, had entered his life, passed near him, touched him, and he was deteriorating. He was appalled. What was it? She was gone. Why? His head was ready to burst with the endeavour to understand her act and his subtle horror of it. Everything was changed. . . . He stared, shaking in every limb, while he felt the destructive breath, the mysterious breath, the breath of passion, stir the profound peace of the house. (Conrad, 2004, pp. 15–16)

Even as Alvan tries to comprehend an event that outwits habits of thought established over decades, Conrad’s effort to render palpable, sensory, the crisis of his protagonist expresses the dominance of conceptual, ethical thought in the world of the novel. At certain intervals, Alvan vocalizes his thoughts, but in every instance they are reflected back to him in a dramatic form in which his experience is no longer present. In general, spoken words in ‘The Return’ are hollow, bathetic in comparison with the interiority of Alvan himself:

He said very distinctly, and looking at the carpet, ‘She’s gone’.

It was terrible – not the fact but the words; the words charged with the shadowy might of a meaning that seemed to possess the tremendous power to call Fate down upon the earth, like those strange and appalling words that sometimes are heard in sleep. They vibrated round him in a metallic atmosphere, in a space that had the hardness of iron and the resonance of a bell of bronze. . . . It occurred to him that he ought to be heartbroken; but in an

exceedingly short moment he perceived that his suffering was nothing of so trifling and dignified a kind . . . He felt very sick – physically sick – as though he had bitten through something nauseous. Life, that to a well-ordered mind should be a matter of congratulation, appeared to him, for a second or so, perfectly intolerable. (12–13)

Shortly after the crisis of meaning precipitated by the discovery of the letter, Conrad reestablishes the novelistic terms of Alvan's existence by means of the central conceit of the story: the wife's return that same evening. The immediate effect of her reappearance is that the crisis is (temporarily) abated. Alvan recovers his equilibrium and his ego: 'Some essential part of himself had in a flash returned into his body, returned finally from a fierce and lamentable region, from the dwelling place of unveiled hearts. . . . It seemed to him that he could never make a mistake as long as he lived' (26). As he attempts to establish the terms on which she has returned, Alvan reflects on the drama in which he and his wife are caught: 'He was profoundly penetrated by the solemnity of the moment; he felt deeply the greatness of the occasion. And more than ever the walls of his house seemed to enclose the sacredness of ideals to which he was about to offer a magnificent sacrifice' (42). The architectural symbolism corresponds to the stability of perspective with which Alvan consoles himself, and that Conrad condemns in him.

Conrad himself wrote of the story that it consisted 'for the most part of physical impressions; impressions of sound and sight . . . rendered as if for their own sake and combined with a sublimated description of a desirable middle-class town-residence which somehow manages to produce a sinister effect' (quoted Colm Tóibín, p. ix). The story ends in the same mood in which Lukács begins *The Theory of the Novel*, with Alvan struck by 'a vast melancholy as of all mankind longing for what cannot be attained' (67). Yet, in Conrad's rendition, this intimation is precisely as sensuous as the crisis that precipitated it. What is cinematic about the story has nothing to do with what V. S. Naipaul has described as its 'cinematic details' (Naipaul, 2003, p. 179): a bronze gas lamp in the shape of a dragon that seems to 'writhe away from the wall in calm convolutions' (9); a scene in which Alvan catches himself multiply reflected in his wife's dressing-room mirrors (9–10). Reading Lukács's essay on cinema alongside *The Theory of the Novel* it becomes apparent that the qualities in 'The Return' that are most truly cinematic are also those in which it is most faithful to the specificity of the novel. As Alvan contemplates the resumption of a life now irrevocably marked by uncertainty and suspicion – 'The years would pass and he would always mistrust her smile, suspect her eyes; he would always misbelieve her voice, he would never have faith in her silence. . . .' (71) – it is apparent that this newly reconfigured world is that of the novel. 'He stood in the revealing night – in the darkness that tries the hearts, in the night useless for the work of men, but in which their gaze, undazzled by the sunshine of covetous days, wanders sometimes as far as the stars. The perfect stillness around him had something solemn in it,

but he felt it was the lying solemnity of a temple devoted to the rites of a debasing persuasion.'

The story's last sentences tell us of Alvan's final departure from the house. For the first time, the narration abandons Alvan's interiority; we perceive the event through the wife: 'She listened, with parted lips and irresolute eyes. Then below, far below her, as if in the entrails of the earth, a door slammed heavily; and the quiet house vibrated to it from roof to foundations, more than to a clap of thunder' (74). The moment signals Alvan's departure from a world of domestic conventionality, but it also announces Conrad's taking leave of 'literature' and everything it denotes: perspective, significance, egoism. The departure, however, is as impossible as it is obligatory. After all, the wife, Conrad's readers and of course the author himself are left behind in the work; only the husband escapes.

The conditions that secure the novel to the ethical, according to Lukács, are indissoluble and constitutive; yet we can see from the Conrad story that fiction is constituted to the same degree by something that escapes ethical reflection, something that succeeds in abolishing all perspective, a measure of physical disorientation in which all architectural or theatrical constituents are thrown into disarray and the work is revealed in its capacity to be 'seared' by reality (to use Benjamin's phrase). The novel *stages* Alvan's escape; however, what succeeds in abolishing perspective is rarely – in fact, could never be – anything identifiable within, or extractable from, the work. The escape takes place, rather, by way of our intuition of the work as an event of sensation. Alvan Hervey's disorientation on reading his wife's letter is not rendered so much as *produced* by the text – by Alvan's habit of thinking, seeing and reflecting 'novelistically'. This dialectic of the sensual and the conceptual is not a quality only of certain texts, although undoubtedly some are more interesting and productive in this regard than others; it is not the result of a process of critical reflection that could be attributed to any reading or writing subject beyond the confines of the text; and it is not an undertaking that yields up truths that may be applied, or understood, in any sphere outside the text.

One name for this quality, invoking Lukács, is 'epic' – the degree to which even the novel, the form of the epoch of 'absolute sinfulness', may attain the sensual immediacy of an age in which 'the fire that burns in the soul is of the same essential nature as the stars'. In the twentieth century, however, the medium in which that quality has been most easily *conceivable* is cinema. Lukács's essay on cinema, inhabiting as it does the same conceptual apparatus as his great work on the novel written several years later, allows us to detach the novel from the idealist chronology that, in *The Theory of the Novel*, seems to characterize its relation to the sensory immediacy of the epic. The 'eternal variability' of the cinematic image, a quality that Lukács opposes to the interplay of 'grand moments' and insignificant details on the stage, makes it possible to *think* the eternal variability of language and of fiction also; to think the text outside the principle of representation, of presence and absence, and to suspend our

sense of the novel as a form that is framed and circumscribed by a normative ethics.

The possibility of forging Lukács's 'new world' depends, then, not on the discovery of a literary form free of the novel's 'absolute sinfulness', but on the critical transformation of 'absolute sinfulness' from a moral to a technical category. That transformation is predicated on the insight that language, too, is a 'mechanical' apparatus, as 'seared' by reality as the photographic image, and as susceptible to ideological, political and ethnographic reversal as the photograph. As Lukács was aware in his essay on cinema, such a discovery enables us to dissolve the historical ontology of the text, as well as the organizing principle of the work's 'expression', to reinsert the work into the moment of our reading, the moment of the work's revolutionary power.

Notes

¹ This preoccupation, apparent in the framing of *The Theory of the Novel*, potentially brings Lukács into dialogue with more recent thinkers of the event, such as Gilles Deleuze, Alain Badiou and Jean-François Lyotard – figures who, it might be thought, are less obviously susceptible to the charges of utopianism, idealism and ideological thinking that have attended Lukács's reputation. It is to them, perhaps, that we owe the emergence of an historical situation in which, according to one recent characterization, the critical idea of the 'presence of meaning in a text' has been given up 'in favour of the idea that meaning is unstable and ever-changing, depending on the contexts to which the signifiers of the text are connected' (Bowie, 2006, p. 40). However, to fail to produce a dialogue between this 'contemporary' situation and that of a thinker such as Lukács would be, paradoxically, to treat the newer situation according to Althusser's first, 'religious' or 'empiricist', reading: as an order of reality that is in principle knowable, whose thinkers stand as vessels of that knowledge, a knowledge circumscribed by a certain critical subjectivity or positionality, and incompatible with a separate knowledge, equally circumscribed by another viewpoint (such as that of Lukács). It would be to treat such 'knowledges', in other words, not as documents of struggle – of which the 'field of the invisible' is presupposed within the 'field of the visible' – but as works capable, potentially, of an empirical prehension. It would be to forget the Althusserian principle that what is invisible in a certain reading is not something outside it, but something that exists within, circumscribed by, what is visible; to regard the work of the later thinkers as a 'standard' of knowledge (Althusser and Balibar, 2009, p. 22), a grid through which to assess the work of the earlier thinkers. (For the distinction between the *place* and the *taking place* of the event, see Badiou, 2007, p. 65.)

² 'Gedanken zu einer Aesthetik des Kino' was first published in April 1911 in the Budapest German daily, *Pester Lloyd*, and in a revised version in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* two years later (on September 10, 1913). For a detailed account of the genealogy of the essay, and of its fortunes in the English-speaking world, see Tom Levin's indispensable essay, 'From Dialectical to Normative Specificity' (1987). See also Blankenship (2001).

Works Cited

- Althusser, L. (2005), *For Marx*, trans. B. Brewster. London: Verso.
- Althusser, L. and E. Balibar (2009), *Reading Capital*, trans. B. Brewster. London: Verso.
- Badiou, A. (2007), *The Century*, trans. Alberto Toscano. Cambridge: Polity.
- Bazin, A. (1967), 'The ontology of the photographic image', in *What Is Cinema? Vol. 1*, trans. H. Gray. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, pp. 9–16.
- Benjamin, W. (1999), 'Little history of photography', trans. E. Jephcott and eds K. Shorter, in M. W. Jennings, H. Eiland and G. Smith, *Selected Writings Volume 2: 1927–1934*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press, pp. 510–12.
- Blankenship, J. (2001), 'Futurist fantasies: Lukács's early essay "Thoughts toward an aesthetic of the cinema"', in *Polygraph*, 13, 21–36.
- Bowie, A. (2006), 'Interpretation and truth: Adorno on literature and music', in D. Cunningham and N. Mapp (eds), *Adorno and Literature*. London and New York: Continuum, pp. 40–52.
- Conrad, J. (2004), *The Return*. London: Hesperus.
- Jameson, F. (1981), *The Political Unconscious: Narrative as a Socially Symbolic Act*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Levin, T. (1987), 'From dialectical to normative specificity: reading Lukács on film', *New German Critique*, 40 (Winter), 35–61.
- Naipaul, V. S. (2003), 'Conrad's darkness and mine', in P. Mishra (ed.), *Literary Occasions: Essays*. New York: Vintage, pp. 162–80.
- Nealon, C. (2009), 'Reading on the left', *Representations*, 108 (Fall), 22–50.
- Tóibín, C. (2004), 'Foreword', in Conrad, pp. vii–xi.

Chapter 3

Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel

David Cunningham

Her voice is full of money.

—*Jay Gatsby*

How are we to read Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* today?¹ More specifically, how are we to re-read its relation to Lukács's later Marxist work on the novel, framed as the latter is by the self-consciously materialist attempt to rework the book's Hegelian categories in the light of Marx's ambition to turn Hegel's own idealism 'right side up'? (Marx, 1974, p. 29). In the wake of the apparent disappearance of a horizon of world proletarian revolution, a horizon that informs, at every point, Lukács's later accounts of the realist and modernist novel, how have the possible meanings of *The Theory of the Novel* come to be transformed? Can we find new life in Lukács's theorization of the novel?

All of Lukács's work on the novel proposes itself as a series of answers to the questions that begin Ian Watt's classic 1957 study, *The Rise of the Novel*:

Is the novel a new literary form? And if we assume, as is commonly done, that it is, . . . how does it differ from the prose fiction of the past . . . ? And is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did? (9)

In this sense, Lukács's theorization of the novel is also a theorization of modernity, and of its specific relation to literary form. Despite the calls of Margaret Doody and, more recently, Franco Moretti, to 'make the literary field longer, larger and deeper' (Moretti, 2006, p. x), Watt's questions remain, in a fundamental sense, ineliminable. While David Trotter may be right to suggest that 'traces of novel DNA' can be found everywhere and anywhere within the history of literate culture (31), there remains something historically specific at stake in questions about the rise of the novel as such, whatever its lengthier 'polygenesis'. While it may be true, as Benjamin writes in the 1930s, that particular aspects of the novel 'go back to antiquity', it was only in its encounter

with the 'evolving middle class' of 'fully developed capitalism' that it discovered those 'elements' that were genuinely 'favourable to its flowering' (2002, p. 147). Such an assertion indicates what for much twentieth- and twenty-first-century criticism has been thought to delimit the novel: that it is a – perhaps *the* – distinctively modern literary form (see Cunningham, 2006, p. 199).

The quality of this modernity has been conceived in many different, more or less 'mythical' (and thereby deconstructable) ways. But if it takes a dominant form, as Benjamin's account suggests, it is probably as one that understands the novel as literature's great bourgeois form: the expression of some 'new centre of gravity' embodied in the 'self-confidence of the middle class as a whole' (Watt, 1972, p. 65). The roots of such a conception – associated, variously, with the rise of individualism, the concretely everyday and secular or the dissolution of some pre-existing hierarchy of genre – lie, however, not so much in any developed account of the novel itself, but rather, negatively, in an account of the epic outlined in a mere page or two of Hegel's *Aesthetics*, from which the conceptual apparatus of Lukács's work on the novel will largely derive:

[I]t is quite different with the novel, the modern bourgeois epic. Here we have completely before us again the wealth and many-sidedness of interests, situations, characters, relations involved in life, the background of a whole world, as well as the epic portrayal of events. But what is missing is the *primitive* poetic general situation out of which the epic proper proceeds. A novel in the modern sense of the word presupposes a world already prosaically ordered. . . . For the whole state of the world today has assumed a form diametrically opposed in its prosaic organization to the requirements . . . for genuine epic. (Hegel, 1975, pp. 1092, 1109; translation modified)

As the modern literary form that attempts to recover the epic's many-sided range and 'wholeness', what the novel necessarily lacks, according to Hegel, is the possible 'occurrence of an action which in the whole breadth of its circumstances and relations must gain access to our contemplation as a rich event connected with the total world of a nation and epoch' (1044). For it is a structural feature of modernity, as regards its potential mediation by the artwork (if not the philosophical concept), that it resists being grasped as a totality. Much as any individual 'story' might strive for universal significance so as to represent or embody totality, it will always resolve back into the contingent and 'unendingly particular'. As Lukács will sum up and extend Hegel's argument some hundred years later, the novel is, impossibly, 'the epic of an age in which the extensive totality of life is no longer directly given . . . yet which still thinks in terms of totality' (TN 56). Such forms 'differ from one another not by their authors' fundamental intentions, but by the given historico-philosophical realities with which the authors were confronted' (56) – that is, they become necessary manifestations (and hence indices) of the difference between the social 'realities' of the ancient and the modern per se.

The Modern Epic

Persistent as such a conception of the epic's negative relation to modernity has been, it is not without its problems. Certainly, *The Theory of the Novel* leaves a good deal to be desired in this regard, given the degree to which it is apparently bereft of any specific historical detail in either social, technological or economic terms. As a characterization of modernity – most notoriously, through Fichte's description of the 'the epoch of absolute sinfulness' (152) – *The Theory of the Novel* would seem no less 'mythical' in its form than in its projection of a lost ancient 'happy age' of perfect and unthinkable completion. Nonetheless, or so I want to argue, stripped of its ostentatiously idealist baggage, we might see this as a question less of the strict historiographic actuality of past epic wholeness in Lukács's work than of the ways in which it articulates a certain self-consciousness of the historically distinctive social forms from which such lost wholeness is 'mythically' projected: the solidity against which the melting of all that is solid into air may be enunciated. This is important because failure to acknowledge such self-consciousness altogether risks simply dissolving the social conditions of novelistic form into an effectively transhistorical set of phenomena – individuation, secularity, entrepreneurship, everydayness and so on – that thereby become progressively unmoored from historical difference and change per se, an ahistorical 'bundle' of 'transcultural constants that can be more or less active from period to period and work to work', as Massimo Fusillo proposes (40). As such, if the task today may well be to 'reorient [Lukács's] text away from its spatio-temporal nostalgia for premodern literary forms', this should not necessarily entail any suspension of 'its periodising aspects' altogether (Bewes, 2006, p. 87). On the contrary: it ought to connect it to what, in the *Communist Manifesto*, is famously described as the conditions of a culture which is itself marked by an experience of 'everlasting uncertainty and agitation' (223).

Of course, if *The Theory of the Novel* largely avoids any attempt to socially concretize such an experience of modernity, the task that Lukács sets himself from the 1920s onwards is precisely to provide the rise of the novel with some more historically specific materialist account. Hence I do not quote Marx merely contingently: it is the bourgeoisie, writes Marx, 'who cannot exist without constantly revolutionizing the instruments of production, and thereby the relations of production, and with them the whole relations of society' (Marx and Engels, 2002, pp. 222–3). If the novel is thus a distinctively modern moment in what Benjamin describes as a process in which literary forms, such as the form of the story, come to be 'melted down' (1999, p. 771), then it is because, for such a view, it both reflects and participates in these ongoing transformations in the relations of society as a whole.

However, from the perspective of the development of Lukács's work, this raises two questions. First, how exactly in the later writings are the essentially Hegelian categories of *The Theory of the Novel* – and, specifically, of the novel's understanding as an (inherently impossible) modern epic form – reworked in

line with the version of historical materialism set out in Lukács's first great Marxist text, *History and Class Consciousness*, and its subsequent developments? Second, how, in doing so, is it around a new understanding of the novel as the specifically modern bourgeois epic that such reworking will come to be organized? More particularly, and outside of the legitimation with which the Hegelian reference provides it, why, in any Marxian-inspired 'rewriting' of Lukács's earlier book, is it as the epic of the bourgeois class, rather than of capitalism itself, that the novel comes to be understood?

This is a question that has gone strangely unasked, not only of Lukács's later work, but of dominant theorizations of the novel more generally. To pose it is not to suggest that the association of the novel with the bourgeoisie, and specifically with the individualism of the bourgeois subject (as opposed to, say, the communal forms of Benjamin's storyteller), is false; far from it. It is however to note, as Fredric Jameson observes, that such theorizations can work to bypass what should otherwise be regarded as 'the very centre of Marx's work, the structural account of the historic originality of capitalism' (1998, p. 145). Jameson continues:

Marxist literary criticism – to limit ourselves to that – has less often tried to analyse its objects in terms of capital and value, in terms of the system of capitalism itself, than it has in terms of class. . . . [It has been] much simpler to establish the more direct mediation of a merchant and business class, with its emergent class culture, alongside the forms and texts themselves. Money enters the picture here insofar as only exchange, merchant activity and the like, and later on nascent capitalism, determine the coming into being of some historically original burgher or city merchant, bourgeois class life. (145)

This has certainly been the case with dominant theorizations of the novel, Marxist and otherwise. Yet, in a context in which it is global capitalism rather than either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat that seems to drive any revolutionizing of 'the whole relations of society', the question is raised whether, if we are to revisit *The Theory of the Novel*, it is – against the grain of Lukács's own re-readings – not as an epic of the bourgeois 'people', but as a displaced account of 'the system of capitalism itself' that the book's engagement with the novel's impossible epic form is best understood today.

Capitalism, Modernity and the Novel

Watt's final question – 'Is there any reason why these differences appeared when and where they did?' – reminds one of certain debates concerning the origins of a *capitalist* modernity. For Watt himself, the novel's eighteenth-century development is traceable first to the supersession of feudal relations of patronage by the increasingly powerful and liberated economic relations of the

market, publishers, booksellers and the 'reading public'. Similarly, Benedict Anderson links the rise of the novel not only to the emergence of the 'revolutionary vernacularizing thrust' of bourgeois culture (39), but, materially, to the rise of what he calls 'print-capitalism' and the production of the book as, in 'a rather special sense', the 'first modern-style, mass-produced industrial commodity' (34). Consequently, the problem of how to define the distinction between 'aspects of the novel' and the rise of the novel as such might productively mirror similar questions concerning the historical development of capitalism itself. For, like Trotter's traces of novel DNA, we can clearly find key economic and social 'aspects of capitalism' – money, the commodity and so on – across a far longer history than that of capitalism proper.² Yet there remains an obvious 'qualitative difference between the commodity as one form among many regulating the metabolism of human society and the commodity as the universal structuring principle' (HCC 85).³

Interesting and important as all this is, my own concern is less with a sociology of literature per se than with its relations to something like a theoretical 'history of forms' in Lukács's work. The central question is not so much one of the novel's own status as a commodity, its links to print-capitalism, or even its ongoing 'reflection' of capitalist modernity's development (in which, say, Moll Flanders appears as 'our classic revelation of the mercantile mind' [Watt, p. 105]), but of the extent to which we can grasp this in terms of its intelligibility as an effective 'model' of such capitalist modernity, a formal equivalent, at some level, to its social being. As an epic form, the novel, Lukács writes, carries 'the fragmentary nature of the world's structure into the world of forms' (TN 39). Whether or not one accepts the more or less mythical terms with which such fragmentation is posited in *The Theory of the Novel*, the question remains of the degree to which literary form can be understood as something like a mediation of *social* form, the means by which social form appears somehow within artistic form itself.

It is worth noting that, suspended from any implausibly simple coding as either negative or positive in character, this conception of the novel's 'form-problem' appears, in both Hegel and Lukács, as an increase in the complexity, distance and objective extent of what Marx terms 'the whole relations of society'. If the novel is the paradoxical epic form of a world in which 'occupations and activities are sundered and split into infinitely many parts, so that to individuals only a particle of the whole may accrue' (Hegel, p. 149), it is because, as Lukács writes, this is a world which 'has become infinitely large and each of its corners . . . richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks'. It is this very wealth that, by virtue of its unending richness, 'cancels out the positive meaning – the totality – upon which their life was based' (TN 34).

For the early Lukács, the novel, any novel, is thus 'the paradoxical fusion of heterogeneous and discrete components into an organic whole which is then abolished over and over again' (TN 84). In the terms that Adorno will later develop, as epic form the novel can only ever be some form of negative or

anti-epic; a formal instantiation of its own negative relation to the possibility for totality given (however mythically) to the epic as such. For the Lukács of *The Theory of the Novel* this negativity is conceived in two possible ways:

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

In both of these possibilities – ‘narrowing down’ and ‘polemical impossibility’ – the work is constituted by failure when judged from the perspective of epic totality; however, their essential forms of negativity are significantly different. In the first, if epic wholeness survives, it does so only by, for example, fleeing ‘from great national events into the restrictedness of private domestic situations’ (Hegel, p. 1109). It is in these terms that we could follow through the consequences of Benjamin’s conception of the novel’s ‘birthplace’ as the ‘individual in his isolation’ – whether in the figure of author, reader or literary character (Benjamin typically cites the *Bildungsroman*) – as what connects it to that ‘which is incommensurable in the representation of human experience’ as a whole (2002, p. 146); an incommensurability which is also the freedom proffered by bourgeois individualism in its break with feudal bonds and hierarchies. In this way the novel is marked by an irresolvable collision between what Hegel calls the individual (bourgeois) subject’s ‘poetry of the heart and the opposing prose of circumstances’ (1092), which, in its more critical form, functions, at best, negatively, as a means either of expressing ‘the conflict between living human beings and rigidified conditions’ – entailing that ‘alienation itself’ must become ‘an aesthetic device for the novel’ – or of constituting the artwork itself as some moment of nonidentity resistant to the more or less violent closure of the whole, where that whole is understood itself as inherently oppressive (Adorno 1991, p. 32).⁴ (By contrast, in Hegel’s terms, no epic hero or epic work can possibly be in *conflict* with its world.)

In the second possibility set out by Lukács, in which the will to a genuinely epic totality is not so much abandoned as ‘polemically’ engaged in its very impossibility, negativity instead takes the form of something like an ironic formal expression of transformations within ‘the whole relations of society’: not so much a direct, concrete witness to the (bourgeois) individual’s alienation – whereby the ‘individual confronts established systems of value and finds them lacking’ (Armstrong, p. 349) – as a rendering visible of the impossible task of grasping, in any finite literary form, the full, complex extent of those ‘whole [capitalist] relations of society’ that confront the individual, and that are increasingly objectified in properly *supraindividual*, even inhuman forms: administration, state law or, above all, the world market.

In short, if the novel as ‘narrowing down’ seeks, in the terms of *The Theory of the Novel*, an escape from the ‘largeness’ of the world so as to find (critically or

otherwise) a ‘particle’ of the whole that can be isolated and encompassed within it – a more or less self-enclosed provincial community or an individual consciousness on an individual day, for example – the novel as ‘polemical impossibility’ gestures *towards* this very ‘largeness’ as a means of registering something about the changing nature of this world’s modernity itself. To employ a term familiar from Jameson’s work, its primary object becomes not so much the unfolding of individual freedom and difference (or their limits), but, as epic form, the impossibility of an adequate ‘cognitive mapping’ of any ‘total’ world *tout court*: ‘the symbol and analogon of that even sharper dilemma which is the incapacity of our minds, at least at present, to map the greater global multinational and decentred communicational network in which we find ourselves caught as individual subjects’ (Jameson, 1998, p. 16).⁵

Becoming Abstract

One way of approaching and focusing such questions would be through a critical attention to the problematic of abstraction apparent in Lukács’s writings, both pre- and post-1917 – or, more precisely, to a certain relation of abstract to concrete at work there. For, in a fundamental sense, Jameson’s rewriting of the novelistic problem of totality as one of a more general problem of cognitive mapping is simply the modern problem of abstraction itself.

A certain account of abstraction is central to Lukács’s early analysis of the nature of the novel. For what defines the novel’s specifically epic ambitions is the degree to which, within it, ‘totality can be systematized only in abstract terms’ (TN 70). Hence what comes to menace the ‘chivalrous novel’ in the moment that gives birth to *Don Quixote* is accorded a far more general significance:

The chivalrous novel had succumbed to the fate of every epic that wants to maintain and perpetuate a form by purely formal means after the transcendental conditions for its existence have already been condemned by the historico-philosophical dialectic. The chivalrous novel had lost its roots in transcendent being, and the forms, which no longer had any immanent function, withered away, became abstract. (101)

This is a historical proposition. For if every novel must risk what, in a Hegelian register, Lukács calls ‘bad abstraction’, this is not a contingent possibility, but a necessary productive logic generated by some abstraction inherent to that very ‘given reality’ with which the novel, in general, is confronted.

This argument, of course, is one of the key targets of Lukács’s own self-critical preface to the book, written in 1962, which attempts to articulate and justify the subsequent development of its arguments on a properly ‘Marxist ground’, informed by ‘concrete socio-historical realities’ (17), and against which Lukács diagnoses in his own earlier self a fatal weakness for what he terms *abstractionism*. But it also entails a more straightforward opposition of abstraction to the

concrete than can be found anywhere in the earlier book.⁶ This is apparent in the notorious deployment of a Hegelian distinction between so-called ‘abstract’ and ‘concrete’ potentiality (MCR 21–4) as a means of distinguishing modernism from realism, as well as in the 1962 critique of an ‘abstractionism’ that effaces the particularity of the novel’s own ‘historical and aesthetic richness’ (TN 13). As he writes there:

The epilogue in *War and Peace* is, in fact, an authentic conclusion, in terms of ideas, to the period of the Napoleonic Wars; the development of certain figures already foreshadows the Decembrist rising of 1825. But the author of *The Theory of the Novel* . . . can [only] find here . . . ‘more melancholy than the ending of the most problematic of novels of disillusionment’. (14)

This, however, runs together two different problematics of abstraction in the earlier work: on one hand, an abstractionism at the level of critical or theoretical approach, which reduces rich particularity to generalized models or types; on the other, an abstraction immanent to the text itself, which, in the case of realism, is thus countered by the claim to an ‘authentic’ concreteness now seen as grounded in some ‘real’ social history. It is a short step from this to an analysis whereby an increasingly simple positive-to-negative encoding of the concrete and the abstract can be progressively mapped onto the formal (rather than predominantly historical) division between realism and modernism per se, in which ‘abstraction’ comes to mean little more than a straightforward ‘negation of outward reality’ or ‘attenuation of actuality’ itself (MCR 25).

Against this, what I am suggesting is that, just as the mature Marx reads a certain account of capitalism out of Hegel’s idealist categories, particularly in the *Science of Logic*, so it might be possible to do something similar with regard to the ‘abstractionism’ of the earlier Lukács work – a reading that the later Lukács will steadfastly resist. At least some of the problems the later work is commonly thought to exhibit result from the questionable ways in which Lukács pursues the project of a ‘translation’ of his own earlier Hegelian terms. Crudely put, where the post-1917 Lukács will seek, positively, to restore epic totality, under the name of realism, through an identification of class consciousness or ‘perspective’ with the expression of a quasi-Hegelian ‘subject of history’, what he will thereby abandon – or, at least, consign to the generic limitations of so-called ‘modernism’ – is the novel’s ‘epic’ connection to abstract form itself, as a confrontation with a totality that ‘can be systematized only in abstract terms’. That totality, I suggest, is best read as that of the capitalist system as such.

If a certain conception of abstraction remains important here, it is because the key engagement with Hegel’s account of abstraction in Marx’s mature work is not so much (as in the early writings on religion and philosophy) a simple demand to render material what the older thinker had expressed in ‘abstract’ or ‘theological’ terms, but Marx’s own elaboration of the social forms of what he calls *real* abstraction: those forms that, in capitalist modernity, come to have an

actual (and thus paradoxically concrete) objective social existence. As Adorno puts it, if the later Marx places an apparently Hegelian emphasis on totality – on ‘the ether that permeates the whole of society’ – for Marx ‘this ether is anything but ethereal; it is rather the *ens realissimum*. If it seems abstract, that is the fault not of fantastic, wilful thinking, hostile to the facts, but of the objective abstraction to which the social process of life is subject – the exchange relation’ (Adorno, 2003, p. 120; translation modified). While what defines the novel as an epic form, for the early Lukács, is that it still thinks in terms of totality, the ‘objective’ reality that the novel confronts in capitalist modernity must therefore be one in which the social totality itself can only be understood in abstract terms. But what would this mean for the theorization of a modern ‘epic form’?

Subjects of History

Before addressing this question, we need to return to Lukács’s own development of Hegel’s description of the novel as the modern bourgeois epic. Superficially, the meaning of such an assertion seems simple: the novel is the epic of the bourgeoisie, as a ruling class itself. Certainly, this is how Lukács will come to understand the novel in its classic ‘realist’ form. Yet, equally, Hegel’s proposition is a paradoxical one. For the whole weight of his preceding argument in the *Aesthetics* is to demonstrate that the epic is possible only within the ‘historico-philosophical’ reality of a specific nonmodern world. If Hegel’s (and the early Lukács’s) argument is followed consistently, there can be no ‘modern epic’, strictly speaking, bourgeois or otherwise.

One way in which the paradox apparent in all this might be dealt with is by approaching the novel’s bourgeois individual as, in Nancy Armstrong’s words, representative of ‘the claims of unacknowledged individuality in general’ (349). By treating such ‘claims’ precisely as ‘general’, the novel turns individualism itself into a kind of socially progressive and collective (class) consciousness, and hence provides a kind of paradoxical concrete ‘unity’ from which an epic perspective of totality, however internally contradictory, might be constructed. The ‘assertion of the primacy of individual experience’ (Watt, p. 15), its sundering from the communal totality of the feudal order, which should, in splitting ‘I’ from ‘you’, render impossible any claim to epic form, thus becomes, for a period at least (pre-1848), the basis for some universal system of values.

Simplifying to the extreme, in reworking his earlier, broadly Hegelian account of the novel, what Lukács takes from Marx is less a thinking of capitalist modernity than a means of rethinking the novel as epic from the specific ‘historical materialist’ standpoint of the supposedly successive revolutionary roles played by two social classes: the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. The idea that each of these classes may at different moments embody what he famously terms the position of a subject of history – history as a whole – allows, in turn, for the supposed restoration of an epic perspective of totality. The novel’s importance

is to be found, after 1917, in the degree to which it formally expresses, 'from the inside' (MCR 93), the perspective of such a world-historical 'subject'.

The reason why Lukács, while maintaining his Hegelian account of the novel as a continuation of epic form, abandons, *contra* Adorno, the negative terms in which this continuity (and, hence, relation to modernity itself) is understood, should then be obvious. In his 1962 preface to *The Theory of the Novel*, Lukács describes the book as written at a moment marked by a mood of 'permanent despair over the state of the world' in the years preceding the Russian Revolution (TN 17). But 1917 changes everything. As Michael Löwy puts it, 'Lukács perceives socialist revolution as a cultural restoration: organic culture again becomes possible' (1989, p. 192). What is epic in the novel thus comes to turn not on a polemical demonstration of the impossibility of achieving its necessary object, but on the positive possibility of a new concretization of what in *The Theory of the Novel* could 'be systematized only in abstract terms' (70). Hence Maxim Gorky, because of his relation to the 'revolutionary labour movement', is able to present 'the new kind of human being through whom the reader can experience directly and concretely the content of the new life' (WC 99). This is what Lukács calls 'the concrete nature of the new socialist perspective', where concreteness 'involves an awareness of the development, structure and goal of society as a whole' (MCR 96). 'Socialist realism is in a position . . . to portray the totality of a society in its immediacy and to reveal its pattern of development' (MCR 99).

In this way socialist realism picks up the 'progressive' perspective accorded to the pre-1848 novel as the epic form of what Lukács calls 'the heroic struggle for the integrated man of the bourgeois revolutionary period' (WC 96, MCR 100). Of course, the 'classical' bourgeois novel's claims to universality, and hence to a true perspective of totality, are still always in some sense 'false', insofar as they continue to be based on class division, and hence will, for Lukács, necessarily break down. But they are never entirely false, constituting rather, for a specific historical span, a kind of heroic 'real illusion' (WC 96), at the level of felt or 'poetic' experience, at least, able to produce a 'directly perceptible unity of the individual and the universal' (WC 38).⁷ It is only on condition of this 'illusion' that the novel's own significance as an epic form can be positively conceived.

However – and this is my key point – Lukács's conceptualization of the bourgeoisie and, speculatively, of the proletariat as successively filling such a role rests on some questionable premises. For we do not stand today on the cusp of some new socialist era, but on that of the domination of capitalism on a global scale. If there is indeed a 'subject of history' in Marx's *Capital*, corresponding to the role played by the Hegelian Idea, it is neither the bourgeoisie nor the proletariat, but self-valorizing capital itself (see Arthur, 2000). Some of the difficulties here stem from Marx's tendency in the 1840s to conflate the bourgeoisie with capital in ways that cannot be sustained (see Osborne, 2000, pp. 75–6). But if Lukács writes that in realism, as in the epic, each 'narrative detail' is 'significant to the extent that it expresses the dialectic between man-as-individual and

man-as-social-being' (MCR 75), according to the logic of *Capital*, the 'real' social being of modernity here is what Marx calls, in a Hegelian mode, the actual abstraction of that 'self-moving substance' which is Subject, 'in the shape of money' (Marx, 1976, pp. 255–6). At any rate, *contra* the suggestion of the *Manifesto*, the class assemblages of both bourgeoisie and proletariat are effectively functions of this movement, rather than its source.⁸

Paradoxically it is the very idealism of Lukács's earlier Hegelian 'theory', with its far more complex account of modernity as a culture of abstraction, that allows it to grasp, in a way his later 'materialist' writings do not, the immanence of an actual idealism to the modern social relations refracted by the novel (as 'materially' lived) – for all that the novel's relation to capitalism is seemingly foregrounded as a central problematic in the latter. If the novel is the modern literary form that attempts to recover the epic's many-sided range and 'wholeness', is it not the 'social being' of capital that defines the totality at stake in any modern epic as such: the ether that 'permeates the whole of society' but that is 'anything but ethereal'? If the novel is the epic of a world that 'has become infinitely large', everywhere 'richer in gifts and dangers than the world of the Greeks' (TN 34), then surely the 'form-problem' of such unending richness will be constituted not by the 'perspective of totality' engendered by either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat as a 'subject of history' but, quite simply, by the impossible 'totality' of capital itself.

At the very least, the question is raised whether the modernity of the novel is best understood in terms of its specific relation to the bourgeois era, or whether it is rather the capitalist age that most coherently defines the novel's historical locatability and form. The two propositions are not simply interchangeable. Rather, they open up quite different perspectives on the development of the novel itself.

An Abstract Art

I want to conclude with a suggestion made by Henri Lefebvre in *Critique of Everyday Life, Volume 3*: 'The predominance of the abstract in modern art accompanies the extension of the world of merchandise and merchandise as a world, along with the unlimited power of money and capital, very abstract and terribly concrete at one and the same time' (2003, p. 94). We are not used to thinking of the novel as a kind of 'abstract art'. Indeed for most, the novel is distinguished by a new kind of concreteness: the corollary of an emergent bourgeois empiricism and secularism, with its radical devotion to what Watt calls the 'here-and-now'. Unsurprisingly, Watt associates the rise of the novel with the emergence of an 'aesthetic tendency in favour of particularity' and against 'abstract and general terms' (17). Yet it is more accurately a conflicted combination and confrontation of abstraction and concretion that makes the novel an exemplary modern art form. If the 'elements of the novel' are, as the early

Lukács writes, 'entirely abstract', it is the very abstraction of the 'social structures' it confronts that the novel 'renders sensuous as the lived experience of the novel's characters', and thus transforms 'into an instrument of composition' (TN 70–1).

The problem at stake is thus an ultimately irresolvable one of how 'to conjure up in perceptible form a society that has become abstract' (Adorno, 1991, pp. 122–3), a problem best grasped in a passage from Brecht that Adorno was fond of quoting:

The situation becomes so complicated because a simple 'reproduction of reality' says less than ever about reality. A photograph of the Krupp factories or the AEG provides virtually no information about these establishments. True reality has slipped over into functional reality. The reification of human relations, that is, the factory, no longer delivers human relations to us. (Ibid., 128)

This point, intensified by early twentieth-century modernism, is not restricted to 'realism'. Already in Balzac, writes Adorno, 'the individual foul deeds through which people visibly attempt to steal from one another the surplus value that has already been appropriated invisibly make the horror graphic'. In both realism and modernism, as Lukács defines them, the novel struggles with the problem of how 'to conjure up in perceptible form a society that has become abstract' (1991, pp. 122–3). This problem goes to the heart of the relations between the novel's concrete and abstract tendencies, and, hence, to the tension between its presentations as a bourgeois epic – a world of heroic entrepreneurs, ruined financiers, uppity governesses and alienated artists – or as an epic of capitalism, constituted through an abstract world of money and circulation, universal exchange and 'functional reality' as such.

We might look to Benjamin's brief comments on Kafka for some alternate development of the account of abstraction and concretion found in *The Theory of the Novel*. Kafka's work, writes Benjamin in a 1938 letter to Scholem, is 'the exact complement' of that social reality that presents itself in 'the experience of the modern city-dweller' (2002, pp. 325–6). For such a perspective, modes of abstraction are less a flight from reality, and more an index of the various social forms of 'real abstraction' constitutive of the (sensuously) 'unrepresentable' totality of modernity itself. Yet – and Kafka is clearly a distinctive case – this should not be misunderstood. For despite Adorno's more apocalyptic pronouncements, capitalism as a social form is never reducible to the more or less 'purely' abstract social relations determined by capital and the value form alone. Indeed, capitalism positively requires other forms of social relation as concrete forms that can be reworked and refunctioned in the drive to capital accumulation. Like the novel, it is nothing without it. This dialectic of abstraction and concretion, unique to each work, is thus key to any thinking through of the new paradoxical hybridities of form engendered by the novel's current

wave of internationalization, following, as it does, those socioeconomic processes through which the more or less ‘concrete’ social forms of noncapitalist and formerly colonial cultures are progressively integrated into the accumulative structures of a transnational capitalist system.

In the ‘created reality’ of the novel – the ‘entire structure’ of which can only be based in ‘abstract systematisation’ – what ‘becomes visible is the distance separating the systematisation from concrete life’ (TN 70). Yet, rather than bemoaning this, one might instead see such ‘visibility’ – its capacity to render visible such distance – as the novel’s distinctive ‘epic’ mode; making visible the irresolvable gap between the forms of abstraction intrinsic to modern social being and what Hegel called the ‘unendingly particular’ – the concreteness of ‘things’ and of individual experience – with which the novel has, historically, been associated. In Balzac, Adorno writes, the novel already depicts, in its ironic repetition of epic ‘wholeness’ and collective ‘fate’, the ‘superior power of social and especially economic interests over private psychology’, in the ways in which in the ‘form of a medium of circulation, money, the capitalist process touches and patterns the characters whose lives the novel form tries to capture’ (1991, pp. 130, 132). It is this ‘patterning’ that is extended in various ‘realist’ works today. ‘You follow the drugs, you get a drugs case’, says a character in that most celebrated of contemporary television *romans*, *The Wire*; ‘you follow the money, you don’t know where you’re going’.⁹ Such a recurring motif marks out, in very concrete ways, a polemical demonstration of the ultimate impossibility of imaging those forms of abstraction that nonetheless become the common denominator of all values in the urban world of the show’s characters. In the depiction of this very impossibility, *The Wire* renders the abstract visible *as* invisible within the work.¹⁰

The dialectic ‘without synthesis’ between the abstract and concrete tendencies of the novel is, on this reading, the ongoing condition of its modernity. For capitalist modernity really is a social world constituted through abstraction. Very abstract and terribly concrete at the same time, the novel, as the early Lukács understood, must be no less so than the socio-historical reality of the modern culture that it confronts.

Notes

¹ This essay draws upon material previously included in a shorter article: see Cunningham, 2009. My thanks to Timothy Bewes for the invitation to deliver the paper from which this article derived, at ‘Theories of the Novel Now’, a conference hosted by *Novel: A Forum on Fiction*, in Providence, Rhode Island, in November 2007, and to the editors of *Novel* for permission to reuse this material here.

² This point occasions some interesting parallel issues of historical and geographical locatability which it would be productive to explore further. For example, there are some compelling symmetries between, on one hand, the thesis of a unique eighteenth-century British origin, in which Watt’s claims for the rise of

the novel could be matched to those of Ellen Meiksins Wood concerning the ‘origin of capitalism’, and the alternate claim on the part of Arrighi or Walter Mignolo for a far earlier and more diffuse ‘Atlanticist’ and/or city-state beginning, developing in the historical passage from late medieval Italian urban-based Mediterranean trading networks to the sixteenth-century Portuguese and Spanish colonial empires that spawned Cervantes and *Lazarillo de Tormes*. Lukács suggests that it is Dante who ‘represents a historico-philosophical transition from the pure epic to the novel’, where ‘there is still the perfect immanent distancelessness and completeness of the true epic, but his figures are already individuals’ (68) – a ‘historico-philosophical transition’ which might then also be read as the transition marked by the proto-capitalist trading networks of Italian city-states, between the Greek *polis* and the modern *metropolis* (of Dickens, Balzac, Joyce, Dos Passos, Doblin, Pynchon and so on), in which the possibility of ‘completeness’ is finally dissolved in a world market system of infinite ‘gifts and dangers’ at a progressively global scale.

- ³ Hence Watt proposes that the supposedly ‘later’ rise of the modern novel in France, with Stendahl and Balzac, corresponds to the later achievement of capitalist hegemony there in the wake of the French Revolution (342), just as more than a century on, magic realism is typically interpreted as the literary outcome of uneven development and the encounter of pre-capitalist, peasant-based cultural forms with a nascent capitalism at a later moment of global capitalist development.
- ⁴ As Adorno puts it, in this way the novel calls the ‘reification of all relationships’ by name. Importantly this is not seen by Adorno as an exclusively twentieth-century modernist process, but is traced back at least as far as ‘the eighteenth century and Fielding’s *Tom Jones*’ (1991, p. 32).
- ⁵ Of course, most novels embody both these understandings of the negative epic (Joyce’s *Ulysses* would be exemplary here, as would Balzac). Yet the distinction, hardly made in Adorno’s own theorization, seems worth insisting upon, if only because it gives a different perspective on what we understand by the modernity of the novel as itself an epic – or anti-epic – form.
- ⁶ Admittedly, the essay ‘Art and Objective Truth’ proposes a slightly more complex relation of abstract to concrete, one that posits a ‘good abstraction’ in realist (as opposed to naturalist) art’s (Aristotelian) acts of ‘generalization’, and that deserves a lengthier study than is possible here. See WC 45–8.
- ⁷ Lukács in this way associates realism proper with the ‘poetic’, as reflective of the ‘poetry of the world’ – as against naturalism, which is reflective of Hegel’s prose of the world: ‘The domination of capitalist prose over the inner poetry of human experience . . . all these are objective facts of the development of capitalism’ (WC 127; see also MCR 125).
- ⁸ This is not a question of deleting the issue of class, which remains key to any full understanding of capitalism as a system. Class division and antagonism, like the exploitation of labour, remain very much alive – more so, globally, than ever – even if it is far from clear that this is accompanied by any expansion in ‘class consciousness’ as Lukács might have understood it. It is, however, to argue that Lukács’s prioritization of class (or more specifically, class *consciousness*) as a means of thinking a ‘perspective of totality’ neglects the extent to which it is capital, rather than either the bourgeoisie or the proletariat, which, via the abstractly

unifying power of the universalization of exchange, most plausibly corresponds to anything like a Hegelian Subject within contemporary societies. The problem is that, as *essentially* abstract, capitalist societies are, by virtue of their production of ever more complex and extensive forms of interconnectedness, in a sense ‘collective’, but only assume the structure of a Subject in an objective, ‘inhuman’ form, quite different from that form of social subjectivity posited of the collective worker (or the ‘classical’ bourgeoisie). From the perspective of a problematic of *totality*, and according to the logic of *Capital*, it is capital, not class, that assumes priority, even as the latter remains crucial to the functioning and self-reproduction of the former. The earlier claim in the *Manifesto*, taken up by Lukács, that the proletariat stands somehow ‘outside’ of capital as an emergent class consciousness both underplays the degree to which labour is also a form of ‘variable capital’ and, from a contemporary perspective, severely underestimates the capacity of capital to subsume labour in such a way as to ‘block’ the formation of collective ‘class consciousness’ in practical terms. With regard to the novel as a modern epic form – which still *thinks* in terms of totality – it must then be capital, not class consciousness, that constitutes its most properly ‘epic’ subject.

⁹ The novelistic quality of *The Wire* has been much remarked upon, not least by its makers, and is parodically alluded to in the title of an episode from the final series: ‘The Dickensian Aspect’.

¹⁰ More vividly than most novels, *The Wire* insists upon the (capitalist) ‘system’ itself as Subject, far more than either its ‘bourgeois’ or ‘proletarian’ characters.

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1991), *Notes to Literature, Volume One*, trans. S. W. NicholSEN. New York: Columbia University Press.
- (2003), ‘Late capitalism or industrial society?’ trans. R. Livingstone, in *Can One Live After Auschwitz? A Philosophical Reader*. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, pp. 111–25.
- Anderson, B. (1991), *Imagined Communities* (Revised Edition). London: Verso.
- Armstrong, N. (2006), ‘The fiction of bourgeois morality and the paradox of individualism’, in Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, Volume Two*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 349–88.
- Arthur, C. J. (2002), *The New Dialectic and Marx’s Capital*. Leiden: Brill.
- Benjamin, W. (1999), *Selected Writings, Volume 2, Part 2, 1931–1934*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- (2002), *Selected Writings, Volume 3, 1935–1938*. Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press.
- Bewes, T. (2006), ‘Paul Auster’s cinematographic fictions: against the ontology of the present’, *New Formations*, 58, 81–98.
- Cunningham, D. (2006), ‘After Adorno: the narrator of the contemporary European novel’, in D. Cunningham and N. Mapp (eds), *Adorno and Literature*. London: Continuum, pp. 188–200.
- (2009), ‘Very abstract and terribly concrete: capitalism and *The Theory of the Novel*’, *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* 42.2, 311–17.

- Fusillo, M. (2006), 'Epic, novel', in Moretti (ed.), *The Novel, Volume Two*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press. pp. 32–63.
- Hegel, G. W. F. (1975), *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 vols, trans. T. M. Knox. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Jameson, F. (1998), *The Cultural Turn*. London: Verso.
- Lefebvre, H. (2003), 'The end of modernity?', in *Key Writings*. London: Continuum, pp. 93–5.
- Löwy, M. (1989), 'Naphta or Settembrini? Lukács and romantic anticapitalism', in J. Marcus and Z. Tarr (eds), *Georg Lukács: Theory, Culture, and Politics*. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction.
- Marx, K. (1974), 'Afterword to the second German edition', in *Capital: A Critical Analysis of Capitalist Production*, trans. S. Moore and E. Aveling, London: Lawrence and Wishart, pp. 22–9.
- (1990), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume 1*, trans. B. Fowkes. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels (2002), *The Communist Manifesto*, trans. S. Moore. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Moretti, F. (ed.) (2006), *The Novel, Volume Two*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Osborne, P. (2000), *Philosophy in Cultural Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Trotter, D. (2007), 'Into the future', *London Review of Books*, 22 March, 31–2.
- Watt, I. (1972), *The Rise of the Novel*. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.

Chapter 4

Typing Class: Classification and Redemption in Lukács's Political and Literary Theory

Patrick Eiden-Offe

Since the 'Great Beginning' of 1919, when Lenin gave the following concise definition, it should have been clear to all his true disciples what class is, and how different classes can be distinguished:

Classes are large groups of people differing from each other by the place they occupy in a historically determined system of social production, by their relation (in most cases fixed and formulated in law) to the means of production, by their role in the social organisation of labour, and, consequently, by the dimensions of the share of social wealth of which they dispose and the mode of acquiring it. Classes are groups of people one of which can appropriate the labour of another owing to the different places they occupy in a definite system of social economy. (Lenin, 1972, p. 421)

Georg Lukács clearly draws on this passage in his essay 'Class Consciousness', while at the same time introducing a shift of emphasis when he defines classes as a limited 'number of clearly distinguished basic types whose characteristics are determined by the types of position available in the process of production'. In the next sentence, Lukács confirms that class position is determined by the 'particular typical position in the process of production' (HCC 51). Lukács establishes his own definition of class by interpolating the terms 'type' and 'typical' into Lenin's definition – terms which themselves demand clarification.

In the following I will trace Lukács's use of the notions of the 'type' and the 'typical' to highlight a certain conceptual exchange between his theory of class and his theory of literary realism. I will show that Lukács's insistence on these notions indicates the presence of a quasi-aesthetic act of form-giving in his political theory, as well as a class determination of literary forms that is intrinsically given and thus to be deciphered. To formulate a workable class theory, Lukács suggests, one has to *typologize*: classes must be brought out in and as types, that is, in the form of the typical (section I, below: 'Class as Type'). On the other hand, to create types *in literature* means to inscribe a class determination into

the formal structure of the literary work (section II: 'Type as Class'). In the third section, 'Types of Redemption', I will discuss the theological notion of typology to show how the notion of the type may help us understand Lukács's notorious 'messianism'.

I. Class as Type

Why Class *Consciousness*?

In the opening passage of the essay on 'Class Consciousness', we can observe Lukács not simply *addressing* his subject, but *constituting* it. After stating that 'Marx's chief work breaks off just as he is about to embark on the definition of class' (HCC 46), Lukács embarks on his own theoretical enterprise by quoting a standard Marxist definition of class: 'In Marxism the division of society into classes is determined by position within the process of production'. While this definition seems to hold true without any further discussion, it is employed in Lukács's argument to lead to his main question: 'But what, then, is the meaning of class consciousness?' This question, in turn, 'branches out into a series of closely interrelated problems' (*ibid.*) which aim at showing that classes are *not* determined (or, at least, not alone) by their 'position within the process of production'. In fact the thesis of determination is marked as an objectivist position in what follows; it is identified with the position of the 'vulgar Marxists' who mistake history for an objective process governed by quasi-natural laws. On the contrary, for Lukács the term 'class consciousness' introduces the 'subjective factor' into theoretical consideration; it breaks open the monolithic notion of class and converts it into a flexible category that can be applied under politically and historically changing circumstances. So when Lukács considers the theoretical implications of the problem of class consciousness, he tries to comprehend society in an *orthodox Marxist* way, without falling into the objectivist traps of vulgar Marxism. In the first part of his essay Lukács shows the antinomies in which bourgeois sociologists and historians entangle themselves in trying to understand society in its concrete historical development (HCC 46–55). Both disciplines 'go wrong . . . in their belief that the concrete can be located in the individual of history ('individual' here can refer to an individual man, class or people) and his empirically given (and hence psychological or mass-psychological) consciousness' (HCC 50). The problem is not, as it first appears, that history and sociology take into account only individuals *instead of* classes, but rather that they treat classes *as* individuals, that is, they take classes as empirically given entities inseparable from their consciousnesses.

Lukács, by contrast, begins his theoretical enterprise with the *relation* instead of the *individual*. He states that society is made up of relations, and those relations, he goes on, quoting Marx, 'are not those between one individual and another, but between worker and capitalist, tenant and landlord, etc.'

(HCC 50). So the kind of ‘concrete analysis’ Lukács is looking for involves constructing a ‘relation to society *as a whole*’, which means the relation to (a set of socioeconomic) *relations*.

With regard to the problem of (class) consciousness, a Marxist approach has to distance itself from the bourgeois method of a ‘naïve description of what men *in fact* thought, felt and wanted at any moment in history and from any given point in the class structure’ (HCC 51). Instead of merely describing different given forms of consciousness, Marxist analysis has to relate these forms to something which is *not* empirically given, but which has to be constructed theoretically. The term used by Lukács to designate this construction is ‘type’. While description can only accumulate little and most likely meaningless differences *ad infinitum*, type-centred analysis creates a comprehensible order – a *classification* – in which the diversity of empirically-givens can be reduced to a simple relation between very few ‘basic types’. To fully understand this operation of reduction (to understand it in a *nonreductionist* way), Lukács introduces the categories of ‘objective possibility’ and ‘imputation’. By means of this conceptual framework, Lukács tries to answer the question of *whose* consciousness class consciousness is, if it is *not* the consciousness of the ‘single individuals who make up the class’ (HCC 51). The answer is somewhat circular, and thus dissatisfying: Lukács constructs class as the typical nonindividual subject to which ‘objectively possible’ forms of class consciousness can in each case be imputed. Class consciousness is the rationally most adequate form of consciousness that people can reach with regard to their ‘objective situations’. Class is thus determined by the position in the process of production *and* by the (objectively possible) consciousness of that position imputable to the people who occupy it; class functions as a *subject of imputation*. But what is achieved by the introduction of the concepts of ‘type’, ‘objective possibility’ and ‘imputation’, if the expanded definition only underlines its own circularity?

An answer to this question can be found by turning to Max Weber. The single page of *History and Class Consciousness* on which the construction of type, objective possibility and imputation is explicated – one of the most important and controversial pages in the whole book – is steeped in Weberian thought.¹ In his groundbreaking essay “‘Objectivity’ in Social Science and Social Politics” (Weber, 1948), Weber introduces the three concepts as closely interconnected. For Weber, ideal types are the genuine instrument for finding adequate classification systems in the social (and, as he alternatively calls them, cultural) sciences. In contrast to the natural sciences, the social sciences have to construct their categories in a reflexive relation to their objects, as the scientists are not only observers but always also part of their object. When the social scientist creates a scientific order, he chooses those elements in reality which *for him* seem to be important. By means of an ‘analytical accentuation’ of these elements, the scientist then forms an ‘*ideal-type*’ that helps to make reality ‘pragmatically *clear und understandable*’ (Weber, 1948, p. 90).

Ideal types are not only devices for classification but also ‘genetic concepts’ that help us ‘to develop our skill in imputation’ (Weber, 1948, p. 90). With the term ‘imputation’, Weber addresses the problem of historical causality. As social reality is not governed by natural law, the social scientist’s task to find ‘concrete causal *relationships*’ (78) must be conceived of as an interpretative and thus creative act that is not completely determined. The act of creating ideal types and imputing causal relations thus depends on the scientist’s faculty of ‘imagination’ (79) on one hand; on the other, however, it is determined by the ‘category of “objective possibility”’ (80). Imputing a causal relationship thus means ‘constructing relationships which our imagination accepts as plausibly motivated and hence as “objectively possible” and which appear as adequate from the nomological standpoint’ (92). What was ‘objectively possible’ in a certain historical situation must be scrutinized by historical investigation. It is always less than what is *imaginable* in ‘pure’ fantasy, but it is also always more than what has actually become reality. Constructing ideal types, along with causal imputation in the limits of objective possibility, thus allows the social/cultural scientist to explain our social reality as a *plausible*, but by no means *necessary*, order of things.

This Weberian digression demonstrates that the abundance of ‘types’ and ‘typical’s on the page of ‘Class Consciousness’ in question must be read as a strong plea to practise class theory as a social or cultural science – and not as a natural science.² Class is not an empirically given fact, nor is it totally determined by unquestionable laws; class as type is a way of comprehending society, and thus it depends on ‘one-sided’ acts of interpretation (90). The strength of Weber’s methodology of the ideal type is its ability to show how different ways of interpreting are closely connected to certain techniques of scientific representation. So class as type is not only a way of perceiving and interpreting society, but also a technique of representing society scientifically. With regard to the ‘expository purposes’ of the ideal type, Weber stresses its almost picturesque quality as a *Gedankenbild*, a mental picture (90). Thus, neither Weber’s ideal type nor Lukács’s class as type can be deduced by description or averaging (101; HCC 51). Weber and Lukács, instead, describe the constructing of (ideal) types in a language strongly tinged with aesthetic connotations. Types as *Gedankenbilder* must be ‘delineate[d]’ [*zeichnen*] by means of ‘abstraction’; they achieve ‘clearness’ and ‘expression’ by exposing strong contrasts (Weber, 1948, pp. 91, 95).

This last point underscores the fact that ideal types only make sense in the plural, as a relation of different contrasting types. Hence *class as type* must be understood also as a relational term: it always addresses *classes* as contrasting types. But *class as type* also implicates another relation, namely that between the typical subject of imputed class consciousness on one hand and the empirically given subjects which make up class on the other. The latter relation is what allows *and* demands class politics – a type of politics that is characterized by the emergence of the type as a political agent.

What Is a *struktives Vorbild*?

The creation of types is not only a reproductive, purely theoretical, activity. It also has a *practical* function that is distinct with respect to different classes in society. For Lukács, social reality itself is structured by a force that types the two pure classes of capitalist society, the bourgeoisie and the proletariat. By supporting this force theoretically, the theorist himself becomes a strong protagonist in the process. This can be elucidated by reference to two passages from ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’. Referring to the question of whether the phenomenon of reification affects both classes with the same intensity, Lukács states that the worker’s ‘fate is typical of society as a whole in that this self-objectification, this transformation of a human function into a commodity reveals in all its starkness the dehumanising function of the commodity relation’ (HCC 92). The word translated as ‘starkness’ – a rather vague term – is ‘Prägnanz’ (GK 183), which refers in part to the context of coining and embossing (*prägen*).³ *Prägen*, in turn, is closely connected to the Greek τύπος (*typos*), which means ‘blow’ and ‘stamping of a coin’. *Prägnanz* thus connotes the state of being ‘stamped clearly’, of being ‘coined in a technically precise way’. The process of reification for Lukács is a process of revelation; it becomes readable, stamped, *typed*, in clear letters on the forehead of its main object, the proletariat. In turn, the proletariat, *by being thus typed*, becomes the medium of the revelation – a revelation of itself for itself – and transforms itself into more than just an object of the process. As a living manifestation of the deadening power of the commodity form, the proletariat emerges as a living subject that is able to intervene in the process of its own (re)production.

This is more clearly expressed in a passage from Part III of the essay: ‘the purely abstract negativity in the life of the worker is objectively the most typical manifestation of reification’ (HCC 172). As this typical manifestation, the proletariat is converted into something which in the German original appears especially enigmatic: it becomes a ‘*struktive[s] Vorbild*’ of capitalist society as such. ‘*Struktiv*’ is an uncommon word, here presumably meaning ‘structuring’ (in opposition to being *already structured*). ‘*Vorbild*’ is easier: it is ‘model’, ‘paradigm’ or ‘role model’. In any case it is something that occupies a primary position (in an artistic, mechanical or ethical way), something that creates, produces or precedes an *Abbild*, a copy, a *Nachbildung*, a reproduction or a *Nachfolger*, a disciple. The 1971 English edition offers a very straightforward translation of ‘*struktives Vorbild*’, although one that gives the whole sentence a certain tautological quality: ‘Thus the purely abstract negativity in the life of the worker is objectively the most typical manifestation of reification, it is the constitutive type of capitalist socialisation’ (HCC 172). The phrase ‘constitutive type’ contains within itself the complexity of the notion of type as such. The Greek τύπος already includes both active and passive senses; it means both the blow and the mark made by the blow; both the act of impressing and the state of being impressed; both model and copy. One way of solving the linguistic riddle of

τύπος is to detach it from the thing in favour of the *relation*. Hence, τύπος is *neither* model *nor* copy, but their relation. Nothing is a τύπος per se; τύπος pertains only in situations when one thing needs another to reveal its meaning (see Ostmeyer, 2000, p. 129).⁴

So reification and the proletariat are typical for one another: reification needs the proletariat to reveal its full meaning, while the proletariat, as a ‘constitutive type’, brings forward and anticipates what capitalist society is really about. It does so by producing its own double, the ideal type of itself as the subject of imputed class consciousness. Only in being a typical relation in itself is the proletariat able to function as the subject-object of history. By being typical for the reifying structure of capitalist society, the proletariat ‘*subjectively* [reaches] the point at which this structure is raised to consciousness and where it can be breached in practice’ (HCC 172). In the last instance, class as type is dependent on the intellectual to formulate the class’s imputed consciousness (and on the party to *incorporate* it). It is the intellectual’s conceptual work that gives the typical relation its highest degree of *Prägnanz*. Only by this work of sharpening the type’s profile, as it were, can the proletariat as a type, as a typical relation, fulfil its historical mission.

Conceiving class as type means to conceive class in a web of proliferating relations. Thinking in types and typical relations thus enables theory to take a first and decisive step towards the abolition of reified forms of thinking and perceiving. Typical thinking starts off with relations instead of individuals and hence divides what in bourgeois thought is the indivisible per se. The type opens up a gap in the given and discovers a tension where bourgeois thought only sees ‘*empirical “fact”*’ (HCC 181). Towards the end of the essay on reification Lukács decrees that the ‘individual can never become the measure of all things’, as in capitalist society the individual has become an opaque thing in itself. Only ‘class can relate to the whole of reality in a practical revolutionary way,’ precisely because it relates to itself *as a relation* in the first place. Only class as type can resist and break up the homogenizing and reifying power of bourgeois reality.

Ironically – but in a move that is typical for his thought – the defetishizing power of the type, for Lukács, unfolds itself in its highest intensity in the literature of bourgeois realism.

II. Type as Class

To establish a valid theory of the ‘great realism’ of the nineteenth century, Lukács first has to do away with certain prejudices against realism in general. In his 1939 essay on Gottfried Keller, Lukács states that ‘Keller’s realism is . . . by no means simply a reproduction of life in its immediate outer appearance’, and thus it does ‘by no means glorif[y] the status quo’ (GR 189). All these things that are excluded from Keller’s (and any other true) realism, are in turn

ascribed by Lukács to ‘pseudo-realism’ (GR 187), or, more generally, to naturalism. The opposition between realism and naturalism for Lukács is not primarily one between two epochs but between two different modes of representation (*Darstellungsmethoden*) (WC 119). In short, while realism is characterized by its ability to create literary types, naturalism fails to do so. To explain this phenomenon, Lukács introduces an ethico-poetical alternative that structures his whole literary theory: to *narrate* or to *describe* (WC 110–48). Naturalism sticks to mere description. It worships the individual in its individuality, giving detailed insights into the figure’s psychology. At the same time, naturalism’s preference for the individual is linked to a predominance of the average; it likes to show ‘common characters of the everyday world’ (*Durchschnittsmenschen der Alltagswirklichkeit*) (WC 132; W [4] 219). In the last instance, the individual appears only as an example of the average (GR 190; W [4] 40).

‘Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels’ (WC 127). Before explicating the first part of this sentence, one should notice the analogy between what Lukács says about naturalism, on one hand, and vulgar Marxism (or vulgar economics) on the other. On the single page of ‘Class Consciousness’ discussed above, vulgar Marxism’s basic theoretical operation is designated as mere ‘description’ twice; a little later the empirically given consciousness of the masses is qualified as ‘psychologically describable’ (HCC 51). Generally, both naturalism and vulgar Marxism/economics share a preference for psychology, while class consciousness proper for Lukács is not a psychological phenomenon at all. Like his realist champion Keller, Lukács himself ‘hates modern psychological overrefinement’ (GR 187). And, finally, naturalists and vulgar economists alike create their figures by the method of averaging.

The analogy between naturalism and vulgar Marxism/economics is by no means incidental. As early as 1922, Lukács outlined the parallel between their scientific and artistic operations in a short essay on the ‘Nachruhm Balzacs’. Balzac’s fame was eclipsed, at the end of the nineteenth century, by the emergence of naturalism; over the same period the reputation of the authentic economists of the classical period was replaced by the vulgar economists. The fates of Balzac and the true economists, for Lukács, represent two sides of the same coin, the spiritual decadence of a bourgeois culture that falls short of its own possibilities. Unlike the naturalists, Balzac was a writer who was able ‘not only to describe human passions and to analyse them psychologically, but to grasp them in their essence, their relations to social totality and in their interdependency’ – that is, to grasp and to represent them as types. Lukács worships Balzac’s figures for being based on a strong ‘vision of passion, character and fate, of man, class and society which resembles the corruption of Marx’s notion of the “economic persona”’ (Lukács 1977, p. 116) – the same ‘economic persona’ (*Charaktermaske*) that Lukács mentions, along with Max Weber, in footnote 11 of ‘Class Consciousness’ as forerunners of his own conception of class as type.

‘Narration establishes proportions’ by creating types; it develops ‘individuals who are simultaneously types’, figures who appear ‘unforgettably etched

[*einprägsam und unvergeßlich*] in their individuality' (WC 150). The 'clarity and richness' (GR 186) of the clear-cut pictures that are typical for genuine realism result from historical and (narrato-)logical dialectics. Historically, 'the typical is no longer directly present in society in a manner that can be used immediately for artistic purposes', since the 'old feudal orders' were overthrown by bourgeois development (GR 200). The typical in modernity is, in short, no longer available to description. What description can deliver, in the words of 'Class Consciousness', is 'merely the *material*' (HCC 51) not only of 'genuine historical analysis', but also of genuine realism. This necessary material, which has to be acknowledged in all its diversity, finally has to be typed by the artist to create a proper work of art: 'the truly typical in characterization can only be portrayed convincingly as the product of significant artistic labour, as the concluding final result of a story, as the author's sublation of the mere individuality that originally existed' (GR 200). The 'artistic labour' of the writer is the labour of narrating; it is the 'selection', 'distribution' and 'accentuation of what is essential' (WC 126, 128), but it may also work via abstraction or silencing (see W [10] 769).

The (narrato-)logical dialectics of creating types appears in sharp contrast to the naturalist technique of averaging. The typical emerges when 'the individual case is brought to an out-of-the-ordinary climax'. The artistic intensification of the extraordinary, the full concentration on 'the extraordinary special case', dialectically turns into the revelation of the 'social typical' (GR 201). The genre of the novella is especially characterized by this dialectics, for the novella can be defined as 'a concentrated, unique event, which, precisely by virtue of features that deviate from the average, lends itself to a convincing, sensuous portrayal of the laws governing a typical aspect of life' (GR 202). The typical is the extraordinary exposed *as the extraordinary*, thus revealing the law by its exception. Keller's realism drives its own narratological dialectics to the point where *every* figure reveals him- or herself as an extraordinary – and thus typical – hero. Keller's plebeian heroes are entangled in social relations, and their value as literary figures stems from these relations. They are never tragic heroes who die for their goals; rather they resign and subject themselves to the '*Forderungen des Tages*', the 'exigencies of the moment' (GK 428; HCC 276–7).⁵

The creation of literary types is linked to the development of society, but it is not determined by it. Because literary types function as a 'clearer, sharper mirror' of people's 'social activity' (WC 126), they can disclose developments that take place underneath the surface of the merely given or anticipate future developments. The trueness of a type thus surpasses the realm of art; types achieve a social validity of their own, a '*typische Geltung*', which can be related to Weber's 'nomological standpoint' (Lukács, 1964, p. 372). Of course literary types do not literally function as lawgivers, but they do intervene into the social process they emerge from. Literary types are not only *prägnante* pictures (*Abbilder*) of bourgeois reality, they also function as 'constitutive types', as *strukturelle Vorbilder* for this reality. This is especially true for nineteenth century Germany, where a gap can be observed between the formal sophistication of

the writers, on one hand – Heine, Keller or Raabe felt almost at home in the European literature of their time – and their ‘material’, the reactionary climate in German politics and economy, on the other (see GR 5). In this situation, the typical representation of reality in literature can be read as an instruction to perceive social types in reality. And to perceive social reality as structured by types is a first step towards perceiving society as structured by a class antagonism. As classes in a class society, types never appear alone. And as classes, different types never behave indifferently towards one another. Classes and types do not blur into one another; rather they confront each other by means of their clear-cut contrasts.

The analogy of class and type in literature indicates finally that realistic literature does not need to represent the standpoint of class, especially the ‘standpoint of the proletariat’, in any explicit manner; one would hardly find any examples for the latter in German realism. On the contrary, the standpoint of class is inscribed into the formal structure of the narrative itself. Realist texts instruct their readers to decipher *type as class* (or, more precisely, types as classes). They give social reality the form of the typical while in turn deriving the realistic appearance (the realist illusion) of their narratives from their type-centered mode of representation. All this of course must not be mistaken for an unproblematic identity of fabricated fiction and given reality (or of type and class). Already Weber’s ideal type was designed to indicate its nonidentity with reality as such in the first place. The overall purpose of Lukács’s conceiving class as type was to expose the ‘distance’ (HCC 51; DHC 66) between the empirically given and its inherent ‘objective possibility’. Lukács’s theory of literary realism along with its implicit advice to read type(s) as class must be understood as a strong indication that the status of (capitalist) reality itself is highly precarious. Reality is not what it seems; otherwise it could be comprehended by mere description. The realistic mode of representation is not meant simply to reproduce reality, but to *interrupt* the quasi-natural perception of reality as a mere given (see Geulen, 1998, p. 271). Reality is not simple – that is what the literary types in all their ‘simplicity and clarity’ reveal (GR 186). Typical representation breaches the reader’s almost corporeal intuition that the individual is the basic element of society, and it disrupts the ever-returning, ever-varying ideological refrain that society has overcome class division at last (see Wyatt, 1982). That class antagonism still persists as the energetic core of society, that, in other words, it still waits to be overcome, is inscribed in realist narratives. Types (in literature as elsewhere) indicate the dynamics and the direction of society’s development.

III. Types of Redemption

To narrate (in a Lukácsian sense) means to tell a story from the standpoint of its ‘conclusion’; here, all questions are ‘resolved and reviewed’ (WC 128). Every

true narrative possesses an internal *teleology* which turns out to be a *typology*. Narratives are organized not only by the relations between different types in a synchronous sense (by their contrasts and resemblances), but also diachronically. They organize themselves through a ‘tension’ between expectation and ‘fulfilment’: all characters, given in abstract outlines first, receive their ‘enrichment’ in the end; all events receive their final justification. In this way, typical relations reveal themselves as relations in time (130).

In the Christian theological tradition, typology designates the hermeneutical practice of reading figures and incidents in the Old Testament as prefigurations – as τύποι – of figures and incidents in the New Testament. To find typological relations between the Old and the New Testament was already common among the early Christians. It helped them to construct a continuous history of salvation. The τύποι in the Old Testament served as prophetic signs for the coming of the Messiah, awaiting their redemption by his advent. The tradition of typological interpretation was rediscovered in the first half of the twentieth century by theologians such as Leonhard Goppelt, whose book *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New* is a classic in this field. Erich Auerbach interpreted the phenomenon of typology in a broader context in his epochal essay *Figura*, named after the Latin translation of the Greek τύπος: ‘Figural interpretation establishes a connection between two events or persons, the first of which signifies not only itself but also the second, while the second encompasses or fulfils the first’ (Auerbach, 1984, p. 53). Auerbach shows that the whole Western literary tradition is programmed by a never completely erased source code based on the typological relation. Thus ‘figural interpretation’ for Auerbach is not only a mode of interpreting old texts, but also a creative source for writing new ones.

Before its rediscovery in the 1930s, typology already had seen a renaissance in German romanticism. To name only those who played an important role for Lukács, one could think of Johann Gottlieb Fichte, who used typology for constructing a philosophy of history in his ‘Characteristics of the Present Age’;⁶ or Novalis, who transformed the theological tradition into a poetic project of ‘Expectation’ and ‘Fulfilment’.⁷

I will not go into philological details about Lukács’s knowledge of the typological tradition here.⁸ Instead I want to ask whether and how Lukács’s ‘messianism’ might be understood in terms of typology (HCC xiii). To address this question, one could start with Lukács’s essay ‘The Changing Function of Historical Materialism’, written in the midst of the revolution itself, and shortly afterwards denounced by its author for its adventism (HCC xli). In this essay, Lukács postulates that history has to be constructed in relation to its fulfilment or conclusion in the proletarian revolution. From this standpoint, ‘the whole of history really has to be re-written; the events of the past have to be sorted, arranged and judged from the point of view of historical materialism’ (HCC 223); the asked-for re-arrangement of history requires a renewed understanding of history as typology.

The new way of writing history is characterized by an abandonment of the revisionist ‘separation of movement and ultimate goal’. Instead, the ‘ultimate goal’ – history’s fulfilment in the Marxian ‘realm of freedom’ – should be conceived as present in ‘every aspect’ of the historical movement leading up to it, in ‘every aspect in its simple and sober ordinariness’ (HCC 22). Not that revolution in a ‘technical’ sense is possible in every moment of history; for the final revolutionary act a historical situation is needed in which the old socioeconomic law is ‘no longer valid’, while a ‘new law has *not yet* gained general acceptance’ (HCC 242). But once humankind (or more precisely, its final representative as a whole, the proletariat) has seen a first glimpse of this dialectics of the ‘no longer-not yet’ (as in 1848, 1871, 1917) it has entered the messianic stage of history.⁹ Every present moment in the life of the proletariat is now turned into a τύπος, charged with the *messianic potential* of its own revolutionary fulfilment.

The typological interpretation of history must be distinguished from a purely allegorical one. Auerbach stresses that in ‘figural interpretation’ the ‘two poles of the figure’ are not only signs for one another, but ‘real historical events’ (Auerbach, 1984, p. 53). That gives typology a ‘staunch’ flavour of historical realism (ibid. 30), or, indeed, of historical materialism. And, of course, the materialist core of Lukács’s historical typology can be found nowhere else than in his class theory.

While the bourgeoisie tries to omit history, giving itself a timeless appearance, the proletariat is designed – by itself and for itself – as a *transitory class* right from the beginning; ‘even the earliest appearance of the proletariat on the stage of history indicated an aspiration towards’ the ‘ultimate goal’ of a classless society (HCC 313). The proletariat gains a privileged role in history because it is not just another class fighting for domination, but a class that sublates itself the very moment it reaches domination: ‘The proletariat only perfects itself by annihilating and transcending itself, by creating the classless society through the successful conclusion of its own class struggle’ (HCC 80). Thus, a gradation of different forms of the typical can be established; the empirical proletariat, the proletariat with its empirically given forms of consciousness, serves as a *typos* for the proletariat in its typical form, with its imputed class consciousness. The empirical proletariat’s ‘particular interests of the moment’ must be transcended towards a consciousness of the ‘ultimate goal’; at the same time, however, these interests must be seriously considered, since otherwise every attempt to establish the typical proletariat is doomed to ‘primitive Utopianism’. As with every figure/*typos*, the ‘momentary interest’ of the proletariat has ‘two functions: either it will be a step towards the ultimate goal or else it will conceal it’ (HCC 73). To elevate the empirically given proletariat to its typical form is to do away with all concealing forms of consciousness and to promote (self-)transparency towards its destination. The ‘distance that separates class consciousness from the empirically given’ (HCC 51) and the process of ‘closing the gap’ (74) must be understood as spatializing metaphors for a messianic ‘tension’ within time itself (327). The *typos* is driven towards its

fulfilment – and beyond. For even having reached the typical stage, the *proletariat as type* is still *nothing but a type* – a *typos* of its own self-annihilation. Even at the typical stage, the proletariat may lose sight of its goal and accommodate the given circumstances; this is the danger of bureaucratic fixation, instead of a progressive ‘self-criticism’, which is the decisive vital impulse for the proletariat (81). The purification of the type (its ‘purge’; see HCC 338), the ever-clearer perception of *class as type*, is not a goal in itself; rather it is a reminder to maintain direction towards something that lies beyond typicality.

Lukács characterized the worker’s fate as typical of capitalist society, because the only commodity the worker can sell is his or her labour-power. Hence, the ‘transformation of time implied by [the] typological relation’ as such (Agamben, 2005, p. 74) finally has to find its innermost materialist determination within the work process, the process of production itself. The commodification of the worker’s labour-power must be understood as an extreme form of expropriation, for it is the expropriation of the worker’s life and time as such. The domination of capital over the proletariat is the domination of past labour over living labour, for capital is nothing but accumulated dead labour, ‘renewing itself . . . through the constant contact with living labour’ embodied in the proletariat. By employing its vital forces, the proletariat subordinates itself under the objectified forms of its own activity. Thus, in capitalist society it is the ‘past which rules over the present’ (HCC 248).

The socialization of the means of production in the proletarian revolution is thus not just a question of mere ownership. Its deeper and almost metaphysical sense (its *antimetaphysical* sense) lies in a ‘decisive *turning*’ of society’s time structure. In capitalist production, the future is foreclosed from the beginning, as time counts for capital only as past time, as value and money. In socialized production, the opposition between objectified labour (capital) and ‘labour in the process’ is ‘objectively abolished in practice’. Along with that, ‘the corresponding opposition in capitalist society of past and present’ is ‘changed structurally’. This does not mean that the irreversibility of time will be abolished altogether, rather the opposite. By breaking the capitalist domination over the *production of time*, by breaching the ‘objectified forms’ of working time (value and money, along with other fetish-forms), the proletariat creates (the preconditions for) a new consciousness of time’s irreversibility – a consciousness that is able to embrace the processual character of human sociality as such (HCC 248).

Typological interpretation of history is a means to relate past and present in a way that is different from the dominant, capitalist one. It paves the way for a completely different conception of historical time, a conception that is essentially ‘tentative’, ‘provisional and incomplete’ (Auerbach, 1984, p. 58). Such a conception of history, open to the appearance of the ‘radically new’ (HCC 249), cannot be understood in any objectified form whatsoever. Dealing with this new kind of history requires a radically new kind of society characterized by collective forms of *practising consciousness*. The new social ‘model [is] situated in

the future' (Auerbach, 1884, p. 59); its prefiguration, its τύπος, is the proletariat – in whatever inadequate, provisional and incomplete form we may find (ourselves in) it today.

Notes

- ¹ Lukács makes reference to Weber in footnote 11 of his essay. Michael Löwy has argued that the category of 'objective possibility' does not necessarily lead to Weber, because it is also 'a category of dialectics' (Löwy, 1979, p. 175n). This is certainly true; still, I want to demonstrate that Lukács refers not only to a single Weberian category but to a dense texture of Weberian notions and connotations. This does not, of course, invalidate the observation that Lukács seriously transforms Weber's argument.
- ² Stephen Perkins emphasizes that Lukács's prescription for sociology must be understood as an explicit turn against 'the established consensus of social democracy and the rapidly developing orthodoxy'. Already Weber's 'rejection of Marxism' was accompanied by his strong 'rejection of the positivistic vulgarizations of Kautsky *et al.*' (Perkins, 1993, p. 98). Laszlo Rudas is an almost 'pure' proponent of the latter school of thought. In his pamphlet attacking Lukács he decrees that 'Marxism is pure natural science'. Rudas was surely right to notice that Lukács's Weberian reformulation of class theory leads to a suspension of the validity of a 'general law' in history, but wrong in equating this with the abandonment of historical causality as such (see DHC 141n).
- ³ The relevant German etymological dictionary, the *Kluge*, indicates that *prägnant* originates from the French *prégnant*, but is most likely also connected to *prägen* (Kluge, 2002, p. 716).
- ⁴ The metaphysical depth of the type – along with its reifying German translation as *Gestalt* and its presumably antimetaphysical Latin translation as *figura* – is explored most profoundly in Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe's indispensable essay on 'Typography' (Lacoue-Labarthe, 1998).
- ⁵ 'Forderungen des Tages' is a slightly modified quote from Goethe, 2000, p. 283: 'Was aber ist deine Pflicht? Die Forderung des Tages.'
- ⁶ In *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács invoked Fichte's diagnosis of the present age as the 'epoch of absolute sinfulness' (TN 18, 152). For Fichte's use of typology see Lubac, 1979.
- ⁷ These are the titles of the two parts of Novalis's programmatic novel *Henry of Ofterdingen*; for Novalis's rhetorical transformation of typology, see Wergin, 2002.
- ⁸ To deal with this problem, one would have to examine the dialectics of 'longing' and 'fulfilment' in the early essay 'On the Nature and Form of the Essay' (SF 33) as well as Lukács's characterization of Novalis as a poet who was able to give form to his expectations, but who was unable – unlike Goethe – to acknowledge its fulfilment (SF 61).
- ⁹ For Giorgio Agamben, the dialectic of 'no longer – not yet' characterizes the messianic situation per se (Agamben, 2005, pp. 95–110). Slavoj Žižek relates the messianic situation to the Lukácsian *Augenblick*, when reality itself provides the 'opening for an act' (Žižek, 2000, p. 164).

Works Cited

- Agamben, G. (1995), *The Time That Remains: A Commentary on the Letter to the Romans*, trans. P. Dailey. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Auerbach, E. (1984), 'Figura', trans. Ralph Manheim, in *Scenes from the Drama of European Literature*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, pp. 11–76.
- Geulen, E. (1998), 'Depicting description: Lukács and Stifter', *The Germanic Review: Literature, Culture, Theory*, 73, 267–79.
- Goethe, J. W. (2000), *Wilhelm Meisters Wanderjahre*, Hamburger Ausgabe, Vol. 8. Munich: Deutscher Taschenbuch Verlag.
- Goppelt, L. (1982), *Typos: The Typological Interpretation of the Old Testament in the New*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans Publishing Co.
- Kluge. *Etymologisches Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (24th Revised Edition, 2002). Berlin: de Gruyter.
- Lacoue-Labarthe, P. (1989), *Typography: Mimesis, Philosophy, Politics*, trans. C. Fynsk. Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press.
- Lenin, V. I. (1972), 'A great beginning. Heroism of the workers in the rear. "Communist Subbotniks"', in V. I. Lenin, *Collected Works*, 4th English edition, Volume 29. Moscow: Progress Publishers, pp. 409–34.
- Löwy, M. (1979), *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. P. Camiller. London: Verso.
- Lubac, Henri de (1979), *La postérité spirituelle de Joachim de Fiore. Tome I: De Joachim à Schelling*. Paris: Editions Lethielleure.
- Lukács, G. (1964), *Deutsche Literatur in zwei Jahrhunderten. Probleme des Realismus IV*, W [7].
- (1969), 'Über die Besonderheit als Kategorie der Ästhetik', in W [10], pp. 539–789.
- (1971), *Essays über Realismus. Probleme des Realismus I*, W [4].
- (1977), 'Der Nahruhm Balzacs', in *Organisation und Illusion. Politische Aufsätze III*, Darnstadt/Neuwied: Luchterhand, pp. 114–17.
- Ostmeyer, K.-H. (2000), 'Typologie und Typos. Analyse eines schwierigen Verhältnisses', *New Testament Studies*, 46, 112–31.
- Perkins, S. (1993), *Marxism and the Proletariat: A Lukácsian Perspective*. London and Boulder, CO: Pluto Press.
- Weber, M. (1948), '“Objectivity” in social science and social policy', in *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, trans. E. Shils. New York: The Free Press, pp. 50–112.
- Wergin, U. (2002), 'Figuration und Fragmentation in Novalis' Sprachpoetik', in G. Brandstetter and S. Peters (eds), *De figura: Rhetorik – Bewegung – Gestalt*. München: Wilhelm Fink, pp. 79–99.
- Wyatt, R. (1982), *Age of Self*. 7-inch single, London: Trade Union Congress/Rough Trade.
- Žižek, S. (2000), 'Postface: Georg Lukács as the philosopher of Leninism', in Georg Lukács, *A Defence of History and Class Consciousness: Tailism and the Dialectic* (2000), trans. E. Leslie. London: Verso. 151–82.

Part II

Life, History, Social Theory

Chapter 5

Lukács *sans* Proletariat, or Can *History and Class Consciousness* Be Rehistoricized?

Neil Larsen

I

There can be little doubt that, almost a century after its first publication, Georg Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*, especially its great centrepiece, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', remains the founding work of modern, Hegelian-Marxist critical theory.¹ Within that tradition, even those who have come to question or repudiate one or another of its central arguments – Adorno, say, or Habermas – would be forced to admit that their own thinking presupposes the theory and critique of reification that Lukács first extrapolated from Marx's writings, especially *Capital*, in the early 1920s. Whatever theoretical errors have now become apparent with the definitive ending of the historical epoch out of which *History and Class Consciousness* was born (roughly, from World War I to the end of the Cold War), new work in Critical Theory nevertheless runs the risk, to paraphrase Sartre's celebrated *mot* regarding Marx himself, of falling back behind its point of departure.²

This can be readily verified by a brief glance – to cite an especially egregious instance – at Axel Honneth's 2005 Tanner lectures, *Reification: a New Look at an Old Idea* (2008). Honneth characterizes Lukács's theory of reification in the following terms:

Regardless of whether objects, other persons or one's own talents and feelings are at issue, Lukács maintains that all these get experienced as thing-like objects as soon as they come to be viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions. But of course, this conceptual strategy is insufficient for the task of justifying the idea of reification as a second nature, for when we speak of a 'second nature', we are dealing not only with economic occurrences, but with all dimensions of social activity. How can one explain what reification means *outside* of the sphere of commodity exchange, if this concept solely denotes an occurrence in which all elements of a social situation get redefined as economically calculable factors? (50, my emphasis)

But, of course, it is just the existence of this ‘outside of the sphere of commodity exchange’ that is challenged by Lukács. Anyone who bothers to read even the first few lines of RCP learns that its crucial theoretical intent was precisely to extend, via the concepts of reification and ‘second nature’, Marx’s theory of the fetishism of the commodity to ‘all the dimensions of social activity’:

The problem of commodities must not be considered in isolation or even regarded as the central problem in economics, but as the central, structural problem of capitalist society in all its aspects. Only in this case can the structure of commodity-relations be made to yield a model of all the objective forms of bourgeois society together with all the subjective forms corresponding to them. (HCC 83)

Honneth has foisted onto Lukács, probably the most profound reader of Marx and of *Capital* of his time, something like a ‘rational choice’ model of liberal economic theory in which, *pace* Marx, the process of commodity production and exchange no longer takes place ‘behind the backs’ of society – all forms of social praxis being ‘viewed according to their potential usefulness in economic transactions’ (RNL 50, my emphasis). According to Honneth the category of reification is one in which ‘subjects are compelled to behave as detached observers, rather than as active participants in social life, because their reciprocal calculation of the benefits that others might yield for their own profit demands a purely rational and emotionless stance’ (51–2). Evidently, a passionate act of commodity exchange would, according to Honneth, escape reification (51–2).

Honneth, one hopes, remains an anomaly among contemporary readers of HCC. Take, at the opposite end of the spectrum, Fredric Jameson. Any contemporary and fully adequate attempt at a ‘rehistoricizing’ of HCC would, inevitably it seems, have to take stock of the latter’s essay ‘*History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project*’. While such a review is not something I have the space to undertake in detail here, a word or two at least is in order. Initially published in the 1988 inaugural issue of the journal *Rethinking Marxism*, the essay makes a second appearance as a chapter in Jameson’s *Valences of the Dialectic* (2009), and is thus certain to attract once again the serious and widespread attention it initially received more than 20 years ago. Worlds apart from the philosophical travesties of Honneth’s RNL, the bulk of Jameson’s essay advances a careful and unorthodox argument against what is still the general consensus that Lukács’s turn to aesthetics and a defence of literary realism from the 1930s onwards represented a radical break, even a betrayal, of the theoretical breakthroughs of HCC. Without underplaying Lukács’s embrace of a version of reflection theory acceptable to the Leninist orthodoxy of the time, Jameson – who, in *Marxism and Form* (1974) was almost single-handedly responsible for re-introducing Lukács to the broader North American literary-theoretical circles gathered around the New Left – challenges and effectively overturns this supposed retreat from HCC. Jameson convincingly shows that the crucial theoretical and

philosophical categories structuring the latter – reification and totality – continue to govern Lukács’s thinking in works such as ‘Narrate or Describe?’ (in WC) and *The Historical Novel*.

But ‘Lukács’s Particular Epistemology’, the fifth and final section of ‘*History and Class Consciousness as an Unfinished Project*’, evidently republished in *Valences* without alteration, opens with the following assertion:

What is argued in this text [RCP] is essentially an *epistemological* priority of a particular social group or class in advanced society. Whatever the group or class identified and ‘privileged’ by such an argument, therefore, the form of the argument is itself unusual and demands attention in its own right, since in its very structure it seeks to relate a truth claim to the social structure and phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity. Epistemology thus passes over into social phenomenology. . . . (Jameson, 2009, p. 214)

What follows, as readers of the original 1988 essay will no doubt recall, is the promulgation of a species of theoretical-political peace treaty between Part III of RCP and the ‘standpoint’ theory then current on the academic flank of the identity-political and ‘new social’ movements of the 1980s, particularly in the case of feminism, but also including the cause of oppressed ethnicities, African Americans and Jews in particular.

This is not the place to rehearse the various twists and turns of the reasoning behind Jameson’s theoretical case for a Lukácsian ‘alliance politics’ (in the sense, prevalent in the late 1980s and early 1990s, of a united front between class, gender and ethnicity-based oppositional movements). Nor do I wish to imply that the broader questions of how the categories of reification, critical standpoint and totality impinge on gender and ethnicity do not deserve the most rigorous theoretical reflection.³ But Jameson’s opening assertion that class is, for HCC and RCP in particular, theoretically commensurate with other ‘social group[s]’, that it counts for Lukács as ‘the phenomenological experience of a specific collectivity’, erases a conceptual distinction so fundamental to Part III of RCP that the latter has, with this one casual remark, as good as disappeared as an object of any genuine critical reflection. Gone, as if by prestidigitation, is the crucial, still controversial theoretical distinction drawn by Lukács between the ‘empirically given’ and the ‘imputed consciousness’ (*zugerechnetes Bewusstsein*) of the proletariat – a disappearance made even more bizarre by the fact that no one could be more aware of and thoughtful about this distinction than Jameson himself. By stating outright that, for RCP, ‘epistemology passes over into social phenomenology’, Jameson has tacitly and knowingly dropped, along with the problem of ‘imputed consciousness’, the very question, perhaps one of HCC’s greatest and most revolutionary theoretical contributions, of (class) consciousness as *form*, as *structured* in its relation to reification and to *social* form as such. ‘Standpoint’ and ‘empirically given consciousness’ in the guise of ‘social phenomenology’ are simply conflated – a conflation as

unfortunate for any genuine critical-theoretical approach to questions of reification and nonclass social and cultural forms as it is fatal to any critical reassessment or possible rehistoricization of HCC itself. One hopes that, as 'Unfinished Project' finds a new generation of readers with the publication of a work as significant as *Valences*, this unfortunate type of critical concession – wholly uncharacteristic of Jameson – will not escape criticism.

Such careless or outright misreadings notwithstanding, the fact remains that the foundational, even paradigmatic, contribution of HCC to Marxian critical theory in the twentieth and twenty-first centuries has long since become a problematic, not to say a deeply paradoxical one. Symptomatic of this problem, rather than explanatory, is the notoriously swift condemnation of HCC by the leading theoreticians, philosophers and ideologues of the Comintern, and Lukács's own (as we now know, privately but angrily reluctant) recantation of its arguments soon after its publication, and his subsequent adherence to a Communist-Party-U.S.S.R.-sanctioned Marxism-Leninism and its philosophical tenets of dialectical materialism and reflection theory. The same applies to what was – with exceptions such as *The Young Hegel* (1938) – Lukács's virtual self-confinement, at least up until his return to Hungary in 1945, to questions of aesthetics and literary criticism. For its repudiation by Soviet-sanctioned Marxism did nothing – perhaps a good deal less than nothing – to prevent HCC and the immanent critique of reification on which it centres from giving direction to the theoretical trajectory that was to become known as the Frankfurt School and, more generally, the Central and Western European as well as North- and Latin American traditions of 'Western Marxism'.

The problematic issue I refer to here is rather the question of what to this day remains HCC's most controversial and fraught theoretical claim, the one that, in a sense, won him sceptics and enemies in equal measure in both a Stalinist Communist Party-dominated East (where HCC was banned) and a non-Party, more dissidently Marxist 'West'. This is the notorious thesis advanced in Part III of RCP, 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat': the claim to have discovered in that class, and its 'imputed' form of consciousness, material History's 'identical subject-object'.

Summarizing the many and wide-ranging debates to which this question has given rise, especially since HCC began to be widely read again by various sectors of the New Left in the 1960s, would far exceed the limits of this essay. So would a comprehensive rehearsal of the many and extraordinarily rich and complex arguments that make up RCP itself and its lengthy third section, a basic knowledge of which I will assume on the reader's part. But it stands to reason that in order to sustain Lukács's thinking as a whole in HCC and RCP one would have to square it somehow with the now historically inescapable reality that the 'standpoint of the proletariat', in the wake of the social and political history of the twentieth and early twenty-first centuries and its (counter)revolutionary *démarche*, simply could not and cannot sustain the historico-philosophical weight that Lukács had placed upon it. Thus it is that theoretically, if not

politically, and whether willingly or ironically, even the most forgiving readings of HCC line up with Lukács's own self-critical 1967 preface to HCC, in which he reaffirmed his adherence to a Leninist, 'materialist' orthodoxy and conceded once again, evidently without reluctance this time, that equating proletarian class consciousness with a Hegelian 'identical subject/object' had been an idealist deviation. And yet if that is so, if the standpoint problem is either reduced to its explicitly Leninist, and implicitly Machiavellian partisan/ideological version as simply the revolutionary class *interest* of the proletariat, or is jettisoned outright as insoluble, what then again becomes of the critical-theoretical argument of HCC and RCP as a whole? Can an *immanent critique* of reification – there being no possible question that this is what HCC proposes to be – simply dispense with the question of the immanent *standpoint* of such a critique, in *both* the theoretical/objective and the practical/subjective sense, without violating its own premises and collapsing entirely? The Lukács of RCP certainly had no doubts on this score. And if that standpoint is not, after all, that of a class identified as the proletariat, to what else, in historically objective terms, might it correspond?

Herein lies the paradox referred to above. For, as convenient and even, in its way, intellectually self-sufficing as it may be to proceed no further in a reading of RCP than sections I and II, contenting oneself, say, with the still breathtaking critique of German Idealist philosophy developed in 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought', the theoretical argument of RCP is too self-integrated and systematic for it to undergo such a *coupage* and not, necessarily, begin to unravel. Recall the closing lines of 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought':

Classical philosophy did, it is true, take all the antinomies of its life-basis to the furthest extreme it was capable of in thought; it conferred on them the highest possible intellectual expression. But even for this philosophy they remain unsolved and insoluble. Thus classical philosophy finds itself historically in the paradoxical position that it was concerned to find a philosophy that would mean the end of bourgeois society, and to resurrect in thought a humanity destroyed in that society and by it. In the upshot, however, it did not manage to do more than provide a complete intellectual copy and the *a priori* deduction of bourgeois society. It is only the *manner* of this deduction, namely the dialectical method that points beyond bourgeois society. (148)

But if, failing to embody itself in the proletariat as the 'we' of history' (149), the revolutionary dialectic comes to a stop at a socio-historical stage correlative with an '*a priori* deduction of bourgeois society' – a position that often seems to be adopted, if only *faute de mieux*, by a thinker such as Adorno – then can we still maintain that it *was* either revolutionary or dialectical and not simply a species of preordained stasis, not to say disaster? For HCC, history itself must offer up, immanently, the subject/object synthesis that is to overcome and exit the antinomial treadmills of reification – 'intellectual genesis must be identical in

principle with historical genesis' (HCC 155) – otherwise, in the final analysis, even the critical *theory* of reification must, on its own standards, fall as well. Where, if not in the 'standpoint of the proletariat', could such a dialectical synthesis be found? To what else, in historically revised terms, might it correspond? How, that is – if at all – is one to rehistoricize HCC *dialectically* after the historical abdication of what was to have been its own central historical-philosophical truth-claim?

In the aforementioned preface to the 1967 re-edition of HCC, Lukács acknowledges the evident 'contradiction' of emphasizing the 'negative aspects of *History and Class Consciousness* while asserting that nevertheless the book was not without importance in its day'. He goes on:

A momentous, world-historical change was struggling to find a theoretical expression. Even if a theory was unable to do justice to the objective nature of the great crisis [he is referring to WWI and the revolutionary wave it unleashed – NL], it might yet formulate a typical view and thus achieve a certain historical validity. This was the case, as I believe, with *History and Class Consciousness*. (xxv)

This, in a certain ironic sense, is just the question I wish to pose as well, only here with regard to the 'great crisis' of capital we are ourselves facing *now*, and, in that context, the form taken by HCC's possibly *contemporary* claim to 'a certain historical validity' – even if a validity not precisely understood, consciously foreseen or perhaps even theorizable by its author.

II

Any attempt to answer this question must surely find its point of departure in those contemporary currents within Marxian critical theory that, without sacrificing the critique of reification, have already set about rethinking themselves 'sans proletariat'. Here I have two sources in mind: (1) Moishe Postone's seminal contribution to Marxian thought, as developed in his principal work, *Time, Labor and Social Domination* (1996); and (2) the closely allied, but more crisis-oriented and conjunctural critical-theoretical school known in German-speaking circles as *Wertkritik* (best translated as 'value-form critique'), as represented chiefly by the journals *Exit!* and *Krisis*. *Wertkritik*'s most prominent theorists include the prolific Robert Kurz, along with Roswitha Scholz, Ernst Lohoff, Norbert Trenkle and increasingly numerous others. Because almost none of the latter work exists, as yet, in English translation and remains practically unknown in anglophone circles, as well as for the sake of brevity, I will focus mainly on Postone's arguments, but will touch as well on a short essay by Trenkle which is representative of the general *Wertkritik* 'line': '*Die metaphysischen Mucken des Klassenkampfes*' ('The Metaphysical Subtleties of Class Struggle').⁴

The latter develops an especially rich and provocative critique of HCC. Time and space constraints again oblige me to provide little more than ruthless abbreviations of a highly developed and complex system of critical-theoretical arguments here. TLSD and *Wertkritik* share a common Frankfurt School, mainly Adornian genealogy, but depart radically from both latter-day Habermasian and ‘third generation’ Frankfurt School offshoots by focusing centrally on what Alfred Sohn-Rethel (another important *Wertkritik* precursor) once pointed to as the Frankfurt School’s greatest theoretical deficit: a sustained, reconceptualized and re-actualized critique of political economy.

In this light, the shared premise of both Postone’s work as well as of *Wertkritik* is that not only the commodity, value and capital but *labour* itself must be counted among the fetishized social categories of capitalism as mode of production and domination. Its ‘concrete’ manifestation notwithstanding, labour, no less than these more familiar Marxian categories as they are known to students of *Capital*, constitutes, for this line of critique, an immanent form of social mediation *historically specific* to capitalism. Labour here ceases to be grasped as the transhistorical, ontologized category with which, in Postone’s phraseology, ‘traditional Marxism’ (including the work of the early Marx himself, and, in a more contradictory fashion, aspects of his mature thought as well) has historically identified it. The goal of the genuine, radical and emancipatory core of Marxian critical theory and praxis is thus, from this standpoint, not to liberate labour (and its class embodiment, the proletariat) from capital, but to liberate society *from* labour, to abolish labour along with capital itself. The goal of critical theory and practice must be to supersede not only the fetishism of the commodity but that of the ‘real abstraction’ of work itself, as the substance-constituting social *praxis*, so to speak, of self-valorizing value. Indeed, in the thinking of *Wertkritik*, contemporary, post-Fordist capitalism is itself well on its way – even if, left to the working out of its own terminal logic, with anything but emancipatory effects in store – to completing this process of abolishing labour. In the wake of the quantum leap in labour productivity brought about by what *Wertkritik* terms the ‘third (microelectronic) industrial revolution’ and the correspondingly enormous increase in the organic composition of capital on a global scale, surplus-value generation itself tends now, not merely in relative but in absolute terms – or so the theory has it – towards zero.⁵

Although Lukács is a frequent point of reference for Postone, he concentrates his critique of RCP in TLSD’s second chapter, ‘Presuppositions of traditional Marxism’. Here Postone readily acknowledges Lukács as, at least in RCP, a quintessential precursor and certainly not a *traditional* ‘traditional Marxist’ on the order of a Lenin, Hilferding, Kautsky, Luxemburg, Sweezy and others. Postone’s initial praise for RCP is as good a summary of the essay as one can find anywhere and is worth quoting in full:

By characterizing capitalist society in terms of the rationalization of all spheres of life, and grounding those processes in the commodity form of social

relations, [HCC] implicitly points to a conception of capitalism that is deeper and broader than that of a system of exploitation based on private property. Moreover, by means of his materialist appropriation of Hegel, Lukács makes explicit the idea that Marx's categories represent a powerful attempt to overcome the classical subject-object dualism. They refer to structured forms of practice that are simultaneously forms of subjectivity and objectivity. (TLSD 73)

It is crucial to note here that Postone's quarrel with RCP is not with its Hegelian-influenced attempt, adapted straight from *Capital* (and though Lukács, at the time he wrote HCC, could not have known it, the *Grundrisse*) at overcoming the subject/object-dualism of 'reified consciousness'. Yet, even so, HCC is 'deeply inconsistent', remaining 'bound to some of [traditional Marxism's] basic theoretical presuppositions' (TLSD 73). For RCP, materializing the Hegelian totality of society, fragmented and alienated by reification, can only be to restore it to its underlying, constitutive basis in *labour*, 'traditionally' understood here as ontological and transhistorical. For reified, bourgeois society to become, for the first time, real, historico-material Subject rather than *Geist*, it must, for RCP, become such *labour as Subject*. And – recall Lukács's equation of the principle of totality with *class* throughout HCC – this can only leave us with the proletariat as labour's subjective embodiment. But

[t]he idea that the proletariat embodies a possible postcapitalist form of social life only makes sense, however, if capitalism is defined essentially in terms of private ownership of the means of production, and if 'labor' is considered to be the standpoint of the critique. In other words, although Lukács's analysis implies that capitalism cannot be defined in traditional terms if its critique is to be adequate as a critical theory of modernity, he undermines his implicit insight by continuing to regard the standpoint of critique in precisely those traditional terms. (TLSD 73–4)

At this point in TLSD, Postone, in one of the book's most controversial theses, stands Lukács and RCP 'on their head'. He disputes the supposition that Lukács's identification of the proletariat as historico-material 'identical subject/object' is a notion shared by Marx himself, arguing that, contrary to his earlier, Feuerbachian practice of simply inverting idealist Hegelian categories in the writings of the 1840s, in his mature work Marx 'analyses the social validity for capitalist society of precisely those idealist Hegelian concepts which he had earlier condemned as mystified inversions' (74–5). In Hegel's concept of *Geist* as Subject (that is, as the subjective moment immanent to the totality of objects) Marx, according to Postone, sees the idealized manifestation not of the proletariat but of capital itself. Citing the well-known passage in *Capital* which terms capital an 'automatic subject' (Marx, 1990, p. 255), Postone claims that here Marx, without naming Hegel,

explicitly characterizes capital as the self-moving substance which is Subject. In so doing, Marx suggests that a historical Subject in the Hegelian sense does indeed exist in capitalism, yet he does not identify it with any social grouping, such as the proletariat or humanity. Rather, Marx analyses it in terms of the structure of social relations constituted by forms of objectifying practice and grasped by the category of capital (and hence value). (TLSD 75)

Moreover, continues Postone:

As the Subject, capital is a remarkable ‘subject’. Whereas Hegel’s Subject is transhistorical and knowing, in Marx’s analysis it is historically determinate and blind. Capital, as a structure constituted by determinate forms of practice, may in turn be constitutive of forms of practice and subjectivity; yet, as the Subject, it has no ego. It is self-reflexive and, as a social form, may induce self-consciousness, but, unlike Hegel’s *Geist*, it does not possess self-consciousness. (TLSD 77)

Sweeping, and, from the perspective of a ‘traditional’ Marxism, traumatic as this conclusion must appear – and whether one concurs with it or not – it is important not to lose sight of precisely what Postone is and is *not* proposing here. Restated in the terms of a general theory of reification, it asserts with impeccable logic that if, as the Lukács of RCP was the first to argue, revolutionary theory must be derived from Marx’s theory of the fetishism of the commodity, and in a broader sense from the theoretical structure of *Capital* as a whole, this provides no *necessary* basis from which to conclude that the proletariat as class, nor, indeed, the social category of *class* itself, occupies the place of a historico-material ‘identical subject/object’. The logic of the commodity as capitalism’s essential ‘form of social mediation’ refers to the category of (capitalist) society as a whole. At no point in *Capital* does Marx, despite the prominent role he accords to both proletariat and bourgeoisie on the historico-sociological plane, give the slightest indication that either class, or the category of class itself, supersedes or stands in necessary, immanent contradiction to this form of mediation. Behind reification as the blind, ‘automatic’ mediating principle binding together all the social atoms afloat in the ether of bourgeois society’s (to use Alfred Sohn-Rethel’s convenient phrase) ‘practical solipsism’,⁶ there must stand a no less blind, unconscious totality – and only capital, or, in an even more elemental sense, the value-form itself, answers, in Marx’s critical theory, to this logic.

But it does not follow, nor does Postone himself argue, that, because class as a form of social-relation immanent to capitalism cannot supply the theoretical or practical standpoint from which to overcome reification, no other form of (self-)conscious social-relation, and no other Subject could therefore possibly supply this standpoint. While not, as a fairly widespread misconception of the book seems to have it, ruling out the possibility of any historical subject *other*

than capital, TLSD does not venture very far beyond abstract generalities in the effort to speculate theoretically as to what such a conscious, but non- or supra-class 'subject/object' might be. And this, as we shall see below, has the potential to create serious difficulties when it comes to the self-consistency of Postone's advocacy of the method, so lucidly expounded in TLSD – and a legacy of HCC itself – of 'immanent critique'.

But before turning back to these questions, I want first to take up Norbert Trenkle's initially parallel critique of Lukács's claim to have 'proletarianized' the standpoint of the critical theory of reification. Trenkle's arguments, briefer but more forceful, contemporized and polemical than Postone's, engage the reasoning of Part III of RCP more directly and are more closely attuned to the concrete problems and debates surrounding current theories of capitalist crisis, casting the problems we are considering into sharper relief and better clarifying what is really at stake here politically. '*Die metaphysischen Mucken des Klassenkampfes*' is framed mainly as a critique of what it terms the 'retro-discourse' of a return to class struggle then (and now) cropping up on the left among the likes of Hardt and Negri, John Holloway, Marcel van den Linden and theoreticians associated with the European movement 'Attac'. Like TLSD, '*Die metaphysischen Mucken*' is careful to credit the Lukács of HCC as still, however little acknowledged by contemporary Marxism, the most 'elaborate and coherent' version of, in Trenkle's acerbic terms, the 'theology of class'.

The young Lukács's theoretical achievement is his attempt to conceive of class perspective together with the reification produced by the commodity form, setting his thinking apart from that of almost the entire Marxist tradition and making him a reference point for the self-reflecting left to this day. It should be kept in mind that even then this represented an attempt to process in intellectual terms the defeat of the revolution in the Western European countries. Basically, Lukács is concerned with questions of why the proletariat had failed to overcome capitalism despite its growing numbers, and why in fact its empirical consciousness had remained fixed within capitalist categories. ('Metaphysical' op. cit., digital version; pp. 1–2; translation emended)

It is, according to Trenkle, the very theoretical depth of this drive to rescue the proletariat and class struggle from the challenge posed by the latter's 'actually existing' political forfeitures that, ironically, produces Lukács's 'metaphysical' leap in Part III of RCP to the highly controversial theory of an 'imputed' (*zugrechnet*) form of proletarian class consciousness – a form theoretically untainted by what was, as Lukács himself conceded, the still reified 'empirical' consciousness of most workers. Such a leap, argues Trenkle, must inevitably follow from the Lukácsian conception of reification as *veil* concealing a social totality mediated by a 'labour' presupposed as transhistorical, socially-constitutive 'essence'. The fundamental difference between capitalist and communist

society would thus in the end be merely that, in the latter, mediation by means of abstract labour would ‘take place consciously’ (2, translation emended). But ‘insofar as this is so’, reasons Trenkle,

the aim of liberating labor from reification turns into an impossible task. Labor is per se a reified activity and, as such, lies at the basis of modern commodity production. The ‘conscious recognition’ of labor as a social principle of mediation would be nothing other than the contradiction in terms of a ‘conscious recognition’ of commodity production and the ‘conscious’ self-surrender to its constraints and imperatives. (2; translation emended)

Echoing an ongoing critical-theoretical project of *Wertkritik* generally, in which not only ‘labour’ but the ‘subject form’ itself as a category purportedly bequeathed by bourgeois Enlightenment thought becomes the target of critique,⁷ Trenkle here effectively takes a step beyond Postone’s claim to have discovered the demystified Subject of History in capital rather than a disalienated labour on the level of ‘species-being’. In effect, the Hegelian dialectical categories in terms of which Lukács had derived a theory of the dialectical negation of reification and reified consciousness – essence, historical Subject and totality as telos, all purportedly in *statu nascendi* in the form of a revolutionary, proletarian class consciousness – turn out here to be, along with labour, *forms of reification themselves*, abstract labour’s ‘metaphysical’ pseudo-negations. Postone, though more cautiously, echoes this same line of thinking in TLSD:

[T]he notion that capital constitutes the historical Subject also suggests that the realm of politics in a postcapitalist society should not be seen in terms of a totality that is hindered in capitalism from emerging fully. Indeed, it implies the contrary – that an institutionally totalizing form of politics should be interpreted as an expression of the practical coordination of capital as the totality, subject to its constraints and imperatives, rather than as the overcoming of capital. The abolition of totality should, then, allow for the possible constitution of very different, non-totalizing forms of the political coordinations of society. (79–80)

The ‘metaphysical’ pitfalls of positing the category of *class* as the historical medium and fulcrum for overturning capital and the reified (un)consciousness of a society mediated through the value form, controversial as they remain, must, in my view, be granted. But the mere evocation of a ‘plurality’ of subjectivities and practices in both Trenkle and Postone nevertheless strikes me as still too theoretically limited and peremptory. Perhaps this is inevitable, given the many historical uncertainties and obscurities that cloud the horizon of the crisis of capital in its present phase. But such pronouncements smack of a certain theoretical pragmatism, even of a kind of ‘bad abstraction’. Indeed, without being further mediated and concretized, they risk calling into question

the viability of the very theory and critique of reification that they are meant to rectify and re-actualize. Take, for example, Trenkle's warnings about contemporary efforts to rescue the idea of class struggle by simply equating the 'proletariat' with whatever forms of social subjectivity and agency appear to challenge the existing world order – whether in the guise of the 'multitude' (Hardt and Negri) or of a sheer, creative and active cry of negation in relation to what is (Holloway). Taken no further than this, do not Trenkle and Postone remain adrift in the political equivalent of an emancipatory 'night in which all cats are grey', unable to distinguish, except by voluntarist political identifications, between say, Al Qaeda and the *piqueteros*?² One must at least question whether, theoretically speaking, the mere insistence on a 'plurality' of resistances to reification and, in Postone's case, 'non-totalizing forms of political coordinations of society' get us very much further than Hardt and Negri, for example, despite resolutely parting company with the 'retro-discourse' of proletarians and class struggle. The mere abstract assertion that such post-class, antimetaphysical pluralities are what the real negative face of capital would have to look like, taken no further, risks limiting whatever critical force it is able to exert against 'traditional' and neo-'traditional' Marxisms by merely repeating those same negative features in an inverse and abstractly positive light.

To put it differently, Postone and Trenkle overcome the 'metaphysical' errors of a 'traditional' Marxism at the risk of merely deferring the question to which Lukács and RCP sought a definitive answer, even if it turned out to be the wrong one: that of the *immanent* standpoint of a critique of reification. Returning now to the principles of immanent critique as explicitly propounded by Postone, consider for example an assertion such as the following, drawn from the section of the second chapter of TLSD discussed in detail above. Here we are told that

the Marxian theory neither posits nor is bound to the notion of a historical meta-Subject, such as the proletariat, which will realize itself in a future society. Indeed, the move from a theory of the collective (bourgeois) Subject to a theory of alienated social relations implies a critique of such a notion. It is one aspect of a major shift in critical perspective from a social critique on the basis of 'labor' to a social critique of the peculiar nature of labor in capitalism whereby the former's standpoint becomes the latter's subject of critique. (78)

But what, then, of the immanent standpoint of such a 'social critique of the peculiar nature of labour in capitalism'? In what sense, precisely, *is* it 'social'? The mere abstract assertion of the plural, 'non-totalizing form' of the social content (or contents) implied in such an immanent critical standpoint might be good enough for a left-poststructuralist, but falls short of an answer here if one keeps to the standards of the Marxian thinking upheld by Postone or Trenkle themselves. To drive the point home even further, one would do well to consult the exceptionally lucid exposition of immanent critique (often in language which echoes HCC's 'What Is Orthodox Marxism?') in TLSD's third

chapter ('The limits of traditional Marxism and the pessimistic turn of Critical Theory'). In the chapter section entitled 'Critique and contradiction' one reads, for example:

The notion that the structures, the underlying social relations of modern society, are contradictory provides the theoretical basis for . . . an immanent historical critique. [Postone speaks interchangeably here and throughout TLSD of 'immanent critique', 'immanent social critique' and 'immanent historical critique' – NL.] It allows the immanent critique to elucidate a historical dynamic that is intrinsic to the social formation, a dialectical dynamic that points beyond itself – to that realizable 'ought' that is immanent to the 'is' and serves as the standpoint of its critique. Social contradiction, according to such an approach, then, is the precondition of both an intrinsic historical dynamic and the existence of the social critique itself. The possibility of the latter is intrinsically related to *the socially generated possibility of other forms of critical distance and opposition – on the popular level as well*. That is, the notion of social contradiction also allows for a theory of the historical constitution of *popular oppositional forms that point beyond the existent order*. (88, my emphasis)

The question, although unspoken here, fairly leaps from the page. What, if it is no longer (or never was) the class struggle of the proletariat, might these 'social contradictions', these immanent 'forms' – 'socially generated', 'other', 'popular oppositional' – be? We know from the general theoretical argument of TLSD that they must stem from what Postone, drawing on the *Grundrisse*, regards as the fundamental, unfolding contradiction of capitalism: the contradiction between value as the abstract labour-based form of wealth specific to the capitalist mode of production and what Postone terms 'material wealth'.⁸ The latter, along with its corresponding social subject-form, the 'social individual', increasingly presses – and, so far, persistently fails – to extricate itself from the constraints (the so-called 'treadmill effect'; see TLSD, 289–91) of the law of value as the exponential growth of labour productivity makes abstract labour itself socially redundant – not to say toxic. And, certainly, in a contemporary situation of unprecedented economic crisis in which, for example – whatever its contradictions and ambiguities – the question of defending, re-appropriating and perhaps *expropriating* the 'commons' has become virtually a global preoccupation of radical theoretical discourse as well as of real social struggles, it is not hard to picture, empirically speaking, such 'popular oppositional forms' and their possible links to the value/material wealth contradiction. But such phenomena remain, in their immediacy, a far cry from the immanent, 'realizable ought' that, for RCP in its 'traditional' Marxist self-understanding, was absolutely unambiguous: the revolutionary class-consciousness and deed of the world proletariat. That reification and the insurrectional consciousness expressed in the October Revolution were to reveal *themselves* to be yet another 'antinomy of bourgeois consciousness' rather than the dialectical poles of

capitalism's structuring contradiction is proof of Lukács's *historical* error. But that observation supplies neither Postone nor the rest of us with any necessary, determinate basis from which to specify what would have, or could now, rectify that epic theoretical failure.

Qua reification and its historical overcoming, the obscure shadow cast by that failure inevitably ambiguates even the most rigorous enunciations of the immanent unity of theory and practice. In a sentence immediately following on the one just cited, Postone writes: 'Immanent social critique also has a practical moment: it can understand itself as contributing to social and political transformation' (89). He chooses his words with admirable care here as always, but, consciously or not, the note of ambiguity is itself unambiguous: critique's 'practical moment' becomes a function of a self-understood 'contribution' to transformation, not, as it is for the Lukács of HCC, the moment in which 'the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object' (HCC 178). Postone goes on, entirely justifiably, to deny the merely 'exhortative' character of critique (178). But in place of the latter, subjective-irrationalist voluntarism (à la Badiou) he again must fall back on an immanent form of critique that, because its 'practical moment' cannot or will not enter more deeply into the question of its own genuine historical concreteness, must remain strangely ancillary, as if immanence were somehow possible at a slight distance from the object: 'Revealing the potential in the actual helps action to be socially transformative in a conscious way' (89). But, as Lukács, if not Marx himself, might have interposed at this point: 'Who will help the helpers?' Witness the spectacle of the present crisis, and the horrifyingly paralysed, if not pathologically self-destructive reaction that, so far, even if with scattered exceptions, seems, as Žižek has observed,⁹ to be its most characteristic ideological symptom. This raises the question of whether theory's 'revealing the potential in the actual' *itself* fails to advance beyond a condition of abstract potentiality, a condition leaving us in a state of – to cite the title of one of Postone's own recent essays – 'history *and* helplessness'.¹⁰

III

Lukács begins the sixth and final section of Part III of RCP with a coda that not only summarizes the argument he has been developing throughout 'The Standpoint of the Proletariat' but also, after its own fashion, anticipates the critical-theoretical problems and questions set forth and elaborated above:

Reification is, then, the necessary, immediate reality of every person living in capitalist society. It can be overcome only by *constant and constantly renewed efforts to disrupt the reified structure of existence by concretely relating to the concretely manifested contradictions of the total development, by becoming conscious of the immanent meanings of these contradictions for the total development*. But it must be emphasised that . . . the structure can be disrupted only if the immanent

contradictions of the process are made conscious. Only when the consciousness of the proletariat is able to point out the road along which the dialectics of history is objectively impelled, but which it cannot travel unaided, will the consciousness of the proletariat awaken to a consciousness of the process, and only then will the proletariat become the identical subject-object of history whose praxis will change reality. If the proletariat fails to take this step the contradiction will remain unresolved and will be reproduced by the dialectical mechanics of history at a higher level, in an altered form and with increased intensity. (197)

Nowhere in RCP does Lukács specify precisely what is meant here by the ‘altered form’ of such an unresolved contradiction, but the present world crisis of capitalism certainly provides us with one unmistakable, if unintended, interpretation of this phrase. One might reasonably speculate that the social and ecological catastrophe, indeed the outright neo-barbarism into which contemporary late capitalist ‘globalization’ has already plunged much of the planet and its inhabitants, is not something that Lukács could have imagined. But a careful reading of HCC, I think, suggests otherwise. Lukács walks a very fine line indeed in ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’, acutely aware of the need to strike a balance between an officially Bolshevik triumphalism and the dangers such triumphalism posed to his own theoretical and philosophical project in HCC.¹¹

That the proletariat, ‘aided’ or unaided by its vanguard Communist Party, did not, has not, will not and could not, whatever else it does, take the step that transforms it into Historical ‘subject/object’ is something very few would now dispute. Taking such a step, given the already reified form of ‘labour’ itself, its own immanence to capitalist relations of production, would be tantamount, according to Trenkle, to leaping over its own shadow. This is obviously a more controversial claim. But in the concluding, necessarily brief arguments and speculations that follow, it is taken as a given.

There is no indication anywhere in HCC, nor, as far as I know, in any other of Lukács’s extensive writings, of any incipient break with a ‘labour’-centred ‘traditional’ Marxism. Thus, when Lukács refers in the passage cited above to the intensification of contradictions should the (itself immanent) consciousness of their ‘immanent meanings for the total development’ fail to take root in the proletariat as class subject, this can only mean a setback, however terrible the cost, for a revolutionary process driven by the *perpetuum mobile* of class struggle. Still, there is another theoretical category at work here, one not necessarily reducible to class or labour, even if for RCP this reduction is never explicitly questioned. Lukács does not name it in the summary ‘coda’ mentioned above, but he does in earlier sections of ‘The Standpoint of the Proletariat’ and, indeed, throughout HCC itself; this is the category of *crisis*, or as RCP sometimes refers to it in a more sinister register, ‘catastrophe’. Take, for example, section 2 of Part III of RCP, in which Lukács attempts, here as so often under considerable logical strain, to establish an organic connection between the

proletariat and dialectical method. Despite the clear acknowledgement, repeated at regular intervals throughout RCP, that both bourgeoisie and proletariat are equally the prisoners of the reified immediacies of capitalist society, he writes:

For the proletariat to become aware of the dialectical nature of its existence is a matter of life and death, whereas the bourgeoisie uses the abstract categories of reflection, such as quantity and infinite progression, to conceal the dialectical structure of the historical process in daily life only to be confronted by unmediated catastrophes when the pattern is reversed. (164–5)

There follows a rapid attempt to construct a dialectical epistemology of individual and class in accordance with which only the proletariat, though no less composed of reified individual pseudo-subjects than its class antagonist, can, driven by the above evoked ‘matters of life and death’, rise above this plane and attain a genuine, class form of subjectivity or ‘imputed’ consciousness. Yet Lukács continues:

Thus we find the subject and object of the social process coexisting in a state of dialectical interaction. But as they always appear to exist in a rigidly twofold form, each external to the other, the dialectics remain unconscious and the objects retain their twofold and hence rigid character. *This rigidity can only be broken by catastrophe* and it then makes way for an equally rigid structure. (165, my emphasis)

This observation, read against the grain and out of the overall context of RCP – but read carefully – implies, *via negationis*, a discrete historical mechanism through which to arrive at a nonreified consciousness of the contradictory totality of capitalist society. And it is a mechanism that differs, if only by omission, from what is itself the ironically Kantian metaphysical requirement, stated at the outset of the ‘coda’, that the breakthrough be achieved by its own ‘infinite progression’ of ‘constant and renewed efforts’ to grasp the totality as praxis and process – a process ‘aided’, of course, *ultima instantia*, by the rationally pure postulate of the Leninist party. It is still clearly a ‘matter of life and death’ here. But with all explicit references to class momentarily suspended, what potentially emerges from this sinister crisis scenario is a theoretical insight into the reality that it must ultimately be society itself, the very *possibility* of the social in the face of the catastrophe of capitalism, that takes up the role of historical ‘subject/object’. The still intractable problem of how such a radically *social* Subject – one *more* radically and concretely totalized than its *class* variant – breaks free of reified into dialectical consciousness remains, of course, for Lukács as for us. But, unconstrained by the ‘traditional’ Marxist fetish-categories of labour and *class* struggle, here at least the problem is posed in a way that is consistent with the historical specificity of a society mediated by the

real abstractions of value, labour and capital, and the inexorable logic of social annihilation that comes ever more clearly into the scope of mass consciousness as capital's terminal crisis – its genuine catastrophe – becomes historical reality. There is at least the potential here for a theory adequate to the increasingly self-evident truth that merely equating capitalism with the interests of the bourgeoisie as its ruling class, while not false on a limited sociological plane – thinking of capital as itself simply another *form* of the social, even if unfree and deformed – already does the latter too much justice. The abstracting logic of capital and its historical 'laws of motion' is, in the end – that is, *now* – to destroy not only the proletariat but the content of all organized social life as such. Capital's laws of reproduction inevitably become the laws that undermine *its own* social conditions of possibility, and, along with them, those of society *tout court*.

From the historical vantage point of HCC – framed by the economic and cultural dynamics of Fordist modernization, whether in its Western or Eastern, Soviet-modelled variations – crisis and 'catastrophe' necessarily and, within limits, accurately appeared to Lukács as relative factors, increasing in destructiveness and intensity. Vide the twentieth century's two world wars. But for the historical moment of HCC these invariably give way to new periods of stabilization, growth and 'class struggle'. 'Catastrophe' might momentarily furnish a glimpse of the social and historical totality, loosening the 'rigidity' of reified, antinomial subject-object relations, but only so as to 'then [make] way for an equally rigid structure'. The frequency with which the topos of crisis as catastrophe recurs throughout HCC, not merely in conjunctural but in theoretical and methodological contexts, is part of what sets that work apart from virtually all the other Marxian theory of its day. Again and again, especially in the final section of RCP, one gets the sense that references to the 'proletariat' are not only invocations of Marx's disalienated humanity in embryo, Bolshevik sloganeering – or, as Trenkle has it, metaphysical, Enlightenment stand-ins for a Rousseauist *volonté general* or a Kantian self-positing Reason. They are also presentiments of something for which Lukács as yet lacked the precise theoretical categories: organized social life itself as, in relation to the social '*Vernichtungslogik*'¹² of the commodity-form in its crisis mode, *sheer negativity*.

To cite just one further illustration of this point: in section 3 of Part III of RCP, after observing the 'transformation [under capitalism] of all relations between human beings into purely social relations' – 'social' here for HCC, following Marx's phraseology, denoting the idea of the pure *abstraction* of 'asocial sociality', '*ungesellschaftliche Vergesellschaftung*' – Lukács goes on to write that, for the 'proletariat . . . the same development progressively eliminates everything 'organic', every direct link with nature from the forms of society, so that socialized man can stand revealed in an objectivity remote from or even opposed to humanity' (176). And, on the following page: 'The proletariat "has no ideals to realize". When its consciousness is put into practice it can only breathe life into the things the dialectics of history have forced to a crisis' (177). Breathe

life, that is, into a crisis because crisis itself has already begun to be sensed as the bringer of (social) death.¹³

In sum, then: *History and Class Consciousness* has, fully in keeping with the radically utopian desires of its conjunctural point of origin, gone the way of the revolutionary proletariat as good as elevated to mythical status, fully justifying critiques such as those of Postone and Trenkle. Yet its absolute fidelity, no less radically utopian in its way, to the immanent critique of reification, correctly understood as the core of Marx's own critical theory, led Lukács's thinking into an impasse from which there could be only one way out: the idea of the crisis of capital as itself an immanent standpoint of critique. Concerning the latter, Lukács's great work was anything but consistent or systematic, but with this idea it had – at least, so it could be argued – uncovered the antidote to the class fetish to which it all the while ceaselessly succumbed. Hatred of capital, a constant in every aspect of the life and work of Georg Lukács, and the indelible proof of his profound humanism, furnished the *unvanishing* mediator that, ironically, allowed HCC to survive what might otherwise have been the fatal contradiction between its utopian myth and its truth as radical critique. Carefully read, *History and Class Consciousness* itself furnishes the answer to the question posed in my title. And its own ambiguous history notwithstanding, history itself, our own 'present as history', demands, as never before, that we go on reading it.

Notes

¹ 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' is hereafter abbreviated as RCP.

² '[A] "going beyond" Marxism,' writes Sartre, will be 'at best, only the rediscovery of a thought already contained in the philosophy which one believes he has gone beyond' (1968, p. 7).

³ Works by critical theorists such as Nancy Hartsock, Sandra Harding (among the Marxist-feminists specifically addressed by Jameson in 'Unfinished Project'), by the important *Wertkritik* theorist Roswitha Scholz, as well as by Moishe Postone on anti-Semitism, Marcial González on the Chicano novel and Kevin Floyd on queer theory, to mention only a few, are more than sufficient proof of this.

⁴ Text available online at: <<http://www.krisis.org/2005/die-metaphysischen-mucken-des-klassenkampfes>>, and an English translation, "The Metaphysical Subtleties of the Class Struggle" at <<http://www.krisis.org/2005/the-metaphysical-subtleties-of-class-struggle>>.

⁵ For an especially comprehensive account of this theory, see Robert Kurz's *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus*, 'Die Geschichte des Dritten industriellen Revolution', pp. 622–800.

⁶ See *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, pp. 39–43.

⁷ See, for example, Lohoff, 2005 and 2006.

⁸ TLSD, chapter 9, 'The trajectory of production'; see *Grundrisse* 705–11.

⁹ See *First as Tragedy*.

- ¹⁰ See Postone, 2006.
- ¹¹ We need not go into further detail here concerning the ‘metaphysischen Mucken’ to which this cautionary stance, the product of what both Trenkle and Postone correctly identify as Lukács’s essentially divided theoretical loyalties, condemned RCP – nor the fact that, for the likes of Zinoviev and Deborin, the line was not fine enough.
- ¹² ‘Logic of annihilation’; the German expression seems somehow unavoidable here. See Lohoff, 2003.
- ¹³ See, in this light, the following passage from Žižek’s *First as Tragedy*: ‘. . . a new emancipatory politics will stem no longer from a particular social agent, but from an explosive combination of different agents. What unites us is that, in contrast to the classic image of the proletariat who have “nothing to lose but their chains,” we are in danger of losing *everything*: the threat is that we will be reduced to abstract subjects devoid of all substantial content, dispossessed of our symbolic substance, our genetic base heavily manipulated, vegetating in an unlivable environment. This triple threat to our entire being renders us all proletarians, reduced to “substanceless subjectivity,” as Marx put it in the *Grundrisse*’ (92).

Works Cited

- Floyd, K. (2009), *The Reification of Desire: Toward a Queer Marxism*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- González, M. (2008), *Chicano Novels and the Politics of Form: Race, Class and Reification*. Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press.
- Harding, S. (1986), *The Science Question in Feminism*. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press.
- Hardt, M. and Negri, A. (2001), *Empire*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Hartsock, N. (1985), *Money, Sex and Power: Toward a Feminist Historical Materialism*. Boston, MA: Northeastern University Press.
- Holloway, J. (2002), *Change the World without Taking Power*. London: Pluto Press.
- Jameson, F. (1971), *Marxism and Form*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- (2009), *Valences of the Dialectic*. London: Verso.
- Kurz, R. (2009), *Schwarzbuch Kapitalismus*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Eichborn Verlag.
- Lohoff, E. (2003), ‘Gewaltordnung und Vernichtungslogik’, *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 27, 17–63.
- (2005), ‘Der Verzauberung der Welt’, *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 29, 13–60.
- (2006), ‘Ohne Festen Punkt: Befreiung jenseits des Subjekts’, *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 30, 32–89.
- Marx, K. (1973), *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus. London: Penguin.
- (1990), *Capital: A Critique of Political Economy, Volume I*, trans. B. Fowkes. London: Penguin.
- Sartre, J-P. (1968), *Search for a Method*, trans. H. Barnes. New York: Vintage.
- Scholz, R. (2000), *Das Geschlecht des Kapitalismus: Feministische Theorien und die post-moderne Metamorphose des Patriarchats*. Bad Honnef: Horlemann Verlag.

- Sohn-Rethel, Alfred (1978), *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel. London: Macmillan.
- Postone, M. (2006) 'History and helplessness: mass mobilization and contemporary forms of anticapitalism', *Public Culture*, 18:1, 93–110.
- Trenkle, N. (2005), 'Die metaphysischen Mucken des Klassenkampfes', in *Krisis: Beiträge zur Kritik der Warengesellschaft*, 29, 143–59. English translation: 'The Metaphysical Subtleties of Class Struggle: On the Unspoken Premises of an Odd Retro-Discourse', trans. Jo Keady, <<http://www.krisis.org/2005/the-metaphysical-subtleties-of-class-struggle>>.
- Žižek, S. (2009), *First as Tragedy, Then as Farce*. London: Verso.

Chapter 6

Rethinking Reification

Andrew Feenberg

Introduction

The difficult task of the intellectual historian consists in explaining how ideas that are no longer credible could once have enjoyed prestige and currency. The still more difficult task of the philosopher is to discover in such outdated ideas a hidden core that is credible in our time. We can only be grateful to Axel Honneth for having undertaken this philosophical task in his recent Tanner Lectures on Lukács's concept of reification. His reasons for attempting to recover this nearly forgotten concept are shared by many who have watched with dismay as philosophical social criticism was reduced to a branch of moral theory. As Honneth rightly points out, injustice is not the only philosophically significant social problem. What he calls 'social pathologies' would have to be addressed even in a just society. Reification is one such pathology.

Nevertheless, despite my appreciation for Honneth's project, I believe he has missed the most important dimension of Lukács's concept of reification. Honneth identifies reification with individual attitudes and practices that tend to block recognition of the other. These have collective consequences when widespread, hence the reference to *social* pathologies. His analysis of the various forms taken by reification in this sense is interesting and provocative. But, for better or worse, the individual is of only marginal interest to Lukács. Psychological attitude scarcely enters the picture, even when he discusses consciousness.

Lukács's discussion of reification focuses on social processes, specifically on what today we would call the dialectic of structure and agency. What is worthy of an effort at recovery in the concept of reification is the role of rationality in this dialectic. The social pathology that concerns Lukács is not the lack of recognition, important though that may be, but rather the overwhelming predominance of rational structures that distort and oppress the human lives they contain.

This problematic – the role of rationality in the relation of structure to agency – can be further developed outside the framework of Lukács's Marxist assumptions. It suggests the need for a renewal of democratic theory, not just

around the formal question of rights, but around the substantive issues that concern human beings trapped in oppressive economic, administrative and technological structures. This is in fact the approach I have taken in developing the critical theory of technology.

Technology was a key example and source of reification for Lukács and became still more central in the thinking of the first generation of the Frankfurt School. These thinkers argued that capitalism creates a productive apparatus designed to support its social structure. The agency of the individuals was ever more successfully channelled as they adapted to this technological 'second nature' which, the Frankfurt School claimed, had spread from work to every aspect of life. Reification describes the standard mode of perception and the practices associated with this 'one-dimensional society'. Democratization of the technologized world is therefore its dereification. I will return to this point in my conclusion.

This chapter expands these introductory remarks. I will first show that Honneth's individualistic approach fails to grasp the core of Lukács's theory of reification. I will follow these critical remarks with a discussion of Lukács's theory based on a reading of *History and Class Consciousness*. Later sections of this chapter discuss the relation of the Lukácsian concept of reification to political events and to the early Frankfurt School. In conclusion I will offer some suggestions for applying the concept of reification in a critical theory of technology.

Reification and Recognition

Honneth's lectures lend themselves to two misunderstandings. On the one hand, he invokes an 'existential' concept of recognition as awareness of the specifically human qualities of human beings which he does not adequately distinguish from the normative concept of recognition as a desirable relation to other human beings. This confusion motivates the three commentaries by scholars who criticize Honneth's argument at the end of the book. On the other hand, Honneth's presentation wavers between an account of reification based strictly on the literal meaning of the word's roots, and a critique and interpretation of Lukács's theory of reification. Since Lukács's role in introducing the term into social theory is well known and acknowledged by Honneth from the start, this ambiguity is particularly confusing. I will focus on it throughout this chapter.

Honneth goes to some lengths to show that the meaning of reification is forgetfulness of recognition of the other. He writes, 'the independence of those practices whose successful execution demands that we ignore all the human properties of our fellow human beings can lead to intersubjective reification' (RNL 156–57, see also, 25, 54). But just how far his definition strays from Lukács's should be clear from his claim that Lukács erred in describing wage labour and commodity exchange as reified. Yet these are Lukács's principal

examples! Honneth's conclusion is nevertheless logical. Exchange and wage labour are based on contractual relations which imply recognition of the other. This is what makes exchange different from theft and wage labour different from slavery.

But Lukács surely knew this and could hardly have failed to distinguish between exchange and theft, wage labour and slavery, nor is it plausible that he completely misunderstood his own conceptual innovation. If the conclusion is false, one of the premises must be false. In this case it would seem that the exclusive identification of reification with the failure of recognition is the source of the error. It is easy to confirm this. In *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács discusses reification at length in relation to Marx's concepts of alienation and the fetishism of commodities and Max Weber's concept of rationalization, but rarely in terms of human relations.

How does Honneth arrive at his rather unusual interpretation of a concept which Lukács introduced with a very different meaning? Why not simply say at the outset that reification is being used here in a sense completely different from Lukács's definition? The answer is a link Honneth believes he can find between his concept and that of Lukács. Were he able to bridge the gap between them with this link, his redefinition of reification could stand as a developing stage in a tradition stemming from Lukács and continuing through the Frankfurt School down to the present. This is certainly one way of saving the concept from obsolescence, but I will argue that it is neither the only nor the best way.

Honneth notes that Lukács has various different descriptions of what constitutes reification. The most fruitful, in Honneth's view, is as an attitude of objectivity or detachment. The word Lukács uses to describe this attitude is 'contemplation', with the emphasis on the distancing and passivity connoted by the term. Honneth draws out the implications of this notion of the reified subject as fundamentally an observer rather than an authentic actor: 'In the constantly expanding sphere of commodity exchange, subjects are compelled to behave as detached observers, rather than as active participants in social life, because their reciprocal calculation of the benefits that others might yield for their own profit demands a purely rational and emotionless stance' (RNL 24–5).

Honneth claims that Lukács's critique of reification implies as its corollary a more fundamental nonreified relation to the world. In some passages Lukács describes this relation as world-constituting. This alternative to contemplation depends on outdated idealist premises. More interesting to Honneth are those passages in which Lukács advocates an alternative 'mode of praxis characterized by empathetic and existential engagement' (RNL 29). This formulation suggests an affinity between Lukács and Heidegger. In Heidegger's thought human experience is grounded on the prereflective givenness of the world in an engaged attitude of 'care'. Lukács and Heidegger arrive at similar conclusions through a critique of the prevailing Cartesian paradigm of subject-object relations. We participate in the world at a fundamental ontological level before viewing it as a subject opposed to an object.

Honneth finds further evidence for his notion of ‘engaged involvement’ in Dewey. With Dewey he argues that ‘we experience situations in such a way that we “take care” to maintain a fluent interaction with our surroundings. In what follows, I will refer to this primordial form of relation to the world as “recognition” in its most elementary form’ (RNL 37). Honneth concludes that Lukács, Heidegger and Dewey are all aiming at the same fundamental idea: ‘the notion that the stance of empathetic engagement in the world, arising from the experience of the world’s significance and value, is prior to our acts of detached cognition’ (RNL 38). All three philosophers argue that emotion, reason and sensation are joined in an original relation to reality that founds objectivity and detachment.

Honneth now redefines reification as an objective view of the world that forgets its origins in recognition. Where such forgetfulness becomes habitual and widespread, it leads to various social problems. Note that this is not an argument against detached cognition but for awareness of its basis in the prereflective experience of recognition. Honneth claims that Lukács was unclear about this and regarded objective thought as such as reified. In an effort to avoid this confusion, Honneth restricts reification in the primary sense to the failure of recognition of other persons. Things figure in his concept of reification only insofar as reifying persons leads to reifying the meanings those persons attribute to things. This restriction eliminates the hint of romantic critique of reason that haunts the Lukácsian formulation.

Honneth’s reflections on recognition in this sense are discussed in the commentaries that follow his lectures. Judith Butler, Raymond Geuss and Jonathan Lear have interesting things to say about recognition, but none of them attempts to verify the accuracy of Honneth’s interpretation of Lukács. I will show that Honneth’s reflections lead him far from Lukács’s concept of reification but surprisingly close to some ideas Marcuse developed towards the end of his life. To unravel the confusion we need to go back to the notion of contemplation to understand its actual significance for Lukács.

Reification as a Social Concept

On the face of it Honneth would seem to have a point. Reified thought in Lukács does indeed involve a detached attitude towards people and things that Lukács calls ‘contemplative’. It is also true that in his 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* Lukács accuses his earlier self of confounding reification and objectivity in general. But the text is a lot more complicated than Honneth (and the later Lukács himself) are willing to concede. To explain what I mean I must now go over Lukács’s argument. This entails discussing many ideas which the intellectual historian will tell us are outdated, but in the conclusion to this chapter I hope to redeem at least some of them.

Lukács introduces the concept of contemplation to explain the reified form of social theory and practice under capitalism. Reified social reality is treated as

a 'second nature', with laws that appear as rigid as those of the first nature described by natural science. The reified subject explains social reality on the model of natural science and acts on it technically. The technical manipulations are based on knowledge of the laws and do not change them. As Bacon said, 'Nature to be commanded must be obeyed.' Here is one typical summary of this approach:

Man in capitalist society confronts a reality 'made' by himself (as a class) which appears to him to be a natural phenomenon alien to himself; he is wholly at the mercy of its 'laws', his activity is confined to the exploitation of the inexorable fulfillment of certain individual laws for his own (egoistic) interests. But even while 'acting' he remains, in the nature of the case, the object and not the subject of events. (HCC 135)

This is what Lukács means when he says that reified practice stands in a 'contemplative' relation to a world it cannot alter in any fundamental respect (HCC 89, 97–8). *History and Class Consciousness* does not criticize contemplation in the everyday sense of the word, but understood as an aspect of a technically manipulative relation to the world. This is sufficiently problematic without suggesting, as do both Honneth and the later Lukács, that the book condemned objectivity in general.

I do not see how there can be any question that this is what the Lukács of 1923 means. He gives several examples in the first part of the reification essay in *History and Class Consciousness*. The capitalist investor stands in a contemplative relation to the stock market. He tries to position himself in relation to trends, not to control the trends. The worker in an automated factory stands in a similarly contemplative relation to the self-acting machine which he operates from an external position rather than himself acting as the centre of production with the tools of craft in hand. Bureaucracies too have the form of a rigid, lawful system. In sum, the three principal bases of a modern society, the economy, the technology and the administrations are reified in the sense that the individual cannot alter their laws, only understand and manipulate those laws to personal advantage.

Now, as we have seen, Lukács's concept of reification does contain a reference to objectivity and detachment as reified modes of experience, but instead of exploring the nature of a dereified experience as does Honneth, Lukács emphasizes the practical aspect of overcoming reification. He regards immediate experience as thoroughly reified and grounded in the social structure. The experiential sources of resistance are explained as a historically specific mediation, and not as an ontological foundation. That mediation is the process of collective human action in the making of the social world. This is why he does not pursue the project that interests Heidegger and Dewey and attempt to get beneath reification to an original prereflective relation to reality. This focus directed his attention to the dynamic of the underlying reality that has been

reified. He described this dynamic with three concepts: tendencies, processes and action.

Reification masks the tendencies of a historical process that is based ultimately on human practical activities rather than on laws. This underlying reality is known, Lukács claims, in Marxist social theory, and not in phenomenological analysis. Hence he is not antagonistic to objectivity and detachment in general, insofar as these cognitive attitudes belong to every social science, including Marxism. This is not an inconsistency but indicates the specificity of the objectivity and detachment Lukács attributes to reified thought. Here we reach the philosophical nub of the matter.

What is it about reified thought that qualifies its objectivity and detachment as problematic? The answer to this question is found in the second part of the reification essay which I will summarize with scandalous brevity here. Lukács argues that Kant's philosophy exemplifies reified thought at the highest level. According to Kant, experienced reality is structured by formal intuitions and concepts such as space, time, causality and substance. These categories 'give' reality in the form of thinghood, that is, as enduring entities with essential properties and accidental relations to other entities. Modern science, which is Kant's model of the exercise of pure reason, grasps these entities in purely rational forms. Lukács understands this to mean that the laws of natural science abstract the quantifiable dimension of their objects and propound universal propositions such as Newton's Third Law of Motion: 'To every action there is always an equal and opposite reaction.' To apply this law specific content must be supplied. One would need to know *what* specific action was involved and what force it exerted to calculate the consequence of the law. Bourgeois social science and economics employ the same kind of formal laws to understand society.

The formalistic character of these natural scientific laws gives insight into nature, as Kant supposed, but it gives only a distorted view of historical processes that depend on human action. This is because the 'content' of the historically given society has the power to alter its structure. It was Hegel who understood the limitations of Kantian formalism and freed philosophy to conceive of history as a domain in which form and content interact in a prior unity, the unity of human action which generates both structures and events. This advance made possible Marx's dialectical critique of political economy and the concept of proletarian revolution.

Why this Marxist detour from philosophy to political economy? Some of the reasons are familiar, such as Marx's distaste for utopian speculation. But this is not how Lukács understands Marx's strategy. Rather, the point of the Marxian approach is to show the historical tendencies leading to socialism emerging within the categories of the capitalist economy as tensions, breakdowns, crises, failures. Marx shows that the formal laws of economics fail to embrace the concrete content of economic life under capitalism.

Say's law can serve as an illustration. It holds that the total supply of goods and services in a free market economy will exactly equal the total demand at

any given time. This law is contradicted by economic crises in which a glut of goods outpaces demand, bankrupting producers and impoverishing workers.

Crises are a consequence of the social fragmentation characteristic of reification. While partial subsystems of the society such as particular enterprises are highly rationalized, the interactions between these subsystems are 'irrational' in the sense that they are not organized and planned as they would be under socialism. Thus the Marxist 'anarchy of production', which describes the total system, is in fact complemented by a rigid order at the level of its subsystems.

Lukács interprets crisis theory in terms of the antinomy of form and content he develops in his critique of German idealism. The sum of the rationalized domains such as enterprises and bureaucratic administrations does not add up to the 'totality'. What is left out is the concrete life process that overflows the rationalized subsystems in every direction. That life process comes back to haunt the rationalized domains in the course of class struggles. These struggles bring to the surface the human basis of the society which has been constrained and hidden by the reified forms. That human basis is the proletariat.

No previous economic system was so vulnerable to the practical critique of the proletariat as capitalism has been. This is because only insofar as the members of a capitalist society relate to it in a reified fashion can it function at all. Individuals must conceive of themselves as individual agents, relating through objective systems such as markets. They must adopt a 'contemplative' attitude and seek personal advantage in these systems. In sum, the reified structuration of the society depends on the reification of consciousness. Lukács calls this mode of perception/structure a 'form of objectivity' to get away from any subjectivist notion of mere illusion.¹ Capitalism has a reified form of objectivity which is perceived and acted upon in a reified disposition, closing the circle of social construction. When that form of objectivity breaks down the system is threatened. And the threat is permanent. The worker is constantly aware of the difference between his social form and his real content as a person. Where, for example, a speed-up or lengthening of the working day is perceived by the capitalist as a simple matter of increasing the quantity of labour power purchased at a given price, for the worker this 'quantity changes into quality'.

The worker cannot help but penetrate the reified quantitative determinants of this form of objectivity. He is inevitably aware of the real qualitative degradation of life and health associated with an intensification or extension of work activity. Thus, 'the quantitative differences in exploitation which appear to the capitalist in the form of quantitative determinants of the objects of his calculation, must appear to the worker as the decisive, qualitative categories of his whole physical, mental and moral existence' (HCC 166). The revolution constitutes the mediation of the reified social order, its transformation through the self-conscious resistance of the proletariat to its own form of objectivity as wage labour, imposed on it by the system.

This theory of class consciousness has problems of its own, but it resolves an aporia that typically afflicts dystopian critique and is sometimes attributed to

Lukács. In Heidegger, for example, the enframing at times appears so total as to block all awareness of it, including Heidegger's own theory (Belu and Feenberg, 2010). Lukács is often interpreted as saying that reification is similarly total, excluding the very possibility of the revolution he foresees. But in fact the form/content distinction saves Lukács from the aporia. *Formally*, reification is total in the sense that it provides the 'form of objectivity' of both objects and subjects in capitalist society. But form and content are not identical. The content overflows the form of objectivity and has the power to modify it. Revolutionary social transformation consists most fundamentally in this process of modification.

The Dialectic of Mediation

Lukács's conception of revolution conforms loosely to the Hegelian pattern of alienation and re-appropriation noted by Martin Jay in his introduction to Honneth's lectures (RNL 4). The social world is created by human action and its alienated form can therefore be overcome through human action. The proletarian revolution dissolves the rigid systems of capitalism into the 'processes of human relations' from which they arose and which can transform them. But this formulation seems to oppose institutions and actions as such. Socialism would be a society without institutions, subject at every moment to the vagaries of the mass movement. The alienated rationality of capitalism would be overcome in a collective decisionism, a kind of romantic immediacy writ large (Adorno, 1973, p. 374). In these remarks Lukács appears to oppose agency and structure as alternative modes of social organization.

So formulated his program sounds quite simplistic and indeed Jay and Honneth dismiss it. They are, I think, influenced by Habermas's systems theory which depends on the concept of differentiation to explain the phenomena Lukács describes with the concept of reification. Differentiation describes the institutional separation characteristic of modern societies among politics, economics, the family, the church and so on. This 'fragmentation' is useful because it makes a complex large-scale society possible. A differentiated social subsystem such as the market cannot be disalienated by human action any more than a game of soccer can be disalienated by abolishing the rules. In both cases, the relative independence of structure from agency is a condition for accomplishing worthwhile ends and not an offence to human freedom.

But the differentiation model has a weakness which Honneth himself identified in his early book, *The Critique of Power*. Sociologists tend to view differentiation not only as useful but as a universally valid achievement. This ignores the structural 'underdetermination' of systems. Their specific design in any given situation is not warranted by the nature of rational action alone but is also contingent on decisions that reflect specific interests. Those decisions and hence the structure of the differentiated systems could have been different.

Honneth writes, 'Technical rules incompletely prescribe the respective form of their transposition into concrete actions. Possibilities of action are closed not by a repeated recourse to purposive-rational considerations but only through the application of normative or political viewpoints' (1991, p. 254).² What Honneth asserts here of systems applies equally to technologies.³ Indeed, the concept of underdetermination is central to current technology studies. I will return to this point in the conclusion of this chapter.

On this account political action shapes systems by altering the rules under which they operate without thereby destroying their rational form. But then systems should be judged in political terms. For example, they may be shown to be more or less democratic, depending on the degree to which they are configured to respect civil rights and the will of the majority. Where undemocratic systems are democratized by broad public interventions, their transformation could be loosely described as a re-appropriation without implying a return from differentiation to immediacy. Passages in Lukács's book which point in this direction coexist with other passages that seem to demand a total 'dissolution into processes' of the rational systems of capitalism.

These considerations take us to the heart of the problem of Lukács's book. The enormous gap between the two poles of his argument – classical German philosophy and Marxist politics – is never entirely bridged. There remain curious exaggerations which expose his argument to easy criticism. Honneth makes a similar point when he notes the co-existence of an 'official' line that is hopelessly idealistic and a more 'moderate' 'unofficial' line that can provide the basis for a recovery of his contribution (RNL 27; cf. Feenberg, 1981, pp. 124–32; and Feenberg, 2011). We differ on the nature of that unofficial line but not on the interest in pursuing the ambiguities of Lukács's argument.

The focus on classical German philosophy leads Lukács at times to formulations that resemble Fichtean identity philosophy. The idealist 'identity of subject and object' is transferred implausibly to the proletariat. Overcoming the antinomy of subject and object and restoring their unity appears then as an 'exigency of reason' in the Hegelian sense. Honneth notes this trend in Lukács's argument and concludes that 'by grounding his critique of reification in this way, he has robbed it of any chance of social-theoretical justification' (RNL 27). This is a conclusion reached by many critics of Lukács, including Adorno and Habermas.

This aspect of Lukács's argument is partially contradicted by another more realistic approach based on a Hegelian-Marxist concept of mediation. According to this approach, reification is gradually overcome in a long-term process and not dissolved in a sudden recovery of absolute agency. Human freedom and initiative increase relative to the structural impediments of a rationalized society as the proletariat gains power and initiates the transition to socialism.

Lukács makes this point repeatedly in different ways throughout the third section of the reification essay, but never develops the argument formally in relation to the problematic of classical German philosophy analysed earlier in

the essay. He writes, for example, that ‘Proletarian thought does not require a tabula rasa,’ but rather it starts out from reification which, for the first time, makes it possible to understand that society is a human product (HCC 163). Socialism is a reorganization of the society around a dialectical mediation of the capitalist inheritance.

He argues further that reification is never completely eliminated but that it is repeatedly overcome in an ‘unbroken alternation of ossification, contradiction and movement’ (HCC 199). And he rejects the humanist tendency to make man himself into an absolute ‘in place of those transcendental forces he was supposed to explain, dissolve and systematically replace’ (HCC 187). The proletariat is thus not able to constitute or posit reality from some transcendental beyond. ‘It is true that the proletariat is the conscious subject of total social reality. But the conscious subject is not defined here as in Kant, where “subject” is defined as that which can never be an object’ (HCC 21).

Lukács invokes Hegel’s famous principle that ‘the true [be understood] not only as substance but also as subject.’ Like the Hegelian absolute, the proletariat too ‘moves in a self-created world’ but that world simultaneously ‘imposes itself upon [it] in full objectivity’ (HCC 142). The reference to the ambitious notion of a ‘self-created world’ is thus instantly deflated by the ‘full objectivity’ explained in Marxist social theory.

Lukács’s theory of mediation suggests a very different image of the revolution from the classic one derived from the French and Russian revolutions. Although those earlier experiences still influence Lukács’s notion of historical development as a sudden reversal – how could they not in 1923? – his theory could just as well support an evolutionary pattern in which reification and its overcoming stand in a permanent relationship of ever-renewed conflict and resolution. The ‘revolution’ would alter the conditions of that conflict, favouring either structure or agency. This approach implies a theory of modernity as a differentiated social formation with two variants, a capitalist one in which reification is predominant and resistances suppressed, and a socialist one in which the relations between reification and resistance are reversed, the resistances modifying malleable reified systems subject to continuous revision.⁴ Although Lukács does not use the term ‘modernity’, the whole of his essay in *History and Class Consciousness* on ‘The Changing Function of Historical Materialism’ implies a definite break between premodern societies on the one hand and capitalism and socialism on the other.

This interpretation of Lukács’s theory of mediation – his ‘unofficial line’ – bears a certain resemblance to Honneth’s independent revision of the concept of reification. Honneth distinguishes between reified and unreified stances, the one unaware of its basis in recognition, the other aware (RNL 56). Lukács, in the interpretation presented here, distinguished between structures that obscure the practices in which they originate and structures that are caught up in a conscious dialectic with those practices. In each case the duality of objectivity and recognition, structure and agency is either blocked or taken up

consciously as a mediation of the first term. But despite the formal similarity there is a considerable difference in the critical import of the two interpretations. Honneth concedes at the end of his book that on his account reification as a social pathology is rare, exemplified by institutions such as slavery that operate ‘at the zero point of sociality’ (RNL 157). Lukács’s concept of reification has a much wider application and suggests a path towards the general transformation of modernity and the emergence of a new form of social rationality.

What is that form? At the philosophical level, the answer is the dialectic, reflected practically in proletarian resistance. But the dialectic is a critical tool and not a positive doctrine. It cannot be institutionalized in rationalized social structures and it is impossible to believe that any modern society could function without them. This is why Lukács treats it as a dynamic rather than an institution. Marx’s own answer was vague and ambiguous. Under socialism the ‘assembled producers’ were expected to organize production to serve human needs rather than the market. This answer points in two opposite directions: on the one hand towards more participation, and on the other hand towards economic planning which, as we have learned from history, is the work of a bureaucracy. Lukács’s answer is no clearer and this had consequences for his politics that eventually led to his unfortunate compromise with Stalinism.⁵

Reification after Lukács

My description of Lukács’s theory of reification is quite different from Honneth’s. But apart from the problem of interpretation, there remains the more interesting question of what can be salvaged from this theory. This was no doubt more important to Honneth than providing a sound interpretation of a text few bother to read anymore. In emphasizing the role of recognition, Honneth continues Habermas’s communication-theoretic approach in an original way, overcoming a certain intellectualist bias for which Habermas has often been criticized. The sketch of Lukács’s theory of reification I have offered sends us further back for precedents in the early Frankfurt School’s critique of instrumental reason. That critique can be renewed in contact with the theory of reification which was one of its most important sources.

Lukács had an extraordinary vision of proletarian revolution. He believed in the emergence of a unified historical subject capable of acting consciously on the ‘totality’ of society from a strategic position giving it leverage on that totality. The failure of this vision has rendered his politics obsolete. Nevertheless, if by ‘reification’ we mean, as did Lukács, the rational form of capitalist society and an associated technical disposition, then clearly the concept still has interesting applications. Perhaps we can recover something worthwhile from this concept and from Lukács’s notion of mediation as the logic of a radical politics of dereification. Just as Lukács reconstructed the arguments of classical

German philosophy in a new context, extracting the concept of dialectics from a specific historically outdated formulation, so may we salvage the form of Lukács's argument for our new situation. It is this approach to Lukács's theory on which I will focus in the remainder of this chapter.

The notion of reification is useful for grouping under one rubric a wide variety of phenomena characterizing modern societies. Certain forms of social interaction in these societies tend to be differentiated from each other and from everyday life. Thus economic interaction is institutionalized in markets, dealing with the state in bureaucracies and production in technically based enterprises. Each of these domains exhibits qualities of rationality such as equal exchange, classification and application of rules and precise measurement and optimization. These are formal qualities just as Lukács supposed, and they shape the rather disorganized and chaotic stuff of everyday life.⁶

The rationalized systems are only partially differentiated from the life-world. They are still subject to intervention and transformation from below, although the closer they are to the core of the capitalist economy, the more they are armoured against resistance and regulation. They are also interdependent in various ways, some obvious, such as the relation between markets and production, others less obvious, such as the impact of law on shaping the boundaries of the other systems. Recently, the differentiated domains have begun to borrow methods and technologies from each other in a pattern which is now identified with progress. For example, government bureaucracies employ ever more complex computer technologies and are increasingly subjected to forms of accountability that imitate the functioning of markets. Markets depend on communication technologies to an ever increasing extent, enabling their globalization, while production is organized by highly bureaucratized managements. These interactions and mutual dependencies tend to create an increasingly technologized system of social rationality that spreads into every aspect of modern social life (Beniger, 1986, pp. 21–6).

Reification in this sense forms the background to the politics of resistance that emerged with the New Left in the 1960s and 1970s. This was an anti-dystopian politics that attacked the 'system' in the name of human values. In Honneth's account, this politics is associated with a brief revival of interest in Lukács and dismissed, but it actually represented a first attempt to do what Honneth himself has attempted, namely to recover the core meaning of the concept of reification. Those New Left scholars who encountered Lukács's early work felt they had discovered the sources of the theory of the 'one-dimensional society' in which they lived.⁷

In diametrical opposition to the technocratic consensus of the day, the New Left criticized the dominant model of technical progress and the way of life it supports. This explains why the Frankfurt School was so influential despite the difficulty of the writings of its leading members. The critique of technology in occasional comments by Adorno and lengthier analyses in Marcuse's work in particular had a considerable impact. Habermas, among others, believed this

coincidence of views on technology was the result of a similar romantic disdain for rationality (Habermas, 1970). But this critique certainly overstates the case. Adorno writes, for example:

It is not technology which is calamitous, but its entanglement with societal conditions in which it is fettered. . . . Considerations of the interests of profit and dominance have channeled technical development: by now it coincides fatally with the needs of control. Not by accident has the invention of means of destruction become the prototype of the new quality of technology. By contrast, those of its potentials which diverge from dominance, centralism and violence against nature, and which might well allow much of the damage done literally and figuratively by technology to be healed, have withered. (Adorno, 2000, pp. 161–2, n.15)

This passage is no more than a promissory note which Adorno never fulfilled, but Marcuse went much further. His argument for an alternative ‘technological rationality’ follows directly from a social diagnosis of technology’s destructive development. The problem is not in the nature of reason as such, as irrationalist philosophers contend, but in the specific form rationality takes in a reified, one-dimensional society. But this implies that another form of rationality is possible (Marcuse, 1964, ch. 8).

Although much derided today for its immaturity and extremism, the New Left established the horizon of progressive expectations for our time. It launched movements such as environmentalism and feminism that continue to challenge the dominant consensus. The demand for a new direction to technical progress and a more participatory organization of modern life has not gone away. It forms the background to the work of Habermas and Honneth, however much they may resist the undesirable association. It is true that many issues have changed, but where the Left is active it continues to advance the argument of the 1960s for a new conception of progress and a more participatory society.

In the 1960s and 1970s the positive side of Lukács’s argument seemed to have no practical implications. Adorno and Horkheimer never attempted to develop an account of the redemption for which they hoped. Marcuse was the only member of the Frankfurt School who took seriously the potential of the New Left, not as a revolutionary vanguard but as prefigurative model of a new sensibility capable of inspiring radical change.

Marcuse argued that the culture of capitalism was antagonistic to life itself. He detected in the counterculture a quasisomatic resistance to the careers and rewards offered by the system. Increasingly, as society became richer, competition and war could be perceived as unnecessary and the false promise of consumerism demystified. If these attitudes and perceptions spread, he believed, they would prepare a revolution that would not only affect political and economic institutions, but technology as well. A ‘new sensibility’ would transform

what Lukács would have called the form of objectivity of the society and this would have consequences for the design of all rational systems, including those supposedly neutral systems based on scientific-technical knowledge.

Marcuse did not, however, employ the Lukácsian term, but introduced the phenomenological concept of an 'aesthetic *Lebenswelt*' through which life-affirming values would enter into perception itself. Values in Marcuse's sense represent potentialities of human beings and things, both artefacts and nature. These potentialities correspond to intrinsic needs and developmental possibilities. In a variation on the dialectic of form and content, Marcuse offers a dialectic of empirical reality and potentiality. His vision of a reformed technology involved incorporating values representing these potentialities into the technical disciplines and designs, from which they had been expelled by capitalism. This would distinguish socialist technical disciplines and technologies from modern value-free technological rationality which contains no intrinsic *telos*. Marcuse writes:

The critique of technology aims neither at a romantic regression nor at a spiritual restoration of 'values'. The oppressive features of technological society are not due to excessive materialism and technicism. On the contrary, it seems that the causes of the trouble are rather in the arrest of materialism and technological rationality, that is to say, in the restraints imposed on the materialization of values. (Marcuse, 2001, p. 57)

A rationality that 'materialized' life-affirming values by incorporating them into its structure would provide the basis for the reconstruction of society and nature as a peaceful, harmonious world. In sum, technology could be redesigned under socialism to serve rather than to dominate humanity and nature.⁸

Marcuse's argument, like that of Lukács, turns on the conflict between the domain of prereflective experience that interests Honneth and the rational systems that constrain individuals' lives. But unlike the Heideggerian 'world' to which Honneth makes reference, the structure of experience in Marcuse and Lukács is a historical form of objectivity. The conflictual encounter between experience and social rationality is the source of the historical dynamic. In Lukács the experiential level is assimilated to a rather traditional concept of class consciousness, but Marcuse offers something much more interesting. His concept of an aesthetic *Lebenswelt* refers to a prereflective realm of experience like that which grounds Honneth's view of recognition. And although Marcuse does not use the term 'recognition', this is effectively what he intends by his 'new sensibility'.

Like Honneth, Marcuse recognizes the existential dimension, the 'facticity' of human life on the basis of which consciousness develops through recognizing a reality and appropriating an identity. Honneth's discussion of self-reification and its overcoming is suggestive in this context. Honneth argues that we are neither spectators on our own inner states nor can we construct them at

will, but, rather, that we learn to express inarticulate feelings that precede language. This expressive or reflexive model of consciousness presupposes two preconditions. In the first place, the individuals' socialization must have supplied conceptual means for interpreting feelings, and, in the second place, they must enjoy a certain degree of self-recognition without which they could not affirm their own feelings (RNL 70–1). This aspect of Honneth's argument could be developed in a theory of resistant sensibility.

These are suggestive similarities between the arguments of Honneth and Marcuse, but there are still more fundamental differences. Honneth's notion of the grounding of objectivity in prereflective experience lacks tension because he does not extend his critique to the form of objectivity of modern society. Marcuse remains much closer to Lukács in highlighting the tensions between experiential ground and objective forms. And Marcuse does not restrict recognition to intersubjective experience as does Honneth, but extends it to things in general. This poses many problems but also makes for a more ecologically oriented theoretical framework.

As we have seen, Marcuse, no more than Lukács, imagines revolution as a return to immediacy. The notion of mediation with which Lukács theorizes the overcoming of reification suggests a way of elaborating Marcuse's politics of technological transformation. I have argued elsewhere that the political struggles emerging around technology in the last 30 years correspond in a much reduced form to that program (Feenberg, 1999, ch. 6). These struggles do not promise a classical revolution, but they do exhibit the mediation of formal rationality in which Lukács's dialectic consists, and they exemplify Marcuse's notion of value oriented technological redesign. I believe that developing this approach to technology is a more fruitful way of saving the concept of reification from obsolescence than Honneth's attempt at a purely intersubjective reconstruction of the concept.

This formulation of the concept of mediation is reminiscent of the notion of a 'tragedy of culture' developed by Simmel and taken up by Lukács in his pre-Marxist literary criticism. The narrowness of social forms confines and constricts the spirit, which, rebelling individually, falls victim to society. When Lukács discovered Marxism, he did not completely abandon this romantic theory but rather transformed it in two dimensions: first, by positing collective rather than individual resistance; and second, by substituting rational systems for social conventions as the barrier to fulfilment. The identification of the collective with the Marxist proletariat and the forms with capitalism effectively masked the romantic background of the theory. The collapse of those identifications exposes that background again, and Lukács's critics have attacked him precisely on this point. Can we avoid regression to those romantic origins in deploying the concept anew in the context of disseminated technical politics? To do so we must reconstruct Lukács's two modifications of his own early romanticism. I believe we can do this by focusing on the role of technical networks in assembling collective subjects.⁹

Radical Philosophy of Technology

I want to conclude by developing the connection between the theory of reification and contemporary struggles over technology. This is one domain in which the theory, in something like its original formulation, retains surprising relevance. But to demonstrate its relevance requires a far more informed understanding of technology than we usually find among critical theorists. The historical context of Marxism was one in which technology was confined, for the most part, to the factory. In that context, struggles over technology were generally subordinate to wider labour struggles over wages, working conditions and political power. The extension of technology into other domains in the first half of the twentieth century met little resistance, although, as the Frankfurt School showed, it had disastrous consequences for the socialist movement. All this has changed in more recent times as technology has become the object of struggle in many domains. It is this which must be explained, and the field of technology studies is useful for this purpose.

Modern technology is more than a tool. It is an environment and structures a way of life (Woolgar, 1991; Akrich, 1992). This technology exhibits the underdetermination of rationality discussed earlier. At every stage in its development choices appeared and decisions were made that were strongly influenced by the interests of the dominant capitalist class. Thus the current technological system responds not just to universal interests of the human species but also to the specific requirements of capitalist development (Noble, 1984, part II). As Honneth says in the passage cited earlier, 'Possibilities of action are closed not by a repeated recourse to purposive-rational considerations but only through the application of normative or political viewpoints.'

Of the many possible forms progress might have taken, we have a particular one. This is evident in the structural indifference this technology exhibits to the welfare of workers, consumers and the natural environment. There is nothing specifically 'technological' about this indifference, nor is it particularly 'efficient' from the standpoint of society as a whole whatever its helpful contribution to corporate profits. This indifference, made possible by the operational autonomy of the capitalist and his representatives, forms the background of current struggles over technology.

These struggles burst out in many domains, around environmental issues, medical issues, in education, on the internet and so on. They are carried on with very different methods, everything from hacking to lawsuits to consumer boycotts, to protests and demonstrations. Politically, they appear weak, even marginal, compared to the great issues of war and peace, civil rights, taxation and so on. However, cumulatively they are changing the nature of technologically advanced societies as ordinary people gain agency in the technological system (Oudshoorn and Pinch, 2003, ch. 1).

This is particularly clear in the case of the environment and the internet. In both these domains the technical traditions inherited from earlier iterations

of modern technology have been challenged by ordinary people with a very different conception of how technology should be designed. The challenges have led to major transformations in the technical disciplines and technologies that depend on them. We are only at the beginning of this process of democratic intervention into technology. The readjustments that will result may very well go beyond what we imagine today.

In what sense can this process be described as mediating a reified rationality? The professional technical disciplines have grown up with capitalism and share in its biases. The consequence of this intimate relationship between knowledge-making and economic power is felt not only in the form of the professions but also in the content of the knowledge on which they base their claim to authority and the designs of the systems they shape. In some cases, for example, the management science that grew out of Frederic Taylor's innovations, it is practically impossible to distinguish contents of general validity from those relative to a particular capitalist organization of production. In other cases, the biases are less pervasive and evident, and only become visible in the course of social conflicts over their effects.

As these conflicts become increasingly commonplace a pattern emerges that resembles a dialectical process of mediation. Like the political economy Marx criticized, the technical disciplines are reified 'sciences' that both describe and shape aspects of the life-world. Of course they differ from economics in many respects, but they share its alienation from the social processes that underlie them. Where the forms imposed by these disciplines and institutions fail to represent adequately the needs of those they enrol, resistances emerge. These resistances are not merely negative.

In technology studies, competition and conflict around a new invention end as one contender gains final victory. This process of 'closure' is also referred to as 'black boxing' the winning design. The structural forms of modern societies consist in large part in such black-boxed technological designs. Mediation in the sense I have introduced the term here is a reopening of the structural 'black box' and a rediscovery of its underdetermined nature. Such mediation occurs most often where technical networks embrace and harm unwitting or powerless participants who eventually gain a voice.

Participation in a technical network constructs a latent collective that may emerge as a community of struggle where its technical involvement evokes needs that overflow network boundaries. Thus, for example, exposing a neighbourhood to toxic wastes enlists it unawares in a network that threatens the health of its members. The famous case of Love Canal illustrates this phenomenon. Although experts were brought in to reassure residents of this neighbourhood, the community believed it was sickened by toxic wastes and enlisted scientists and government in pursuit of compensation. Many other environmental struggles resemble this one. Official, supposedly 'scientific', definitions of the situation are challenged by victims on the basis of their own interpretation of their experience (Callon et al., 2009). As Honneth argues,

their 'feelings' must appear valid to themselves for a struggle to be possible at all. Validating those feelings is a political task. A resolution is reached when both knowledge and the human situation are modified to take experience into account.

This pattern is not confined to industry and its side effects since technology is everywhere. Consider the case of AIDS patients desiring to enlist in medical experiments in the 1980s when the disease was first recognized. The experiments were designed to drastically limit participation and in some cases placed an onerous burden on patients. Through their illness the patients belonged to a medical network that excluded them from their only hope of a cure. In this and similar cases the needs at issue are not simply physical but emerge in the context of the technical system. It was medicine's conception of experimentation that both created the need and blocked its satisfaction. These patients gained confidence from their political mobilization in gay rights struggles and acted on their own understanding of their interests against the advice of the medical profession until the designs were finally modified (Feenberg, 1995, ch. 4).

The process of resistance in cases such as these 'mediates' the 'forms' imposed by society. These forms enter a dialectic with the human beings whose lives and activities they structure. New rational configurations emerge in response to contestations that modify a technical environment which may again require revision at some future date as new needs emerge to challenge it. This is precisely what Lukács expected from socialist revolution, although the language in which he expressed himself can be read to call for an absolutism of the subject that he did not intend.

The theory of this new modern order remains to be written. If it were to gain force over time, its culture might perhaps realize concretely some of Marcuse's speculations on a new sensibility. Its science and especially its technology would surely evolve in different directions from those that now prevail, undoing much of the work of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries in the process. Other rational systems such as bureaucracies and markets would take a different form in this alternative modernity, and democracy would disseminate over the whole surface of its institutional structures instead of being confined to occasional elections.

These reflections suggest that the contribution of Lukács and the early Frankfurt School is not exhausted. Their critique of rationality can help us once again to understand an unprecedented political situation, this time not as Marxist class struggle, nor in a dystopian critique of progress, but through developing the democratic implications of the politics of technology.

Notes

¹ The concept of '*Gegenständlichkeitsformen*' disappears in the English translation and becomes 'objective forms' and similar renderings. This obscures the

connection between Lukács's argument and the German idealist tradition. See, for example, HCC (7, 13, 83), and GK (178, 185, 257).

- ² I have discussed Honneth's book at length in Feenberg (1995, ch. 3). With this argument, Honneth eliminated two ambiguities in Habermas's theory. On the one hand, it seemed on occasion that Habermas viewed systems as rational in some absolute sense and that therefore any action to change their configuration would be de-differentiating and regressive. On the other hand, it was difficult to tell whether systems in Habermas's view were distinguished from the lifeworld analytically or in reality. Honneth made it clear that the distinction was analytic; that system and lifeworld are not separate spheres but interpenetrate, and that no absolute rationality presides over the configuration of systems, but rather human, all too human, decisions.
- ³ For my objections to the Habermasian exclusion of technology from the system/lifeworld analysis, see Feenberg (1999, ch. 7).
- ⁴ It might be objected that reification is no longer reification if it is relativized by proletarian practice in this manner, but this is to ignore once again the significance of the form/content distinction for Lukács. What is most fundamentally 'reified' are formal-rational social structures, whatever their relation to the corrective practices in which their failure to embrace content finally surfaces. The definition of reification does not hinge on whether those practices are frequent or infrequent, violent or peaceful, but on the formal character of social rationality.
- ⁵ I have discussed the early source of this problem in Lukács's later work in Feenberg (2002).
- ⁶ I have developed the concept of social rationality in chapter 8 of Feenberg (2010).
- ⁷ See, for example, Feenberg (1981) and Löwy (1979).
- ⁸ See Marcuse (1969). For more on Marcuse's views on technology, see Feenberg (2005, ch. 5).
- ⁹ I owe thanks to Martin Jay for pointing out this problem.

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1973), *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton. New York: Seabury.
- (2000), *Introduction to Sociology*, trans. E. Jephcott. Cambridge: Polity.
- Akrich, M. (1992), 'The de-description of technical objects', in W. E. Bijker and J. Law (eds), *Shaping Technology/Building Society: Studies in Sociotechnical Change*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 205–24.
- Belu, D. and A. Feenberg (2010), 'Heidegger's aporetic ontology of technology', *Inquiry*, Vol. 53, No. 1, 1–19.
- Beniger, J. (1986), *The Control Revolution: Technological and Economic Origins of the Information Society*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.
- Callon, M., P. Lascoumbes and Y. Barthe (2009), *Acting in an Uncertain World*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Feenberg, A. (1981), *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory*. Totowa, NJ: Rowman and Littlefield.
- (1995), *Alternative Modernity*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.

- (2002), 'Post-utopian Marxism: Lukács and the dilemmas of organization', in J. McCormick, (ed.), *Confronting Mass Technology and Mass Democracy: Essays in Twentieth Century German Political and Social Thought*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- (2005), *Heidegger and Marcuse: The Catastrophe and Redemption of History*. New York: Routledge.
- (2010), *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (2011), 'Reification and its critics', in M. Thompson (ed.), *Georg Lukács Reconsidered: Essays on Politics, Philosophy and Aesthetics*. New York: Continuum, forthcoming.
- Habermas, J. (1970), 'Technology and Science as Ideology', in J. Shapiro (trans.), *Toward a Rational Society*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- Honneth, A. (1991), *The Critique of Power: Reflective Stages in a Critical Social Theory*, trans. K. Baynes. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- (2008), *Reification: A New Look at an Old Idea*. Los Angeles and Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Löwy, M. (1979), *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*. London: Verso.
- Marcuse, H. (1964), *One-Dimensional Man*. Boston: Beacon Press.
- (1969), *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston, MA: Beacon Press.
- (2001), *Towards a Critical Theory of Society*. New York: Routledge.
- Noble, D. (1984), *Forces of Production*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Oudshoorn, N. and T. Pinch (eds) (2003), *How Users Matter: The Co-Construction of Users and Technology*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.
- Woolgar, S. (1991), 'Configuring the user: The case of usability trials', in J. Law (ed.), *A Sociology of Monsters*. London: Routledge.

Chapter 7

Justice and the Good Life in Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness*

Timothy Hall

There are seemingly compelling reasons why the social and political thought of Georg Lukács has had little attention paid to it in recent years.¹ Not the least of these is its apparent exclusive focus on class-based forms of social domination and the related claim of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history. What can such an approach contribute to a social conjuncture that is altogether more complex and resistant to democratic transformation? In what follows I will suggest that Lukács's social and political thought contains crucial insights that remain relevant today, notwithstanding its other limitations. Foremost amongst these is the recognition that questions of social justice and questions of the meaningful, good or worthwhile life cannot be separated.

While Lukács does not formulate the problem in this way, I will argue that the concept of critical social theory developed in *History and Class Consciousness* responds to a twofold problem: on one hand, the social injustice following from capitalism as a social system; on the other, a pervasive nihilism resulting from increasing social rationalization. These two problems – the former the preserve of social and political theory, the latter the central concern of philosophical thought – are not reducible to one another and lend his approach its distinctive character. For Lukács, capitalist modernity is both unjust and nihilistic. This implies that modern social institutions produce unjust social outcomes but also – by dint of their self-naturalizing character, by which they place themselves beyond human intervention and control – a deficit of *meaning*. Because we lack a basis from which to recognize these institutions as our own socio-historical work and create new ones, we are left without a practical standpoint and therefore without a basis to confer meaning on the world.

This original insight of Lukács's social theory, as developed in his landmark essay, 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat', is, I will suggest, of continuing relevance to contemporary critical theory. In general terms social and political writing have tended to emphasize the problem of social justice at the expense of the problem of nihilism, while philosophical thought has tended to focus on the problem of nihilism at the expense of the problem of justice.

Few projects have succeeded in holding together these two problems and recognizing their fundamental entwinement, as Lukács's does. Moreover, within the tradition of Frankfurt School social theory – the tradition arguably inaugurated by Lukács – there is a tendency to see critical theory as nothing more than a branch of moral theory concerned *exclusively* with questions of social justice. Against this backdrop of the separation of the problems of social justice and the worthwhile life, and the conversion of critical theory into a branch of moral theory, Lukács's approach is perhaps surprisingly relevant to the present.²

In this chapter, then, I set out the case for a return to a Lukácsian concept of critical theory developed principally, by Lukács, in *History and Class Consciousness*. I argue that what is important about this conception is precisely the way in which the problem of social justice and the question of the good life are presented as inextricably intertwined. What distinguishes this conception from contemporary ones – especially, I argue, those informed by the communicative-theory approach of Jürgen Habermas and the action-theoretical approach of Axel Honneth – is the manner in which it allows the question of the good life to continue to be raised. Recent attempts to address the question of the good or worthwhile life and insist on its centrality to social and political thought have generally taken an explicitly antimodernist form. The neo-Thomistic work of Alasdair MacIntyre and the classical republicanism of Martha Nussbaum spring immediately to mind.³ Lukács's broaching of the question of the worthwhile life, however, has little in common with these approaches. For one, there is no attempt in *History and Class Consciousness* to discern, in a 'doctrine of ends' or concept of natural law, a 'blueprint' of life rightly lived – much less so even than in Marx's *1844 Manuscripts*, in relation to which Lukács would later relegate his work.⁴ While the concept of 'alienated' social activity has a pivotal role in his thought, there is little to suggest, I will argue, that Lukács viewed the restitution of this alienated social activity in praxis as amounting to anything more than the discovery of historically and ontologically *novel* forms of action.

Lukács develops this conception principally through the generalization of the commodity form – specifically the manner in which this generalization opens up the question of materialist reason as a whole. I focus on this generalization here, and consider its principal implications for both Marxism and critical social theory generally. One unexpected consequence of this, I will suggest, is the emergence of Lukács as a thinker of *ontological novelty* rather than of identity – notwithstanding his well-known and often cited proposition of the proletariat as the identical subject-object of history (HCC 149).

The proletariat emerges as the putative solution to the antinomies and contradictions of bourgeois society, but it does so by virtue of the fact that it is capable of free, self-initiating action. In other words, it is fated not simply to reproduce the social relations and institutions that comprise capitalist modernity, but to open up new social relations and create *ab nihilo* new social institutions. What distinguishes Lukács's account of this action – what he terms

praxis – from Kantian and other moralistic approaches is his insistence that it overcome the ‘indifference of form towards content’ that comes to characterize the latter. By this he intends to challenge the ‘logic of subsumption’ – in terms of case and rule – that is ever present in the principal schools of moral theory (HCC 125–6).⁵ If praxical action involves the application of rules, then this cannot take the form of the indifferent subsumption of ethical content. Rather, the precept or practical rule must be open to the hitherto unthought or radically new. I discuss this in further detail below. Finally I argue that while ontological novelty and identity remain in tension in Lukács’s work, this does not detract from the basic conception of critical social theory that he puts forward. Moreover, I will contend that a return to this is necessary if we want to prevent the latter from deteriorating into a branch of moral theory exclusively concerned with issues of justice.

Between Marx and Weber

What is most distinctive about a theory is often what is most contested. This is particularly the case with Lukács’s essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, whose generalization of Marx’s theory of commodity fetishism is frequently singled out as his most significant contribution to both the Marxist tradition and to social theory more broadly. Within the Marxist tradition, Lukács’s work represents the founding document of Hegelian or Western Marxism. As such, it rids Marxism of its reductive, positivistic and deterministic elements. Beyond this tradition, it represents the tantalizing bridge between two distinct schools of sociological theory: between a class-based analysis of society deriving from Marx, and a value-pluralistic or perspectival approach deriving from Weber. The exact manner of Lukács’s generalization of the commodity form, however, is often not understood, or is ‘written off’ as confused. Even Axel Honneth’s detailed and – in many ways – admirable reading of the essay appears to pull up short at this generalization, dismissing Lukács’s social theory as fundamentally ambiguous – torn between a Marxist/functionalist explanation of social illusion, on one hand, and a Weberian account of inexorable rationalization on the other (RNL 23). To show the shortcomings of Honneth’s reading we need to look in detail at Lukács’s review of Marx’s analysis of the commodity form in order to reconstruct his argument.

The elaboration of the subject-object forms of bourgeois society begins with a commentary on Marx’s analysis of the commodity form, and proceeds to an outline of the subject-object relation constituting the economic aspect of social existence. Lukács cites Marx’s famous passage from *Capital*, volume 1, chapter 1, in which the mysterious character of the commodity form is addressed (HCC 86). What interests Lukács in this analysis is the way that ‘a man’s own activity, his own labour becomes something objective and independent of him’ (86–7). This has, he says, both an objective and a subjective significance: objectively the

world of commodities comes into existence, operating in accordance with its own autonomous laws; subjectively, individuals are alienated from their own distinctively human activity (labour) which now appears to them as a commodity like everything else (87).

Lukács goes on to generalize this subject-object relation. After distinguishing between the objective and subjective sides of the productive process in which man is increasingly 'incorporated into a mechanical system' (89) he proceeds to an analysis of other subject-object relations obtaining in bourgeois society, in the legal, political and cultural spheres. In each case, the rationalization of a determinate sphere of human activity is premised upon a similar process of integration into mechanically functioning social systems. For example, in the context of the emergence of the centralized bureaucratic state, Lukács argues as follows:

The split between the worker's labour power and his personality, its metamorphosis into a thing, an object that he sells on the market is repeated here [in bureaucratic consciousness] too. But with the difference that not every mental faculty is suppressed by mechanisation; only one faculty (or complex of faculties) is detached from the whole personality and placed in opposition to it, becoming a thing, a commodity. But the basic phenomenon remains the same even though the means by which society instils such abilities and their material and 'moral' exchange value are fundamentally different from labour-power. (99)

What is striking in this passage is, first, how the characteristic process of alienation – the 'splitting off' of one aspect of the personality and the opposing of this to the 'total' personality – is not restricted to the experience of industrial labour but extends to clerical work as well. Secondly, and centrally for our focus on Lukács's generalization of the commodity form, the integration of quantitatively measurable human activity becomes the precondition for the rationalization of the administrative sphere or state, just as it did for the rationalization of the labour process.

The same argument is utilized by Lukács in accounting for the emergence of a rational system of law and the reification of the public sphere. Just as the human qualities and idiosyncrasies of the worker become, in the context of the rationalized labour process, 'mere sources of error' (*ibid.*), so in the administrative and legal spheres individual judgement and discretion are increasingly foreclosed on the grounds that they upset the otherwise predictable outcomes of mechanical social systems (97). Lukács contrasts modern and premodern systems of law not because he favours a return to the latter but to highlight the extent to which judgement and the exercise of discretion are precluded by the advent of the former (*ibid.*). Rationalized social systems are 'mechanical' precisely because they leave no room – or provide no objective basis – for free, self-originating action. Every action follows from an antecedent cause, and

freedom itself is reduced to a subjective vantage point from which to observe and judge the inexorable course of social events (124).

The case is similar in the rationalization of the public sphere. Just as the seamless integration of the labourer or bureaucrat is the precondition of the thoroughgoing rationalization of labour, administration and the legal process, so the self-commodification of the journalist is the precondition for the emergence of what Adorno and Horkheimer will later call the administered public sphere.⁶ For Lukács, journalism represents the apogee of the capacity for self-reification inasmuch as the very intuitions, personality and temperament of the journalist are commodified (HCC 100). What appear as irreducible *human* characteristics which, as such, defy all attempts at commodification, turn out to be all too commodifiable in journalism, and the basis for the thoroughgoing rationalization of the cultural sphere. Moreover, the understandable concern to 'update' Lukács's analysis – replacing it with ever more refined and complex accounts of 'cultural industries', each with their own 'logics' – runs the risk of overlooking his basic insight: that the commodity form provides the basis for the thinking of the subject-object relations of bourgeois society in their entirety (84).

The ramifications of this generalization with its characteristic constitution of objective and subjective domains are profound and, in my view, have not been fully appreciated by the Marxist tradition.⁷ It also goes to the heart of Lukács's celebrated 'synthesis' of the social theories of Marx and Weber.

(i) In relation to Marx

Lukács extends Marx's argument about the alienated social activity that appears as an objective characteristic of a thing – its value-in-exchange or price – to the legal, political and cultural spheres. Marxists are familiar with the notion that the domination of use-value by value-in-exchange in the commodity form is premised upon the suppression of concrete (use-value-generating) labour by abstract measurable social labour. This makes possible the notion of 'alienated' social labour inherent in the commodity form. As a consequence, it becomes possible to think an alternative to the distributive and productive decisions that follow the fluctuations of the values of commodities on the market. Instead of these, production *could be* socialized; such decisions *could be* the outcome of a process of deliberate planning. The effect would be that fluctuation in value is no longer experienced as a quasi-natural force that determines how resources are distributed and what (and how much) is produced in society. Lukács's great innovation, however, is the notion that social activity, not simply labour, is alienated in other aspects of the social structure. This is precisely what Lukács intends with the generalization of the commodity form. The emergence of the modern state with its centralized bureaucracy, the emergence of a rational system of law and even the emergence of a system of culture, are all predicated

on the seamless integration of human social activity into mechanically functioning systems.

If the same fundamental tendency is at work in the productive, legal and administrative and cultural process, then there is no need to theorize social structure in terms of base and superstructure, with the former having ontological primacy over the latter. What is fundamental is not natural man, confronted by nature, reproducing his own material conditions of existence in a position of original scarcity, but the process by which, in modernity, our own activity becomes something independent of us – something that controls us by virtue of an autonomy alien to us (HCC 87). Here, ‘fundamental’ is understood in purely historical terms, alluding to the meaning of the present, not to a speculative philosophical anthropology.⁸ In other words, the recovery of social activity will not take the form of the reversion to an original nature, as it will do in Lukács’s later work, most notably *The Young Hegel*. Any trace of a philosophical anthropology is conspicuous by its absence in the Reification essay. Rather the commodity form – or more specifically, the proletariat, as the self-conscious commodity (HCC 168) – is the central cipher of the present, which makes possible an understanding of the subject-object process that structures society as a whole. It is the historical present brought to self-awareness, for which the model is Hegel rather than Rousseau.⁹

(ii) In relation to Weber

Lukács makes the integration of human social activity into mechanically functioning social systems the basis for the rationalization of productive, legal and administrative spheres that Weber traced in detail in *Economy and Society*. Lukács thereby challenges Weber’s contention that rationalization is the fate of the West. The possibility that the alienated social activity lying dormant in things could be awoken implies that there is nothing inexorable about rationalization. A further and more significant upshot is that Lukács makes available to a Marxist approach the critique of Enlightenment conceptions of reason that Weber inherits from Nietzsche. This is the drive or will, evidenced in modern rationalism, towards rendering human life in all its aspects increasingly predictable and calculable. So while making rationalization conditional on the prior ‘alienation’ of social activity in reified social structures, Lukács also introduces debates around reason and rationality in Marxist thought.¹⁰ Might the form of domination bound up with the suppression of use-value in value-in-exchange actually have its roots in our most fundamental concepts of reason and rationality and the norms and ideals that underpin these conceptions? We are familiar with the idea that we are complicit with social domination insofar as we exercise our economic agency (buying, selling, etc.) – and even, by extension, our social agency more broadly construed – but does this extend to the activity of expressing our opinions, to concept-formation in the sciences and to thinking itself?

What is at stake in the problem of the commodity, for Lukács, is not simply the extraction of surplus value and the overthrow of class-based forms of social domination, but the very possibility of a meaningful or worthwhile life. What the ubiquity of the commodity form presages is the thoroughgoing rationalization of life to the point where no aspect of human existence – social/political/cultural, inner or outer – is spared the disintegrating effects of societal reification.

Lukács's generalization of the commodity form, instead of, as Honneth contends, representing a fundamentally incoherent attempt to marry irreconcilable – class-based and perspectival – approaches in social theory, opens up an entirely original analysis, one that we are in danger of losing today, in which the traditional tasks of sociology and philosophy – to redeem claims of social justice and to account for the possibility of the good life – are interconnected.¹¹ On the basis of his extension of the alienation of labour to social activity in general, Lukács invites us to rethink the ontological primacy attributed to productive labour in the standard materialist approach.

Before pressing this claim further, however, more needs to be said about how the problem of the commodity relates to the critique of idealist reason. For while the question of the meaningful or worthwhile life arises, for Lukács, in the context of his discussion of the generalization of the commodity form, it is raised much more directly and explored further in his critique of idealist concepts of reason. The critique of idealist reason undertaken in the second section of the Reification essay provides a concept of materialist reason – praxis – that will enable the meaning of the present to be redeemed and the class-based character of society to be overcome.

Reification and Idealism

The continuity between sections one and two of the Reification essay, dealing respectively with 'The Phenomenon of Reification' and 'The Antinomies of Bourgeois Thought', is frequently overlooked by commentators and critics. Habermas's analysis of Lukács's social theory in *Theory of Communicative Action* (1984) and Honneth's analysis of societal reification in *Reification: A New Look at and Old Idea* (2008) make little or no reference to it.¹² Yet overcoming societal reification and resolving the antinomies of bourgeois thought are clearly related for Lukács. In Lukács's view the central problem that Kantian and post-Kantian idealism grapples with – the problem of the thing in itself – is nothing other than the fetish form of the commodity articulated at the philosophical level.¹³ For this reason the understanding and resolution of the problem of the thing-in-itself is material to a full appreciation of the depth of the problem of reification and its putative overcoming. And while he maintains that no solution to the problem of reification is possible from the standpoint of 'bourgeois philosophy', he clearly views the various attempts by the idealists to surmount the

problem of the thing-in-itself as formative for his own conception of reason/praxis.¹⁴ Why does he maintain this?

The principal reason is that he views Kant, and idealism generally, as the philosophical articulation of – and attempt to overcome – the antinomies of bourgeois society. These antinomies relate, as we have seen, to the concrete contents of rationalized social systems which are increasingly unknowable, and to the absence of any conception of society as a whole that follows from social fragmentation. Thus, Lukács argues, the more rationalized a social system becomes, the less it is able to relate to the concrete matter it is adjudicating. The specificity of the matter disappears behind the subsumptive logic of case and rule. Similarly, he maintains, the more we master the detail of social existence, the less we are able to understand society – or the social process – as a whole; the more specialized our knowledge of the separate aspects of the social structure, the more we forfeit our ability to understand and direct social events in their entirety (HCC 121). These contradictions are crystallized, Lukács suggests, in the Kantian aporia of the thing-in-itself.

While the problem of the thing-in-itself in Kant's philosophy is notoriously slippery, it can, Lukács suggests, be reduced to two complexes of problems: the first pertains to the problem of conceptual content, while the second relates to the ultimate objects of human knowledge and understanding (HCC 115). Both sets of problems can be seen to follow directly from Kant's anthropocentrism (121). For Lukács, Kant's thought represents a decisive development in Western rationalism insofar as it suspends debates about our ability to have knowledge of a mind-independent reality and inaugurates the search for the intrinsically *human* (i.e. finite) forms of knowledge. However, in accounting for the inescapably human forms of knowing – forms of intuition, categories, transcendental ideas, etc. – Kant is forced to acknowledge a moment of ineluctable givenness in the system of reason which, in turn, entails that our conceptual representations are necessarily incomplete. For this reason Lukács maintains that the problem of the irreducible irrationality of conceptual content is tied up with the ultimate unknowability of what were the ultimate objects of metaphysical knowledge: God, soul and world.

This is not the place to evaluate the accuracy of Lukács's reading of Kant. As should be clear in any case, this is not Lukács's central concern in the second section of the Reification essay. Rather he is concerned to show, first, that the seemingly abstruse paradoxes of Kant's cognitive philosophy have a concrete reference to social contradictions and tensions (Löwith, 1993, p. 82). For Lukács, the antinomies of content and totality simply are the contradictions of bourgeois society raised to the philosophical level. Secondly, and as becomes clear from the way his argument unfolds, he views the problem of the thing-in-itself as the fundamental aporia of idealism in general, and not simply of Kantian idealism.¹⁵ As such, it functions as the key for his critique of idealist reason and undergoes a series of displacements. It appears first as a cognitive problem in the critique of the theoretical philosophy of Kant and Fichte

(HCC 121–3); then as a practical problem in the critique of Kant's moral philosophy (123–6); then as an aesthetic question in the critique of Schiller's *On the Aesthetic Education of Man* (137–40); and, finally, as a problem of the historicity of thought and the possibility of a systematic account of reason in Hegel's thought (140–4). The re-cognizing of the various attempts to resolve the problem of the thing-in-itself, across the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic domains, can also be understood as the process by which the central legacy of idealism for a theory of praxis – the dialectical method – is derived (148).

An example of the importance of this critique for Lukács's concept of praxis can be found in his critique of Kant's practical philosophy. Like Kant, Lukács maintains that practical reason holds primacy over theoretical reason (126). For Lukács, however, Kant's practical philosophy never succeeds in establishing its primacy: it remains 'contemplative' – a mere interpretation of the moral facts (124). Without an account of how moral norms are applicable *in principle* to the empirical domain – in which whatever occurs does so in accordance with the law of causality – the moral subject will remain quite literally without a world in which to act. The negation of the world as it is in moral action will, in turn, be negated by the world acting in accordance with laws that are impervious to human direction and control. As Lukács puts it elsewhere: 'It is self-evident that a merely subjective decision will be shattered by the pressure of uncomprehended facts acting automatically according to laws' (23).

The recovery of a world in which to act and the establishment of the primacy of reason is achieved through the negation of the empirical world in its immediacy. Here Lukács draws on Hegel's concept of mediation. The factual world organized in accordance with principles and laws is precisely not a given to which the acting subject must adjust, but a mediated reality. By understanding how the facts are constituted *as* facts – say, through the feedback-controlled method in the empirical sciences – a space is opened up for human agency again. The central model for this in the Reification essay is the recovery of agency that follows from the negation of economic laws in their immediacy.

The primacy of practical reason is also connected to the discovery of the historical dimension of human thought and action for Lukács. Behind the illusion of change in Kant's moral philosophy and his account of historical progress – i.e. the gradualist account of historical change in the Kantian concept of the 'infinite task' – is the real process of socio-historical becoming: the reproduction of social relations in their entirety as a consequence of unconscious (i.e. class-related) social practices. Lukács's contention is that through awareness of class – i.e. through the awareness of the contrasting meaning of the experience of reification relative to one's position in society – reification in its social and philosophical forms is overcome (159–72).

Far from being merely an excursus, the critique of idealist reason is therefore central to the task of overcoming societal reification as Lukács conceives it. Kant's concept of practical reason, and the notion of historical change allied to it, is a form of pseudo-praxis. The meaninglessness of the empirical world

remains untranscended and inimical to human intention and purpose. Without a conception of reason in which the possibility of human action and historical change are accounted for, the resources for overcoming societal reification will simply be lacking.

Ontological Novelty or Identity?

In outlining the ways in which social critique and the critique of idealist reason reciprocally condition one another in Lukács's thought, another problem emerges. Do Lukács's conception of reification and his account of how it is overcome draw too heavily on the idealist tradition? In other words does his account end up incorporating into its basic concepts some of the more problematic elements of idealist thought? Foremost among these would be the claim that the proletariat represents the identical subject-object of history. Quite apart from how this claim stands vis-à-vis the historical disappearance of the proletariat as a revolutionary class, there is the problem of whether his theory incorporates the speculative principle of identity found in various forms in the philosophy of Schelling and Hegel; in other words, whether his account presupposes the identity of thought and being or consciousness and reality in the same way that certain forms of idealism are accused of doing. According to this critique, Lukács's account of action as mediation draws normative force from the speculative identity of reason and nature, or of thought and being. For example, the resolution of reified 'things' into social processes, and unmediated facts into social tendencies, draws on the uncritical acceptance of innate teleologies in human history. What this implies is that Lukács's claim to have uncovered the historical dimension of human thought and action is flawed because it draws on a dogmatic philosophy of history. The very discovery of the historical domain coincides with its abolition as it comes to be comprehended in a speculative philosophy of history.¹⁶

Again I think that it is relatively easy to show that this criticism of Lukács is, at the least, summary. One only need look at the importance he attributes to the capacity of any philosophical approach to history to entertain the new. Commenting on the limitation of eighteenth-century materialist philosophies of history (e.g. Holbach's) that attempt to arrive at historical laws that do justice to every foreseeable possibility, Lukács writes:

it is of the essence of such a law that within its jurisdiction nothing new can happen by definition and a system of such laws which is held to be perfect can indeed reduce the need to correct individual laws but cannot calculate what is novel. . . . But if genesis, in the sense given to it in classical philosophy, is to be attained it is necessary to create a basis for it in a logic of contents which change. It is only in history, in the historical process, in the uninterrupted

outpouring of what is *qualitatively new* that the requisite paradigmatic order can be found in the realm of things. (HCC 144, my emphasis)

The problem with a rationalist approach to history is that it precludes the possibility of the radically new. Whatever happens in history, insofar as it is intelligible, must conform to laws: whatever does not is consigned to the realm of contingency and is unknowable. To allow for the possibility of the historically new, however, the forms imposed on historical events must have a basis in content. It must, in other words, be possible to discern a prediscursive order to historical events that exceeds existing rational forms.

Lukács is here thinking through the historicity of reason. By opening up a gap between the prediscursive form of historical events and existing categories of historical comprehension, he leaves room for the emergence of new forms of historical comprehension, i.e., new ways of understanding hitherto unforeseen tendencies and patterns in history. The model for this is aesthetic reason, in the sense that aesthetic form is both nonsubsumptive and putatively rational. Through the interpretation of artworks it becomes possible to derive new discursive forms that exceed and extend existing categories of understanding. What for romantic conceptions remain features of aesthetic subjectivity are generalized in Hegel's account of the formation of a modern subject whose social and historical formation can be recapitulated and rendered explicit. Lukács follows Hegel in his insistence that an account of the formation of the subject is necessary, but argues that Hegel fails to provide a basis for this subject in the logic of contents. The consequence of this failure is that the subject – absolute spirit – is introduced into history (HCC 162). In contrast, Lukács insists that the subject, and the forms in terms of which history is to be understood, are suggested by history itself. The proletariat and the categories with which it understands the world begin as prediscursive intuitions which are only later – retrospectively – given a discursive articulation.

Paradoxically, then, Lukács's claim that the proletariat is the identical subject-object of history is the result of his attempt to historicize both the subject and its basic forms of understanding and action, forms that he takes to have been only partially historicized in Hegel's thought. Only when subjectivity is thought of as historical through and through – with no aspect of subjectivity considered invariant and thereby exempt from the process of historical becoming – will the diremption of subject and object be truly overcome.

Holding fast to the radical historicity of Lukács's project we might conclude that *ontological novelty* – and not identity – is the animating principle of his thought. Certainly by attending to Lukács's insistence that theory remain open to ontological novelty, the criticism of his thought as metaphysical looks problematic.¹⁷ Does Lukács's conception of praxis draw illegitimate normative force from the principle of speculative identity, or do the fundamental limitations of existing forms of thought and action become apparent only from the vantage

point of an experience that exceeds them? If Lukács's concept of praxis draws normative force from anywhere, it is from the negation, pure and simple, of these already existing forms. Thus Lukács argues that the proletariat is driven beyond immediacy simply by the fact that society's concept of the subject is everywhere contradicted by the reality – by the proletariat's existence as pure object, rather than the subject, of social events (HCC 167–8). We might well dispute with Lukács whether the experience of the proletariat continues to occupy the perspective from which the limitations of social categories come into view. To maintain, however, as Habermas and Honneth have, that Lukács's theory of class consciousness rests on a materialization of the identity principle is ill-founded.

This said, the principles of ontological novelty and identity remain in fundamental tension in Lukács's thought. It is not clear, for example, what room Lukács's radically historicized account of the subject and dynamic social ontology leave for an account of social institutions. The dynamization of the social world that seems to follow from the resolution of reified social things into processes appears to conceptualize a de-reified world as one *without* institutions. Adorno in particular has criticized the extent to which Lukács's theory remains in hock to idealism on this point, emphasizing its affinities with both subjective idealism and romanticism (1973, pp. 189–92).¹⁸ Adorno points to the absence of mediation in Lukács's account of overcoming societal reification, and a reluctance to allow new forms of freedom to assume objective, institutional form. There remains, however, an important difference between a reading of Lukács that maintains that the principles of ontological novelty and identity are in fundamental tension and one that uses the identity claim as a pretext for dismissing the contemporary relevance of Lukács's theory of praxis.

Social Praxis

Critical social theory is, for Lukács, informed by a conception of praxis, the fundamental contours of which emerge from the critique of idealism. Praxis succeeds where idealism failed in resolving the antinomies of totality and content. However it does this by assimilating key elements of the idealist project: notably the anthropocentrism of idealism; the primacy of practical reason; a nonsubsumptive conception of form found in aesthetic reason; and a mediated account of the subject. Social praxis for Lukács, therefore, represents an account of the self-determining life which is fundamentally practical. The rationality of this praxis is not something inhering in existing institutions and practices and requiring only cognitive recapitulation. Rather, it is an emerging form of social life, one not captured by existing social categories, a form of action that is neither objective (i.e. strategic/technical) nor subjective (moral). It is action *from the middle*. As such it is necessarily improvised and experimental. Maurice Merleau-Ponty captures this nicely in the preface to his classic study of

Lukács when he describes Lukács's conception of politics as an 'action in the process of self-invention' (1974, p. 4). Social praxis cannot appeal to any rule or algorithm for justification because the concepts and forms that will enable the praxical subject to interpret his or her experience are in the process of becoming. These forms do not pre-exist the act itself.

At the same time, rules do not entirely drop out. If they did, social praxis would be indistinguishable from a politics of *modus vivendi* or muddling through in the absence of norms.¹⁹ Lukács makes this point clearly in his discussion of the way in which the category of totality figures in praxis in the final section of the Reification essay:

the relation to totality does not need to become explicit, the plenitude of the totality does not need to be consciously integrated into the motives and objects of action. What is crucial is that there should be an aspiration towards totality. . . . (HCC 198)

If an insight into the total social process were the necessary precondition of praxical action then the categories in terms of which experience could be interpreted would precede the act. For Lukács the issue is not how to render explicit the way norms figure in action, but how the determination of the subject is effected by action. At the same time 'aspiration towards totality' is not synonymous with the Kantian concept of regulative idea, for this would immediately re-open the chasm between subject and object. That praxical action evidences an aspiration towards totality implies nothing more than that its meaning outstrips existing social categories. Filtered through the concept of class, this offers the alternative of unconscious or conscious socio-historical activity. What distinguishes the latter from the former is the recognition that the norms and values in terms of which the bourgeois social-world becomes comprehensible are themselves the products of action.

The Proletariat and the Good Life

How does Lukács's concept of social praxis respond to the twofold problematic of critical social theory outlined earlier? Although, as a Marxist theory, it responds to the problem of social justice with a politics based on class, there is little evidence to suggest that Lukács thinks that societal reification can be transcended through the overcoming of class division alone. As the subject of the social-historical process, the proletariat is also charged with the task of rendering life meaningful. The prospect of an objective (rule-governed) world sealed off from subjective (moral) action was articulated by Kant in his practical philosophy. Hegel's account of the mediated historical subject was an explicit attempt to transcend this. Thus, on the proletariat, according to Lukács, devolves the twofold task of realizing social justice and rendering social life meaningful.

Does Lukács's contention that the transition to the standpoint of the proletariat dissolves the antinomies of content and totality undermine his account of praxis as ontological novelty? In my view it has to. Against the claim that the proletariat represents the identical subject-object, one should posit Adorno's recognition of the intransigence of capitalism. The implication of this intransigence is an untranscended *dualism* of subject and object – or, as Adorno puts it in *Negative Dialectics*, the fact that 'objects do not go into their concepts without leaving a remainder' (Adorno, 1973, p. 5). Ontological novelty, by contrast, cannot ultimately be accommodated under the schema of subject-object identity. Adorno's acknowledgement does not, then, invalidate Lukács's basic conception of critical social philosophy; if anything it deepens it. For the imbrication of the problems of social justice and of meaning is not lessened by the adoption of a dualist conception of subject and object, as Adorno's conception of negative dialectic attests.²⁰

Lukács opens up an entirely original theoretical perspective in the Reification essay in which the tasks of social critique (realizing claims to social justice) and philosophy (outlining the possibility of the good life under conditions of modernity) are shown to be intertwined. This is accomplished primarily, I have suggested, through the generalization of the commodity form, that is, through the generalization of Marx's claim that human social activity (abstract labour) appears as the objective property of a thing. This generalization enables Lukács to raise the problem of social rationality and its nihilistic, disintegrating effects, and this, in turn, allows him to pose, within a Marxian framework, the question of the good life. This was a question posed emphatically in Weber's sociology – Why this life rather than others? – but the social sciences were in Weber's view severely circumscribed in what they could contribute to this. They were restricted to pointing out the consequences of taking up one value-position over another. Of the value choices themselves, however, nothing more could be said. This was a question of faith and there was ultimately an element of undecidability about the choice of one value over another (Weber, 2009, p. 151).

While acknowledging that the nihilistic effects of rationalism represented a blind spot for Marxist thought – which would ensure that the attempt to redeem claims for social justice had to fail – the concept of a critical theory of society that Lukács sketches out moves beyond the limitations prescribed by Weber. He is able to do this because he recognized that rationalization is premised on 'alienated social activity' lying dormant in reified 'objects'. The possibility of this social activity awakening, and the transfiguration of the social that would result from this, could never, for this reason, be ruled out. This of course was precisely what Lukács envisaged through the figure of the proletariat which, as self-conscious commodity, was capable of bursting through the rigidified subject-object dichotomies that structured bourgeois society. In contrast to Weberian sociology, we should expect substantive answers from Lukács to the question of why *this* life and not others.

This discussion of the good life has a distinctively modernist inflection as the problem of the possibility of the self-directing or autonomous life. Lukács, however, rejected all essentialist approaches to the question, along with the notion that such a possibility could be 'specified' in advance. Whatever meaning the proletariat imparted through its historical and institutional invention would be ultimately transient and subject to decay.

Notes

- ¹ A draft of this chapter was first presented at a symposium on Lukács's *History and Class Consciousness* organized by the Marxism and Philosophy Society in London, February 2010. I would like to thank Meade McCloughan for organizing the symposium and for the invitation to speak; my fellow presenters, Gordon Finlayson and Michalis Skomvoulis; and Andrew Chitty, Robert Cannon and all the other participants for their responses and criticisms.
- ² See Bernstein (1995): 'Critical theorists typically fuse a concern for justice with a concern for 'meaning' or said otherwise . . . they perceive a connection between the problem of domination and the problem of nihilism, where the terms "domination" and "nihilism" recall the dual provenance of critical theory in social science and philosophy' (p. 11).
- ³ See, for example, MacIntyre (1981), ch. 17, and Nussbaum (1986), ch. 1.
- ⁴ See, for example, the 1967 preface to HCC: 'In the process of reading the Marx manuscripts all the idealist prejudices of *History and Class Consciousness* were swept to one side' (xxxvi).
- ⁵ The classic formulation of this would be Kant's definition of a practical maxim in the *Groundwork of the Metaphysic of Morals* (Kant, 2005, p. 71). Closer affinities can be found with the Aristotelian tradition in which all action is held to be singular. See, for instance, Aristotle's account of the mean relative to us in book II, chapter 6 of the *Nicomachean Ethics* (Aristotle, 2002, p. 117).
- ⁶ While the claim that Lukács, in the Reification essay, anticipates Adorno and Horkheimer's conception of the culture industry would require further argumentation, it is at least clear that the rationalization of culture presupposes the division of the personality and the integration of aspects of this into rational systems. See, for example, the analysis of how cultural products that appear on the market are inevitably preclassified by the cultural industry (Adorno and Horkheimer, 1979, p. 125).
- ⁷ The exception to this is Karl Löwith's classic study, *Max Weber and Karl Marx*. In a comparative study of the social theories of Weber and Marx, Löwith offers ontological interpretations of 'rationalization' and 'self-alienation' that clearly draws inspiration from *History and Class Consciousness*. See Löwith (1993), pp. 81–2 n. 36.
- ⁸ See Axel Honneth (2007), ch. 1.
- ⁹ For this reason Postone's central criticism of *History and Class Consciousness* – that Lukács treats labour as an invariant, rather than historically mediated, category – is highly questionable (TLSD 73). This takes no account of the way that, not just labour, but *social activity generally* is alienated in Lukács's account of

- societal reification. Postone effectively criticizes Lukács for reductivism when the rejection of this is precisely Lukács's innovation.
- ¹⁰ The question of reason is raised, in submerged form, in the question of method in Marx – most noticeably in *Capital Vol. 1* and the *Grundrisse* – but not in the explicit form in which it is raised in Lukács's work.
- ¹¹ Contra Honneth: the extension of the commodity form to other aspects of the social structure only appears 'arbitrary' if the basic tenets of Lukács's generalization are not elaborated (RNL 77–8).
- ¹² Habermas discusses this briefly in section IV of Volume 1 of *The Theory of Communicative Action*, but he does not link it to the problem of the commodity. See Habermas (1984), pp. 355–65.
- ¹³ Compare Adorno's description of the exchange relation as the 'social model' of the identity principle in *Negative Dialectics* (Adorno, 1973, p. 146).
- ¹⁴ See, for example, the following passage: 'Classical philosophy finds itself historically in the paradoxical position that it was concerned to find a philosophy that would mean the end of bourgeois society, and to resurrect in thought a humanity destroyed in that society and by it. In the upshot, however, it did not manage to do more than provide a complete intellectual copy and the *a priori* deduction of bourgeois society. It is only in the manner of this deduction, namely the dialectical method that points beyond bourgeois society' (HCC 148). While idealism is unable to surmount the antinomies of bourgeois society, it is able, through the development of the dialectical method, to point beyond this. It is this that I am suggesting is 'formative' for Lukács's concept of praxis.
- ¹⁵ A similar reading of idealism as the encounter with unaccountable 'givens' can be found in Pinkard (2003). According to Pinkard, Kant bequeaths to philosophy a set of paradoxes. The classical example of this is Kant's attempted justification of freedom as a 'fact of reason' in the *Critique of Practical Reason*. Thus the fundamental paradox as the principle of freedom is dogmatically asserted. Pinkard views the development of idealism from Fichte to Schopenhauer as the repeated attempt to resolve this paradox.
- ¹⁶ Adorno (1973), pp. 189–92; Habermas (1974), pp. 157–8; Habermas (1984), p. 362; and Honneth (RNL 27) have all offered versions of this criticism, albeit with different outcomes.
- ¹⁷ See also the following passage: 'Theory and praxis . . . refer to the same objects, for every object exists as an immediate inseparable complex of form and content. However, the diversity of subjective attitudes orientates praxis towards what is qualitatively unique, towards the content and material substratum of the object concerned' (HCC 126).
- ¹⁸ See Adorno (1973), pp. 189–92. See also Hall (2011), and Andrew Feenberg's critique of Adorno's criticism of Lukács in this volume.
- ¹⁹ For an example of a politics of *modus vivendi* see Gray (2007), p. 234.
- ²⁰ I have developed this argument in greater detail in Hall (2011).

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1973), *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E. B. Ashton. London: Routledge.
- Adorno, T. W. and M. Horkheimer (1979), *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. J. Cumming. London: Verso.

- Aristotle (2002), *Nicomachean Ethics*, trans. C. Rowe. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Bernstein, J. M. (1995), *Recovering Ethical Life: Jürgen Habermas and the Future of Critical Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Gray, J. (2007), 'Enlightenment's wake', in *Enlightenment's Wake*. London: Routledge.
- Habermas, J. (1974), *Theory and Practice*, trans. J. Viertel. London: Heinemann.
- (1984), *The Theory of Communicative Action Vol. 1*, trans. T. McCarthy. London: Heinemann.
- Hall, T. (2011), 'Reification, materialism and praxis: Adorno's critique of Lukács', in *Telos* (forthcoming).
- Honneth, A. (2007), *Disrespect: the Normative Foundations of Critical Theory*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Kant, I. (2005), *The Moral Law*, trans. H. J. Paton. London: Routledge.
- Löwith, K. (1993), *Max Weber and Karl Marx*, trans. T. Bottomore and W. Outhwaite. London: Routledge.
- MacIntyre, A. (1981), *After Virtue*. London: Duckworth.
- Merleau-Ponty, M. (1974), *Adventures of the Dialectic*, trans. J. Bien. London: Heinemann.
- Nussbaum, M. (1986), *The Fragility of Goodness*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Pinkard, T. (2003), *German Philosophy 1760–1860: The Legacy of Idealism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Weber, M. (2009), *From Max Weber: Essays in Sociology*, trans. and eds. H. H. Gerth and C. Wright Mills. London: Routledge.

Chapter 8

Capitalist Life in Lukács

Stewart Martin

What is the nature of life within capitalist societies? This question is neither new nor uncommon, yet it remains urgent. It, or some other construal of it, may encourage all sorts of misconceptions or superficial musings; nonetheless, it is of profound significance, as fundamental as it is simple. Its persistence and insistence is justified by the extent to which it enquires after the foundational constitution of capitalism in the exploitation of life, of which labour is but a manifestation. This is decisive to capitalism's origins as well as its ends, its construction and its destruction. The issue at stake is the capacity of capital to subsume life. Is life ultimately independent of capital? That is to say, is capital only a form or abstraction which may be capable of using or exploiting life, but which is incapable of transforming its content, life itself? Or, does capital transform the very nature of life? To put this at its most radical, is capital capable of becoming essential to life, the very principle of its existence, its production and reproduction? Is the subsumption of life by capital formal or absolute?

Although this issue pervades the entire evolution of capitalism, its articulation today, within the unprecedented intensification and globalization of contemporary capitalism, seems to face a situation in which it is more difficult than ever to discern the independence of life. This may sound like a modest or unremarkable observation, but it is not. Its consequences are momentous, amounting to the dissolution of capitalism's historic delimitation by life and of the politics that invested in this delimitation. Certainly it presents a crisis for Marxism, the magnitude of which has been scarcely recognized. This is simply because Marx maintained that life was essentially unsubsumable by capital, that its subsumption could only ever be formal, not absolute. For although the subsumption of life is essential to capital's production of value and to the generation of surplus-value for Marx, this remained for him essentially a parasitical process, unable to constitute itself autonomously and become, so to speak, a life unto itself. Capitalist life remained impossible for Marx. Subsequent critics of capitalism have displayed less confidence in this impossibility, and have therefore sought to go beyond Marx in crucial respects. Such moves, however, have remained tentative in actually articulating the possibility of

capitalist life. The questioning of Marx's limits has, on closer inspection, served largely to reassert them. It might be said that an emphatic conception of capitalist life, of the absolute subsumption of life by capital, has yet to be articulated. The assumption that it exists is no more adequate to this task than the assumption that it cannot exist. Capitalist life often appears like a storm that looms ever more darkly while we are told that it will never arrive, or that it has already passed. The absolute subsumption of life by capital may in fact remain impossible. It is scarcely just a matter of conceptual innovation; it concerns the actuality of capitalism today. And the consequences involved mean that the stakes could not be higher. At the very least, the interrogation of its possibility is necessary and urgent. Hence the question: what is capitalist life?

There are a number of thinkers who have raised this question most explicitly: the Frankfurt School, particularly Adorno; Baudrillard, who may be associated with Debord in this regard; and, most recently and conspicuously, the so-called 'post-Autonomists' such as Negri, Virno and Lazzarato. Lukács is another. This question does not by itself justify a monographic examination of Lukács, but there are certain respects in which he deserves particular attention. In the first place, he raises the question of capitalist life with striking explicitness in his analysis of reification: 'How far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?' (HCC 84) This appears a momentary question, but it is testament to the deep influence of Hegel in his approach to Marx. Its transformatory implications for Marx's account are not articulated by Lukács, and they remain obscure. Still, both these revealings and concealings are highly instructive, and raise issues that have motivated subsequent accounts. This is not to say that Lukács uncovers a source from which all the questions and answers about capitalist life flow. Nevertheless, in the light of other more recent investigations, Lukács appears as a point of origin, and formerly unpromising and obscure reaches of his oeuvre attain a new significance. This essay will attempt to reconstruct this retrospective view, however incompletely, moving backwards from Negri via Adorno, albeit with a preparatory confirmation of the problem in Marx. The aim is not primarily genealogical, but rather to raise the question of capitalist life through the dramatic staging of alternative approaches to it, not least because none, taken on its own, presents an emphatic concept of capitalist life. And yet the following remains preparatory. At most the concept of capitalist life is projected negatively by the criticism of these approaches.

Life *contra* Capital

The question of capitalist life, its possibility, is dramatized above all by its impossibility for Marx. Fundamentally this impossibility is due to the fact that, for Marx, capital is dependent on life, while life is independent of capital. Capital requires the production of surplus-value out of the exchange of

equivalent values. But a surplus cannot result from equivalents. Marx identifies and resolves this problem by arguing that this surplus is produced by the use of a tool that produces more value than it costs, namely labour.¹ This capacity of labour is its 'living' quality, the ability or potentiality to produce, rather than any products it may result in. Thus capital is, in essence, dependent on life; it cannot subsume life, in the sense of taking over this productive capacity. One might also say, conversely, that capital *must* subsume life, insofar as life controls its essence, but that this subsumption can only ever be formal, not absolute, since the productive capacity remains a capacity of life, not of capital.

This dependence is underpinned by the independence, difference or incompatibility of life from capital. Capital presupposes value as its substance and measure. But labour is essentially *un-valuable*; it cannot be made a value in itself; it is immeasurable.² Its measure or transformation into a value therefore requires its submission to an order that is alien to it. This takes place in the substitution of the use of labour for an exchange-value, an operation that is essential to capital. But this transformation remains alien and deceptive, presenting labour as something that it is not. Again, one might describe this alienation as a formal subsumption of labour and life by capital, even as capital presents itself deceptively as their absolute subsumption. Marx's conception of the 'real' as opposed to 'formal' subsumption of labour by capital should therefore be understood as not absolute.

This formal and limited conception of capital is at stake in a number of other features of Marx's account that subsequent commentators have sought to overcome or to radicalize. The heterogeneity of use and value is essential to the explanation of surplus-value by labour. If this is dissolved, as many commentators have proposed, then labour would be of the same order as capital and, by extension, life would be absolutely subsumed by capital. Ironically, this would also mean that capital, as Marx conceived it, would be no longer possible. Likewise, the 'reality' that Marx attributes to abstract labour cannot be understood as constituting labour absolutely, since this would dissolve the immeasurability of living labour, making it of the same order as the abstraction enabling the value form and capital, and, again, cancelling the difference of life from capital. Finally, 'living labour' cannot be understood as objective. It is a capacity or praxis that is potential, not reducible to what it actualizes in the form of objective commodities, nor to the universal form through which commodities are objectified, namely the value form. This nonobjective character of living labour underpins the independence of life from capital. It also underpins life's independence from consciousness, which, as the constitution of objects through positing their form of objectivity, is in this respect homologous with capital.

As will become clear in what follows, these conditions are not maintained by subsequent critics of capitalism, who thereby problematize Marx's account and raise the possibility of 'capitalist life', even where this is not intended.

Biopolitical Labour

The concept of 'biopolitical labour' proposed by Negri and a number of others working in his milieu is perhaps the most conspicuous recent articulation of the question of the subsumption of life by capital. As the term indicates, this form of labour is defined by its 'living' and 'political' qualities, and describes the new mode of production generated by contemporary or post-industrial capitalism.

The contention of biopolitical labour is that the dimension of life within labour, what Marx had conceived of as living labour, has acquired an intensified significance for the realization of capital, leading to a crisis of the value form. Biopolitical labour is characterized by potentiality, rather than by what can be actualized or objectified from it as commodities; by communicational, cognitive and social qualities, rather than by what can be organized by capital; and by immeasurability, rather than by what can be quantified or valued. These shifts in the nature of labour are said to result in a crisis for the capitalist exploitation of labour through the quantification of its value, and for capitalism's need to restructure itself by capturing the very creativity of life itself. The political character of biopolitical labour is attributed to the centrality of its social or communicational qualities, which are understood to give rise to forms of commonality that are generated independently of mediation by capitalist organization, as in the tradition of unionized factories.

The echo of Foucault in the concept of biopolitical labour is noteworthy. Foucault's research into how life becomes central to modern power and politics is integrated into this new conception of capitalism. Negri and Hardt conceive of traditional capitalism as a 'disciplinary society' in which life is ruled by relatively external and delimited apparatuses, as opposed to the 'society of control' generated by contemporary capitalism, which 'regulates social life from its interior', and in which 'what is directly at stake . . . is the production and reproduction of life itself' (Hardt and Negri, 2000, pp. 23–4).

It is evident that the subsumption of life or some determinately capitalist formation of life is raised here. However, there is considerable ambiguity about the nature of this subsumption in Hardt and Negri. At some points there are indications of a transition from the real subsumption of labour by capital to the subsumption of 'the social *bios* itself' (ibid., 24). Such indications stand in stark contrast to repeated claims that 'capital can never capture all of life' (Hardt and Negri, 2004, p. 146). Some consistency to these claims can be extracted if we understand them as describing how capital must subsume life, and to the greatest possible degree, even though capital is ultimately only able to do so formally, not absolutely. In other, more Foucauldian terms, capitalism must 'control' or 'capture' life as the source of value simply because it is itself not the source of value. And, despite these ambiguities, this is how we are asked to understand the relationship of 'empire' to 'multitude'.

The insistent claims to have moved beyond Marx by Negri et al. should not be allowed to obscure the repetition of his contention that life is unsubsustainable. This continuity is underpinned by the retention of Marx's conception of living labour as potentiality, as immeasurable and as the unsubsustainable source of value. What is more clearly a departure from Marx is the notion that the independence of use-value from exchange-value has been dissolved, or that abstract labour might become the emancipatory form of living labour.³ Both are impossible according to Marx's conception of living labour as immeasurable; both would intimate the absolute subsumption of life by capital.

Given the ambiguities of this account it is tempting, at least for those asking after capitalist life, to suspend the claims to the contrary and read biopolitical labour as the unwitting elaboration of the absolute subsumption of life by capital. But it is perhaps more significant to regard it as testimony to the endurance of Marx's fundamental contention that life is unsubsustainable.

Novissimum Organum

Adorno raises the issue of the subsumption of life throughout his writings. We find there a radical engagement with the possibility of the absolute subsumption of life, exceeding the limits placed on this by Negri and his comrades. *Minima Moralia* is explicitly dedicated to this problem insofar as it concerns the possibility of life – in particular the classical conception of the 'good life' – within late capitalism's horizon of 'absolute production', in which Adorno claims that even the appearance of a good life would be 'entirely effaced' (Adorno, 1974, p. 15). One especially direct consideration of the transformation at stake here and its consequences for Marx is in the fragment '*Novissimum organum*':

Only when the process that begins with the metamorphosis of labour-power into a commodity has permeated men through and through and objectified each of their impulses as formally commensurable variations of the exchange relationship, is it possible for life to reproduce itself under the prevailing relations of production. Its consummate organization demands the coordination of people that are dead. The will to life finds itself referred to [*verweisen auf*] the denial of the will to live: self-preservation annuls all life in subjectivity. (229, translation modified)

What is described here is a transformation of the organic composition of capital, in which living labour has become completely integrated into the production of capital, into dead labour, and to such a degree that the very possibility of reproducing life has become the reproduction of capital, the death of life. Late capitalism is conceived as subsuming life absolutely, transforming it into

the negation of what it was or might be. Here is a conception of capitalist life, and, moreover, the projection of a new science of this latest composition of capital and the death of life. Rather than Bacon's *Novum Organum*, a melancholy science.

Marx's conception of living labour is hereby collapsed. Ironically, Adorno only maintains Marx's understanding insofar as, for Marx too, such a subsumption would mean the eradication of life. But Adorno's break is qualified and equivocal, given that he sometimes treats this new composition as an imminent horizon rather than an achieved state of affairs. And he always attempts to view it from a critical perspective, in the light of the remnants of noncapitalist life that he discerns in the private realm of individual life, even if the privatization of this life is conceived as itself an effect of capitalist subsumption, from which life does not escape undamaged. Nonetheless, Adorno abandons Marx's insistence that the very possibility of capital derives from a living force that it cannot subsume. This condition of possibility is inverted. But this inversion is facilitated and even presupposed by Adorno's classical conception of the good life, with its opposition to self-preservation, since this opposition is dissolved by Marx. Marx saw the reproduction of life and the satisfaction of its needs as being essential to a good life, both before and after capitalism.

Despite Adorno's radicalism, there are ways in which he discerns the persistence and reproduction of unsubsumed life within capitalism that are akin to Marx's own understanding, rather than treating such life as a vanishing remnant. The supposition that private life is not an archaic form, but is reproduced within capitalism, is one such way. Another is Adorno's conception of 'negative dialectics' which presents an immanent critique of the positive or idealist dialectics of Hegel's philosophy, but also of capitalism itself. Here the condition of possibility of positive dialectics is a material and somatic force that can only ever be formally subsumed. A more or less orthodox adherence to Marx's conception of subsumption is discernible here.

In this respect, the contrasts between Adorno and Negri are striking. Negri departs radically from Adorno's articulation of the absolute subsumption of life, and generally insists on the resistant power of living labour to a degree that Adorno did not. In many ways, this can be accounted for by their different experiences and interpretations of capitalist industrialization. Negri invested in the power of living labour as it was marginalized and excluded from industrialization in the 1970s and then in its postindustrial formations; Adorno remained largely preoccupied with the intensive integration of labour within industrial processes in the 1920s and 1930s, even where this takes apparently remote cultural forms. However, this chronological explanation scarcely grasps the foundational issues. Adorno's account may be dated, but, unless Marx remains right about the unsubsumability of life, it may be Adorno, rather than Negri, who offers the fundamental framework for understanding the composition of contemporary capitalism.

Total Commodification

The preceding sections – outlining the fundamental problem in Marx, and the opposed negotiations of it by Negri and Adorno – have attempted to establish the main stakes demarcating Lukács’s significance. These sections have also sought to dramatize what remains an apparently remote and somewhat muted issue in Lukács’s writings. One exception, however, is to be found in the opening pages of his essay ‘Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat’, where Lukács raises a question that will determine the character of the answer he will offer. Emphasizing that he is concerned with the examination of modern capitalism, not other, more ‘primitive’ forms of society, Lukács writes: ‘What is at issue *here*, however, is the question: how far is commodity exchange together with its structural consequences able to influence the *total* outer and inner life of society?’ (HCC 84). This is decisive, since ‘The distinction between a society where this form [of exchange] is dominant, permeating every expression of life, and a society where it only makes an episodic appearance is essentially one of quality’ (ibid.). The posing of this question and somewhat conditional statement, and others like them in the introductory passages of the essay, does not indicate a hesitation or equivocation as to the answer, as subsequent passages confirm: ‘The atomisation of the individual is, then, only the reflex in consciousness of the fact that the “natural laws” of capitalist production have been extended to cover every manifestation of life in society’ (HCC 91–2).⁴ Modern capitalism, for Lukács, is a society whose total life, inner and outer, has become dominated by commodity exchange. Thus we are presented with a conception of capitalist life, the contention of the absolute subsumption of life by capitalism.

The explicitness of these opening pages is not sustained throughout the text. But the domination of life by capital underpins what follows, especially some of the innovations of the text. It provides the framework for the extension of commodification to the ‘inner life’ of consciousness and to the cultural sphere, and for the critique of the antinomies of bourgeois thought. Indeed, it is precisely the total domination of life by commodification that requires the dialectical method that Lukács deploys here in order to grasp the qualitative transformation of society as a whole by capitalism, and to understand its contradictory unity. It is therefore particularly illuminating that Lukács should exemplify his derivation of dialectics from Hegel with a quotation from Hegel’s early writings in which the concept of life is central: ‘the totality of life at its most intense is only possible as a new synthesis out of the most absolute separation’ (HCC 141).

Nonetheless, even if Lukács’s initial question projects the idea of capitalist life as its answer, we need to return to the question anew, since Lukács only ever intended to elaborate Marx’s conception of capitalism, not radically transform it. Furthermore, the notion of capitalist life would seem to contradict the preoccupation with revolutionary praxis that is fundamental to this text. Thus, we need to enquire whether his projection of a ‘capitalist life’ is an anomaly or

unintended result, which should be marginalized as such, or a systemic consequence of Lukács's approach to Marx.

This can be illuminated by considering the relation of life to capitalism in Lukács's other writings. His explicit self-criticisms and defences of *History and Class Consciousness* do not obviously concern this problem of life, although there may be seen to be implications for it in the deepening of his criticism of Hegel's idealism in his *Defence of History and Class Consciousness* (written in 1925 or 1926) (DHC). Richer pickings, however, may be found elsewhere.

Life *contra* Life

Before examining the legacy of this gesture towards capitalist life in Lukács's subsequent work, it is worth considering his prior writings, not merely for the sake of comprehensiveness, but for their significance to the question at hand. Although the concept of life is pivotal to many of Lukács's early writings, it is not articulated there in relation to capitalism, except allusively. It is not until the Reification essay that we see a direct articulation of this relation. This is the first, negative, lesson to be drawn.

The next most striking feature of Lukács's early articulation of the concept of life is its dualistic character. The young Lukács is preoccupied with the opposition between two forms of life, or between 'true' and 'empirical' life. This is particularly evident in *Soul and Form*:

To live is to live something through to the end, but life means that nothing is ever fully and completely lived through to the end. Life is the most unreal and unliving of all conceivable existences; one can describe it only negatively – by saying that something always happens to disturb and interrupt the flow. . . .

True life [*Das wahre Leben*] is always unreal, always impossible in the midst of empirical life. Suddenly there is a gleam, a lightning that illumines the banal paths of empirical life: something disturbing and seductive, dangerous and surprising; the accident, the great moment, the miracle; an enrichment and a confusion. It cannot last, no one would be able to bear it, no one could live at such heights – at the height of their own life and their own ultimate possibilities. One has to fall back into numbness. One has to deny life in order to live. (SF 176, translation modified)

These two forms of life are related antinomically, in an irresolvable contradiction. The impossibility of living one without the other, or of their unification, produces the 'metaphysics of tragedy' that concerns Lukács here and in numerous other early writings. The indebtedness to Kant is profound; his antinomies of moral and natural life are reconceived as a philosophy of tragedy. Tragic neo-Kantianism is the principal philosophical orientation of the early Lukács.

It is precisely such antinomies that Lukács will come to criticize as bourgeois ideology by the time of *History and Class Consciousness*, a criticism that rests on Hegel's dialectical overcoming of Kant's philosophy, on the one hand, and Marx's conception of the proletariat, on the other. The metaphysical tragedy of life is hereby overcome. The early Hegel sublates the early Lukács.

However, this sublation does not demand the immediate dissolution of this antinomy, insofar as Hegel seeks dialectically to recognize Kant's antinomies as part of the process of their overcoming. This is evident in the Reification essay, where the antinomies of bourgeois thought are shown to be not illusory, but to exist within a dialectical history in which they can be overcome. To this extent, the antinomy of life can be maintained in Lukács's Hegelian conception of modern capitalism, even if it is sublated by a higher form of life. It is tempting to regard the total domination of life by commodity exchange as equivalent in some way to 'empirical life', in contradiction to which stands a 'true life' free of commodification; in other words, perhaps, an opposition of capitalist life to noncapitalist life. However, the implications of Hegel's dialectics would demand that communist life be absolute, the sublation of the opposition of capitalist and noncapitalist life. And yet, it is precisely this that appears to be contradicted by Lukács's proposition that the domination of life by commodity exchange is total, suggesting that absolute life is capitalism. It is this consequence that makes the dialectical conception of life in the Reification essay such a radical proposition, both with respect to Marx and with respect to overcoming such a life – however unintended this may have been on Lukács's part.

This consequence of the 'totality' of commodification may be suspended as an error, either in Lukács's formulation or in the overinsistence of its interpretation here. It seems pretty obvious that Lukács conceived of the totality of capitalist life as antinomic, as giving way to a resolution in the form of communism or communist life. But this does not dissolve the significance of this error, since it is equally evident that Marx conceives of life's unsumability and its existence within communism in ways that are different, even opposed, to Hegel. Lukács certainly recognized this, but the nature of his recognition harbours further problems. Again, these problems take on an ulterior significance here, since we are not in quest of the correct Marxian line, but the unorthodox idea of capitalist life.

Practice or Objectivity?

Despite numerous references and allusions to life and capitalism in Lukács's late writings, there is no explicit conceptualization of the absolute subsumption of life that is comparable to that projected in the Reification essay. This indicates its anomalous status perhaps. However, there are implicit ways in which the concept is indeed elaborated, and the issues attending it are negotiated.

The Young Hegel is particularly significant in this respect, since here Lukács addresses Hegel's approach to the critique of political economy – and ultimately his prefiguring of Marx's critique – from its origins in the dialectical concept of life proposed in Hegel's early writings. The book therefore elaborates extensively what had been intimated in the Reification essay, albeit with the new horizon of Marx's conception of alienated labour derived from his then recently discovered *Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts*. And it is here, in *The Young Hegel*, that we find a re-articulation of the dialectical conception of life within capitalism, which establishes the proposition of a postcapitalist life, and thereby distinguishes it from the absolute subsumption of life by capital alluded to in the Reification essay:

When Hegel refuses to accept life as something immediately given and chooses to see it instead as an objective which can only be achieved after the annulment and subsequent preservation of reflection, what he is after is a philosophical rescue action to preserve humanist ideals *within* capitalist society, a development or transfiguration of capitalist society which would make fully human relations a possibility. (YH 119)

It is true that this passage presents life as more of a future than an antinomic present, and that it conflates the 'philosophical rescue action' with the transfiguration itself. But the demarcation of absolute life from capitalist life is evident. The dialectical recognition of 'reflection' is diagnosed by Lukács as the anticipation of a critique of capitalist property relations in Hegel's later thought, in which the dialectical conception of labour displaces the preoccupation with life. The alienation of labour within capitalism is then interpreted as prefiguring Marx's critique of political economy, in which the limits of Hegel's critique are finally overcome (YH 120). The intimations of a concept of capitalist life in Lukács are therefore dissolved into the concept of alienated labour. The debt to Hegel is paid off by investing in a central concept of Marx's thought.

However, this solution contains a profound problem, namely, whether Marx's conception of life as unsubsumable by capital is adequately grasped by the conception of objectivity that he develops in opposition to Hegel in the *Manuscripts*; and, further, whether there is in fact an opposition between the concepts of alienation and objectivity, which Lukács comes to depend upon as the guarantee of Marx's distinction from Hegel.

This problem concerns an equivocation in Marx's critique of Hegel. In the *Manuscripts* Marx draws on Feuerbach in order to diagnose a conflation of alienation and objectivity in Hegel, such that: 'The *reappropriation* of the objective essence of man, produced in the form of estrangement as something alien, therefore means transcending not only *estrangement* but also *objectivity*. That is to say, man is regarded as a *non-objective, spiritual being*' (Marx, 1975, p. 387). The alternative to Hegel, following Feuerbach, therefore becomes a matter of maintaining the irreducibility of objectivity: 'a non-objective being is

an unreal, non-sensuous, merely thought, i.e. merely conceived being, a being of abstraction. To be sensuous, i.e. to be real, is to be an object of sense, a sensuous object, and thus to have sensuous objects outside oneself' (390). However, by the time of *The German Ideology* it is clear that Marx has rejected this alternative to Hegel as lacking substance, being no more than a concealed form of the philosophy of consciousness. This is most dramatically and famously expressed in the first of the so-called 'Theses on Feuerbach':

The chief defect of all hitherto existing materialism (that of Feuerbach included) is that the thing, reality, sensuousness, is conceived only in the form of the *object or of contemplation*, but not as *sensuous human activity, practice*, not subjectively. Hence, in contradistinction to materialism, the *active* side was set forth abstractly by idealism – which, of course, does not know real, sensuous activity as such. Feuerbach wants sensuous objects, really distinct from the thought objects, but he does not conceive human activity itself as *objective* activity. (421)

The notion of objectivity, of 'objects outside oneself', proposed in the *Manuscripts*, is rejected as a form of 'contemplation' or passive consciousness, which, moreover, in its passivity, regresses from the active (but abstract) consciousness conceived by Hegel. Thus, the reference to '*objective* activity' in the first Thesis does not mean what it did in the *Manuscripts*. It does not refer to an activity constituted by objects external to itself, but rather to the reality of activity itself, and to the fact that activity or practice is ontologically fundamental. However, the injunction to conceive of activity 'subjectively' or in parallel to idealism does not signal a return to the philosophy of consciousness. However profound the ambiguities of Marx's manoeuvre, he is clear that his ultimate aim is to develop a conception of the reality of activity that is fundamentally distinct from, and yet still foundational for, theory or consciousness. 'The dispute over the reality or non-reality of thinking that is isolated from practice is a purely *scholastic* question' (422).

The nature of this distinction of theory from practice is not grasped by empirical references to theories and practices, and it is far more elusive than Marx's rhetorical bluster suggests, not least because theory is a dissimulative mode of practice. But it is crucial. Marx's conception of life rests on it: 'All social life is essentially *practical*' (423). And his conception of life as unsubsumable by capital is derived from it.

The point of distinction that Marx reiterates again and again is that theory or consciousness involves a process of abstraction from what is real, namely practice. Abstraction is treated as constituting theory and the objects of theory, even where these objects appear to be independent of theory – hence the false opposition of idealism and materialism. Practice is therefore essentially not abstract. It is what has been abstracted from in theory and its objects. This is the crux of Marx's critique of ideology.

Besides being nonabstract or involving engagement in historical events, the positive articulation of practice remains elliptical. What is evident, however, is that life is integral. In *The German Ideology* Marx conceives of life as a matter of needs, and activity as primarily a capacity of life to produce the satisfaction of these needs, whether basic or sophisticated, and therefore to reproduce life, including through procreation (Marx and Engels, 1976, pp. 41–3). Consciousness is conceived as an effect of life, which idealism has abstracted from life, inverting the relation and making life an effect of consciousness, thereby rendering consciousness autonomous.

In *Capital* we can see the same critical operation. Living labour produces the means to satisfy and reproduce itself. Capitalism is an effect or stage of the historical evolution of production, which abstracts from the needs and uses of life through the measure of value, and inverts their relation, such that needs or uses are presented as an effect of the accumulation of value, suggesting that capital is autonomous, a self-valorizing value. Thus, Marx's critique of capitalism reproduces his critique of the philosophy of consciousness. His conception of the unsubsistence of life by capital hereby rests on the distinction of practice from theory. Without that distinction, capitalist life – the absolute subsumption of life by capital – would be possible.

To return to Lukács, it is now evident how the problem of objectivity in the *Manuscripts* turns out to be a problem of life and its subsumability by capital. There is no indication that Lukács was aware of these consequences, or that he intended anything other than to reproduce Marx's own intentions. But the question remains whether he managed to avoid these consequences. In *The Young Hegel* Lukács certainly follows the course of Marx's writings methodologically, up to and including his critique of Feuerbach and his appeal to a radicalized conception of practice. However, Lukács does not regard this as undermining the distinction of objectivity and alienation proposed in the *Manuscripts*.⁵ Lukács's failure to identify this pivot does not in itself turn his whole approach away from Marx. But his subsequent writings do suggest that this was in fact the case. In particular, Lukács appears to remain caught within the double bind indicated by Marx's first thesis – drawing on Feuerbach to oppose Hegel and vice versa – rather than following the clues Marx gives for the way out of this into an independent and new conception of practice. In general terms we might say that this double bind results in a philosophy of consciousness delimited by a strengthened conception of objectivity, with the suspicion that objectivity is only a concealed positing of consciousness. It is difficult to distinguish Lukács's late philosophy from this image.

Consequences

Before considering Lukács's writings after *The Young Hegel*, it is worth reviewing the vantage that text establishes with regard to the Reification essay, especially

given how significant the concept of practice has proved to be for the concept of life, and how central the concept of practice is for Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness*. Lukács's 1967 Preface to *History and Class Consciousness* indicates the significance of Marx's *Manuscripts* for Lukács's self-criticism, since he criticizes *History and Class Consciousness* for the same reduction of objectivity to alienation that Marx had criticized in Hegel's philosophy of consciousness (HCC xxiv). It is evident that Lukács's conception of practice in the Reification essay is indeed treated as a phenomenon of consciousness. Characterizing the consciousness of the proletariat and its practice, Lukács writes: 'since consciousness here is not the knowledge of an opposed object but is the self-consciousness of the object *the act of consciousness overthrows the objective form of its object*' (178). This suggests a counterintuitive consistency with Lukács's gesture towards the subsumption of life by capitalism earlier in the essay. For, if the concept of practice and life as unsubsumable depend upon conceiving of them independently from consciousness (especially insofar as capitalism embodies this structure of consciousness) then the revolutionary conception of practice developed in the Reification essay does not contradict the subsumption of life by capital. This may appear absurd, but perhaps it should be explored anew as a conception of revolutionary practice within an era of capitalist life.

Even if Lukács is right that HCC is an attempt to 'out-Hegel Hegel' (xxiii), his correction of this by a strengthened conception of objectivity derived from Marx's *Manuscripts* does not guarantee that he has escaped either the philosophy of consciousness or Hegel. Nor does it demonstrate a grasp of practice or life as unsubsumable by capitalism. Rather, it suggests the Feuerbach-Hegel double bind, resulting in a predictably contemplative and pacified version of Hegel's dialectics.

Lukács's later writings display symptoms consistent with what has been diagnosed so far. *The Destruction of Reason* is the one work in which the concept of life is central. However, it is treated here as a thoroughly ideological term, principally – via 'vitalism' and '*lebensphilosophie*' – as a key concept of the irrationalism he attributes to the 'Imperialist' phase of European capitalism (from 1870 to 1914). There is no attempt to elaborate a concept of capitalist life, or to redeem or reconstruct a concept of life in general. Indeed, the absence of discussions of the concept of life in the chapters concerning Hegel and Marx suggests the suppression of its significance. It is only in *The Young Hegel* that we find a brief consideration of the relation of *lebensphilosophie* to Hegel's own concept of life (YH 119). There Lukács makes it clear that his critique of *lebensphilosophie* rests on Hegel's critique of immediacy. What is repressed is any consideration of what this tradition shares with Marx's concept of life.

The consequences of maintaining the double bind of Feuerbach's materialism and Hegel's idealism are evident in *The Destruction of Reason*. Lukács invests in the progress of natural science, generally conceived as a correct reflection of reality, where reality is understood as an independent objectivity, rather than practice itself. This naturalism or realism is then treated as an adequate corrective to Hegel's dialectics, which provides the methodological touchstone

throughout the book. The way is then paved for Lukács's polemical rejection of irrationalism in the name of rationalism, despite the fact that the reality of practice projected by Marx is fundamentally irreducible to reason.

The Ontology of Social Being is a somewhat more revealing late work. Again, the consideration of capitalist life is at best implicit, and the explicit discussion of life furthers the consequences already projected. Life is treated naturalistically and biologically, for the most part – as an object of nature and natural science. Thus it is 'objective', and as such becomes the measure of Lukács's realism. Furthermore, Lukács treats life, as natural being, as categorically distinct from capitalism, which he treats as a form of social being that has been emptied of nature or natural being. This emptying cannot be completed, according to Lukács, since what is central to his critique of Hegel's idealism is that it erroneously dissolves natural being into social being absolutely. Hence capitalism effectively presents the illusion of absolute sociality. This critique is broadly attributed to Marx. *The Ontology of Social Being* therefore rests heavily on Hegel, but within strong limits: at one end, through recourse to Marx's critique of capitalism, and at the other, through a realist ontology of nature.

But the account of capitalism is also transformed by Lukács's recourse to Hegel, since he assumes the task of elaborating the social ontology that he claims is undeveloped in Marx's concepts of capitalism. Thus he argues that abstract labour and the value form should be understood as social-ontological forms. In this way, the illusory and fetishistic forms of capitalism are ontologized. The ontological distinction between the reality of practical life as opposed to the fetishism, alienation, abstraction and irreality of capitalism is dissolved, and replaced by an ontology of social forms, for which Hegel offers the model. There is no explicit discussion of the subsumption of life by capital, but the insistence on life as a natural limit to social being may be read as retaining the unsubsumability of life by capital. However, this is only life in its natural form, as presocial and even prepractical, and not in a form that would be able to determine different social forms such as capitalism and communism. Life as a natural substratum is either unsubsumable by any social form or subsumable by all social forms.

Lukács's conception of labour as teleological positing confirms the extent to which he conceives of practice in terms of a relation to objectivity, which, furthermore, presupposes consciousness as its essence. 'If the subject, separated from the object world as it is in consciousness, were unable to consider this object world and reproduce it in its inherent being, the positing of goals that underlies even the most primitive labour could not come about at all' (Lukács, 1978, p. 24). Hence, on the basis of Marx's distinction between the bee and the architect, Lukács renders human labour and practice a phenomenon of consciousness. A practice that grounds and exceeds consciousness is marginalized within the realm of nature, while within the realm of society Hegel's labour of consciousness reigns supreme.

Lukács cannot be regarded as having produced a positive conception of capitalist life. Like a flash of lightning followed by a long and distant rumble of thunder, he identifies it in a gesture and then does not so much elaborate it or reject it as fail to avoid it. Nonetheless, the critical description of its course within his writings reveals much about what the concept of capitalist life might involve. And it is evident that the problems raised in Lukács are addressed subsequently, especially by Negri and Adorno. Both of them pursue further the consequences for life of capitalism's totalization, albeit with radically different results. More critically, both attempt to outline a life independent of capital through a deepened opposition to Hegel's influence on Marxism, although in Adorno, unlike Negri, this takes place through an immanent critique of dialectics. Neither thinker exhausts the issues generated around the question of capitalist life in Lukács's writings. Inadvertently, they remain seminal. At their closure, we may not be left with the answer we were seeking, but the question stands out all the more vividly and compellingly: what is capitalist life?

Notes

- ¹ 'Exchange as the *positing of equivalents* cannot therefore by its nature increase the sum of values, nor the value of the commodities exchanged. (The fact that it is different with the exchange with labour arises because the use of labour is itself *value-positing*, but is not directly connected with its exchange value)' (Marx, 1973, p. 632).
- ² 'Human labour-power in its fluid state, or human labour, creates value, but is not itself value. It becomes value in its coagulated state, in objective form' (Marx, 1976, p. 142).
- ³ See, for instance, Negri (2003); Negri (2005).
- ⁴ It is perhaps as a further characterization of this that Lukács talks of 'the real life-process of capitalism'; see HCC 93–4.
- ⁵ '. . . the precise distinction between objectivity and alienation in human praxis prepared the ground for a critique not only of Hegel's idealism but also of Feuerbach's mechanical materialism' (YH 561).

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1974), *Minima Moralia: Reflections From Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott. London and New York: Verso.
- Hardt, M. and A. Negri, A. (2000), *Empire*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- (2004), *Multitude: War and Democracy in the Age of Empire*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Lukács, G. (1979), *The Ontology of Social Being, Vol. 3: Labour*, trans. D. Fernbach. London: Merlin Press.

- Marx, K. (1973), *Grundrisse: Foundations of the Critique of Political Economy*, trans. M. Nicolaus. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- (1975), 'Economic and Philosophical Manuscripts', *Early Writings*, trans. R. Livingstone and G. Benton. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- (1976), *Capital*. Vol. 1, trans. B. Fowkes. Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin.
- Marx, K. and F. Engels (1976), *The German Ideology: Collected Works*. Vol. 5, trans. C. Dutt et al., Moscow: Progress Publishers.
- Negri, A. (2003), *Time For Revolution*, trans. M. Mandarini. New York and London: Continuum.
- (2005), *Books for Burning*, trans. A. Bove et al., London and New York: Verso.

Part III

Aesthetic Reframings

Chapter 9

Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Writing

Georg Lukács

L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung appeared in June 1926 in *Die Tat*, a monthly journal with the subtitle *Monatschrift für die Zukunft deutscher Kultur* that came from the press of the neoconservative Jena publisher Eugen Diederichs. In 1926 Lukács told his old friend, the dramatist Paul Ernst – the subject of the last chapter in *Soul and Form* – that he could not write for bourgeois journals and newspapers without party approval, and that this would be forthcoming only if the article's publication contributed to the communist movement's objective needs.¹ Given this condition, Diederichs's *Die Tat* might seem a rather odd venue, except that in his way its publisher was also a vehement critic of modern industrial society and bourgeois liberalism.² An extraordinary autodidact, Diederichs made the press he founded in 1896 into a massive propaganda machine through which a highly eclectic range of publications were disseminated, publications that he construed as weapons against the pervasive materialism and stultifying rationality of capitalist modernity and the liberal ideology of its defenders. Although he was an elitist who argued that idealism was incompatible with mass democracy, Diederichs was no apologist for the Second Reich and believed that class antagonisms needed to be assuaged to restore the unity of the Volk. Before 1914 he was already drawn to reformist socialism and published works by Eduard Bernstein and Beatrice and Sidney Webb (Stark, 1981, pp. 102–3). In the war years this perspective attracted Diederichs to corporatism, and after it to an interest in the Soviet model as an alternative to Western 'Mammonism' (*ibid.*, pp. 141–2, 178).

Characteristic of *Die Tat*'s coverage of socialism and the working-class movement are the issue of July 1926, devoted to workers' education (*Arbeiterbildung*), and a more miscellaneous group of articles on socialism in the issue of July 1927. In both cases the majority of the contributions were written by Social Democrats.³ The theme of proletarian culture was the subject of two other articles in these years, one by the journalist and poet Walter Ochilewski and the other by Johannes Resch, who headed the *Freien proletarischen Hochschule in Remscheid*⁴ (Resch, 1925a; Ochilewski, 1927; Heidler, 1988, p. 111). To judge from a letter Diederichs wrote him in January 1925, Resch was involved in organizing a *Die Tat* special issue on communism that was to have included contributions from Lukács, the dramatist and historian Karl Wittfogel and the art historian Lu Märten.⁵ However, the publisher did not approve the texts by Wittfogel and Märten and

accepted only Lukács's essay, which appeared more than a year later in an issue in which no other contributions addressed socialist or communist themes, and that began with an article on the contemporary relevance of Dostoevsky by Ernst – a theme of common interest to him and Lukács. Both Ernst and Lukács had contact with Diederichs before the war; it seems from their correspondence that Lukács had wanted to publish the German edition of *Soul and Form* with the Diederichs Verlag before the arrangement fell through over some personal matter.⁶ Perhaps their acquaintanceship counted for something, but Lukács's *Die Tat* essay was a mere four pages confined to the review section; set against the other contributions it definitely appeared an interloper.

Ernst had engaged with Marxism in the 1880s and 1890s but his involvement with Social Democratic politics was brief, and in 1919 he published an essay collection titled *Der Zusammenbruch des Marxismus* with the neoconservative press of Georg Müller, which marked a precisely contrary direction to the one Lukács was taking at that time.⁷ However, their friendship survived disagreements over the war,⁸ and Ernst was one of those distinguished writers who signed an appeal, published in the *Berliner Tageblatt* in November 1919,⁹ that Lukács not be extradited from Vienna to Budapest; they remained on friendly, sparring terms in the 1920s.

Ernst criticized the argument of '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' in two separate articles. First, he denied Lukács's claim that the writer stood in a relationship of 'sensuously naïve immediacy' with the social order, stressing instead his intrinsic separateness and the inherently factitious character of his creations. Second, while he conceded that the proletariat was a determining stratum in European society, Ernst denied that it was a determining class, since it had not achieved a cohesive and unifying class consciousness. Shaped by the profoundly fragmenting effects of industrial capitalist relations on individual consciousness, the proletariat was not an organic social formation, as even the German bourgeoisie of Goethe's time had been, and consequently it was incapable of forming a unified culture.¹⁰ Lukács responded in an undated personal letter of 1926 or 1927, entirely amicable in tone, in which he said that in spite of the objectively false character of Ernst's critique, their similar attitudes to capitalism meant they did not stand on opposite sides of the barricades.¹¹ This is the last surviving correspondence between them.

The publication of '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' in Diederichs's *Die Tat* seems indicative of its place in the transition from Lukács's romantic critique of capitalism to a more rigid and rationalistic Marxism accommodated to that of the Third International.

– Andrew Hemingway

L'art pour l'art (art for art's sake) is always the certain sign of the despair of a class with regard to its own existence, to the possibility of creating a meaningful and humane form of life within the framework of the underlying economic structure of society and the corresponding forms and contents of social life.

Everyone who knows the great and honest representatives of *l'art pour l'art* (reference is made here to Gustave Flaubert above all, and especially to his letters), knows how strongly this despair worked in them, knows how much

their 'purely artistic' attitude was only a mask that quite transparently concealed their furious and contemptuous hatred against their own class, the bourgeoisie.

Nonetheless, even the most honest and clear-thinking representatives of this tendency could not come to a clear understanding of the true causes of their despair, let alone find a path by which to redeem their lives as artists. The reason for this is not only that as bourgeois they could not leap over their own shadows and were incapable of transcending the horizon of their class existence. For many of their class were able to move beyond the limits of their bourgeois existence, both practically and intellectually: they found the way to the proletariat, to the correct critique – critique in theory and practice – of bourgeois society. Beside the difficulty that anyone born bourgeois would have in breaking fully with his class, the barrier lay in the very fact that they were artists.

For the artist always perceives life in its *immediacy*; the truer the artist, the more direct and unmediated is his experience of life. He may engage in bold criticism of men, groups, institutions and so on, yet to remain an artist he must always stand in a relation of sensuous, naive immediacy to the underlying objective forms in which the life of his time presents itself. (In this regard, Dante stands in a line with Homer, Cervantes with Shakespeare.)

The tragedy of the artist in bourgeois society – from which tragedy the whole of the *l'art pour l'art* movement stems – lies in the fact that precisely this relation of immediacy, the basis of the artistic attitude towards reality, is disturbed, indeed made impossible. First of all, the development of bourgeois society, determined by the development of capitalism as one of the modes of production dominating all of society, makes human pursuits, the relations of humans with one another (the stuff of literature) unbearably abstract, unsensuous, incapable of being shaped into art [*ungestaltbar*]. Capitalism's social division of labour, the dominance of the exchange relationship [*Warenbeziehung*] over all aspects of human life, the fetishism of all life forms that necessarily follows, and so on, surround the artist with an environment to which he, *because* he is an artist – and thus of an intense, sophisticated and discriminating sensuality – *cannot* relate in a naive-immediate way, delighting in his world and creating joyously. However, if he wishes to remain an artist, it is just as impossible for him to relate to this in a purely critical and thus intellectual way, transcending the immediate.

And this insoluble dilemma is further intensified for the modern artist. Since every true and great art is a forming of life in its highest possibilities, it always goes beyond the obvious superficial reality of the shallow everyday. It seeks to give form to the collective life of its times in its highest expressions; it relinquishes naturalism in order to seek out living nature; it renounces the flat immediacy of the world as it is simply found before us, so as to arrive at an entire sensuous forming of life that encompasses all that is essential to it. In this sense, all true literature is a critique of the times. But when he becomes a critic of his time, the modern writer inevitably remains stuck fast in pallid, abstract, nonsensuous and artistically unsatisfactory criticism. For bourgeois consciousness, society as a whole is given at best as an abstract concept. And when, for

artistic reasons, he turns his back on this abstract totality, when he turns his gaze exclusively to the 'concrete', uncritically apprehended phenomena of perception, then he becomes artistically suffocated in the grey and barren triviality of bourgeois everyday life. His artistic conscience demands the impossible from him: the union of irreconcilable modes of conduct. (Here we need only refer only to Hebbel, Ibsen, Tolstoy, Hauptmann, etc.)

Already this would suffice to explain the desperate background of *l'art pour l'art*. But secondly, the development of bourgeois society also makes the existence of the writer problematic in a way that it never previously was – and indeed as much inwardly as outwardly. Outwardly, because the increasing capitalist transformation of society makes the true, vital need for literature, for art, ever weaker, and transforms the connection between writer and public ever more strongly into an abstract relationship subject to the value law of commodity relations. The writer knows ever less for whom he writes. And if he now expresses his social rootlessness as an arrogant theory of art for art's sake, this is at best a case of a desperate self-anaesthetization, something that the honest artists in their lucid moments already saw through as such (I refer again to Flaubert), but which lesser and less honourable ones turn into a kind of self-deception that corrupts their character as artists as well (one thinks of artists of the type of Wilde, D'Annunzio, Hofmannsthal, etc.).

This social uprootedness of the artist goes hand in hand with the inner rootlessness of art. Artistic forms, as Goethe and Schiller recognized quite clearly, emerge from the particular needs of experience, whereby the typical possibilities of the most intense sensuous fulfilment are condensed in artistic forms (epic, drama and so on). As we have shown, capitalist development, with its division of labour that abstracts human relationships (and so on), not merely annihilates the stuff of literature, but also pulverizes its forms, by engendering in abstracted and socially atomized men such a chaotic need for an intensified experience of life that these cannot be fulfilled in any adequate, truly artistic way, whatever the form. The writer must find his forms purely within himself; he must become an aesthete, an adherent of *l'art pour l'art*. A great art, an art truly perfect in form, originated always only as the fulfilment of an unequivocal and clear need of its time. Aesthetes in search of a form, whether they are called Neo-Romantics or Expressionists, must necessarily retain an inner formlessness.

There is of course, one will say, also a *Tendenzkunst*. But this in no way shows an artistic route out of the labyrinth of *l'art pour l'art*. It is rather – viewed simultaneously from a social and an artistic viewpoint – the exact opposite move. For those tendencies that are meant to define the substance and form of literary works, and that are possible in bourgeois life from a bourgeois viewpoint, float either as abstract-romantic utopias so high above materially formed life that they are never integrated with it in an artistically organic way (the late Ibsen, but also G. Kaiser, [Ernst] Toller, etc.), or they concern such abstract, trivial everyday problems of banal bourgeois life that they can never reach the height of art.

This dilemma is not coincidental either. It mirrors the social being of the bourgeois class, which – since the historical appearance and increasing importance of the proletariat – becomes ever less capable of regarding impartially the foundations of its social existence. This is because it is as impossible for the bourgeoisie to affirm this existence sincerely as to criticize it impartially. It is forced to take refuge either in a desperate hypocrisy (the ‘subjectlessness’ of *l'art pour l'art*, the sovereignty of form alone), or in that trivial hypocrisy that says that every problem it can register can be dealt with by superficial ‘reforms’.

Thus, from whichever standpoint we observe it – including the standpoint of art – *l'art pour l'art* reveals ever more clearly the hopelessness of bourgeois existence. But what can proletarian revolution offer the development of art in its place? To begin with, very little. And it ill becomes the proletarian revolutionary, the Marxist, to get carried away in utopias that ignore any actually available possibilities.

Above all, he must not forget that proletarian revolutionary art is, socially, in a much less favourable position than the art of the revolutionary bourgeoisie in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. At that time, the socioeconomic forms of bourgeois life were already developing *within the feudal world*. Bourgeois writers were thus in a position to give immediate and sensuous form to this mode of existence, in whose world-redemptive calling they could still have real faith (the English novel of the eighteenth century, Diderot, Lessing, etc.). By contrast, despite all the upheavals of the present, the proletariat lives in a world whose underlying structure (rule of the law of value, division of labour, equal and abstract law, etc.), still retains the structural forms of capitalism – and this not only before the overthrow of capitalism, but also, as Marx showed incomparably in the *Critique of the Gotha Programme*, in the first, lower phase of communism. The gigantic changes that we are experiencing, which the revolutionary proletariat has achieved, initially disrupt our *immediate, sensuous* reality (the material and form of literature) less than one might superficially suppose. This explains the ‘disillusionment’ with the Russian Revolution of those intellectuals who had expected from it the immediate solution to their own personal privations.

Nevertheless, much has already taken place in this area, even for the writers of the still-capitalist Western Europe. For those writers who have inwardly aligned themselves with the proletarian revolution, who truly experience the revolutionary development of the proletariat, this experience shows a way out of the antinomies of *l'art pour l'art*. For all its faults, Leonhard Frank's *Der Bürger* towers over ‘*Tendenzdichtungen*’,¹² precisely because the scale of its ‘*Tendenz*’ allows a vital artistic fusion with the concrete matter – because the clear and conscious hate of this ‘*Tendenz*’ for bourgeois society leads it beyond the formlessness of the art of pure form. And Andersen Nexø succeeds in depicting the awakening of class consciousness in a farm worker with a richness of detail and the broad view of the world that only the writers of the best period of the bourgeoisie could achieve with their material.

And while in the rest of Europe the stagnation of literature and the lack of talented younger writers are generally and correctly lamented, in Russia a whole group of new and highly talented young writers has emerged. In their works – while they might often be groping and stammering – one already senses the solid ground on which they stand as men and writers. It is hardly as if a new, unprecedented literature, completely distinct from all earlier developments, were suddenly to emerge. Those who expect and want this are exactly the most bourgeois, those closest to the over-formed formless writing of European despair (on this literature see Comrade Trotsky's book *Literature and Revolution*). But one senses that writers are *beginning* again to discover, socially, a solid ground under their feet – and that this is having a complementary effect on the material and form of their writing. And it seems to me hardly coincidental that the most strongly formed work of this development that I have yet encountered, Libedinski's *Eine Woche*,¹³ was the work of the *most conscious proletarian and communist* among these writers. For it is in the proletarian and the communist that the process is being accomplished that is called upon to overcome bourgeois society (and with it the problems of its art). To be sure, just as, according to Marx's words, law can never rise above the economic form of society, neither can literature! But precisely when we expect no sudden wonder, no solution to all problems at a single blow, the *gigantic advances* that will also be possible for literature in the proletarian revolution become visible and recognizable to us.

Translated by Andrew Hemingway
and Frederic J. Schwartz

Notes

- ¹ Georg Lukács to Paul Ernst, 29 January 1926, in Kutzbach, 1974, p. 174.
- ² For Diederichs, see Stark, 1981, pp. 15–19, 58–110, 132–48, 172–85; for *Die Tat*, see pp. 43–50 and *passim*. See also Heidler, 1998.
- ³ For *Die Tat*'s presentation of socialism and *Volksbildung* see Heidler, 1998, pp. 428–39.
- ⁴ With regard to Resch, see also Resch, 1925b.
- ⁵ Eugen Diederichs to Johannes Resch, 26 January 1925, in Diederichs, 1967, pp. 292–4.
- ⁶ See the 1910 correspondence in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 6–7. Lukács also planned for a German translation of his *A modern dráma fejlődésének története* to be undertaken by Karl Mannheim and published with Diederichs; see Karl Mannheim to Georg Lukács, 25 July 1914, in Lukács, 1986, pp. 239–40. The project fell through.
- ⁷ On Ernst and Lukács in the period after 1918, see 'Einleitung', in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. xxxii–xxxvii.
- ⁸ See their correspondence of July–August 1917, in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 117–20. These letters partly record Ernst's unsuccessful attempt to persuade Lukács to participate in the Lauenstein Kulturtag of September, a conference organized by Diederichs to consider cultural and political questions raised by the war. On the Lauenstein Kulturtagen, see Stark, 1981, p. 136.

- ⁹ Reprinted in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 155–6. For correspondence relating to the appeal, see *ibid.*, pp. 153–9.
- ¹⁰ Ernst, 'Kunst und Proletariat' and 'Was nun?', in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 181–201.
- ¹¹ Georg Lukács to Paul Ernst, undated (but almost certainly 1926 or 1927), *ibid.*, p. 202.
- ¹² Frank, 1924. The title of the 1930 English translation, *A Middle-Class Man*, is potentially misleading, since the German *Bürger* can mean a bourgeois, a citizen or a burgher, but does not imply a member of the traditional German middle class (*Mittelstand*) (translators' note).
- ¹³ Libedinski, 1923 (translators' note).

Works Cited

- Diederichs, E. (1967), *Selbstzeugnisse und Briefe von Zeitgenossen*. Düsseldorf and Köln: Eugen Diederichs Verlag.
- Frank, L. (1924), *Der Bürger*. Berlin: Malik Verlag.
- (1930), *A Middle-Class Man*, trans. Cyrus Brooks. London: Peter Davies.
- Heidler, I. (1998), *Der Verleger Eugen Diederichs und seine Welt (1896–1930)*. Mainzer Studien zur Buchwissenschaft, Bd. 8. Wiesbaden: Harrassowitz.
- Kutzbach, K. A. (ed.) (1974), *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács. Dokumente einer Freundschaft*. Emsdetten: Verlag Lechte.
- Libedinski, J. N. (1923), *Eine Woche*, trans. Eduard Schiemann. Hamburg: C. Hoym Nachf.
- Lukács, G. (1926), 'L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung', *Die Tat*, 18, (3), 220–23.
- (1986), *Selected Correspondence, 1902–1920*, ed. J. Marcus and Z. Tar. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Oschilewski, W. G. (1927), 'Das Problem der Kultur', *Die Tat*, 19, (4), 296–302.
- Resch, J. (1925a), 'Leninismus in der deutschen proletarischen Kulturbewegung', *Die Tat*, 17, (3), 168–80.
- (1925b), 'Offener Brief an Ernst Teller', *Die Tat*, 17, (3), 228–30.
- Stark, Gary D. (1981), *Entrepreneurs of Ideology: Neo-Conservative Publishers in Germany, 1890–1933*. Chapel Hill, NC: North Carolina University Press.

Chapter 10

The Historical and Political Context of Lukács's 'Art for Art's Sake and Proletarian Writing'

Andrew Hemingway

After the reviews and articles he wrote for *Die rote Fahne* in 1922 (Lukács, 1983) and a few passages in *History and Class Consciousness* (1923), Lukács published hardly any statements on cultural questions, until the controversy over his so-called 'Blum Theses' in 1929 led to his political marginalization and prompted a return to earlier interests.¹ To judge from the fullest biography of Lukács to date, his years of exile in Vienna, 1919 to 1929, were largely given over to political activity.² *L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' thus stands out as an intriguing clue to the course of his aesthetic thinking in that period. In his indispensable study of Lukács, *From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (1979), Michael Löwy has argued that 1926, the year the essay appeared, marked a turning point in Lukács's thinking – most clearly signalled by his essay 'Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics' – in that he moved away from the 'dialectical revolutionary harmony' of *History and Class Consciousness* and 'drew nearer to realism pure and simple', thus adopting a position from which he could support the 'Soviet Thermidor' of Stalinism without bad faith.³ The rediscovery of Lukács's 1925–1926 defence of *History and Class Consciousness* makes this interpretation appear a little too neat (although its publication prompted Löwy to make a convincing reassertion of his case [Löwy, 2005]). If the line of Lukács's politico-philosophical development was indeed set in 1926, *L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' suggests that in the immediately preceding years he worked with a more flexible conception of aesthetic value than in his later criticism. This is partly to say that the essay displays elements of an earlier romantic anticapitalism that were subsequently ironed out of his interpretative scheme.

Art for Art's Sake

Just as it is evident that Lukács's concept of totality in *History and Class Consciousness* was deeply rooted in the thought of his pre-Marxist years,⁴ so too is its

corollary: a profound aversion to aestheticism as a symptom of the lack of organic unity in contemporary life.⁵ Lukács's critique was grounded in value judgements he advanced on both contemporary literature and the visual arts. Keenly involved with the latter, and a patron of the Hungarian Post-Impressionist artists associated as 'The Eight', Lukács identified aestheticism with Impressionism as an art that signified 'the anarchy, the absence of culture, the isolation of art and artists in life' (LR 162).⁶ In a well-known essay of 1910 he had counterposed the inability of Impressionist art to do more than present aspects of perception dependent on individual mood and sensation with the permanent truths revealed by the natural sciences and Marxism, and suggested that Hungarian Post-Impressionism offered an 'art of order and values' that was able to stand for an apprehension of the whole (LR 170–71; SF 105).

The most extensive and revealing statements of Lukács's early critique of *l'art pour l'art* are the 1909 essay on the novelist and poet Theodor Storm, 'The Bourgeois Way of Life and Art for Art's Sake' – arguably the centrepiece of *Soul and Form* – and that of the following year, 'Aesthetic Culture'. Both present aestheticism as an outlook peculiar to bourgeois society. That it is so may appear paradoxical, Lukács acknowledges in the Storm essay, in that the bourgeois way of life is defined by asceticism and 'a renunciation of all brilliance in life', 'a kind of hateful servitude . . . against which every life instinct must rebel'. Its ethos is a 'whip that drives the life-denying man to work without cease'. In what is surely an echo of Weber's conception of the capitalist spirit as defined by the Calvinistic idea of an individual 'calling' (*Beruf*), Lukács argues that 'a life is made bourgeois first and foremost by the exercise of a bourgeois profession' (SF 75).⁷ The innovation of his argument lies in the claim that this self-denial acquires its meaning as a negative, as a refusal of everything that is beautiful. The life of the senses is entirely subordinated to obedience to abstract ethical laws. In 'Aesthetic Culture' this argument is extended. Lukács now asserts that bourgeois civilization has 'indisputably' produced 'two pure types: the expert and the aesthete'. Although 'incompatible and mutually exclusive', each needs the other as its complement. To the former, inner life is defined by life's external aspects; for the latter inner life is all. The expert embraces his profession with the same exclusive concentration aestheticism focuses on art; the aesthete embraces the pursuit of sensation as if it were a profession. In their 'one-sided lives' and the 'one-dimensionality of their soul' they have a deep solidarity. From the perspective of aestheticism, life is 'stripped of all values' and the only values that exist are those associated with transient subjective moods. Aestheticism thus proscribes 'all real spiritual activity'; it is an admission that the subject no longer knows how to live, a 'dilettante hedonism'. The advocates of form have killed form in that aestheticism's form is no more than 'an attractive collage of surfaces', whereas true form has 'an innate organic unity, with its own growth and an inner, purposeful teleology'. Form is defined against the resistance of reality, while aestheticism is 'oblivious of the disharmony of things and their embittered struggles' (LR 147–50). For Lukács in 1910, as in 1926, the consequence of this situation for artists is that they lead a 'rootless existence'

and are unable to 'relate to others and establish human contact' (152). Such a life is 'tragic' because from the perspective of aestheticism all life's problems appear simply trivial. Art is left without a mission.

Lukács conceived the antagonism between the Post-Impressionism of 'The Eight' and Impressionism in militaristic terms as 'a life and death struggle' between antipathetic attitudes to life (LR 172). This was an extension of the position on the significance of form he laid out in the opening chapter of *Soul and Form*, in which he asserted that: 'All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny-relationship; everywhere the problem of destiny determines the problem of form'. In the artwork, form set the limits to the immaterial without which destiny would simply dissolve into the flux of life. Feelings and experiences are 'melted down and condensed into form', giving it what Lukács calls 'soul-content'. Through the critic's 'symbolic contemplation' of form as 'life-symbols', form 'becomes a world-view, a standpoint, an attitude vis-à-vis the life from which it sprang' (SF 23) – a position that both draws on Dilthey's concept of *Weltanschauung* and looks ahead to Max Dvořák's *Kunstgeschichte als Geistesgeschichte*.

In 1910 Lukács had already mooted the idea that the only hope for culture might lie with socialism, that proletarian barbarians would come 'with callous hands' and 'tear apart all delicate, refined things', 'all things peripheral', so that the revolutionary spirit would return to 'what is essential in art'. But he judged this hope a vain one, in that socialism did not encompass 'the soul-expanding, religious strength of early primitive Christianity' and thus could not be the 'the real adversary of bourgeois aestheticism' (LR 151). In a passage that anticipates post-1917 debates on proletarian culture, he observed that socialism's 'conscious aim . . . to create a proletarian art in the midst of bourgeois culture' had only issued in 'a gross caricature of bourgeois art; just as fragile and superficial, but without [its] seductive charm' (151–2). Although for Lukács culture was once 'the unifier of life' (146), it could no longer fulfil this function and to believe it could is to be either ignorant or self-deluded. The individualistic culture of the present exerts an 'iron necessity' upon the subject; but for the artist to subordinate himself to socialism is to suppress inner life in favour of external realities, leading to an inner debacle. The strong artist recognizes that 'his own inner drives also constitute a necessity' and accepts the loneliness of his tragic situation (154–5). The shortcoming of contemporary aesthetes is that they are not aestheticist enough. Satisfied with merely giving form to their transient individual moods, they shy away from the 'interminable struggle and suffering' required to give form to life, 'to forge a unity out of the diverse and divergent' (157, 156).

Lukács's aversion to aestheticism was given a new edge by his conversion to communism in that the outlook no longer signified only bourgeois society's inability to produce a culture of wholeness, it also stood as an obstacle to the formation of a culture that embodies the outlook of the proletariat, the potentially universal class that has the capacity to do so. In making this point in

a short article of 1922 Lukács advanced an argument similar in important ways to that of Plekhanov's well-known 1912 lecture, 'Art and Social Life', in that both presented *'l'art pour l'art'* as reflexive of situations in which 'people engaged in art are hopelessly out of harmony with their social environment', and both opposed it to an attitude that accorded to artworks 'the significance of judgments on the phenomena of life' (Plekhanov, 1981, pp. 657, 643).⁸ However, Lukács certainly did not conceive his approach as a 'utilitarian view of art' as Plekhanov did, and his critique was also informed by the same conception of the failure of *'l'art pour l'art'* to give form to life that we identified in *Soul and Form* and related texts. In the literature of the generation of Baudelaire and Flaubert, Lukács wrote in 1922, 'the forms of sensibility and the life-forms which determine the content of sensibility have remained the same. They are in consequence of the loss of a belief in their ability to reconstruct the world – only hollowed out from within, they have become merely formal, merely "poetic" forms.'⁹ In *Theory of the Novel* Lukács had described Flaubert's *L'Éducation sentimentale* as 'the only novel that attains true epic objectivity and, through it, the positiveness and affirmative energy of an accomplished form' (TN 125). After his accommodation with Stalinism he would describe this judgement as an error he had shared with other '*bourgeois* aestheticists and critics' (SER 3). But already in the 1920s the romantic anticapitalist evaluation of Flaubert had become inconsistent with his view that socialism provided the unifying *Weltanschauung* that in 1910 he had argued it did not – indeed, this was the very thing that drew him to communism.¹⁰ Nonetheless, the tenor of his references to Flaubert in 1926 is more positive than those that appear in his criticism of the 1930s, although these are far from dismissive (SER 63, 76, 92, 190, 249).

In '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*', Lukács draws on the concept of reification to bolster his 1922 critique. Now aestheticism is not simply the repressed negative other of the dominance of asceticism and abstract ethical law in the bourgeois way of life, as it had been in 1910, it is also an effect of the permeation of the exchange relationship into all human relations, which renders them 'unbearably abstract' and 'unsensuous' thus rendering them unfit for use as literary material.¹¹ Moreover, the bourgeois artist no longer has the faith in his own class that his predecessors had in the period of the bourgeoisie's rise to dominance, and feels inwardly rootless. The implications of these circumstances are that the artist cannot apprehend the world in a truly artistic – a 'naïve immediate' – way. The prospects for the bourgeois practitioners of art for art's sake are hopeless because their efforts cannot issue in a truly meaningful form: 'A great art, an art truly perfect in form, originated always only as the fulfilment of an unequivocal and clear need of its time. Aesthetes in search of a form, whether they are called Neo-romantics or Expressionists, must necessarily remain inwardly formless.' *Tendenzkunst*,¹² the other option for the bourgeois writer, is no solution either, because the bourgeoisie is incapable of criticizing the foundations of its existence impartially, and the tendentious writer either takes refuge in 'abstract-romantic

utopias . . . high above materially formed life', or fantasizes that 'every problem . . . can be dealt with by superficial "reforms".' The only prospect for the bourgeois artist is to ally him- or herself with the proletariat so that the sheer drive of the '*Tendenz*' leads the writer 'beyond the formlessness of the art of pure form', as Lukács claims Leonhard Frank does in *Der Bürger*.

Tendenzliteratur

The most predictable of Lukács's choices with regard to 'those writers who have inwardly aligned themselves with the proletarian revolution' was the Danish novelist Martin Andersen Nexø – the work he referred to being *Pelle the Conqueror*, published in four volumes between 1906 and 1910 and still Nexø's best-known novel.¹³ A German translation of *Pelle* appeared in serialized form in *Vorwärts*, the organ of the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD), in 1911, and then in increasingly larger book editions in 1912, 1920 and 1926.¹⁴ Social Democratic critics in Germany and elsewhere hailed its complex narrative of the struggles of an impoverished Swedish immigrant, from his peasant childhood to a leading role in the urban workers' movement, as a major step in extending the *Bildungsroman* form to depict the sufferings and political awakening of the proletariat.¹⁵ Nexø's next major novel, the five-volume *Ditte: Child of Man* (1917–1921), began to appear in German in 1920 and was issued in a complete edition in 1924. As critics almost invariably noted, the author was himself from the Copenhagen working class and had all the credentials to be a proletarian writer; indeed *Pelle* drew from the experiences of his own childhood and youth. Nexø had joined the Danish Social Democratic Party in 1910, but was dismayed by the craven response of European social democracy to the war and in 1918 quit the party out of disgust with its right-wing leadership. From then on he was a committed and quite uncritical supporter of the USSR; he played a role in the formation of the Danish Communist Party in 1923 and was at one stage on its central committee (Ingwersen and Ingwersen, 1984, pp. 11–13).¹⁶ From 1923 to 1929 he lived in Germany (Le Bras-Barret, 1969, pp. 224–7). Nexø was thus an inescapable reference point for a communist critic considering the prospects of proletarian literature in the mid-1920s. However, although Lukács would praise *Pelle* again in a short piece published in Berlin in 1947, Nexø did not figure as an exemplar in his 1930s criticism in the way Gorki, Mann and Roland did.¹⁷

If the choice of Nexø's *Pelle* seems predictable, the choice of Leonhard Frank's *Der Bürger*, which was issued in 1924 from Wieland Herzfelede's Malik Verlag, is less obvious. It was indeed a book in which we might anticipate the later Lukács finding many 'faults'. Born into an artisan family, Frank was a product of the Munich and Berlin bohemian milieus of the pre-war years.¹⁸ His first novel, *Die Räuberbande* (1914), was a big success and won him the Theodore Fontane Prize. In 1915 he was on the way to completing his second,

Die Ursache, when he heard the Social Democratic journalist Felix Stössinger describe the sinking of the *Lusitania* as ‘the most heroic act of human history’ in the Café des Westens and struck him in the face before other customers. As a result he was denounced as a French agent and took refuge in Zurich where he hung around the Cabaret Voltaire and mingled with a circle of pacifist socialists and anarchists that included Erich Mühsam and Gustav Landauer (Grobmann, 2004, pp. 47–9; Frank, 1954, pp. 70–71). It was in this context that he wrote his antiwar novella, *Der Mensch ist gut* (1917), which was first published in Switzerland because it could not be published in Germany. When it appeared there the following year it made a huge impact and was selected a joint award-winner for the Heinrich von Kleist Prize (Frank, 1918; Grobmann, 2004, pp. 51–5).

In November 1918 Frank returned to Germany and witnessed the Bavarian Revolution, becoming a member of the central committee of the Munich Council Republic, which was established on 6 April of the following year. A recent study describes Frank as a ‘*Gefühlssozialist*’ or sentimental socialist, one whose socialism was essentially a moral conception, resting on principles akin to that of Christian brotherhood (Grobmann, 2004, pp. 20–34).¹⁹ From the *Communist Manifesto* onwards Marxism had distanced itself from socialists who took this kind of stance, and Lenin used the term ‘*Gefühlssozialist*’ disparagingly to refer to the American author Upton Sinclair (*ibid.*, p. 26). Frank admired the character of the communist Eugen Leviné, who headed the Council Republic in its last days and paid with his life, but he did not accept the doctrine of dictatorship of the proletariat or the necessity of revolutionary terror. In the aftermath of the republic’s suppression Frank moved to Berlin and withdrew from active political engagements; in the 1920s he kept his distance from the Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) (Grobmann, 2004, pp. 56–8; Frank, 1954, pp. 83–6).

Essentially an expressionistic *Bildungsroman*, *Der Bürger* was a product of Frank’s disappointment with the outcome of the November Revolution and an attempt to explain why a minority of bourgeois young people gravitated to socialism.²⁰ Its central character, Jürgen Kolbenreihe, is the only child of a long-established bourgeois family, but is regarded by his father and his aunt as an ‘ignominious nonentity’ (*ein schmähhliches Etwas*), unsuited for a life of duty and destined at best for a minor civil service career. However, as a schoolboy the timid Jürgen is already an atheist and his sympathy for immiserated working-class children induces him to rebel against the destiny his family expects of him. The narrative charts his protracted struggles to choose between the life of a socialist organizer, with its dreary routines, disappointments and small advances (symbolized by a loving and self-denying activist, Katharina) and a banker’s life of luxury, power and sexual excess (symbolized by a selfish and promiscuous banker’s daughter, Elisabeth). Although both women become pregnant by Jürgen, Elisabeth dies giving birth to a stillborn infant, while Katharina, the true principle of life, produces a healthy son. Frank depicts Jürgen’s consciousness as increasingly schizophrenic, a development that culminates in a hallucinatory episode in Berlin in which he searches the city trying to find his idealistic

youthful self, hiring a private detective to assist him and putting up posters with his own image offering a reward. This schizophrenia can only be resolved by re-immersing himself in the socialist movement and following Katharina's example.

Ralph Grobmann's claim that Frank's early works correspond with the theory of realism Lukács enunciated in the 1930s is unpersuasive (Grobmann, 2004, pp. 348–51). Although *Der Bürger* spans the period from Jürgen's schooldays to his mid-forties, the markers of time in it are imprecise and long stretches are unaccounted for, with different temporal stages flowing into one another without chapter divisions. Moreover, the experiences of the protagonists are not connected with specific historical events. Given that it makes no reference to either the war or divisions between socialist and communist,²¹ the novel might seem to be set in the pre-war period; but there is no mention of the Kaiser or the imperial order. Neither is the provincial industrial city that provides the main scene of events named. This lack of specifics contributes to the novel's fabular quality. While it is not written in a uniform stream of consciousness mode, the narrative moves between Jürgen's thoughts, fantasies, hallucinations and actual events in ways that match the divided character of his mental state. The Berlin episode in particular conjures up Expressionist images of the subjective experience of the city environment reminiscent of pictures by Ludwig Meidner and George Grosz. Moreover the concepts of 'life force' and the unconscious that inform the story have their origins in Nietzsche and Freud, however unscientific their application. These, of course, were thinkers whose influence on contemporary literature Lukács would roundly condemn in the following decade.²²

In 1926 Lukács praised *Der Bürger* because the novel achieved a relationship of style and content that raised it above the formlessness of aestheticism. Eight years later, he would write of expressionist antiwar writing – and Frank's *Der Mensch ist gut* could exemplify the genre – that even those whose works were prosecuted in wartime Germany were engaged in 'only a mock battle', 'a struggle against war in general, and not against the imperialist war'. Similarly, they 'struggled against "middle-classness" in general, and not against the imperialist bourgeoisie'.²³ While not denying the talent or good intentions of expressionist writers, Lukács criticized them for their 'abstracting away from the objective reality', uprooting the subject's experience from 'its causal connection in time and space' to get at its essence, thus leaving characters as 'mere silhouettes' (ER 104–6). This was effectively the defect he criticized in the theatre of Georg Kaiser and Ernst Toller in 1926. Frank's *Der Bürger* falls somewhere between the expressionist model of abstraction and the realist novel in that while the characters are not denominated as merely abstract types their individuality is only summarily described. Further, while *Der Bürger* does presuppose capitalist society as an 'objectively unified totality', as Lukács would later insist the novel should picture it, particular phenomena are not shown in their relation to 'the essential and the driving forces' of oppression and exploitation

and the agency of the bourgeoisie is seemingly denied.²⁴ It is an omnipresent state rather than class power that is the cause, and when Frank offers a symbol of ‘civilization’, it is the prison (Frank, 1930, p. 150),²⁵ a visit to which prompts Jürgen to reflect: ‘In the bourgeois state there is no one who is responsible. . . . The system of things – that is to blame’ (151). This is something like the fetishization of the judicial system Lukács would later attack in Ernst Ottwalt’s novel, *Denn sie wissen, was sie tun* (1931) (ER 53). In 1924 Frank’s old friend from his pre-war Munich days, Johannes Becher, now turned communist, reproached him as an ‘open class traitor’ in a public letter in *Die rote Fahne* (Grobmann, 2004, pp. 63–4). Lukács, however, was still willing to see that beyond ‘all its faults’ Frank’s *Der Bürger* gave form to significant features of contemporary social experience.

Literature of the Proletarian Revolution

Juri Libedinski’s *A Week*, Lukács’s choice as ‘the most strongly formed’ instance of proletarian literature, was first published in Moscow in 1922 and appeared in English and German editions the following year.²⁶ Its plot centres on a peasant uprising in a provincial town, provoked by the forced grain requisitions of War Communism. The narrative begins and ends with Party meetings, a device that has symbolic weight partly because none of the three protagonists who dominate the opening meeting survives the book – all are brutally murdered and one undergoes gruesome torture. Several other communist characters suffer similar fates. The revolutionary process as depicted in *A Week* is a violent and pitiless struggle to ‘rebuild the lives’ of peasants who appear to the Communists as superstitious ‘savages’ that still live in the Middle Ages (Libedinsky, 1923, p. 101; cf. pp. 24–5).²⁷

Given its brevity, its short temporal span and focus on an individual episode, the book is more a novella than a novel – although a large cast of characters is contained within the 145 pages of the German edition. The Communists are extremely varied in terms of both social origin and personality, and the range of types suggests vividly that both Party and Red Army had to be built from whatever imperfect human materials were to hand. Even the Cheka officer Gornuikh – who by the end emerges as the moral centre of the narrative – regards most of his fellow Chekists as ‘a useless crowd’ (ibid., p. 77).²⁸ The Party hierarchy includes self-serving careerists and its organization is afflicted by ‘bureaucratism’, tending to ‘push forward those who knew how to speak eloquently, preside at meetings and manage them’, rather than the workmen members who could ‘do more responsible Party work and . . . with more Communistic tact’ (ibid., pp. 44–5, 112). The strength of the Communists is represented not so much by their narrow and hard-earned victory but by the succession of the Chekist Gornuikh, a former factory worker who is the first to scent the revolt and whose actions avert defeat. It is Gornuikh who is acclaimed

to preside over the meeting that ends the novel, thus rectifying the Party's unfortunate tendency to advance intellectuals to leadership roles.

The English translator of *A Week*, Arthur Ransome, described it as an 'honest piece of literary pioneering', and reported that: 'It admitted so much damaging evidence [which] mere political propaganda would attempt to rebut that it was fiercely denounced by some of the Communists as a counter-revolutionary work, though Bukharin and others warmly defended it' (ibid., pp. 10–11). More complex than 'mere political propaganda' perhaps, but Lukács might still have characterized *A Week*, no less than *Der Bürger*, as an instance of *Tendenzdichtung*. The Communists take centre stage in the narrative and for the most part have more developed personalities. None of the revolting muzhiks is endowed with a name or inner life; the former Tsarist officer who leads them looks 'handsome' and 'kindly', but turns out to be brutal and murderous. These are caricatures, not the rounded types Lukács advocated in his realist criticism of the 1930s (see ER 71, 115–16).

A Week aligns with Lukács's assertion (echoing Lenin) that 'genuine revolutionaries' are distinguished by their 'lack of illusions' – their recognition that under capitalism human beings have been 'spiritually corrupted and depraved' and their steadfast faith in the proletariat's world-historical mission despite this knowledge (PR 64–5). Communism will make new and better human beings, but for this to be realized a moral transformation has to accompany the social and institutional one (66). However, there is another aspect of the novel that I suspect made it appeal to Lukács and that adds to its heft as a political fable. This is the seventh of the book's thirteen chapters and literally its centre-piece. In Chapter Six the solid Communist Stalmakov learns that his roommate and friend the Chekist Surikov has been horribly murdered on a mission into the steppes, and carries to the Cheka president Klimin a letter Surikov asked him to deliver in the event of his death. The letter forms Chapter Seven and is in effect an apologia for its author's shortcomings as a Chekist. What makes the device vivid is its account of the episode that broke Surikov's enthusiasm for the Cheka's tasks and left him 'the shell of a man', namely the shooting of five White guards in a monastery wood on a frosty moonlit night and the dumping of their bodies in a quarry. It was not Surikov's first shooting, and to begin with he finds it unexceptional. However, this changes when Klimin orders the condemned to remove all their clothes, despite the freezing cold, so that they can be worn by others 'useful to the Republic'. Prior to this, Surikov recounts that he undertook all his Chekist work with enthusiasm, carrying out death sentences 'without the slightest tremor . . . because I knew for certain . . . that this was a bloody road, but the only road out of the horror that ruled over the lives of people in this world.' Through the experience of the moonlight executions, Surikov comes to feel an empathy for his victims that he can no longer repress – he has crossed the boundary of necessary hatred of the class enemy. However, he is emphatic that the work of the Cheka is 'the most revolutionary and the most necessary at the present time' and he does not wish to be excused from it

(Libedinsky, 1923, pp. 85–90). By contrast, while Klimin – who may be modelled on the ascetic Felix Dzerzhinsky who headed the Cheka – does not like killing, which leaves him feeling ‘somehow dirty’, he knows that he will ‘go on shooting, without end, just so long as the revolution needs it’ (ibid. pp. 92–3).²⁹

In his 1919 text, ‘Tactics and Ethics’, Lukács had asked: ‘How do conscience and the sense of responsibility of the individual relate to the tactically correct collective action?’ and answered that the individual’s conscience must be governed by his ‘necessary historico-philosophical consciousness’ rather than by a consideration of personal motives. There was no neutrality in matters of ethics and the individual must act as though ‘on his action or inaction depended the changing of the world’s destiny’ (PR 7–8). Human destinies ineluctably lead to ‘tragic situations’ in which individuals are faced with a choice between two courses either of which will leave them burdened with guilt. The correct choice is to make the sacrifice of one’s own moral purity to realize the ‘higher idea’ (PR 10–11).³⁰ Libedinski’s Surikov faced precisely this problem, but in his weakness allowed feelings of empathy to unsettle his Marxist morality and slipped into a mistaken individualist ethic. Lukács himself – of whose personal bravery during the Hungarian Council Republic there is ample testimony – reportedly did not flinch from acts of terror in that period (Kadarkay, 1991, pp. 222–4). Doubtless many readers will find his admiration for a novel that offers an apologia for revolutionary terror morally distasteful, but it was certainly true to what Lukács regarded as the ethical demands of the revolutionary process. Moreover, it is an indicator of the complexity of *A Week*, as compared with the ‘revolutionary romanticism’ of Soviet Socialist Realism, that Chapter Seven and all it contains were excised from the later East German edition (Libedinski, 1961). Yet while these features may help to explain why the novel caught Lukács’s attention, it remains a piece of *Tendenzliteratur* – its formulaic types and rudimentary psychology only point towards some new fusion of form and content to which the revolutionary process in the USSR will lead.³¹

Trotskyism

L’art pour l’art und proletarische Dichtung does not put the ‘creative methods’ of the authors it recommends ‘under the microscope’, as Lukács later would those of Willi Bredel and Ernst Ottwalt, in essays written in 1931 and 1932 (ER 63).³² His proffered exemplars of progressive tendencies stand merely as representatives for the working-class novel and bourgeois novel in capitalist societies, and the emergent literature of the Soviet proletariat; their function is hortatory, a counter to ‘the over-formed formless writing of European despair’. Given that the essay was presumably the one that *Die Tat*’s publisher had already read in January 1925,³³ it seems likely that Lukács wrote the piece in 1924. This would make the references to Frank and Libedinski more topical, and helps explain the allusion to Trotsky’s *Literature and Revolution*, which appeared in German

translation from a Vienna publisher in that year (Trotsky, 1924). Lukács's brusque dismissal of the idea that 'a new, unprecedented literature, completely distinct from all earlier developments' will suddenly emerge from the revolutionary process seems to echo Trotsky's repeated denial that 'every class can entirely and fully create its own art from within itself' and that a new style can be torn out of the future by force of will (Trotsky, 1925, pp. 179, 135–6). Similarly his sympathetic appraisals of the formal properties of *Der Bürger* and *A Week* might be read as emulating Trotsky's qualified praise for the 'revolutionary work' the Futurists had done in the sphere of poetic language, despite the movement's origins in bourgeois bohemianism, and his even more qualified and critical judgements of attempts to establish proletarian literature (ibid., pp. 143, 130–31, chapter 6). However, in relation to the latter, Lukács may have been more open to persuasion than Trotsky, who regarded Libedinski's *A Week* as formally like 'the work of a schoolboy', 'notwithstanding its marks of talent' (Trotsky, 1923, p. 26).³⁴ At any rate, for both, form had its own laws and new forms are only 'discovered, proclaimed and developed under the pressure of an inner need . . . a collective psychology,' grounded in social necessity (Trotsky, 1925, p. 233). It is probably a mark of the greater changes that were occurring in Lukács's outlook that within a year of the appearance of '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' he would be referring to the errors of Trotskyism in the German communist press (Lukács, 1927).³⁵ His process of adaptation to the realities of emergent Stalinism was beginning.

My thanks to the editors and to Michael Löwy for their helpful comments on an earlier version of this essay.

Notes

- ¹ On the 'Blum Theses', see PR xviii–xx, 227–53; also Löwy, 1979, pp. 198–201. Although '*L'art pour l'art und proletarische Dichtung*' was reprinted in Kutzbach, 1974, pp. 176–80, it is oddly omitted from the most recent Lukács bibliography – see Hartmann, 2007.
- ² See Kadarkay, 1991, chapters 10–12. Tantalizingly, Victor Serge recalled that at this time Lukács was 'engaged in writing a number of outstanding books which were never to see the light of day' (Serge, 1967, p. 187).
- ³ Löwy, 1979, p. 196; Lukács, 'Moses Hess and the Problems of Idealist Dialectics', in PR 181–223.
- ⁴ On the logic of Lukács's transition to Marxism from romantic anticapitalism, see Löwy, 1979, Parts I and 2; Arato and Breines, 1979, Part I; Márkus, 1983.
- ⁵ For the context of this, see Gluck, 1985, ch. 4.
- ⁶ On 'The Eight', see Arts Council of Great Britain, 1980.
- ⁷ See Weber: '[T]his particular idea . . . of one's duty in a calling . . . is what is most characteristic of the social ethic of capitalistic culture, and is in a sense the fundamental basis of it' (Weber, 1930, p. 54). Weber's essay was initially published in the *Archiv für Sozialwissenschaft und Sozialpolitik* in 1904–1905. Arato and Breines

have already noted the connection; see Arato and Breines, 1979, pp. 39–41. On Lukács and Weber, see Löwy, 1979, pp. 37–43, and the Weber letters in Lukács, 1986.

- ⁸ Plekhanov's lecture was published in Russian in 1912–1913; I have not been able to determine when it would have been available to Lukács.
- ⁹ 'Marxism and Literary History', in Lukács, 1983, p. 64.
- ¹⁰ On *Weltanschauung* as cultural unifier see the deeply revealing letter from Lukács to Félix Bertaud (March 1913), in Lukács, 1986, pp. 215–20.
- ¹¹ See the commentary on *Madame Bovary* in 'Tolstoy and the Development of Realism' (1936), SER 169–70.
- ¹² On *Tendenz*, see "'Tendency" or Partisanship?' (1932), in ER 33–44.
- ¹³ Doubtless partly as a result of the lyrical 1987 film based on the first volume, *Pelle Erobreren*, directed by Bille August.
- ¹⁴ For the publishing history of the novel, see the bibliography in Houmann, 1975, pp. 397–408. *Pelle* was translated into many languages, including English (1913 to 1916).
- ¹⁵ Houmann, 1975, reprints these reviews: pp. 121–2, 127–33, 195–9.
- ¹⁶ For Nexø's visits to the USSR and his attitude towards it, see also Le Bras-Barrett, 1969, ch. 18.
- ¹⁷ Lukács, 1947, reprinted in Houmann, 1975, pp. 290–4. This text is impressed with Stalinist doctrine on national cultures in a way that distinguishes it from Lukács's writings of the 1920s.
- ¹⁸ The main source I have drawn on for Frank's life is Grobmann, 2004. Frank's autobiographical novel (1954) is vivid in parts but sketchy and unreliable as biography.
- ¹⁹ Christian Schmeling, in his useful study (Schmeling, 1988), refers to Frank's 'human socialism' or 'socialism with a human face.'
- ²⁰ References are to the English edition (Frank, 1930). Schmeling, 1988, pp. 42–69, provides a helpful analysis of the novel.
- ²¹ This corresponds with the disenchantment with both SPD and KPD Frank described in his autobiography (Frank, 1954, pp. 102). *Der Bürger* makes no reference to communism, and refers only generically to 'die sozialistische Partei', not to the SPD.
- ²² See, for example, 'Marx and the Problem of Ideological Decay' (1938) in ER 137.
- ²³ 'Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline' (1934), in ER 91.
- ²⁴ Georg Lukács, 'Realism in the Balance' (1938), trans. R. Livingstone, in AP 31; 'Reportage or Portrayal?' (1932), in ER 52, cf. 59.
- ²⁵ Brooks translates 'Kultur' as civilization.
- ²⁶ References here are to the English edition (Libedinsky, 1923). For a brief account of Libedinski's career and works, see Brown, 1982, pp. 110–14.
- ²⁷ The major peasant uprisings of the civil war were one in Tambov Province in southern Russia, and another led by Nestor Makhno in the Ukraine. By comparison, the Urals region was not a major centre of banditry. See George Leggett, 1981, pp. 330–8.
- ²⁸ Cheka (ChK), or Vecheka (VChK), is the familiar term for the All-Russian Extraordinary Commission for Combating Counterrevolution and Sabotage, precursor of the KGB. In fact, the Cheka did have serious problems with

- recruiting reliable personnel; see Leggett, 1981, pp. 186–92; Serge, 1967, pp. 80–2.
- ²⁹ For Dzerzhinsky, see Leggett, 1981, pp. 250–4.
- ³⁰ The ethical struggle that Lukács underwent in his conversion to communism has been analysed by, among others: Löwy, 1979, pp. 128–44; Kadarkay, 1991, pp. 193–207; Arato and Breines, 1979, chapter 6.
- ³¹ On form and content, see Lukács, ER 59–60.
- ³² See ‘The Novels of Willi Bredel’ and ‘Reportage or Portrayal?’, in ER 23–32, 45–75.
- ³³ Eugen Diederichs to Johannes Resch, 26 January 1925, in Diederichs, 1967, pp. 292–4.
- ³⁴ Intriguingly, Edward J. Brown suggests that *A Week* indicates Libedinsky’s support for Trotskyism; Brown, 1982, p. 111.
- ³⁵ For the errors of ‘literary Trotskyism’, see Lukács, ER 39, 43, 69.

Works Cited

- Arato, A., and P. Breines (1979), *The Young Lukács and the Origins of Western Marxism*. London: Pluto Press.
- Arts Council of Great Britain (1980), *The Hungarian Avant-Garde: The Eight and the Activists*. London: Arts Council of Great Britain.
- Brown, E. J. (1982), *Russian Literature since the Revolution*. Cambridge, MA and London: Harvard University Press.
- Diederichs, E. (1967), *Selbstzeugnisse und Briefe von Zeitgenossen*. Düsseldorf and Köln: Eugen Diederichs Verlag.
- Frank, L. (1918), *Der Mensch ist gut*. Zurich: Max Rascher Verlag.
- (1924), *Der Bürger*. Berlin: Malik Verlag.
- (1930), *A Middle-Class Man*, trans. Cyrus Brooks. London: Peter Davies.
- (1954), *Heart on the Left*, trans. Cyrus Brooks. London: Arthur Barker, Ltd.
- Gluck, M. (1985), *Georg Lukács and his Generation, 1900–1918*. Cambridge, MA, and London: Harvard University Press.
- Grobmann, R. (2004), *Gefühlssozialist im 20. Jahrhundert. Leonard Frank 1882–1961*. Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang.
- Hartmann, J. (2007), ‘Chronologische Bibliographie der Werke von Georg Lukács’, in F. Benseler and W. Jung (eds), *Lukács 2006/7. Jahrbuch der internationalen Georg Lukács-Gesellschaft*. 10/11, pp. 118–80.
- Houmann, B. (ed.) (1975), *Omkring Pelle Erobreren*. Copenhagen: Hans Reitzel.
- Ingwersen, F., and N. Ingwersen (1984), *Quests for a Promised Land: The Works of Martin Andersen Nexø*. Westport, CT and London: Greenwood Press.
- Kadarkay, A. (1991), *Georg Lukács: Life, Thought, and Politics*. Cambridge, MA and Oxford: Blackwell.
- Kutzbach, K. A. (ed.) (1974), *Paul Ernst und Georg Lukács. Dokumente einer Freundschaft*. Emsdetten: Verlag Lechte.
- Le Bras-Barret, J. (1969), *Martin Andersen Nexø*. Paris: Lettres Modernes.
- Leggett, G. (1981), *The Cheka: Lenin’s Political Police*. Oxford: Clarendon Press.
- Libedinsky, I. (1923), *A Week*, trans. A. Ransome. London: George Allen & Unwin Ltd.

- Libedinski, J. N. (1923), *Eine Woche*, trans. Eduard Schiemann. Hamburg: C. Hoym Nachf.
- Libedinski, J. (1961), *Eine Woche*. Berlin: Dietz Verlag.
- Löwy, M. (1979), *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism*, trans. Patrick Camiller. London: New Left Books.
- (2005) 'Lukács's Marxism of revolutionary subjectivity', in F. Benseler and W. Jung (eds), *Lukács 2005. Jahrbuch der internationalen Georg-Lukács Gesellschaft*. 9, pp. 193–200.
- Lukács, G. (1927), 'Eine Marxkritik im Dienste des Trotzismus' (review of M. Eastman, *Marx, Lenin and the Science of Revolution*), *Die Internationale*, 10, 6, 189–90.
- (1947), 'Dichtung aus der Solidarität', in *Tägliche Rundschau*. 9 April.
- (1983), *Reviews and Articles from Die rote Fahne*, trans. Peter Palmer. London: Merlin.
- (1986), *Selected Correspondence, 1902–1920*, J. Marcus and Z. Tar (eds). New York: Columbia University Press.
- Márkus, G. (1983), 'Life and soul: the young Lukács and the problem of culture', in A. Heller (ed.), *Lukács Reappraised*. New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 1–26.
- Plekhanov, G. (1981), 'Art and social life', in G. Plekhanov, *Selected Philosophical Works*, 5 vols, trans. K. M. Cook and A. Fineberg. Moscow: Progress Publishers, Vol. 5.
- Schmeling, C. (1988), *Leonhard Frank und die Weimarer Zeit*. Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang.
- Serge, V. (1967), *Memoirs of a Revolutionary, 1901–1941*, trans. Peter Sedgwick. London: Oxford University Press.
- Trotsky, L. (1924), *Literatur und Revolution*, trans. Frida Rubiner. Vienna: Verlag für Literatur und Politik.
- (1925), *Literature and Revolution*, trans. R. Strunsky. New York: International Publishers.
- (1973), *Problems of Everyday Life and Other Writings on Culture and Science*. New York: Monad.
- Weber, M. (1930), *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Talcott Parsons. London: Unwin University Books.

Chapter 11

‘Fascinating Delusive Light’: Georg Lukács and Franz Kafka

Michael Löwy

I

Georg Lukács’s essays on literature are rightly considered among the most important works in twentieth-century Marxist aesthetics. But they are not all equally successful. One of the least satisfactory, by general consensus, is *Die gegenwartsbedeutung des kritischen Realismus* (*The Contemporary Meaning of Critical Realism*) from 1957, published in a second edition in 1958 with the title *Wider den missverstandenen Realismus* (*Against the Misunderstanding of Realism*). The book was translated into English with the title *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (1963).¹ Its most famous chapter is called ‘Franz Kafka or Thomas Mann?’

A few words on the political context: the book was written during the years 1955–1956, a time of crisis, transition and conflict in the Soviet-led Communist movement. During these years Lukács behaved at the same time as a faithful member of the movement, accepting some of the basic premises of ‘really existing socialism’, and as a figure of remarkable intellectual and political independence, as shown by his role in the Hungarian events of late 1956. This ambiguity is relevant for understanding the work under discussion.

As the author explains in a preface to the German edition of 1957 (included in the 1963 English translation), the first draft was composed in the autumn of 1955 on the basis of lectures given in Berlin, Warsaw, Rome, Florence, Bologna, Turin, Milan and Vienna (9). Stalin had been dead for two years, but ‘de-Stalinization’ had not yet begun in the USSR (nor in Hungary). This draft was revised after the Twentieth Congress of the Soviet Communist Party (the occasion of Nikita Khrushchev’s ‘secret speech’ denouncing Stalin in February 1956); the date mentioned on the last page of the book is ‘Summer 1956’. Soon afterwards, Lukács would take part in the dissident Communist government of Imre Nagy, suppressed by the Soviet invasion of Hungary at the end of 1956. Arrested by the Soviet military, but liberated a few months later, Lukács wrote a preface for the book, dated ‘Budapest, April 1957’, which contains a brief reference to the dramatic events of the previous months: ‘I began this preface in September

1956. In the meantime, in Hungary and other countries, events have occurred which demand a rethinking of certain problems connected with Stalin's legacy' (MCR 10).

In this book, apparently, Lukács is attempting to move beyond Stalinism; he often refers in positive terms to the Twentieth Congress and its denunciation of Stalin, particularly in the last chapter, which deals with Socialist Realism. But the attempt stops halfway, since he is unable to grasp the real nature of the Stalinist system. He refers to the need for a profound critique of Stalin's 'dogmatism' and his 'personality cult', but cannot give up the attempt to rescue his 'positive' aspects: 'Only on the basis of such criticism, as with Rosa Luxemburg's complex legacy, can Stalin's positive achievements be seen in perspective' (MCR 10, 117). Lukács is referring here to Lenin's well-known critical but sympathetic assessment of Rosa Luxemburg, soon after her death in 1919. However, the attempt to compare the 'positive achievements' of Joseph Vissarionovitch Djugaschvili, the tyrant who murdered most of the leaders of the October Revolution, with those of Rosa Luxemburg, who in 1918 had written a fraternal critique of the authoritarian mistakes of her Bolshevik friends, is a clear sign that the great Hungarian philosopher was still very far from an understanding of the true meaning of Stalinism.

In any case, the political context of those years, for the Soviet Union and the Communist movement, was the Peace Movement, and the struggle for 'Peaceful Coexistence'. One of the book's main shortcomings is Lukács's tendency – a remaining legacy of the Stalinist period – to analyse and judge literary works according to a somewhat narrow political question: their coincidence or not with the Peace Movement. Thus, a burden of Lukács's contrasting treatment of Franz Kafka and Thomas Mann rests on his belief in a 'convergence' between two antagonistic pairings: 'the antithesis between realism and modernism and the antithesis between peace and war' (MCR 15). Modernist literature, of which Kafka, of course, is representative, is guilty of a philosophical 'fatalism' which is resigned to the 'inevitability of war' (*ibid.*). Furthermore, vanguardist/modernist works of art based on 'angst' cannot 'avoid – objectively speaking – guilt by association with Hitlerism and the preparations for atomic war' (MCR 81). There is no need to insist on the highly artificial character of Lukács's construction in these pages.

For these and other reasons, the book became notorious. It was sharply criticised by Theodor Adorno in an essay entitled 'Extorted Reconciliation', which takes the side of the modernist authors – Beckett, Kafka, Musil – and rejects outright, as a fetishistic adherence to vulgar materialism, the Lukácsian view that art should be the 'reflection of objective reality' (Adorno 1991, p. 218) – or the 'depiction [*Abbildung*] of empirical reality' (219).

Despite these shortcomings, and some others that we will discuss later on, the book has some interesting insights; the author's culture and intelligence – as evident in his major works, from *History and Class Consciousness* (1923) until his later essays on Hegel, Balzac, Goethe and Mann – is such that even his weakest writing raises interesting questions.

For instance, Lukács is one of the few Marxist authors to acknowledge, as early as 1956, the importance of Walter Benjamin's writings, which were collected by Adorno and Gershom Scholem in two volumes in 1955. Discussing Benjamin's early work on German Baroque drama, he emphasizes the importance of Benjamin's definition of allegory as a procedure that is able to grasp 'the *facies hippocratica* of history' as a 'petrified primeval landscape' (MCR 41).² That is to say, the sick and deadly – the *facies hippocratica* – dimension of the historical process is perceived, in allegory, as a field of ruins, a landscape of desolation and disaster. In Lukács's view, Benjamin provides the first basis for a philosophical comprehension of the aesthetic paradoxes of modernist art in general, and of Kafka, its greatest literary figure, in particular. This attempt to interpret the significance of Kafka's works as an allegory which perceives the *facies hippocratica* of history as a 'petrified landscape' is insightful, and highlights the *critical* power of his writings. Lukács also quotes from Benjamin's 'brilliant essay on Kafka': 'his profoundest experience is of the hopelessness, the utter meaninglessness, of man's world, and particularly that of present-day bourgeois man' (MCR 44). These references are central to Lukács's argument that Kafka's art is essentially allegorical – an argument that is one-sided but at least partially adequate.

In spite of his critical distance, Lukács doesn't hide his admiration for Kafka: there are few writers, he insists, where a spontaneous seizure and representation of the world has been so powerfully given shape; the intensity of his writing is reinforced by his 'passionate sincerity' – a rare quality among present-day authors. The originality and singularity of Kafka's work lies not in its formal innovations but in its utterly convincing presentation of a world of objects and his characters' reactions towards it, a presentation that is 'at the same time suggestive and provoking indignation' [*Empörung hervorruhende*] (77–8, WR 86–7, translation altered).³

Lukács also has some interesting things to say about Kafka's 'religious atheism', the feeling of God-forsakenness of the world [*Gottverlassenheit der Welt*] (MCR 44). Kafka's God, like the 'supreme judges' in *The Trial*, or the administrative bureaucracy of *The Castle*, represent 'transcendence in Kafka's allegories: the transcendence of Nothingness [*das Nichts*]' (44). If there is a God here, adds Lukács, it is 'the God of religious atheism: *atheos absconditus*' (44). Such comments recall those of Gershom Scholem and Benjamin on Kafka's negative theology, a theology of the absence of God, of his 'Nothingness'.

But even for Lukács, and despite what he himself seems to suggest, this doesn't mean that Kafka's work is nothing more than an 'allegory of a transcendent Nothingness' (53). The fate of Joseph K. in *The Trial*, victim of a powerful and absurd bureaucratic machine, is not related to a 'transcendent Nothing', but to the political structures of modern society. As Lukács himself emphasizes, the reality described by Kafka is the world of the lower 'organs' of power, whose behaviour is brutal, corrupt, unjust, bureaucratic and irresponsible: it is 'a picture of the capitalist society (with some Austrian local colour)'

(44, WR 46, translation altered). For Lukács, 'the diabolical character of the world of modern capitalism, and man's impotence in the face of it, is the real subject-matter of Kafka's writings' (77, WR 87). Lukács even acknowledges that Kafka's novels have a sort of prophetic quality, insofar as they perceive in the old Hapsburg monarchy the historical foundation of the diabolical world of fascism. Kafka fears – is terrified of – the totally reified world of imperialist capitalism, a fear that 'anticipat[es] its later fascist progeny' (52, WR 56). Considering these arguments, why doesn't Kafka qualify as a critical realist author? Do not his writings, too, provoke in the reader a feeling of indignation? Isn't a radically critical attitude towards capitalist reality a decisive moment of his literary work?

Lukács does not shrink from these questions, but he seems to hesitate in his answer. He observes, in a lucid comment, that realism and antirealism can co-exist in the writings of the same author. The case of Kafka, he admits, is 'complex'; unlike most other modernist writers, he is not a naturalist: his presentation of the details is founded on a selective perception (52). Essential, significant moments are emphasized, according to the principles of realism, while the inessential are 'subtracted' (53). Immediacy of presentation is a main reason why 'Kafka belongs with the great realistic writers' (77). Indeed, adds Lukács, 'he is one of the greatest of all, if we consider how few writers have ever equalled his skill in the imaginative evocation of the concrete novelty of the world' (77). It is difficult to imagine higher praise. Lukács notes that one of the great realist authors, Thomas Mann, has shown sympathy for Kafka's attempt to 'widen the scope of realism' in order to find an adequate form for the specific content of the present world (50).

Lukács himself, however, is not yet ready to accept such a 'wider' perspective. In the last analysis, he insists, Kafka was not a realist. This insistence probably has to do with Lukács's own definition of realism which uses the very problematic concept of 'reflection': that literary realism is 'a truthful reflection of reality' – as if the creative mind of a writer could be compared to a mirror (23). Since Kafka's writings do not fit such a criterion, Lukács is not willing to include him alongside Thomas and Heinrich Mann, Bernard Shaw and Theodor Dreiser, Anatole France and Romain Rolland, critical realist authors who represent a 'humanist revolt' against imperialism (16).

Such arguments remain part of the debate between the various conflicting interpretations of Kafka's works; others, however, are wide of the mark. Let us discuss them briefly, one at a time.

1. Lukács claims that Kafka's universe is dreamlike, that he presents the world as a nightmare (26). This is certainly accurate, but why should the fact that a writer presents capitalist reality as a nightmare make him less important or less relevant from a Marxist perspective? Also, according to Lukács, all 'modernist' authors, Kafka included, share 'the conviction that this subjective experience constitutes reality as such' (51). How can an artist or writer

- experience reality if not through his own subjective experience? The stark opposition between modernist subjectivism and critical realism as the 'truthful reflection' of objective reality now looks itself decidedly undialectical.
2. The 'extraordinarily expressive details' in Kafka's writings are nothing but allegories, says Lukács, 'cryptic signs [*Chiffrezeichen*] of an unfathomable transcendence [*unfassbaren Jenseits*]' (78, WR 87–8). This interpretation seems to be influenced by Max Brod, who considered *The Castle* to be an allegory of divine grace, but such approaches are rejected by most contemporary scholarship. There is nothing in the novel that suggests that the Castle is anything other than the seat of a worldly absurd and unjust power. Some of Kafka's writings, such as 'The Metamorphosis', do have an allegoric quality, but this is far from true of the three novels.
 3. Kafka's writings present the existing reality as a timeless '*condition humaine*', says Lukács (MCR 78). This view has been developed mainly by conservative or reactionary scholars, but is generally rejected by Kafka's leftist readers, from Benjamin and Kurt Tucholsky to Adorno. It also contradicts Lukács's own comment that Kafka's novels give us 'a picture of capitalist society'. In fact, there is nothing in the novels that indicates that they are dealing with an abstract and eternal human condition.
 4. Finally, Kafka's angst, according to Lukács, 'is the experience *par excellence* of modernism' (36): he is 'the classical example of the modern writer at the mercy of a blind and panic-stricken *angst*' (77). Angst is certainly an important element in several of Kafka's writings, particularly his short stories, but to reduce his essential structure of feeling to 'blind fear' ignores the subtle irony – the 'black humour', as André Breton called it – of his novels. Far from being paralysed by 'panic-stricken angst', the protagonists of *America* and *The Castle* keep obstinately struggling for their rights and resisting the absurd and unjust authorities; the same applies to Joseph K. in *The Trial*, with the exception of the last page.

Lukács's conclusion is that one has to choose: either Mann or Kafka, either 'social sanity' or 'morbidity' (80). The association of Mann with health is rather ironic, given that – unlike in Kafka – morbidity and sickness occupy a central place in some of his most important novels: *Death in Venice*, *The Magic Mountain*, *Doctor Faustus*.

In a more developed part of Lukács's argument, the choice between Kafka and Mann is presented as one between 'an aesthetically appealing, but decadent modernism, and a fruitful critical realism' (92). The correct choice is supposed to have been made easier by 'the imminent defeat of Cold War policies' and 'the new perspective of peaceful coexistence among the nations' which permit us to overcome 'the all-pervading fatalistic *angst*' (ibid.). Regrettably, Lukács refuses to consider both authors as different but not incompatible forms of humanist and critical literature. Against Mann's own view of Kafka, Lukács constructs an artificial and abstract choice, mixing together Soviet

foreign policy ('peaceful coexistence'), the dogmatic pseudo-Marxist concept of 'decadence', and an extremely narrow view of critical realism, which excludes 'pessimistic' authors, lacking 'the faith in human progress' (91). For all this, what is clear is that Lukács cannot avoid being impressed by what he calls Kafka's 'extraordinary evocative power', by his 'unique sensibility' (45), and by the 'fascinating delusive light [*Irrlicht*]' of his art (78, WR 88, translation altered).

II

The greatness of a thinker lies in his capacity to correct his mistakes. Less than ten years after writing *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, Lukács apparently revised his judgement on the Prague writer. Before examining the details of that change of heart, we may well ask: what motivated it? Several events took place in the intervening years that may have contributed to the new attitude. First, one can mention a curious story told by Lukács himself to his disciples. After the suppression of the Hungarian revolution in 1956, Lukács was imprisoned by the Soviet authorities, together with Imre Nagy and other dissident communists, in a Romanian fortress. While waiting to be judged he had no idea of the accusations weighing on him; indeed, it is not clear even now under which authority he was to be tried: A Soviet Court? The new Hungarian authorities? The KGB? One day, during this long and disquieting period which lasted several months, from the end of 1956 to the spring of 1957, on the occasion of a walk in the prison's courtyard, György Lukács turned to his wife and made the following remark: '*Kafka war doch ein Realist*' (After all, Kafka was a realist).⁴

However, the context of this remark does not seem quite sufficient to explain the later change of attitude, since in the preface to the book on critical realism, written shortly after this episode, in April 1957, no new assessment of the author of *The Trial* is offered. It is more likely that the need for a new interpretation was prompted by an important political and cultural event a few years later: the international conference on Kafka organized by communist writers and literary critics in the Czech town of Liblice in May 1963. Among the participants were well-known Marxist scholars and writers such as Ernst Fischer, Eduard Goldstücker, Anna Seghers and Klaus Hermsdorf. Lukács was not in attendance, but he certainly heard reports about it, and may well have had access to its proceedings, even before they were published in German (under the title *Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht*).

Several speakers, starting with Goldstücker, the Czech organizer of the conference, took the position that Kafka was a realist author. Ernst Fischer's intervention was without doubt the most impressive. Directly answering Lukács's choice of Mann against Kafka, the Austrian Communist leader and literary critic argued that *Buddenbrooks* did not penetrate as deeply into the obscurity of the late capitalist world as the fragmentary novel *The Trial* (Fischer, 1981, p. 85).

While Mann retrospectively describes the development of the bourgeoisie, Kafka looks forward and discovers in the details of today the hell of tomorrow. Reality, insists Fischer, cannot be reduced, as the dogmatists insist, to the outside world: is not the subjective experience of this world an important part of reality? (77). As for Kafka's 'negativism', no writer is obliged to offer solutions. Kafka's 'question marks are often richer in content than frequent and too boldly printed exclamation marks' (93). Some of these arguments could already be found in Lukács's essay; but Fischer's conclusions are very different.

We do not know whether Lukács was influenced by these and similar arguments developed during the Liblice conference of 1963, a cultural event that opened the way for the 'Prague Spring' of 1968. In any case, 18 months later, in December 1964, Lukács wrote a preface to the sixth volume of his complete works in German, published under the title *Probleme des Realismus III*, which offers a new assessment of Kafka. His viewpoint is not developed, but he suggests an analysis of the Prague writer that is exactly the opposite of his previous arguments.

Lukács's argument begins with Jonathan Swift, in his eyes a great realist who deals in his works with a whole human epoch, conceived not as a *condition humaine* but in its historical specificity. 'In our time, something analogous is offered only by Kafka,' says Lukács now, 'who sets in motion an entire epoch of inhumanity [*eine ganze Periode der Unmenschlichkeit*].' Kafka's world

contains a profound and disturbing truth. It stands in contrast to that which [in other writers] is aimed directly at the pure, abstract . . . generality of human existence, which has no historical background, basis, or perspective and thus ends up always striking at perfect emptiness and nothingness. (V 9; EE 223)⁵

Instead of a choice, 'Franz Kafka or Jonathan Swift', Lukács analyses both as examples of critical literature – grasping the specific historical aspects of their societies – rather than as examples of an abstract and timeless *condition humaine*. It is unfortunate that Lukács did not produce a new essay developing this view of the value of Kafka's work as a profound diagnosis of modern inhumanity.

III

Was Kafka a realist writer or not? I would argue that Kafka's novels and tales defy such classifications: they establish themselves in a no man's land, a border territory between reality and 'irreality'. Kafka's writings do not fall into the classical realistic canon because of their disquieting oneiric atmosphere: the author seems to erase, silently, discreetly, systematically, any distinction between dream and reality. His visionary power flows precisely from this subjective approach, which, being neither 'realist' nor 'antirealist', illuminates social reality from within.⁶

According to Lukács, realism and modernism 'are to be found in one and the same individual', not as discrete stages of development but 'at one and the same time' (MCR 16). This is a crucial observation, one that perfectly suits the case of Kafka. I would argue that in Kafka's writings, critical realism is interwoven with something else, which I would call 'critical irrationalism.'⁷ With this coinage, which does not exist as a critical term, I designate works that do not follow the rules of the accurate representation of life as it really is – the standard definition of realism – but which are nevertheless critical of social reality and contain a powerful, explicit or implicit, negative charge challenging the philistine bourgeois order. The word 'critique' should not be understood necessarily as a rational argument, a systematic opposition or formal discourse; more often, in irrealist art, critique takes the form of protest, outrage, disgust, anxiety, even angst, the feeling so thoroughly disparaged by Lukács.

Critical irrationalism is not an alternative, a substitute, or a rival to critical realism: it is simply a different form of literature and art which does not attempt, in one way or another, to 'reflect' reality. Might not critical irrationalism be conceived as complementary to critical realism? Are they not both fruitful, but in distinct manners and using distinct methods? By creating an imaginary world, composed of fantastic, supernatural, nightmarish or just nonexistent forms, can it not critically illuminate aspects of reality, in a way that sharply distinguishes itself from the realist tradition?

The concept of critical irrationalism permits one to define a large and important territory in the aesthetic sphere and give it a positive content, instead of just ignoring it, or rejecting it for the *tenebrae exterioris* of realism. Adepts of the realist canon often seem to consider nonrealist art as a residual category, a dustbin of aesthetics where one must dump all irrelevant, unimportant or inferior works, disqualified by the lack of the most important requisite of accomplished art: fidelity to real life. This is a serious mistake, not only because it leaves out important works of art, but because it is blind to the capacity of critical irrealist art to help us understand and transform reality.

A good example of the inseparable combination of critical realism and irrealism in Kafka is his short story 'In the Penal Colony' (1914). This disturbing work describes, in realist terms, a purely imaginary – unreal – machine, invented by the Commander of a penal colony in order to torture and execute prisoners by inscribing on their body the words of the sentence that condemned them. The narrative turns around this deadly appliance, its origin, its social and political meaning, its automatic functioning. There is no need to move it by hand, since 'it works all by itself' (Kafka, 1971, p. 141). The human characters in the story play a role only in relation to this central device. The machine, whose 'movements are all precisely calculated', appears more and more in the explanations of the officer in charge of it as an end in itself (143). The officer himself serves only the machine, an insatiable Moloch for which he finally sacrifices his life. A fetish created by human beings, the mechanical thing becomes a power in itself which dominates and destroys them.

Of which specific human-sacrificial ‘machine’ was Kafka thinking? ‘In the Penal Colony’ was written in October 1914, three months after the beginning of World War I. The war was for Kafka a mechanical process in two senses: first, insofar as it was the first really modern war, the first one where the confrontation of ‘killing machines’ had such an important role. In a document he produced in 1916 – a call for the building of a hospital for the treatment of nervous illnesses produced by the war – Kafka observed: ‘the enormously intensified role of machines in the operation of war today generates the most serious dangers and suffering for the nerves of the soldiers’ (Kafka, 1973, p. 764). Second, the world war itself was a sort of blind system of gearwheels, a murderous and inhuman mechanism escaping any human control.

‘In the Penal Colony’ can be considered an allegory in the sense Benjamin gave to this term, and as discussed by Lukács. It is an allegory of what Lukács called, speaking of Kafka, ‘the diabolical character of modern capitalism’ (MCR 77), presenting ‘the *facies hippocratica* of history’ as ‘a petrified primeval landscape’ (MCR 41).

Notwithstanding the critical voice with which he presents his assessment of Kafka, Lukács gives us important tools to understand his writing. It is time for us to look beyond his often catastrophic aesthetic judgements to his broad philosophical approach. The importance of Lukács’s writings on Kafka in the history of the Marxist interpretation of modernist literature is as much due to their contradictions and tensions as it is in spite of them.

Notes

¹ References to the English edition throughout are indicated using the abbreviation ‘MCR’; references to the 1958 German edition are indicated by ‘WR’.

² See Benjamin, 1998, p. 166.

³ The English translation renders this passage as follows: ‘His originality lies not in discovering any new means of expression but in the utterly convincing, and yet continually startling, presentation of his invented world, and of his characters’ reaction to it’ (MCR 77).

⁴ This story was told to me by Lukács’s followers, Agnes Heller and Ferenc Fehér. It is also mentioned in Raddatz, 1972, p. 116.

⁵ See ‘An Entire Epoch of Inhumanity’, trans. Zachary Sng, included as an appendix in the present volume.

⁶ For a development of this argument see Löwy, 2004.

⁷ I discuss this concept in more detail in Löwy, 2007.

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. W. (1991), ‘Extorted reconciliation’, in *Notes to Literature Vol. 1.*, trans. S. Nicholsen. New York: Columbia University Press.

- Benjamin, W. (1998), *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, trans. J. Osborne. London: Verso.
- Breton, A. (2009), *Anthology of Black Humour*, trans. Mark Polizzotti. London: Telegram.
- Fischer, E. (1981), 'Kafka conference', in K. Hughes (ed.), *Franz Kafka: An Anthology of Marxist Criticism*. London: University Press of New England.
- Kafka, F. (1971), 'In the Penal Colony', trans. W. and E. Muir and ed. N. Glatzer, *The Complete Stories*. New York: Schocken.
- (1973), *Letters to Felice*, trans. J. Stern and E. Duckworth. E. Heller and J. Born (eds), New York: Schocken.
- Löwy, M. (2007), 'The current of critical irrealism: "A moonlit enchanted night"', in M. Beaumont (ed.), *Adventures in Realism*. London: Blackwell.
- (2004), *Franz Kafka, rêveur insoumis*. Paris: Stock.
- Raddatz, F. (1972), *Lukács*. Reinbek bei Hamburg: Rowohlt.
- Reimann, P. and E. Goldstücker (1965), *Franz Kafka aus Prager Sicht*. Prague: Academia.

Chapter 12

The Historical Novel After Lukács

John Marx

Georg Lukács's *The Historical Novel* may be credited with many things, but perhaps none is so important as its formula for linking the individual to society. Lukács announces his interest in the relationship between these two terms on his first page, declaring that what 'is lacking in the so-called historical novel before Sir Walter Scott is precisely the . . . derivation of the individuality of characters from the historical peculiarity of their age' (HN 19), and adding later that Scott's characters 'always represent social trends' in their 'psychology and destiny' (HN 34). Summing up the significance of this explanation for how characters distinguished 'by their *typicality*' stand 'for something larger and more meaningful than themselves', Fredric Jameson credits *The Historical Novel* with defining 'what is distinctive in realism' (Jameson, 1971, p. 191). Lukács helped make it habitual for scholars to think of novels as well equipped to correlate individual development with social change. Without this conventional understanding of what novels are good at, we would certainly find it more challenging to construct national allegories or to explain what is distinctive about the way fiction represents historical situations.

The individual, however, is not the only social unit to figure prominently in *The Historical Novel*. Lukács also dwells on the activities of the Highland clans who populate the Waverley novels and the heterogeneous groups that battle their way through Scott's medieval fiction. What appears intriguing about these assemblages has little to do with the representative quality of any single character within them. In fact, what draws Lukács's attention is the alternative such groups offer to individualism. In *The Theory of the Novel* Lukács was dismissive of Scott's 'hankering after times when the artist could draw with more generous lines or paint with brighter colors than today' (TN 115). 'The flight from the present is of no use whatever', he argued there (116). He is less dismissive when he revisits *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe* in *The Historical Novel*, by which point he has become invested in differentiating between species of historical fiction, and is no longer inclined to label it all 'disillusioned romanticism' (TN 116). Scott's novels present what Lukács calls a 'prehistory' for the present day, and thereby make visible conflicting aspects of contemporary social life (HN 61).

Scott's fiction not only imagines precedents for bourgeois individualism, but anticipates another, less heralded bourgeois attribute, that of interpersonal bonding. In order to understand the formula wherein, according to Lukács, the typical characters of Scott's novels are understood to represent social trends, we need to consider not only the individuality of his characters but also their fondness for joining groups.

To argue thus is both to reinterpret *The Historical Novel* and to engage with ongoing debates about the relationship between the novel and individualism. That these projects go together is indicated by Jameson's account of how Lukács treats his object of study. 'The framework of the work of art', Jameson writes in *Marxism and Form*, 'is individual lived experience, and it is in terms of these limits that the outside world remains stubbornly alienated. . . . [T]his life on two irreconcilable levels corresponds to a basic fault in the very structure of the modern world' (Jameson, 1971, p. 169). With his famous definition of the novel as 'the epic of a world that has been abandoned by God', Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel* identifies a modern incapacity to reconcile totality and experience as necessarily defining 'the productive limits of the possibilities of the novel' (TN 88). Few works that Lukács considers in *The Theory of the Novel* test those limits so forcefully as *L'Education sentimentale*, wherein 'the hero's inner life' appears every bit as 'fragmentary as the outside world' (TN 124–5). In *The Historical Novel* the framework is different. God has little to do with Lukács's connection of 'the struggle of the Saxons and Normans', as portrayed in Scott's *Ivanhoe*, to 'the class struggle between bourgeoisie and proletariat' (HN 32–3). Without suggesting that we return to the polarizing distinction between the early and the late Lukács,¹ it seems necessary to differentiate the claims of his two most celebrated works on fiction. Instead of experience and totality, *The Historical Novel* distinguishes forms of assemblage that exacerbate heterogeneity from the contrasting containment of the heterogeneous that he associates with bourgeois nationalism.

By pining for Highland life even after the Highlanders' defeat, *Waverley* keeps alive an affiliation that we might otherwise conclude was eclipsed by the rise of the bourgeoisie. Even as Scott's characters anticipate the 'narrow-minded features of the English "middle class"', they preserve their connection to the very modes of social organization that middle-class life threatened to displace (HN 35). The editors of *Aesthetics and Politics*, the important anthology published by New Left Books in 1977, argue that for Lukács, 'literary history composed an ordered and univocal past whose meaning and value were fixed by the wider history that determined it' (AP 13). However, I am not convinced that *The Historical Novel* presents the past in this way at all. By positioning *Waverley* as leaning forward towards bourgeois modernity and back towards clan life, I read Lukács as identifying a temporal unevenness in which the past is far from univocal.

Although *The Historical Novel* displays an interest in heterogeneous assemblage, Lukács does not treat these associations in a particularly systematic way. In fact, *The Historical Novel* engenders two competing trajectories for historical

fiction. One associates bourgeois individuality with a late-eighteenth-century rise and mid-nineteenth-century fall. Decline sets in as both the genre of historical fiction and an ethos of individual liberty cease to be capable of representing national populations in their entirety. The other trajectory focuses on narratives of pre- and trans-national affiliation, has less teleological momentum and is convinced that the medieval remnants of *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe* are never fully subsumed within the bourgeois nation. Lukács does not tell us what happens to intra- and inter-clan ties in later historical fiction. My point in this essay is to demonstrate that he could have done. The most obvious and perhaps also the most sensible explanation of why he does not is that stories of such assemblages hardly reinforce the notion of modernity as a radical break from the past. For all that he may attune his readers to medieval holdovers in *The Historical Novel*, Lukács remains largely committed to a notion of epochal change. In the last section of this essay, I will flesh out a genealogy for historical fiction that is less committed to such a notion, a genealogy that Lukács enables, even if he never fully explored it himself.²

Ian Watt is largely responsible for our sense of the novel as a genre ‘governed by the idea of every individual’s intrinsic independence both from other individuals and from that multifarious allegiance to past modes of thought and action denoted by the word “tradition” – a force that is always social, not individual’ (Watt, 1957, p. 60). Subsequent efforts to enumerate the literary forms Watt banishes to the realm of ‘tradition’ have tended to repeat his linking of the novel’s rise to an epochal shift. Katie Trumpener, for instance, stipulates that if the national tale before *Waverley*

habitually presents a regionalist chronotope so strong that it pulls cosmopolitan modern travelers back into it, the historical novel presents a violent struggle between different possible future worlds derivable from the same past, a process complete only when a particular present subsumes the past, with all its historiographical and narrative possibilities. (Trumpener, 1997, p. 151)

Lukács’s account of *Waverley* is particularly alert to those aspects of the past that do not get subsumed. Subsequent examples of the historical novel that keep alive narrative possibilities for depicting even seemingly traditional assemblages might also be mentioned. Such examples show us that the historical novel never became fully and completely devoted to the society of individuals that Watt invokes.³

In Nancy Armstrong’s account, the novel’s production of the individual takes place only by invalidating ‘competing notions of the subject – often proposed by other novels – as idiosyncratic, less than fully human, fantastic, or dangerous’ (Armstrong, 2005, p. 3). Watt imagines that this competition was more or less over by the beginning of the nineteenth century, whereupon the novel proceeded to consolidate both itself and its privileged subject. Trumpener agrees, while locating continued resistance in marginalized types of fiction.

In contrast to both, Armstrong portrays an ongoing contest within the novel form itself. If Watt's novel is sure of its project and dismissive of Trumpener's alternatives, Armstrong's novel appears as 'a cultural category and a bundle of rhetorical figures that were extremely fragile and always on the defensive' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 3). Even during periods 'when the novel was consolidating the formal conventions of the genre', she argues, 'there were periodic outbreaks of new and remarkable versions of the gothic, along with a proliferation of subgenres' that would qualify neither as participants in Watt's rise nor Trumpener's resistance (Armstrong, 2005, p. 23). I am relying on Armstrong's depiction of an adaptable but defensive novel in my assessment of whether the novel, for Lukács, was ever fully convinced that its exclusive duty lay in producing individuals in the first place.

From its first appearance in the novel, as even Watt allows, the individual requires supplementation. Watt finds it 'appropriate' that *Robinson Crusoe* should feature a character whose individuality registers as lonely isolation (Watt, 1957, p. 86). On his island, Watt argues, Crusoe 'drew attention to the opportunity and the need of building up a network of personal relationships on a new and conscious pattern' (92). This lesson is latent in Lukács's reading of *Waverley*; but where *The Rise of the Novel* can only conceive of such networks as constituting a break with older social relations, *The Historical Novel* frames *Waverley*'s interpersonal connections through reference to their antecedents. When Scott's hero refuses to let go of clan life, he anticipates a whole cast of subsequent novelistic characters who cling to seemingly anachronistic or idiosyncratic groups. Such groups, far from being anachronistic, are in fact quite typical of novels that present alternatives to those fictions committed to individualism, nations of free-thinking citizens, and the myth of modernity as break. Novels about group association are not any less bourgeois, however. Lukács allows us to imagine a genre of historical fiction that, because detached from bourgeois nationalism and its individualized subjects, is ever more free to follow bourgeois assemblies in their adventures around the globe.

The Contradictions of Historical Fiction

Even as bonds among Scots and Englishmen, Saxons and Normans anticipate British union in Scott's fiction, the way his characters collaborate across ethnic, religious and linguistic lines suggests their interest in transnational alliance. A proclivity to connect is, according to Marx's *Manifesto*, the counterpoint to bourgeois 'political centralization', the 'lump[ing] together into one nation' of loosely connected towns and provinces (Marx, 1994, p. 163). 'The world for the bourgeois is a room', says T. J. Clark (2009). Lukács concurs, describing a bourgeois soul that compensates for the limited 'destinies which life has to offer' by evolving an interiority 'like a cosmos . . . self-sufficient, at rest within itself' (TN 112). But this is only one aspect of the bourgeois world. Even as it

lumps together in nations, settles down in private homes and turns increasingly inward, the bourgeoisie simultaneously lights out for the territories. It is 'chased over the whole surface of the globe' in the *Manifesto*: 'It must nestle everywhere, settle everywhere, establish connexions everywhere' (Marx, 1994, p. 162).

When the historical novel represents this combination of centrifugal and centripetal inclination, an imperial framework is implied. The historical novel gives narrative shape to a British Empire that abandoned the seventeenth-century model of plunder and trade but never entirely decided whether the new goal was to consolidate rule or to extend commerce. Britain famously did both, of course, converting colonial subjects into little Britons and establishing profitable trading networks among cities and regions that it had no intention of governing. If the drive to colonize underwrites what Lukács calls Scott's portrayal of 'the necessary downfall of gentile society' (which clears the way for unification), the desire to connect structures his 'portrayal of the survivals of past gentile society' (which reproduce the possibility for cross-cultural exchange) (HN 56–7). These competing themes famously organize the conclusion of *Waverley*. Edward settles down with Rose Bradwardine in a marriage that promises to wed English core to Scottish periphery, but he pines for the pleasures of exotic commerce with Flora MacIvor. Extrapolating from this example, Lukács fashions a genre defined by its simultaneous presentation of 'historical necessity . . . of the most severe, implacable kind' and of narratives that derive their energy from rendering 'opposing social forces . . . brought into a human relationship with one another' (HN 58, 36). Even as history dooms the clan, it elevates characters who live to bridge populations, to forge cosmopolitan friendships, to fall in love with enemies of their home nations and to collaborate with strangers of all sorts.

Anthony Jarrells argues that Scott manages to preserve the very clans whose destruction his plots recount by separating the 'political' life of Scotland from its 'cultural' forms (Jarrells, 2004, p. 30). In so doing, the conquest of Scottish society in no way thwarts the imaginative project of narrating transnational exchange. Such contradiction does, however, give Scott's account of British history a rhythm of uneven development. James Chandler observes that the 'Postscript' to *Waverley* presents Scotland rapidly advancing in the century after the Union of 1707, outpacing the steady but slower progress experienced by England. 'In Scott's reckoning', he relates, 'the time of Scotland, at least in the period we date to the eighteenth century, moves faster than the time of England by a ratio of more than a century to a generation' (132). What Lukács calls Scott's 'application to history of the creative principles of the great English realist writers' may be thought of as a literary technique for synchronizing English and Scottish temporality (HN 63). By rendering Highland culture using the same tools used to represent relations within England, Scott made it possible to think them together. By portraying Highland culture as an atavistic reminder of England's past, Scott made it possible to think of Union as something other than assimilation.

Useful as this contradiction was for generating an account of Union that preserved cosmopolitan exchange, the 'Dedicatory Epistle' to *Ivanhoe* suggests that Scott was formulating a rhetorical mode equally suitable for British expansion in North America. According to the Epistle, Scotland's past offers a glimpse of the present as experienced by far-flung clans. 'It was not above sixty or seventy years' ago, writes its fictional author Laurence Templeton, 'that the whole north of Scotland was under a state of government nearly as simple and as patriarchal as those of our good allies the Mohawks and the Iroquois' (6). In this instance of what Johannes Fabian calls the denial of coevalness, Scott offers a trans-Atlantic variation upon the dynamic that governs Scottish and English relations in *Waverley* (Fabian, 1985, p. 25).⁴ Like the Scots, the Mohawks and the Iroquois appear capable of being portrayed as both culturally different from and politically allied to the English. What Lukács characterizes as historical fiction's ability to render the past as 'the *necessary prehistory* of the present' becomes thinkable as the rhetorical foundation for global connection as well as national development (HN 61).

Such might be thought of as the *macro* scale of Scott's project; but we find those same contradictions reiterated at the *micro* scale of interpersonal relations.

Lukácsian Packs

Armstrong maintains that by throwing his weight behind 'such disappointingly ordinary human beings' as the eponymous protagonist of *Waverley*, Scott testifies to the loss entailed by 'the limited definition of community that ushers in the age of realism' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 78). Instead of running wild with Flora MacIvor, *Waverley* settles for the 'prosaic conventions of marriage' to Rose Bradwardine – a woman with 'all the features that would eventually characterize the Victorian angel in the house' (Armstrong, 2005, p. 666). This marriage provides the means for *Waverley* to interlock narratives of interpersonal and international coalition. However, readers who agree that Edward settles down when he decides to marry Rose may find it difficult to treat such a conclusion as entirely conclusive. It is surely tempting to compare the unsatisfying marriage of Edward and Rose to the slew of more satisfying and exciting relationships the novel depicts earlier in the story. Any telos that drives Scott's hero into Rose's arms appears mitigated by the novel's status as a catalogue of alternative sorts of assemblage. We are only too aware of what *Waverley* has to give up in order to settle down.

Lukács encourages this reading when he describes 'Scott's great art' as consisting 'precisely in individualizing his historical heroes in such a way that certain, purely individual traits of character, quite peculiar to them, are brought into a very complex, very live relationship with the age in which they live' (HN 47). The individual is of little interest on its own, he observes, and requires

an interpersonal supplement to bring idiosyncratic 'traits of character' to life. By focusing on relationship, Lukács argues, Scott represents 'the significant qualities of the "historical individual" in such a way that it neglects none of the complex, capillary factors of development in the whole society' (HN 127). Individuality both emerges out of and is subordinated to 'the complex interaction of human beings, human relations, institutions, things, etc.' (HN 140).

Readers of novels, however, have generally paid more attention to individuals in Scott than to the relational mechanism that defines them. Retracing Lukács's argument helps us to see how the very mediocrity of Scott's heroes emphasizes a process of character definition, rather than its product. Lukács tells us that '[t]he relative lack of contour to their personalities' should direct us to what Scott's characters do instead of mulling over what they are (HN 128). '[T]he absence of passions which would cause them to take up major, decisive, one-sided positions, their contact with each of the contending hostile camps etc.' is what 'makes them especially suited, to express adequately, in their own destinies, the complex ramifications of events in a novel' (HN 128). In sum, Scott's eponymous heroes deserve our interest less because they isolate the salient characteristics of bourgeois individuality than because their actions reveal what forming connections and joining packs did for the nascent bourgeoisie. It not only got them out of the house, it also set them off on adventures in and around the British Isles and the larger world.

It is 'a law of literary portrayal which at first appears paradoxical', Lukács avers, that in order to show how populations change, 'smaller . . . relationships are better suited than the great monumental dramas of world history' (HN 42). One wants characters who are gregarious like Waverley, whose habit of falling into 'personal friendships and love entanglements' leads him from History's margins into the 'camps of the rebellious Stuart supporters' (HN 37). Waverley's sociability is a source of narrative efficiency: by tracing his alliances, Scott shows how the actions of 'a limited number of characters and destinies . . . specially selected and grouped' can reveal 'the way society moves' (HN 144). *Ivanhoe* also provides *The Historical Novel* with another instance of this process. Lukács observes: 'the hero of this novel . . . is overshadowed by the minor characters', and most importantly two serfs, Gurth and Wamba, whose affiliation with the likes of Richard the Lionheart and Robin Hood helps the novel portray the 'complex interaction between "above" and "below"' (HN 49). Across the medieval divide that separates gentility from serfdom, *Ivanhoe* depicts associations of considerable durability.

The reproduction and comparison of various groups as they form and re-form is *Ivanhoe's* explicit theme. It confirms this interest over and above any investment in depicting individual *Bildung* by relegating its eponymous hero to a sickbed during the bulk of the action. It ensures that readers understand that *Ivanhoe* is a "romantic" knight of the Middle Ages' who, as Lukács puts it, resembles in his lack of personality all of Scott's 'correct, decent, average representatives of the English petty aristocracy' (HN 33). *Ivanhoe* admonishes readers against thinking that the novel cares about the fate of any one

character, 'for, like old Ariosto, we do not pique ourselves upon continuing uniformly to keep company with any one personage of our drama' (Scott, 1998, p. 152). The novel portrays, moreover, a historical moment when power was sufficiently disseminated such that no ruler could dominate a world populated by multifarious packs and teams: a comprehensive list would include bands of Knights Templar, 'large gangs' of woodsmen, nobles 'each fortified within his own castle', and myriad other forms of 'petty' sovereignty (Scott, 1998, pp. 66, 314–15).

Having introduced an array of such groups, *Ivanhoe* begins to study their aggregation, as woodsmen link up with royals and Knights Templar bond with minor sovereigns. One loose association forms around Richard in his guise as the Black Knight, while another network links Prince John, the Knights Templar, and sundry nobles whose loyalty John has purchased with 'prospects of advantage' (Scott, 1998, p. 133). Scott focuses on the techniques each of these groups employs to maintain order. Waldemar Fitzurse is the lord responsible for keeping John's crew happy when Richard returns from the crusades and starts to organize his competing band of allies. 'No spider ever took more pains to repair the shattered meshes of his web', the narrator reports on Fitzurse's efforts (*ibid.*). Ultimately, however, promises of 'donations in gold' and 'extended domains' prove to be less successful means for securing a network than the good will that links Richard to his confrères (*ibid.*).

Early in the novel, *Ivanhoe* establishes the importance of transparent negotiation and demonstrating loyalty through action. He bonds with the Jewish financier Isaac by doing him a good turn, securing Isaac's safe passage when the Knights Templar threaten bodily harm. Isaac recognizes his affiliation with *Ivanhoe* by responding in kind, equipping this hero for combat at the Prince's 'Passage of Arms' (Scott, 1998, pp. 58, 64). Good turns multiply among parties conventionally at odds – and none is more surprising than this first pairing of hero and banker, for neither Saxon nor Norman in this novel is naturally a friend to the Jews. Equally strange bedfellows team up when the outlaw Robin Hood, a.k.a. Locksley, and King Richard discover their shared dedication to 'the duty of a true knight' to befriend 'the weaker party' (Scott, 1998, p. 169). As such allegiances accumulate, Richard assembles a posse of distinctly heterogeneous ethnic and linguistic composition.

Innovative though it may be, little of the social experiment that dominates *Ivanhoe's* plot shapes Richard's rule in the end. The novel concludes by reporting that in office Richard proves 'willfully careless, now too indulgent, and now allied with despotism' (Scott, 1998, p. 396). As David Simpson characterizes this denouement, 'Diversity, as we now call it, is . . . not gathered up within any emerging socio-political unit (for example a nation state) that can be imagined as containing or incorporating its components into a peaceable kingdom', nor does it appear capable of organizing the putatively 'spontaneous harmonies of an evolving civil society' (Simpson, 2008, pp. 439–40). *Ivanhoe's* finale does include a wedding that connects Saxon and Norman, thus marking 'the marriage of two individuals as a type of the future peace and harmony betwixt

two races', the foundation of what Ian Duncan calls the novel's 'idea of an ancestral England' (Scott, 1998, p. 398; Scott, 1996, p. vii). But the most daring cross-ethnic alliances of the plot never translate into institutionalized bonds. Instead, love is kindled but forbidden between Ivanhoe and Rebecca, daughter of Isaac, a heroine every bit as enticing and impossible for an Englishman to marry as Flora proved in *Waverley*.

Richard's England, like Scott's Britain, is defined as much by what it excludes as what it incorporates. Rebecca testifies to this fact when she and her father Isaac announce their intention of emigrating to Moorish territory, having found the English 'a fierce race, quarreling ever with their neighbours or among themselves' (Scott, 1998, p. 399). Michael Ragussis argues that Scott rewrites 'English history as Anglo-Jewish history' when he shows there was no more room for Jews in myths of union than there was for Highland Scots (Ragussis, 1993, pp. 201–2). Simpson argues further that Scott's portrayal of Rebecca as 'a figure of greater sympathetic capacity' than even Ivanhoe himself turns her into a veritable 'mistress . . . of the *pharmakon*', a tropic reminder of the benefits of hooking up with rather than ostracizing cultural strangers (Simpson, 2008, pp. 447, 452).

Like *Waverley*, *Ivanhoe* balances all of this nationalist myth-making and nationalist critique by preserving the desire for cosmopolitan connection. And like Flora MacIvor, Rebecca represents the allure of the heterogeneous pack rather than the homogeneous mass. She is not the only reminder of such an alternative, moreover, for *Ivanhoe* also releases Locksley back into the wild. His evident expertise with the bow had been enough for Richard to grant this outlaw a command position in his crew. Locksley might even be said to be the best representative of the meritocratic impulse that organizes the King's squad. Talent gets him a promotion, and talent is the criterion Richard uses to evaluate himself when justifying his own place: 'if I be thought worthy to have a charge in this matter', he intones before battle, 'and can find among these brave men as many as are willing to follow a true knight, for so I may call myself, I am ready, with such skill as my experience has taught me, to lead them to the attack' (Scott, 1998, p. 260). Although Richard's endorsement of meritocracy ebbs by the novel's end, Locksley's band survives to show that 'civil policy' is reproducible even 'amongst persons cast out from all the ordinary protection and influence of the laws' (Scott, 1998, p. 293). With these outlaws still in the forest and with Rebecca living amongst the Moors, *Ivanhoe* leaves open other possibilities for imagining future social organization than those engendered by the rise of a homogenized English nation.

After *The Historical Novel*

After his discussion of Scott, Lukács focuses on fiction that, over the course of the nineteenth century, increasingly turns away from the experiments in group

formation that marked *Waverley* and *Ivanhoe*. After 1848, Lukács argues that ‘the combination of a desire for great deeds with a personal and social inability to accomplish them’ generates novels that fetishize individuality while downplaying the importance of interpersonal relations (HN 224). By the late nineteenth century, Lukács maintains that Europe is awash in fiction that privileges psychological complexity, transforming ‘the function of history’ into ‘merely that of a background’ for the unveiling of personality (HN 286). Instead of storytelling about the teamwork involved in pulling together scattered aspects of social life, fiction gives us ‘purely individual forms and purely private fates’ (ibid.). The retreat from the larger world to the confines of the nation and its allegorical household at the end of *Waverley* is in effect recapitulated and intensified via the hyper-individualism of such later prose, but the ambivalence Scott built into his novel’s conclusion disappears.

Although excised from the tradition Lukács documents, investment in often cosmopolitan collaboration persists in novels appearing into the twenty-first century. Such works could appear idiosyncratic, given the mainstream of a European novel ever more interested in elaborate stories of individual *Bildung* that in turn allegorize the fate of a bourgeois nation. To imagine culling together eccentric examples of historical fiction still devoted to Scott’s project of narrating teamwork is to imagine a genealogy that competes with Lukács’s, in the sense that it deviates from his rise and fall, but is nevertheless aligned with his account of what the historical novel can do when it attends to the organization of groups.

Bleak House provides an example of a nineteenth-century work every bit as fascinated by team efforts as *Ivanhoe*. Although the past it recounts is recent, Dickens follows Lukács’s rule of discerning prehistory in that past. He identifies the secrets of 1850s London in the decades-earlier construction of new transportation infrastructure and development of new policing techniques. *Bleak House* formally captures the British novel’s competing interest in individual development and group formation through the device of a famously split narration. Instead of opposing Esther’s first-person to the narrator’s third-person storytelling, however, Dickens uses both to mull over how families, law offices and other assemblages reproduce themselves. In telling her own story, Esther also charts her growing network of connections and chronicles her desire to ‘let that circle of duty gradually and naturally expand itself’ (Dickens, 1996, p. 117). Esther is swept up into one family at the beginning of the novel and finds herself married into another at its end. Along the way, she collaborates with any number of characters on myriad projects of charitable assistance, medical treatment and (perhaps most memorably) police detection. Esther and Bucket are the ultimate good cop, bad cop team. That they fail in their endeavour to save Lady Dedlock underscores their status as an experiment, the most extended example of many such experiments in a novel thinking hard about how to infuse disciplinary authority with the sympathetic quality of feminine domesticity.

Weighing the historical significance of such innovation has been central to *Bleak House* criticism at least since D. A. Miller's influential reading of how the novel 'localizes the field, exercise, and agents of power, as well as, of course, justifies such power' (Miller, 1988, p. 75). More recently, critics including Lauren Goodlad have evaluated Dickens's experiments in social organization in light of his 'commitment to personalized community bonds' and his apparent unwillingness to sanction 'a safe means of institutionalizing modern power' (Goodlad, 2005, pp. 546–7). The scepticism *Bleak House* has for the law, for charitable entities, and for nearly all existing forms of administration provides its motivation to imagine new forms of association.

The myriad teams that scholars have discovered clustering in and around *Bleak House* do not reveal anything like a teleology of social organization in the nineteenth century. Precisely because *Bleak House's* method involves trial and error, even when the novel strikes a chord – say, in its description of the all-seeing, all-knowing authority of the police panopticon – there is little suggestion that such innovation represents progress. In this respect, Dickens's London resembles Scott's Britain. It is a *mélange* of the old and the new, a place of profoundly uneven development. Like Scott, Dickens presents the novel as a textual confluence where diverse populations can and do meet. 'What connexion can there have been', the third person narrator asks, 'between the many people in the innumerable histories of this world, who, from opposite sides of great gulfs, have, nevertheless, been very curiously brought together?' (Dickens, 1996, p. 235). As in *Ivanhoe*, what we have in *Bleak House* is a novel that conceives of history as a matter of diverse meetings and sundry collaborations.

The same could be said for Virginia Woolf's *Orlando*, which goes so far in its enthusiasm for the history of group organization as to render its eponymous protagonist herself as a kind of assemblage. Woolf's novel trains readers to recognize a character who represents the spirit of his/her age – and Orlando represents the spirit of every age – by containing multitudes. Orlando's particularity derives, in other words, from the multiplicity of lives she has lived. *Orlando* assures us that this condition is normal: 'For if there are (at a venture) seventy-six different times all ticking in the mind at once, how many different people are there not – Heaven help us – all having lodgment at one time or another in the human spirit? Some say two thousand and fifty-two' (Woolf, 1973, p. 308). Just as Woolf's novel explodes the self, rendering the individual as an assemblage of various parts, so *Orlando* recounts the history of a nation that never succeeds (and perhaps never aspires) to the coherence of cultural homogeneity. It may well be, as Jaime Hovey argues, that '*Orlando's* polymorphously perverse female subject can never be less than national', but the British nation she belongs to is clearly defined by the imperial ambition to build global associations rather than reprise fantasies of little England (Hovey, 1997, p. 402). Such ambition is announced, albeit under the sign of war, with the Moor's head swinging from the rafters in the novel's first line (Woolf, 1973, p. 13). With later announcements that the 'gipsies . . . seem to have looked upon her [Orlando]

as one of themselves', musings about whether 'in the season of the Crusades, one of his [Orlando's] ancestors had taken up with a Circassian peasant woman', *Orlando* mulls all manner of overseas encounter, conflating any compelling distinction between progressive cosmopolitan connection and more overtly imperial conquest in the process (141, 121). Like Scott's heroes, Orlando dreams of running away and joining a clan. Such craving for exotic contact confirms that *Orlando* is no oddball text. Rather, this fiction is nothing less than an inheritor of Scott's historical novel, one that renovates the genre while recalling its earlier incarnation.

Even today there is substantial interest in updating the form of historical fiction, as demonstrated by the 2008 appearance of *Sea of Poppies*, the first volume of Amitav Ghosh's 'Ibis trilogy'. The novel derives its narrative momentum by assembling a group whose variety rivals that of the Saxons and Normans, Jews and Saracens who populate *Ivanhoe*. On board a former slave ship headed from Calcutta to Mauritius, Ghosh places passengers and crew from all corners of India, China, Britain and the United States. The largest demographic on the Ibis is the crew of lascars, seafarers whose language of reworked Persian, Hindi and English is a manifestation of its diversity. Although characters initially inhabit their own distinct sections of plot, every chapter is a composite of multiple experiences that become increasingly intertwined and inseparable. After the fashion of *Orlando*, characters such as the upwardly mobile Zachary find they possess multiple selves: he begins the novel as the half-caste son of a freedwoman in Baltimore and ends it passing as a white man, on the verge of becoming a captain, wondering whether his alliance with a lascar named Serang Ali will turn him into a pirate.

Sea of Poppies is set on the cusp of the British government's takeover of colonial operations in India and in the ramp up to its mid-nineteenth-century war with China. This timing highlights options aggressively marginalized by Britain's decision to govern its Asian empire. By showing how imperial expansion both makes possible and rules out the sorts of collaborative arrangements Ghosh discovers on the Ibis, *Sea of Poppies* considers the status of networking that does not have British rule as its ultimate goal. The novel looks at the beginning of Britain's more formal empire from its aftermath, from the standpoint of global interconnection that empire engendered but never fully managed. This is an investigation very much in the spirit of Scott, whose *Waverley* similarly considered the fate of cosmopolitan relationships after colonization.

Taken together, *Bleak House*, *Orlando*, *Sea of Poppies* and other comparable works demonstrate the novel's abiding interest in the workings of groups, especially those groups whose internal relations involve participants from different cultures, classes and regions of the world. That this genealogy is grounded in *The Historical Novel's* treatment of Scott should lead us to reconsider what future Lukács enabled for the genre; he did more than enable scholarly documentation of a historical novel tied to the fortunes of bourgeois nation-building. His emphasis on the appeal of the claim, for *Waverley* and for the groups of actors

in *Ivanhoe*, makes it possible to say that he also directs readers to follow the genre's itinerate travels outside the nation. Rereading *The Historical Novel* allows us to better consider how fiction presents innovative types of transnational association, and imagines new varieties of team hierarchy. Like *Waverley*, the novels I have briefly considered, and the many more I might add to this genealogy, are ambivalent about displacing clan life and settling for the sexual division of labour that one finds in the middle-class household. They do not presume that narrating the development of individuals and bemoaning the limited communities of nuclear families is the only responsibility of the novel form. They wonder about the flexibility of packs and how to distinguish such associations from more stringently organized administrative units.

The historical novel offers both a prehistory for the nation and a counter-discourse. Lukács is attentive to both tendencies when he reads Scott, but when he follows the historical novel over the course of the nineteenth century only the nationalist impulse continues to interest him. In Scott, Lukács discovered not only an author who treats history as 'a series of great crises' and foregrounds the 'Historical necessity' of epochal change, but also a writer whose works document the contrastingly consistent rhythm of small-scale change, of those 'social and human forces which, in the course of a long evolution, have made our present-day life what it is' (HN 53, 58). One reason why Lukács does not remain interested in the problem of small change among small groups is that such an emphasis challenges the primacy of epochal change: the innovative packs and teams in *Bleak House* and *Sea of Poppies* represent changes to social organization that fall far short of revolution (bourgeois or otherwise). Instead, these groups often appear to reproduce the unequal relations of capitalism, modifying without overthrowing them. To discover such mixed allegiance in fiction published two hundred years after *Waverley* shows that even as fiction has documented the rise and fall of national polities, it remains invested in social change with a less shapely arc.

In recent decades, novelistic investigation of such historical unevenness has echoed through scholarly studies in fields ranging from economics to anthropology. Across the disciplines, one may find writing in search of historical precedents for contemporary globalization. Those precedents have been found not only in the recent imperial past but also in commercial arrangements dating as far back as the thirteenth century. *Sea of Poppies* is far from the only recent novel to participate in this historical reconstruction. Works like Ghosh's Ibis trilogy do not flatten distinctions among historically distant and proximate networks so much as invite questions about how to discern them from one another. Fiction encourages us to ask, for instance, whether the contemporary corporate ethos of flexible and adaptable teamwork is really all that new. When commentators such as Zygmunt Bauman, Richard Sennett and Arjun Appadurai announce the arrival of 'liquid life', 'impatient capital' and 'new logics of cellularity', novels such as those I have referenced serve to remind us that the organizational strategies we equate with contemporary corporate culture and

recent political economy have a history (Bauman, 2005; Sennett, 2006, p. 40; Appadurai, 2006, p. 29). Our present requires us to relearn this history, to recall the variety of flexible groups, fleeting assemblages and ambivalent bourgeois subjects yearning for cross-cultural connection that constitute a counter-discourse to the emergence of bourgeois nationalism and liberal economy. The framing that a longer genealogy of historical novels can give to politics involves competing cosmopolitan affiliations, some of which will be corporate, while others look more ad hoc; none, however, looks like a revolutionary class. In addition to describing what literature contributed to the bourgeois revolution, Lukács gives us the tools to understand a non-class-based politics of association in the present by attending to novels devoted to the past.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Paul de Man, who warns readers of the ‘danger in an oversimplified view of a *good* early and a *bad* late Lukács’ (de Man, 1986, p. 51), or vice versa; also Fredric Jameson, who in *Marxism and Form* aspires to a holistic account in which it would be possible to see how ‘the earlier works proved to be fully comprehensible only in light of the later ones’ (Jameson, 1971, p. 163).

² In suggesting this alternate genealogy, I sidestep the realism/modernism debate that Jameson and others employ in situating Lukács among his peers. There is plenty to be learned in simply noting the affinity among historical novels, thus avoiding the generic division of labour that charges realism with speaking to the ‘issues of the day’, as Jameson puts it, and modernism with ‘secluding’ social content ‘in the very form [of fiction] itself’ (AP 201–2).

³ A full account of the vast scholarship debating the status of epochal change in and of the novel is beyond the scope of this essay. Hunter’s *Before Novels* remains a firm foundation for how to talk about the origins of novel form and content. See also Brown, 1997, and Tennenhouse, 2007.

⁴ Chandler considers these North American references especially timely, given the activities of Scotland’s Society for the Propagation of Christianity, which in the mid-eighteenth century expanded its mission to fight off French Catholic influence on the indigenous peoples of new world colonies (Chandler, 1998, p. 135).

Works Cited

- Appadurai, A. (2006), *Fear of Small Numbers*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.
- Armstrong, N. (2005), *How Novels Think: The Limits of British Individualism from 1719–1900*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Bauman, Z. (2005), *Liquid Life*. Cambridge: Polity Press.
- Brown, H. O. (1997), *Institutions of the English Novel from Defoe to Scott*. Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press.
- Chandler, J. (1998), *England in 1819: The Politics of Literary Culture and the Case of Romantic Historicism*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

- Clark, T. J. (2009), 'Picasso and Truth, Part 2: Room', The Fifty-Eighth A. W. Mellon Lectures in the Fine Arts, lectures delivered at the National Gallery of Art, Washington DC, 29 March 2009. <http://dl.luxmedia.com/nationalgallery/audio/042809lect03.mp3>
- De Man, P. (1983), *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism* (2nd edn). Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press.
- Dickens, C. (1996), *Bleak House*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Fabian, J. (1983), *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Ghosh, A. (2008), *Sea of Poppies* (1st American Edition). New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux.
- Goodlad, L. (2003), 'Is there a pastor in the *House*? Sanitary reform, professionalism, and philanthropy in Dickens's mid-century fiction', *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 31, 525–3.
- Hovey, J. (1997), "'Kissing a Negress in the dark": Englishness as a masquerade in Woolf's *Orlando*', *PMLA*, 112, (3), 393–404.
- Hunter, J. P. (1990), *Before Novels: The Cultural Contexts of Eighteenth-Century English Fiction*. New York: Norton.
- Jameson, F. (1971), *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Jarrells, A. (2004), 'Bloodless revolution and the form of the novel', *Novel*, 37, (1–2), 24–44.
- Marx, K. (1994), 'Communist Manifesto', in L. H. Simon (ed.), *Selected Writings*. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing.
- Miller, D. A. (1988), *The Novel and the Police*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Northrup, D. (2005), 'Globalization and the great convergence', *Journal of World History*, 16, (3), 249–67.
- Ragussis, M. (1993), 'Writing nationalist history: England, the conversion of the Jews, and *Ivanhoe*', *ELH*, 60, (1), 181–215.
- Scott, W. (1985), *Waverley*. New York: Penguin.
- (1998), *Ivanhoe*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.
- Scott, W. and I. Duncan (1996), *Ivanhoe*. The World's Classics. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Sennett, R. (2006), *The Culture of the New Capitalism*. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press.
- Simpson, D. (2008), 'Which is the merchant here? And which the Jew?': friends and enemies in Walter Scott's crusader novels', *Studies in Romanticism*, 47, (4), 437–599.
- Tennenhouse, L. (2007), *The Importance of Feeling English: American Literature and the British Diaspora. 1750–1850*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Trumpener, K. (1997), *Bardic Nationalism: The Romantic Novel and the British Empire*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Watt, I. (1957), *The Rise of the Novel: Studies in Defoe, Richardson, and Fielding*. Berkeley, CA: University of California Press.
- Woolf, V. (1973), *Orlando: a Biography*. New York: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich.

Chapter 13

Realism, Totality and the Militant *Citoyen*: Or, What Does Lukács Have to Do With Contemporary Art?

Gail Day

The theme of this essay – Georg Lukács and contemporary art – is not the most obvious of subjects, its conjoined terms being deeply incongruous, their contiguity seemingly precluded by his harsh criticisms of aesthetic modernism. Lukács appeared barely able to consider the new literature of his own period; I am merely thinking of the montage practices of the interwar period, not imagining his likely response to the type of artwork produced towards the end of his life, let alone subsequently. Moreover, Lukács's interest in the 'visual' arts is limited; when he does address modern art, he often struggles to comprehend it, comparing the paintings of Paul Cézanne unfavourably, for example, to those of Rembrandt (WC 138). Such problems do not apply to Lukács's most famous interlocutor and critic: we feel we can readily speak of 'Brecht and contemporary art', as did the curators of the 2009 Istanbul Biennial, who made Bertolt Brecht, Elizabeth Hauptmann and Kurt Weill's 'What Keeps Mankind Alive?' from *The Threepenny Opera* the thread of their selection.¹ The problem extends further than questions of Lukács's aesthetic judgements. There is something of his strong sense of historical evolution and decay, his commitment to 'the general line of development', and an untroubled rhetoric of 'nation', 'people' and 'masses', that seems of another time and place. Then there is the humanism of his intellectual universe – albeit one appended to a hard selflessness of one placing himself in the service of the revolution – and his (sometimes quite aggressive) *modus operandi* in debates. One of the main tasks of this essay is to try to overcome the (warranted) scepticism prompted by its premise: that Lukács might have something to offer for the critical consideration of art today. Doing so requires looking beyond many received ideas, and, to a degree, demands that we not approach the undertaking by drawing up checklists of where art does or does not match up to Lukács's strictures. To be clear from the outset: I do not think Lukács would approve of the art I will discuss. The mission is not to establish some notion of 'Lukácsian art', nor do

I claim that, having been long overlooked by art critics, Lukács actually represents the way forward for considering contemporary aesthetic practices. My aim is both more modest and perverse. I will suggest that the points of contact between Lukács and visual art today can be found in some unexpected places, often emerging from precisely the type of features that Lukács famously criticized (description, reportage, montage or ‘Brechtian’ modes). In the process, some of the dichotomies for which Lukács is usually known will start to unravel or reverse; another will come to the fore, although this one names a historico-political obstruction that Lukács seeks to dislodge.

I

In discussions of ‘contemporary art’, the category itself has come under increasing scrutiny.² Is it not, as a number of commentators have suggested, little more than a marketing category devised by the major auction houses? For some time there has been a significant strand of leftist criticism which has seen in art – and visual art especially – nothing but the marks of ‘the commodity’. This line of critique has become rather too undifferentiated, with all aspects of (non-amateur) artistic production – from open celebrations of conspicuous wealth through to work genuinely seeking radical democratic effect – tarred by the same brush. As one of the theorists known for extending homologies between the commodity form and cultural forms, Lukács might be understood as a progenitor for such criticism, ‘reification’ having become a dominant motif for the critical common sense of today’s cultural theory (albeit largely by way of simplified versions of ‘the spectacle’, ‘the colonization of everyday life’ or ‘the culture industry’). But over the course of the twentieth century, the sense that came to prevail increasingly lacked commitment to, or faith in, the power and effectivity of agency (whether collective or individual) – influenced by the series of political setbacks and defeats, the compromising of the socialist vision, the collapse of the revolutionary ideal and the associated developments in postwar social and cultural theory. In crucial, if highly attenuated, ways this commitment fundamentally shaped Lukács’s account. For him, criticism *of* the object is displaced by a notion of criticism *in* or *through* human action; this recognition of the dynamic imbrication of subject and object (through a praxis of mutual transformation) underpins his outlook and – despite experiencing some of the setbacks just mentioned – this political philosophy provides resistance to the extending reificatory powers of capital. With this conception, Lukács’s work often meditates upon the gap between *Sein* (what is) and *Sollen* (what ‘ought’ to be), the gap between the existing state of things under capitalism and the desired transformation of human social relations. Deriving from his early engagement with Kierkegaard, and inflected by Hegel’s distinction between the real and the rational, this contrast of *Sein* and *Sollen* – or, more precisely, the question of how to pass from the former to the latter – translated into the

politicized terms of Marxism, becoming a vital strand in his aesthetic writings on realism. I want to argue that this critical problem returns – in ways caught between subliminal registration and conscious deliberation – for a number of key artists working today.

Prompted by a series of translations in the 1960s and 1970s, the anglophone reception of Lukács was simultaneously a site of his appearance and disappearance. Attention to Lukács epitomized the moment of the New Left, and, as a result, his work also became a central focus of criticism. In the 1970s, radical discourses in art were much influenced by the ‘critique of representation’ which emerged through ‘neo-Brechtian’ film theory (associated in *Screen* with the films of Jean-Luc Godard and Jean Gorin, or Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet), and also through approaches to photography and video developed through second-wave conceptual art. This approach was complemented, in subsequent years, by the development of a specifically postmodern interpretation of Walter Benjamin’s theory of allegory.³ Lukács was generally presented as the point of polemical contrast. A critique of Lukácsian realism – along with his suspicion of modernist fragmentation and the methods of reportage – was prominent in these developments (although Lukács’s critics were often prone to conflating his account of bourgeois realism simplistically with Zhdanovist socialist realism). These debates still linger and continue to impinge upon the discursive parameters of today’s critical practices.

Yet since the 1990s something akin to a realist impulse has re-emerged in artists formed through or informed by these arguments. What has often been referred to as the social or political ‘turn’ in art invites reconsideration of the substance of Lukács’s approach to realism. Even if most artists still prefer to avoid any talk of ‘totality’, the efforts of many practitioners today can be said to aspire to ‘portray’ contemporary social totality. There is no space here to take on debates over ‘relational’ or ‘postrelational’ practices, many of which reject the task of ‘representation’ altogether (let alone that of ‘portrayal’), seeing it as inherently dated and problematic.⁴ Suffice it to say that whatever the specific line of art-politics preferred, there has emerged, in response to the post-1989 reordering of the world and the extensions of the neoliberal economic sphere, a felt urgency not only to describe, witness or give testimony to the new phase of capital accumulation, but also to account for, analyse, respond to and intervene in it, and to imagine how we might even exceed capital’s social relations. Indeed, even ‘descriptive’ methods of documentary reportage are now being deployed by visual artists towards what we could characterize as explicitly ‘narrative’ ends.

II

Above all it has been Allan Sekula’s work that has been framed as an example of revived ‘critical realism’. The use of the term by the artist himself, and by Benjamin Buchloh, who first applied it to Sekula’s practice, is not without a



FIGURE 13.1 Allan Sekula, ‘Volunteer Watching, Volunteer Smiling (Isla de Ons, 12/19/02)’, horizontal diptych, colour photographs, from *Black Tide/Marea negra* (2002–2003). Courtesy of Allan Sekula.

certain irony, one provoked by the need to navigate the legacy of the Brecht-Lukács conjunction – and specifically, to avoid forsaking Brecht’s critique of Lukács in making the critical-realist claim.⁵ Nevertheless, the ironic distancing goes only so far: Sekula remains notable for taking seriously the Lukácsian contribution, refusing to duck the concept which leaves so many others uneasy: that of social totality. Especially well versed in debates concerning politicized aesthetics, Sekula seeks to go beyond the historical dichotomy abbreviated by the names ‘Lukács’ and ‘Brecht’, preferring to focus on their common cognitive-aesthetic, or realist, commitment. Already, in the early 1980s, we find Sekula describing his approach as a realism ‘against the grain’ or as ‘a realism not of appearances or social facts but of everyday experience in and against the grip of advanced capitalism’ (Sekula, 1984, p. x). The emphasis here on a ‘realism not of appearances or social facts’ touches on Sekula’s engagement with Lukács’s critique of immediacy, although photography – as Sekula knows – was fundamentally problematized by this very attribute, figuring in Lukács’s essays adjectivally as a byword for naturalism. (Interestingly, considering their differences with Lukács we can find photography serving much the same essential role for Brecht and Adorno.) Sekula’s point, then, is also – and here Walter Benjamin proves important – to challenge the widespread denigration of the photograph and to rescue its critical potentials from a triple problem: the downplaying of photography by the dominant aesthetic discourse; photography’s ‘art-ification’ (prominent from the 1960s and 1970s); and the ‘postmodern’ reaction to these developments. As Sekula argues, photography attracts him, first, because of its ‘unavoidable social referentiality’ – albeit one that needed to be handled with care – and, secondly, by the way the life-world interpellates the photographer as ‘already a social actor’ (ibid., p. ix). Seeking out a form of ‘extended documentary’, he criticizes the lack of reflexivity to be found in much traditional social documentary (x). However, Sekula also steps back from artistic fascinations with the ‘fatalistic play of quotations and “appropriations” of already existing images’ then current, as well as from approaches that posit the ‘idealist isolation of the “image-world” from its material conditions’ (xii).

With his later projects such as *Fish Story* – a large work comprised of photographs, diagrams, captions and essays, and around which the claims to ‘critical realism’ congregated – Sekula uses the literal and metaphoric capacities of seafaring to delineate a picture of the modern maritime economy, to reflect on the history of its representations and to challenge late twentieth-century theoretical preoccupations with digital speed, flows and ‘de-materiality’. *Black Tide* (2002–2003) developed these themes.

Similar challenges to an art of (uncritical) appropriation – to the reduction of the ‘image-world’ to something divorced from materiality (or of the world itself to image), and the complacent tendencies within aesthetic self-reflexivity – can be found voiced by a few other artists and filmmakers, such as Harun Farocki and Martha Rosler. It has also been picked up, in widely varying ways, by younger practitioners, such as Ursula Biemann, Hito Steyerl and Oliver Ressler. Crucial to these modes of realism is a certain reflexivity about reflexivity, a willingness to subject basic counter-intuitive lessons familiar from modern art or film theory to a more sustained consideration, and a determination to avoid the dangers of aesthetic internalization. In the hands of a number of artists, the distinction between the representation of politics and the politics of representation does not simply lead to the assumed critical superiority of the constructed image, nor does it conclude with a prohibition on representing politics, as it did for so many first-wave neo-Brechtians. Rather, it is taken as an imperative to explore the dialectics of the materiality of the image qua image, of materiality *in* the image, and the materialism of representation’s own social embeddedness (which would acknowledge the image’s veiling, and the roles of the fetish and ‘real abstraction’ in representation).⁶

Sekula is especially interested in how photography has a ‘way of suppressing in a static moment its often dialogical social origins’ (Sekula, 1984, p. x). His combinations of texts and images, with picture-story formats or slide sequences, then, can be seen not only as efforts to provoke Eisensteinian ‘third meanings’. Nor, following Brecht’s well-known comments that photographs of the AEG or Krupp factories failed to show anything of the social reality of these sites, should we see his work simply as the montagist’s attempt to rectify this problem by constructing something artificial (Brecht, 1931, p. 164).⁷ More exactly, Sekula’s strategies should be understood as attempts to release social distillates from their reified suspension, to reactivate something of social process evacuated by the stilling of life (a ‘stilling’ that is not restricted to photography, the time-based work of film or video being equally susceptible to the forces of social hypostasis). We will return to this theme.

III

While generally displaying hostility towards the idea of ‘totality’, contemporary cultural theory has nevertheless translated Lukács’s concept of reification into what might be called (in its derogatory sense) a ‘totalizing’ account in which

capital's power is posited as near-universal. This flattened-out account of capitalist reification is the type of argument to which the Russian-based work group Chto Delat objects when, in 'Declarations on Politics, Knowledge and Art' (and with echoes of Brecht and Leon Trotsky), its members assert that 'capitalism is *not* a totality' (Chto Delat 2008). Naturally, much turns here on how 'totality' is conceived. It is certainly possible to accept the idea that capitalism *is* a totality – that is, to disagree with the statement offered by Chto Delat – while still sharing the intended challenge to its widespread conceptualization as closed and undifferentiated, and – crucially – as a seamless unity beyond contestation.

In 'Realism in the Balance' (1938), Lukács argues that the world market of capitalism presents us with the most totalized social form to date (AP 31–2). It was a point he had been making since the early 1920s, and it did not mean that he conceived capitalism as all-powerful or as noncontradictory. Rather, he saw himself as reiterating Marx and Engels in describing capitalism's unique integration of political, economic and social aspects of life, and also, as he puts it, the way capital is a force that 'permeates the spatio-temporal character of phenomena' (HCC 23). An additional dynamic to the 1938 discussion was introduced by Ernst Bloch, accusing Lukács of adhering to an outdated classical-idealist conception of reality as cohesive and unified (AP 16–27).⁸ In response, Lukács distinguishes the harmonious totality of classical idealism from the unified-and-fragmentary totality (contradictory unity) of the globalized market economy. But as Lukács emphasizes, their dispute did not essentially concern the analysis of socioeconomic or historical features, but was philosophical in character; that is, their difference was over the way thought – and specifically, dialectical thought – engages with the surrounding reality (AP 31).

We can glimpse here some of the complexity of Lukács's conceptualization of totality. It is customary to distinguish Neo-Kantian, Hegelian and Marxist phases of Lukács's thought, and, further, to demarcate within the latter the more 'political' essays of the 1920s from the 'aesthetic' work that dominated subsequent years. While there are some important changes to the way he contextualizes totality and weights it, there is nevertheless a remarkable consistency to his approach from *The Theory of the Novel* onwards.⁹ Totality is characterized most succinctly by Lukács himself as 'a structured and historically determined overall complex', albeit one that needs to be grasped dynamically (as concrete unity, and as both systematic and historically relative) (cited Mészáros, 1983, p. 479).¹⁰ At different moments, totality is used to refer to the external world, to thought's hold on that world, to the subject's action upon the world, to artistic representation as such or to the ways art relates to the world (structurally, or in terms of its representational relation to the world, as both form and content). In *The Theory of the Novel* – where the concept of capitalism is still only implicit – we find allusions to the lost 'spontaneous totality of being' (TN 38), the 'spontaneously rounded, sensuously present totality' (46) or the epic's 'extensive totality of life' (56), as well as the limitless 'real totality' of our world (54), which is contrasted to, and contained by, the 'created' or 'constructed

totality' of the novel (38, 54). In his political essays – 'What is Orthodox Marxism?' (1919), 'The Marxism of Rosa Luxemburg' (1921) and 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat' (1923) – Lukács alludes to the 'totality of the process' to which political action must relate (the larger historical perspective he demands of the proletarian movement) (HCC 198); the knowable totality and the totality to be known (39); totality of the object and the totality of the subject (28). Different classes are also understood to constitute totalities (28–9). Totality is a point of view (20, 27, 29); it is both a 'conceptual reproduction of reality' (10) and an *act* of knowledge formation, a necessary presupposition for understanding reality (21–2); it features as the historical process (24) or the social process (22). Moreover, as Lukács later insists in 'Realism in the Balance', the ways in which totality appears to us are contradictory: when capitalism is relatively stable, it is experienced partially and yet people assume it to be 'total'; conversely, in the midst of crises, when the totality asserts itself, it seems as if the whole had disintegrated (AP 32). Totality appears simultaneously as fragment and whole, but does so disjointedly and unevenly.

Totality is not to be taken as something 'out there' bearing down upon us and yet beyond our ken.¹¹ Despite its considerable weightiness in Lukács's writing, the concept is surprisingly modest in what it performs; it simply demands that we consider the interrelations and interactions between different phenomena, that we relate the parts to the whole – and that we conceive these parts – the whole and all their relations – as mutable, as both materially constraining and subject to human actions. For Lukács, the category of totality is the crux of dialectical methodology and central to Marx's own analysis. The late-twentieth-century anxiety that has come to be associated with the impossibility of understanding or representing totality (a view disseminated especially by Fredric Jameson) is absent in Lukács's writings. It is not that the question of totality's unreachableness is unacknowledged, but rather that this impossibility of grasping its entirety is treated by Lukács as little more than a banal truism, or, worse, as a weak way to think. Essentially, Lukács's sense of the modern world is one of a permanently open totality, yet one that is not conceived as some free-flowing vitalistic flux, but as subject to specific determinations, resistances, concretizations and actions. Already in *Theory of the Novel*, Lukács outlines how our access to totality has lost the self-sufficient immanence that characterized the world of the ancients (where the 'totality of being' is described as symbiotic and seamlessly connected with the epic form) (TN 34–9); thenceforth humanity faces an 'endless path of an approximation that is never fully accomplished' and will 'always be incomplete' (34). This characterization translates in his early Marxist essays into the 'aspiration towards totality', where our task is not to attempt to grasp the 'plenitude of the totality' but rather to think from totality's point of view (that is, to conceive ourselves as a vector in, and as subject and object of, the historical process) (HCC 198). This attitude is echoed yet again in his later essays on critical realism in art, where Lukács is fairly scornful about literary efforts 'to portray the totality of a society in', as he puts it, 'the crude

sense of the word' (MCR 99). Advanced artists, he argues, are committed to 'the ambition to portray the social whole', but since the object before them is an ever-changing 'infinite reality' which they 'cannot exhaust' (97), the exploration of totality's substance has to be 'active, unceasing' (97–8), the results only ever an approximation (100). The 'ideal of totality' in art should be understood not as a fixed sight or yardstick, but should be grasped as a fluid 'guiding principle' (100). In any case, he suggests, art best approaches the question of totality through *intensive* rather than *extensive* means; by, for example, addressing 'a particular segment of life' (100). What he calls the '*mere* extensive totality' is taken to be typical of that 'crude' understanding to which he objects (*ibid.*). Thus, the *partial* perspectives prevalent in many recent artworks are no reason per se to see them as inherently antipathetic to Lukács's arguments. Rather, the question to consider is whether their limited scope provides a positive focus for reflection, or whether they fail by dissolving into mere partiality. The outlook here can be compared to a point made in his 1921 essay on Rosa Luxemburg (his immediate topic being political, rather than aesthetic, praxis). Attention to the isolated parts of a phenomenon is not the problem; 'what is decisive', Lukács argues, is whether those parts are conceived as interconnected with one another and integrated within a totality, whether addressing them in isolation serves to understand the whole (or, on the contrary, if it remains an 'autonomous' end in itself) (HCC 28).¹² We can observe that in recent artworks the facets of current reality explored rarely rest solely in their particularities – certainly not for any intelligent viewer; instead, they escalate their scale of bearing, serving as 'aspects'.

IV

Insufficient attention has been paid to the fact that Lukács takes socialist realism to be only a *potential* aesthetic (MCR 96, 115).¹³ Given that socialist realism had already held official status for some 20 years when Lukács made this remark in 1956, his perspective should give us pause. At one level, he was marking his distance from the legacy of Zhdanovism, but the allegoresis of Lukács's essays – as veiled critique of the narrowing horizons of Soviet socialist realism and of Stalinist politics and culture – is just a part of what is going on. Centrally at stake is the question of social transitivity, a topic that is often lodged under terms such as 'the inner poetry of life' or 'the poetry of things', by which Lukács seems to mean the activities and struggles of human relations (WC 126, 136). His contrasting figure is that of 'still lives', an expression encompassing both the rigidities of reified forms and the failure of social agents to act within and upon the world (the paralysis of social life itself, akin to Sartre's dead totalities, or to Marx's account of the power of dead over living labour). We find 'still lives' at various levels: there are, of course, the 'still lives' of individual characters; but we also find the 'still lives' of a plot-*as*-plot or the stalling of the genre

of the *Bildungsroman*. (Cézanne's portraits – specifically his paintings of people, rather than his paintings of *nature morte* – are also seen as 'still lives'.) Ultimately, the category of 'still lives' even comes to characterize the approach he supports, insinuating itself into the very modality of bourgeois critical realism. Increasingly, Lukács identifies a stalling of lives in his most favoured artworks. Nineteenth-century naturalism comes to be understood not so much as the external 'other' to realism – 'the conflict between realism and naturalism' described by Lukács in 1948 (SER 5) – but as realism's own immanent reduction. Most interestingly, by 1956, the problem of 'still lives' is used to characterize a situation between, on one hand, a critical realism that Lukács finds to be ever more stalled, and on the other, the socialist realism that is yet to be actualized.

Thomas Mann's work was taken to be exemplary of critical realism (and of its internal limits), forming the subject of one of Lukács's most admired essays – 'In Search of Bourgeois Man' – prepared in the mid-forties (Lukács, 1964, pp. 13–46). Mann's work, Lukács believes, had drawn progressively closer to socialism, but because German culture lacked traditions comparable to the militant *citoyen* or to the Russian *grazhdanin*, Mann's 'search for bourgeois man' – that is, his efforts to grasp bourgeois social totality – remained unrealized; the ability to understand the world more fully required a commitment to practical action within it. The militant invoked in Lukács's discussion of Mann, then, might be understood simply as a literary protagonist, or as the problem of Mann the artist, but it is important to recognize how the militant *citoyen* acquires a more extended role in Lukács's argument, featuring as a moment of social process and as the condition for transitivity. Indeed, we find Lukács making the essential point already in the early 1920s: 'The totality of an *object*,' he argues, 'can only be posited if the positing *subject* is itself a totality' (HCC 28). While it may come as little surprise to encounter this argument in *History and Class Consciousness*, it might be less expected of his later writings on realism; yet the subject that posits itself as a totality is here being reworked through the idea of the militant *citoyen*. Returning to contemporary anxieties over the unattainability of totality, we can note that the central problem resides not, as so often assumed, with the unprecedented complexity of today's world or with the reification of life; nor does it really concern the difficulties of depicting or representing that totality. Rather, our confrontation with the question of totality – even our efforts to delineate its mere outlines descriptively – is inseparable from, dependent on, the subject's claim upon, and to, totality. What we find surfacing in Lukács's study of Mann, then, is no simple defence and celebration of critical realism, but rather a probing of its connection to, and limitations for, social transitivity.

V

A significant stream of art today explicitly commits itself to the figure of the militant (as often *militants sans papiers* as *citoyens*). The protestors and syndicalists



FIGURE 13.2 Allan Sekula, *Waiting for Tear Gas [white globe to black]*, single slide from 14-minute continuous slide sequence (1999–2000). Courtesy of Allan Sekula.

who feature in Sekula's photo sequence of the anti-WTO protests in Seattle, *Waiting for Tear Gas* (1999–2000), and in the video essay *Lottery of the Sea* (2006), would be obvious examples (and not just by way of representation – the figurative inclusion of the militant in the work – but also through embodiment in Sekula's rejection of the techniques and subject-positioning of professional photojournalism).¹⁴ In video films such as *Venezuela from Below* (2004), *Five Factories* (2006) or *Comuna under Construction* (2010), Oliver Ressler and Dario Azzellini explore the role of workers' councils or community-based organizers building participatory democracy through the Bolivarian revolution. Taking a very different approach, the now-disbanded Radek Community staged demonstrations at a Moscow junction, bearing red flags and banners emblazoned with slogans such as the World Social Forum's 'Another World Is Possible' and appropriating the rush-hour crowds assembling to cross the road. As the lights change, signalling pedestrians to cross, the insignia of protest unfurl. Resonant with the history of representations of revolutionary masses (from early Soviet newsreels to Sergei Eisenstein's restaging of 1917), the work is laden with a Dada-Situationist humour and pathos. Such resonances highlight the historical absence of the *grazhdanin*, and yet the work resists full melancholic immersion (although this, in turn, forces further reflection on avant-gardism-as-vanguardism or -as-voluntarism, and on art's relations with social transformation – indeed, it is this oscillation which is interesting).

The Radeks are named after the famous left councilist Karl Radek;¹⁵ similarly, the words *Chto Delat?* – "What is to be done?" – recall both the nineteenth-century novel by Nikolay Chernyshevsky and Vladimir Lenin's famous 1902



FIGURE 13.3 Radek Community, still from *Manifestations*, video of Moscow action, 2001. Courtesy of Petr Bystrov on behalf of the Radek Community.

pamphlet on the tasks of political organization. Both groups have produced works that take us to the point where we must consider not just the artworks' open political contents, but the very links between aesthetics and politics. *Chronicles of Perestroika* (2008), by Dmitry Vilensky, a member of Chto Delat, assembles documentary footage of mass gatherings in St. Petersburg between 1987 and 1991. Accompanied by Mikhail Krutik's score, reminiscent of the music of silent cinema, this short film draws forth a triple historical comparison and complex set of hopes, disappointments – and reminders. In *Partisan Songspiel: A Belgrade Story* (2009), a scripted video performance operates as a morality play in which a monument to the Yugoslav partisans comes to life as chorus and serves as counterpoint to the four main characters (the Worker, the Lesbian, a Romany Woman and an Injured War Veteran). Despite suffering similarly at the hands of neoliberal repression (personified by a business leader, a city politician, a war profiteer and their bodyguards), and despite expressing some partial empathy for one another's plight (each taking turn to tell us the life story of another), the oppressed types are unable to overcome their local interests and social prejudices to achieve solidarity. The statue-chorus is both classic meta-commentary and political conscience, pointing to what has been forgotten and what, in our aspirations for a better future, is being politically overlooked. In *Builders* (2004) – a video film composed primarily of a sequence of stills in which members of Chto Delat appear together in various affable



FIGURE 13.4 Chto Delat, still from *Partisan Songspiel*, video-film, 2009. Courtesy of Chto Delat.

interactions on a low wall – the voice-over dialogue reflects on their varying attitudes towards the late socialist realist painting *The Builders of Bratsk* (1960–1961) – sometimes known as *They Built Bratsk Hydro-Electric Power Station* or *Constructors of the Bratsk Hydropower Station* – by Viktor E. Popkov, and offers further observations on unity and organization in the present.¹⁶ Eventually acquiring the collective form and postures of Popkov’s assembly, Chto Delat constructs a *tableau vivant* (a quintessential allegorical form); however, this animation of Popkov is paradoxically frozen (and stilled photographically). An aesthetic-political aporia (both a circumscription by ‘art’ and an injunction to exceed its limits) unfolds through a number of tensions: the painting and its

restaging; the world built by Popkov's figures and the future being invoked by Chto Delat; worker-builders represented in art, artist-constructors taking their places; the initial appearance of some casual flash-lit snapshots of friends larking about at night contrasting with a deliberately-managed set echoing the devices of the canvas (the wall, the darkened background, the sharp lighting of the figures); jumps in the sequence of fixed shots contrasting with the continuity of dialogue. Mimesis is not here a passive reflection but a conscious act of making (as if to reclaim or recoup the originary magic).



FIGURE 13.5 Chto Delat, still from *Builders*, video-film, 2004. Courtesy of Chto Delat.



FIGURE 13.6 Freee, *Protest is Beautiful*, billboard poster, 2007. Courtesy of Freee.

This intransitive circling – with its aesthetic and political dimensions – dramatizes a dominant problematic of recent art, which might be understood as the difficulties of direct commensuration, and the troubles of relaying, between aesthetics and politics as such. The problem is at once internalized by the work and resisted. It is registered in, for example, the knowing efforts of Chto Delat to stage occupations of the role of the militant *citoyen* or the Radek's attempt to 'force' its representation. Sometimes it is embedded in tropes, as in Sekula's *Lottery of the Sea*, where the accumulation of the metaphors 'from below' and 'linking', on one hand, and the unleashing of 'linking' as metonyms and associative chains, on the other, begin to imply models of social transformation: ways of emerging, anticipating, organizing, and of breaking through political and social impasse. And what is being mourned in Freee's *Protest Is Beautiful?* Political dissent, the aestheticization and commodification of rebellion (Freee's works often take the form of billboards, advertising slogans, posters or shop signs), or the way the aesthetic repeatedly circumscribes the political aspirations in art – what has been called its 'Midas touch' (Bürger, 1991, p.14)? It would be fatuous to hold artists to account for the intransitive situation. That their work addresses these problems – absorbing them as themes (explicitly and implicitly), or registering them more structurally, while pushing the issues to their limits, even if voluntarily – seems significant enough.¹⁷

VI

While much recent art has dispensed with the experiencing humanist self as its subject, and would therefore seem light years from Lukács, its own 'predicaments' and 'dilemmas' turn on this same pursuit of the functional role of the militant *citoyen/sans papiers*. As noted earlier, in Lukács's account, 'still life' finally comes to characterize the hiatus reached by *bourgeois* critical realism, its inability – as he sees in Mann's work – to progress beyond a certain point, and to pass from advanced forms of bourgeois to a fully socialist realism (the latter understood as something altogether more complex than the phenomenon claiming the designation). However, it is vital to recognize the extent to which this impasse was also pressured from the other side, by the difficulty of connecting to the conditions for this socialist-realism-still-to-come, a socialist form of realism that could ward off the contingent pressures of the Zhdanovist legacy and inherit instead those qualities Lukács valued in critical realism. There was thus a gap between the present state of things and the desired future: the incapacity of the present to deliver the socialist future, of course, but, more critically, a lack of tangible 'feelers' which might connect *Sein* to *Sollen*, and which might endow *Sollen* with more than just an abstract disposition. The problem of intransitivity was there for Lukács too: his withdrawal from political debate after 1930 should be seen not merely as a retreat into aesthetic issues, but as an intensification of political questions within his reflections on art – as nothing less than the politicization of narrative and

aesthetic quandaries.¹⁸ Unlike Thomas Mann, the artists briefly considered here are explicitly committed to the projects of social emancipation, although they find themselves in circumstances where the prospects for realization seem far more uncertain. And so we find much recent art living out a problem noted by Lukács in *The Theory of the Novel*: the need to navigate the gap between the intelligible ‘I’ of the novel’s protagonist and the empirical ‘I’ – roughly, between ‘art’ and ‘life’ (TN 48). Lukács understands this difficulty as emerging not simply from the distance between *Sein* and *Sollen*, but from their hypostatization – a reification of difference into opposition, a reified stilling of both historical time and dialectical temporality. The bifurcation of these two ‘I’s is attributed to the introjection of this hypostatization within *Sollen* itself. An inflection on this subject resurfaces in his disagreements with Adorno – for example, in ‘The Ideology of Modernism’, one of Lukács’s least propitious essays from the 1950s – where he raises the problem of the fissure between concrete and abstract possibility (MCR 21ff.).¹⁹ And we can see its force working through the artworks considered. Through their efforts to make raids on the structural function of the ‘militant’, to seize hold of its fantasized forms, to reanimate its legacies afresh or to embed its motive forces in tropic meditations, the frequent summoning of the figure of social agency by some of the most compelling artists working today vividly presents the critical dilemma that Lukács’s writing confronted: the problem of *Sollen* becoming an abstract claim; the imperative to make it over into a dynamic force for praxis, a desire seeking to create the possibilities for its realization; the urgency to retrieve *Sollen* from its reduction to no more than a utopic placeholder or protected space for critical thought. Whatever Lukács’s drawbacks, his reflections offer important delineations of challenges now facing us even more acutely, and an example of how emancipatory ambitions refract through aesthetic-political mediations.

Notes

- ¹ See What, How & for Whom (2009). Brecht’s relation to modern art was complex, and was certainly not as straightforwardly affirmative as is often suggested by debates which pit him against Lukács.
- ² See, for example, the special edition of *October* entitled ‘Questionnaire on “The Contemporary”’ (*October* 130, Fall 2009, 3–124).
- ³ I address the problems with the postmodern interpretation of Benjamin in Day (1999) and Day (2010).
- ⁴ Interestingly, the relational emphasis on ‘experience’ and ‘involvement’ comes close to Lukács’s category of ‘portrayal’ through ‘narrative’ (as opposed to ‘description’ and spectatorial distance).
- ⁵ See Buchloh (1995); also Van Gelder (2005) and Baetens and Van Gelder (2006).
- ⁶ Approaches vary considerably. If Steyerl holds to the politics of representation (and for her, the ‘politics’ in this phrase remains vital), Ressler is prepared to

argue for the dissolution of highly reflexive practice into an approach that reclaims the powers of the document (Ressler, 2007). Nevertheless, their difference needs to be grasped not as dichotomous, but as a tensile distinction.

- ⁷ The comments are mostly encountered in Walter Benjamin's quotation of Brecht (Benjamin, 1931, p. 526.) In a manuscript entitled 'No Insight through Photography', Brecht attributes the argument to Fritz Sternberg, but this time the reference is to a photograph of the Ford factory (Brecht, c. 1930, p. 144). See also Cunningham, 'Capitalist and Bourgeois Epics: Lukács, Abstraction and the Novel', this volume, p. 60.
- ⁸ Bloch, of course, was defending Expressionism. In the cultural field more generally, however, his characterization of Lukács has held firm.
- ⁹ The 'Hegelianism' of TN has to be understood carefully: its account of the modern period, and of the novel as its form, is reminiscent of the dynamics described by Hegel's unhappy consciousness (but it is not Hegelian in failing to progress beyond this aporetic stage). Unlike Hegel's, Lukács's account of alienation is historical and distinguished from objectification.
- ¹⁰ Mészáros's reference is to G. Lukács (1948), *A marxista filozófia feladatai az új demokráciában* (The Tasks of Marxist Philosophy in the New Democracy). Budapest: Székesfővárosi Irodalmi Intézet.
- ¹¹ Note Lukács's insistence in 'What Is Orthodox Marxism?': 'We repeat: the category of totality does not reduce its various elements to an undifferentiated uniformity, to identity. The apparent independence and autonomy which they possess in the capitalist system of production is an illusion only in so far as they are involved in a dynamic dialectical relationship with one another and can be thought of as the dynamic dialectical aspects of an equally dynamic and dialectical whole' (HCC 12–13).
- ¹² Lukács's outlook might be compared and contrasted with that of Adorno, who argued in his 1931 lecture that 'the mind is indeed not capable of producing or grasping the totality of the real, but it may be possible to penetrate the detail, to explode in miniature the mass of merely existing reality' (Adorno, 1977, p. 133).
- ¹³ This found an interesting reprise in the 1980s with Jameson's project of 'cognitive mapping': it too was a hypothesis awaiting – without any guarantee – its realization (Jameson 1983).
- ¹⁴ For an extended discussion of photographic representations of protest, see Edwards, 2009.
- ¹⁵ Karl Radek was secretary for the executive of the Communist International, supported the Left Opposition from 1924 to 1929 and died in a Russian camp in 1939.
- ¹⁶ Popkov's painting (oil on canvas, 72–1/16 x 118–1/8 inches, State Tretyakov Gallery, Moscow) is associated with the period of the Khrushchev 'thaw', and, in the artist's career, is an example of Popkov's 'severe style'.
- ¹⁷ As Sekula noted in an essay from 1978, a 'didactic and critical representation' is a necessary part of, but will not be sufficient for, social transformation; for that, a 'larger, encompassing praxis is necessary' (Sekula, 1984, p. 75).
- ¹⁸ Mészáros is particularly attuned to this continuity (Mészáros 1972). See also Jameson's comment that Lukács's political theories were essentially aesthetic or narratological (Jameson, 1971, p. 163 and p. 190).
- ¹⁹ Discussed in more detail in Day (2010). The 'feelers' mentioned earlier in the paragraph derive from Adorno's intervention.

Works Cited

- Adorno, T. (1977), 'The Actuality of Philosophy', *Telos* 31, Spring, pp. 120–33.
- Baetens, J., and H. Van Gelder (eds) (2006), *Critical Realism in Contemporary Art: Around Allan Sekula's Photography*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- Benjamin, W. (1931), 'Little history of photography', in Edmund Jephcott and Kingsley Shorter (trans), *Selected Writings*, Volume 2: 1927–1934. Cambridge, MA and London: Belknap Press, 1999.
- Brecht, B. (c. 1930), 'No insight through photography', in Marc Silberman (ed. and trans.), *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*. 2000. London: Methuen, p. 144.
- (1931), 'The Threepenny lawsuit', in Marc Silberman (ed. and trans.), *Bertolt Brecht on Film and Radio*. 2000. London: Methuen, pp. 147–99.
- Buchloh, B.H.D. (1995), 'Allan Sekula: photography between discourse and document', in Sekula (ed.) *Fish Story*, Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag, pp. 189–200.
- Bürger, P. (1991), 'Aporias of modern aesthetics', in Andrew Benjamin and Peter Osborne (eds), *Thinking Art: Beyond Traditional Aesthetics*. London: ICA, pp. 3–15.
- Chto Delat (2008), 'Declaration on knowledge, politics and art', *Chto Delat* special issue 'When Artists Struggle Together'. http://www.chtodelat.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=494&Itemid=233&lang=en.
- Day, G. (1999), 'Allegory: between deconstruction and dialectics', *Oxford Art Journal*, 22, (1), 103–118.
- (2010), *Dialectical Passions: Negation and Postwar Art Theory*. New York: Columbia University Press.
- Edwards, S. (2009), 'Commons and crowds: figuring photography from above and below', *Third Text*, 23, (4), 447–64.
- Jameson, F. (1971), *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- (1983), 'Cognitive mapping', in Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg, (eds), *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1988, pp. 347–57.
- Lukács, G. (1964), *Essays on Thomas Mann*. London: Merlin.
- Mészáros, I. (1972), *Lukács's Concept of Dialectic*. London: Merlin.
- (1983), 'Totality', in Tom Bottomore (ed.), *A Dictionary of Marxist Thought*. London: Blackwell, pp. 479–81.
- Ressler, O. (2007), Interview by Zanny Begg, 'Approaches to Future Alternative Societies'. <http://www.ressler.at/approaches-to-future-alternative-societies/>.
- Sekula, A. (1984), *Photography Against the Grain: Essays and Photo Works, 1973–1983*. Halifax: The Press of Nova Scotia College of Art & Design.
- (1995), *Fish Story*. Dusseldorf: Richter Verlag.
- Van Gelder, H. (ed.) (2005), *Constantin Meunier: A Dialogue with Allan Sekula*. Leuven: Leuven University Press.
- What, How & for Whom (2009), *What Keeps Mankind Alive? The Texts*. Istanbul: İstanbul Kültür Sanat Vakfı.

Appendix

An Entire Epoch of Inhumanity

Georg Lukács

This is the Foreword written by Lukács in December 1964 for Volume 6 ('The Problems of Realism, 3') of his Collected Works (Georg Lukács, Werke, 17 vols., Neuwied and Berlin: Luchterhand, 1962–1974). Volume 6 contains The Historical Novel (1937) and a series of essays collected under the title 'Balzac and French Realism' (written in the period between 1934 and 1940). Lukács included three shorter texts in an appendix: 'Don Quixote' (1952), 'On an Aspect of Shakespeare's Timeliness' (1964), and 'Faust Studies' (1940). The first paragraph of the Foreword, which is essentially an extended erratum note, is omitted here. All notes are by the translator.

I have always found it regrettable that my detailed discussions of literature have been confined to the nineteenth century. The demands placed on me by my daily life and theoretical work were such that I never had the opportunity to write about authors who sometimes meant more to me than others whom I have treated at length. I therefore include the modest preface to Cervantes and the short piece on Shakespeare here not because I attach particular importance to them. Rather, their presence bears witness to the painful gap in my literary-historical writing of which I am constantly aware.

The main topic of this volume is the intellectual and artistic transition from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century. The new novel that emerges here – and the novel, the bourgeois epos, is the leading literary genre of this period – will set the tone for the entire nineteenth century in both its form and its idea. I am, in fact, convinced that this novel form has not lost its significance even today. That is not to say that we should see it as an immediate model or exemplar [*Vorbild*]. No such exemplarity exists in the entire history of art; where it is claimed, we usually find a misunderstanding of the 'ideal' (even if this misunderstanding is often productive). This holds true for the relationship between the *tragédie classique* and antiquity as well as the relationship between Goethe or Pushkin and Shakespeare. Aesthetically speaking, there is something far more complicated at work in the problem of exemplarity. Every great work of art conforms to the laws of its genre but extends their limits at the same time. Among writers of the greatest genius and originality, this is the expression of a historical transformation with which the subsequent generation must come to

terms. This leads to a double dilemma that confronts truly great, truly universal writers when it comes to their creative process: their modification of formal laws must incorporate that which is permanent and points to the future, but it must also exhibit a conformity commensurate with their historical situation. Already [Edward] Young, in the eighteenth century, was aware that exemplarity should not simply produce imitation. Only weak artists and confused times find themselves standing at that false crossroads where one must choose between the path of imitating so-called 'models' and that of a deracinated 'originality' that is just as dubious.

When it comes to the modern epic, the great achievement of combining conformity with modification can be credited to Walter Scott, who united the totality and completeness of the epic form with a content that was consciously socio-historical in its entirety as well as its details. I am fully aware that this characterization must sound completely outdated to the majority of those who make pronouncements about literature today. That the whole is synonymous with untruth has become a fashionable slogan for the most diverse forms of modern worldviews [*Weltanschauungen*] and repudiations of worldviews [*Weltanschauungslosigkeiten*], for whom the socio-historical appears to be a surface without essence. My aim here is not at all to portray Walter Scott as pointing the way back to a 'return'. In fact, his example illustrates most clearly the dialectic that these essays attempt to shed light on. In a certain way, Scott is not really a great writer at all. He does not possess that gift for charming and fascinating animation that extends to the smallest details of every figure in Tolstoy. Neither is he simply a discoverer of new territory, such as George Lillo and Denis Diderot are for bourgeois drama (even if this groundbreaking reputation might exist only among historians). Instead, he 'merely' gives shape to something whose newness he was the first to experience: the socio-historical as it manifests itself in the destiny of each individual. Whether it comes to the limitations of person and gifts, or to the question of that grand one-sided ambition required of all significant discoverers, Walter Scott ascends to literary heights only when he writes about man rising above his historical *hic et nunc*, about the way its irresistible might constrains his most authentic desires, about the uncomprehending confrontation between men whose attitudes are thoroughly determined by opposing social forces, etc. etc. The discrepancy between such heights of composition and descents into purely individual fortunes is what characterizes the greatness and the limitation of this writer in his singular incomparability.

Individual accomplishment matters less here than the effects [*Ausstrahlungen*] of the accomplishment, which corroborates the difference (the opposition) between exemplarity and imitation proposed earlier. Scott's discovery in relation to totality and historicity had direct consequences, of course, but who would on this account consider Manzoni or Pushkin an 'epigone' of Scott? There is a creatively productive distance that separates them from Scott, because their figures and stories grow out of a completely different history in which they find their proper home. The decisive thing about Scott's effect, and the thing

that makes him unique in his age, is that the novel of society historicized itself in his wake, challenging writers after him to grasp and give form to their own present moment as a historical one. This brought about a turn whose consequences are still in effect today and which is disregarded only at the risk of artistic inferiority.

No rule in the history of art remains without exception: the contrast between the novel of the eighteenth century and that of the nineteenth century is immediately eye-catching, but it does not apply to Swift. Or if it does, it is only with significant qualification. In Swift, a conscious expression of the socio-historical *hic et nunc* is not just absent, but explicitly and artistically set to the side. We find an entire human epoch, with its most universal conflicts, confronting man in general [*überhaupt*] or perhaps man who bears the faintest traces of his time. Today, one calls this the *human condition*, but this expression fails to capture Swift's true subject matter: not man in general but rather his fate in a historically determined society. Swift's unique genius lies in his ability to take in an entire epoch prophetically with his gaze on society. In our time, something analogous is offered only by Kafka, who sets in motion an entire epoch of inhumanity as an antagonist to the Austrian (Bohemian-German-Jewish) man of Franz Joseph's reign. His world, which can only be interpreted as the human condition in a strictly formal sense, thus contains a profound and disturbing truth. It stands in contrast to that which is aimed directly at the pure, abstract (and through abstraction, distorted) generality of human existence, which has no historical background, basis or perspective and thus ends up always striking at perfect emptiness and nothingness. Even if this nothing might be adorned with an arbitrary, somewhat existential ornamentation, it remains, in contrast to what we find in Swift and Kafka, an empty nothing.

The necessary historicity of art is only a subdomain of the general problem of historicity. This problem has been on the agenda since the French Revolution, and German Romanticism presented the world with a solution to it whose false-ness continues to afflict us. With the help of the pamphleteer Edmund Burke, German Romanticism advanced the thesis that the Enlightenment was antihistorical in spirit. It held the French Revolution to be proof of this, and claimed that the historical spirit awakens only with Romanticism and only in the theory and practice of Restoration. To still have to waste words on this thesis is tiresome: it dismisses the reality of the great historians of the Enlightenment (one needs only to think of Gibbon) and amputates the category of progress from history. It acknowledges only that which has emerged 'organically' as historical, and considers any upheaval or conscious action aimed at real change to be antihistorical. This is how Ranke gradually became (above all in Germany) the model of the historical spirit, while the positions represented by Condorcet and Fourier, Hegel and Marx came to be considered antihistorical. As facile and intuitive as it might seem, it would be nonetheless accurate to connect the beginnings of this line of thought with the countermovement against the French Revolution, especially since many of its earliest and most prominent advocates also served the cause of Restoration. This is not the place to describe

how the theorists and practitioners of this view of history eventually became the leading ideologues of the 'Second Reich' and its disastrous Wilhelminian policies. Such a view persists into the present, although sometimes accompanied by a very different intellectual apparatus. Whenever the Metternichian Restoration, for example, is celebrated as a realization of 'European thought', it is not hard to discern an intimate relationship with a primal ideology of restoration, regardless of any historically specific differences.

This theory of history justifies itself as an attack against an abstract concept of progress. But such a concept of progress is a mere myth, at least as far as the significant thinkers and writers of the nineteenth century are concerned. One does not need a fatalistic and mechanistic concept of 'progress' to account for historical change and the way completely new constellations emerge from the finest changes in interpersonal and intra-personal human relations. It would suffice to speak of an irresistible movement [*Fortbewegung*] with one consistent direction and tendency despite all internal and external contradictions. From Thierry to Gordon Childe, from Scott to Thomas Mann – one will find no forthright and rigorous thinker among them to confirm in the least this myth of mechanical progress. Quite the contrary. While we are on the topic of literature: the nonrestorative character of its view of history is grounded in the fact that its significant representatives portray and give shape to irresistible socio-historical tendencies that form men and are formed by the actions of men. The effects and results of these tendencies remain objective and independent from the convictions, wishes and sympathies of writers. This is the view of life that prevails in great literature, from the decline of clans in Walter Scott to the uprooting of the Buddenbrooks to the tragedy of *Leverkühn*. But the (ultimately, and admittedly only ultimately) irresistible movement of history consists of the activity of men, as it occurs among men and to men. No elaborate, abstract theory is needed to portray the historical existence of men as a product of their own acts and passions, in order to artistically or practically lend truth to their continuities and prospects. Only when present conditions congeal into timeless fetishes, losing their mobility and connection to concrete men, do 'living images' of the human condition arise, lending fixity to an often despised and contemptible present and turning it into an unbegotten and unchanging fate. Such a 'will to art' [*Kunstwollen*]¹ is possibly (but not necessarily) the product of genuine desperation, and its aims are possibly (but not necessarily) unrelated to any conscious goal of restoration; in its effect, however, it always tends towards an alliance with restoration. The tension that plays itself out around this 'possibly' is itself socio-historical: one finds no traces of restoration in Kafka himself, but many in his aesthetic successors. A respected sociologist of our day has offered the following generalization of this state of affairs: the end of history has already arrived, and the future can only consist of different ways of dealing with the forms and contents that we know today.²

This view of life and literature, along with our modern literary historical understanding, draws support from the assertion that all important figures and developments of the nineteenth century are essentially Romantic. Trends

towards homogenization have always been fashionable in the history of literature. As a young student, I heard from classmates at the university in Berlin about Dilthey's cutting remarks on the conventional understanding of the eighteenth century: 'If it doesn't make sense, call it "Spinoza"'. The same thing happens today with Romanticism, and it changes nothing that the flattening, conventionalizing effect of overgeneralization now passes for interesting and unconventional. Romanticism is an important intellectual movement of the nineteenth century that began as opposition – set off by the French Revolution in the realm of politics and literature, and by the parallel Industrial Revolution in the economic and social world. One therefore finds in its truly significant representatives a sharp, sometimes even profoundly, penetrating critique of the new contradictions that accompanied these fundamental transformations of social reality. This critique always loses its edge, however, because Romantic writers do not direct the dynamic energy of these contradictions towards the future, as do great utopian thinkers such as Fourier or [Robert] Owen. Instead, they seek to turn back the wheel of history, pitting the Middle Ages and the *ancien régime* against the present, and simple commodity exchange against capitalism. In literary terms, real Romanticism begins with Chateaubriand and passes through the German Romantic School to [Alfred de] Vigny or Coleridge. In socioeconomic terms, we find it in Sismondi, Cobbett or the young Carlyle. There is a tendency that runs from Scott to Balzac to Tolstoy and Thomas Mann (although there are naturally a few significant writers who could be excluded from it), and the overcoming of this tendency through the integration of legitimate critical elements into a realistic image of the world is a more or less essential moment in its development towards maturity.

We seem to have lost sight of this critical point of view today. Beginning with Byron (whose life-motto Goethe so wittily summarized as 'more money and less governance') and moving on to the antiquity-inspired utopian socialist Shelley and that disciple of the Enlightenment, Stendhal: the list of supposed Romantics proceeds to infinity. Wherever we find someone sympathetic and relevant for the present, we readily extend a diploma attesting to Romantic heritage. This veneration has not changed even after Fascism followed the Romantic premise to its furthest and most gruesome conclusion: contrasting the problematic present with a mythologized and idealized past, it called for an actualization of the latter in order to solve the difficulties of the former. Hitler and Rosenberg were not the only ones who took recourse to this 'primal state', which was a modern equivalent of the revival of the *ancien régime* or feudalism; [Ludwig] Klages, Jung and many others made similar attempts before them. The collapse of Fascism was not followed by a coming to terms with the past, either intellectually or in other spheres closer to daily praxis. When I had occasion to speak to staff officers of the Paulus Army after Stalingrad, I experienced in personal proximity for the first time how a sharp criticism of Hitler's 'mistake' was compatible in practical terms with an affirmation of German imperialist expansion, and in theoretical terms with a strategic retreat to the position of Spengler and Nietzsche. To what extent the unexamined past has

played a role in the renaissance of Romanticism remains unexplored, not least because it is part of the method of literary history (and here it is not alone among disciplines) to skim over vast historical differences elegantly and focus attention on semantic or psychological parallels. We therefore get boundless theories of boundlessness, flavoured with a titillating blend of the most modern and a dash of Marxism. That groups of objects have no fixed boundaries is self-evident for Marxist dialectics. For example, the exact point of division between feudal and capitalist formations is not subject to precise definition in principle, although what opposes feudalism and capitalism in principle certainly is. In the theories of boundlessness, however, objectivity itself dissolves into a semantically well-appointed nothing. One might as well conclude with the sentence that was already given a philosophical twist by Hegel: 'By night, all cows are Romantic'.³

These few and fleeting remarks are meant to make clear that the author of these essays – most of which are more than a quarter of a century old – still stands by the principles that guided his old investigations today, heedless of the rebirth of the All-Romantic whose currents have swept along even those who before the tyranny of this fashion had correctly perceived the historical situations. (That individual interpretations here have been rendered obsolete by history is a different matter that has nothing to do with this question).

Budapest, December 1964

Translated by Zachary Sng

Notes

¹ The term *Kunstwollen* was coined by the art historian Alois Riegel (1858–1905), whom Lukács in *History and Class Consciousness* refers to as one of the 'really important historians of the nineteenth century' (HCC 153).

² Lukács may be referring here to the conservative sociologist and philosopher Arnold Gehlen (1904–1976). In *Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei*, Gehlen argued that the avant-garde art movements of the early twentieth century would be followed by nothing but repetitions and variations in terms of both technique and content.

³ The reference here is to Hegel's famous criticism of Schelling's concept of the Absolute, which in the *Phenomenology of Spirit* he dismisses as a reduction of difference into 'a night in which, as the saying goes, all cows are black' (9).

Works Cited

- Gehlen, Arnold (1960), *Zeit-Bilder: Zur Soziologie und Ästhetik der modernen Malerei*. Frankfurt: Klostermann.
- Hegel, G.W.F. (1977), *Phenomenology of Spirit*, trans. A. V. Miller. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Contributors

Timothy Bewes is Associate Professor in the Department of English at Brown University. His publications include *Cynicism and Postmodernity* (Verso, 1997), *Reification, or the Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (Verso, 2002) and *The Event of Postcolonial Shame* (Princeton University Press, 2011). He is an editor of the journal *Novel: A Forum on Fiction* and a member of the editorial board of *New Formations*.

David Cunningham is Principal Lecturer in English Literature at the University of Westminster, and an editor of the journal *Radical Philosophy*. He is coeditor of the books *Adorno and Literature* (2006) and *Photography and Literature in the Twentieth Century* (2005), and has published widely on issues in modernism, aesthetics and urban theory. He is currently completing a book entitled *Reflexes of the Future: Essays on the Avant-garde*.

Gail Day is Senior Lecturer in History of Art in the School of Fine Art, History of Art and Cultural Studies at the University of Leeds. She is an organizer for the London-based seminar series Marxism in Culture (www.marxisminculture.org) and an Advisory Editor for the *Oxford Art Journal*. She is a contributor to *The Philistine Controversy* (Verso, 2002), to journals such as *Radical Philosophy*, *Third Text*, *Oxford Art Journal* and *Art History*, and the author of *Dialectical Passions: Negation in Post-War Art Theory* (Columbia University Press, 2010).

Patrick Eiden-Offe is a Research Associate at the Centre of Excellence on 'The Cultural Foundations of Social Integration' at the University of Konstanz. He is currently working on a project on figurations of class in German nineteenth-century literature and political theory. His fields of research include political theologies, theories of culture and Robert Walser.

Andrew Feenberg holds the Canada Research Chair in Philosophy of Technology in the School of Communication of Simon Fraser University. He is the author of *Lukács, Marx and the Sources of Critical Theory; Alternative Modernity; Questioning Technology; Transforming Technology* and *Heidegger and Marcuse*. His most recent book is *Between Reason and Experience: Essays in Technology and Modernity*.

Timothy Hall is Senior Lecturer in the Department of International Politics, University of East London. He is the coauthor of *The Modern State: Theories and Ideologies* (Edinburgh University Press, 2007). His recent publications on Lukács include 'Lukács's *The Theory of the Novel* and its importance for Adorno's aesthetic theory' in *Adorno and Literature* (Continuum, 2006), and 'Lukács' in *The Palgrave Guide to Continental Political Philosophy* (Palgrave, 2004).

Andrew Hemingway is former Professor of History of Art at University College, London. His books include: *Landscape Imagery and Urban Culture in Early Nineteenth-Century Britain* (1992) and *Artists on the Left: American Artists and the Communist Movement, 1926–1956* (2002). He is also editor of *Marxism and the History of Art from William Morris to the New Left* (2006), and editor, with William Vaughan, of *Art in Bourgeois Society, 1790–1850* (1998). He is on the editorial board of the *Oxford Art Journal* and *Kunst und Politik. Jahrbuch der Guernica-Gesellschaft*.

Neil Larsen teaches Critical Theory and Comparative Literature at the University of California, Davis. He is the author of *Modernism and Hegemony* (Minnesota University Press, 1990), *Reading North by South* (Minnesota University Press, 1995) and *Determinations* (Verso, 2001). He publishes widely in the areas of Critical Theory and Latin-Americanism. He is a member of the editorial collectives of *Mediations* (the journal of the Marxist Literary Group), and of the German critical-theoretical journal *krisis*.

Yoon Sun Lee is Associate Professor of English at Wellesley College, and the author of *Nationalism and Irony: Burke, Scott, Carlyle* (Oxford University Press, 2004) and numerous articles. She is currently completing a book on the emergence of the everyday in Asian American literature.

Michael Löwy was born in Brazil but has lived in France since 1969. He is *emerit* Research Director at the CNRS (National Centre for Scientific Research), Paris, and Lecturer at the École des Hautes Études en Sciences Sociales, also in Paris. He is the author of *Georg Lukács: From Romanticism to Bolshevism* (Verso, 1981). His books and articles have been translated into 28 languages. His recent publications include *Romanticism against the Current of Modernity*, with Robert Sayre (Duke University Press, 2001); *Fire Alarm: Reading Walter Benjamin's 'On the Concept of History'* (Verso, 2005); and *Franz Kafka, rêveur insoumis* (Stock, 2004).

Stewart Martin is a member of the editorial collective of the journal *Radical Philosophy* and Senior Lecturer in Modern European Philosophy, Aesthetics and Art Theory at Middlesex University.

John Marx is Associate Professor of English at the University of California, Davis. He is author of *The Modernist Novel and the Decline of Empire* (Cambridge

University Press, 2005), and is currently completing a book manuscript with the working title 'Fiction After Liberalism'.

Frederic J. Schwartz is Professor of History of Art at University College London, where he teaches nineteenth- and twentieth-century German art and architecture. His publications include *The Werkbund: Design Theory and Mass Culture Before the First World War* (Yale University Press 1996), and *Blind Spots: Critical Theory and the History of Art in Twentieth-Century Germany* (Yale University Press 2005).

Zachary Sng is Associate Professor of German Studies at Brown University. He is the author of *The Rhetoric of Error from Locke to Kleist* (Stanford University Press, 2010), and has also published on British and German writers of the long eighteenth century.

Index

Works by Georg Lukács and Karl Marx are indexed by title. Abbreviations given for Lukács titles are those used in the text (see pp. x–xi). Entries for illustrations are indicated in italics.

- absolute sinfulness 6, 39–41, 46–7, 51, 77n. 6
abstraction 55–61, 62n. 6, 62–3n. 8, 148, 159–60, 170
Adorno, Theodor
 dialectics 85, 134, 136n. 13, 144, 152, 217
 history 1–2, 85
 literature 53–4, 58, 60–1, 62n. 4, 62n. 5, 179–80, 182
 photography 206
 rationalization 125, 135n. 6
 reification 81, 109, 132
 technology 112–13
 totality 139, 142–4, 152, 218n. 12
aestheticism 157–77
Agamben, Giorgio 77n. 9
agency *versus* structure 7, 101–2, 108–11
AIDS 118
alienation
 in art 54
 and objectivity 147–8
 social activity 108, 122, 124–7, 134, 135–6n. 9, 140
allegory 75, 180, 182, 186, 205, 214
Althusser, Louis 2–3, 6, 37–8, 40, 47n. 1
American Indians 193, 201n. 4
Anderson, Benedict 53
Appadurai, Arjun 200–1
Aristotle 21, 27, 33, 135n. 5
Armstrong, Nancy 57, 190–1, 193
Arrighi, Giovanni 61–2n. 2
art *see* literature; visual arts
‘Art for Art’s Sake and Proletarian Writing’ (Lukács) 8, 157–77
Atget, Eugène 42–3
Attac 90
Auerbach, Erich 74, 75
Azzellini, Dario 212
Badiou, Alain 47n. 1, 94
Balibar, Étienne 2–3
Balzac, Honoré de 19, 22, 60–1, 71, 225
Baudrillard, Jean 139
Bauman, Zygmunt 200–1
Bavarian Revolution 169
Bazin, André 41
Becher, Johann 171
Benjamin, Walter
 allegory 180, 186, 205–6
 aura 34n. 11
 literature 49–51, 60, 180, 182
 photography 42–3
Bernstein, Eduard 157
Bernstein, J. M. 20–1, 33n. 8, 39, 135n. 2
Bewes, Timothy 5–6, 34n. 18, 227
Biemann, Ursula 207
biopolitical labour 141–2
Bloch, Ernst 10–11, 29–31, 34n. 13, 208, 218n. 8

- 'Blum Theses' (Lukács) 164
- bourgeoisie
 and aestheticism 158–62, 165–71
 in class struggle 69–70, 89, 96–7
 and critical realism 211, 216
 and everyday life 20, 24–5, 29
 and the novel 50–3, 57–9, 173–4, 189–201
- Brecht, Bertolt 60, 203–4, 206–8, 217n. 1, 218n. 7 *see also* neo-Brechtianism
- Bredel, Willi 173
- Breton, André 182
- Brod, Max 182
- Buchloh, Benjamin 205
- Butler, Judith 3–4, 17–18, 33n. 1, 104
- Byron, George Gordon 225
- Capital* (Marx)
 commodity form 123
 labour and value 149, 152n. 2
 method 40, 136n. 10
 Subject of history 58–9, 62–3n. 8, 88–9
- capitalism *see* crisis of capitalism; totality
- Carlyle, Thomas 225
- Cervantes, Miguel de 61–2n. 2, 159, 221
- Cézanne, Paul 203, 211
- Chandler, James 192, 201n. 4
- Chateaubriand, François-René, Vicomte de 225
- Cheka 171–3, 175n. 28
- Chernyshevsky, Nikolay 212
- Childe, Vere Gordon 224
- Chto Delat 208, 212–16
- cinema 5–6, 41–4, 46–7, 205–7, 212–16
- Clark, T. J. 18, 191
- class *see* bourgeoisie; proletariat
- class consciousness
 and culture 158
 and identity principle 132
 imputedness 1, 4–5, 12n. 3, 65–8, 83–4
 and the novel 56–7, 62–3n. 8
 and objectivity 150
 and reification 90–8, 107–8, 129
 and type 7, 65–8, 75–7
- Cobbett, William 225
- Coleridge, Samuel Taylor 225
- commodity
 art and literature as 53, 160, 204
 exchange 82, 144, 146
 fetishism 82, 87, 89
 generalized commodity
 form 122–35, 136n. 11
 labour-power 76
 and reification 69, 102–3
- commons 93
- Communist Manifesto* (Marx and Engels) 59, 62–3n. 8, 191–2
- Communist Party *see also* Stalinism
 after Stalin 178–9
 censorship of Lukács 84, 157
 Danish Communist Party 168
 in fiction 171–3
 German Communist Party (Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands/KPD) 169, 175n. 21
 revolutionary party 4–5, 70, 95
- Condorcet, Marie Jean Antoine Nicolas Caritat, Marquis de 223
- Conrad, Joseph 44–6
- contemplation 103–5, 148
- contemporary art 9, 203–19
- crisis of capitalism 6, 11, 86, 90–8, 106–7, 141
- critical irrationalism 185–6
- critical realism 181–5, 205–11
- Critical Theory *see* Frankfurt School
- Critique of the Gotha Programme* (Marx) 161
- Croce, Benedetto 1–2
- Cunningham, David 5, 227
- Danish Communist Party 168
- D'Annunzio, Gabriele 160
- Dante Alighieri 61–2n. 2, 159
- Day, Gail 9, 227
- de Man, Paul 201n. 1
- Debord, Guy 139
- Defence of History and Class Consciousness* (DHC) (Lukács) 1, 145, 164
- Defoe, Daniel 191
- Deleuze, Gilles 41, 47n. 1
- The Destruction of Reason* (Lukács) 150–1
- Dewey, John 104–5

- Dickens, Charles 197–200
 Diderot, Denis 161, 222
 Diederichs, Eugen 157–8, 162n. 6,
 162n. 8 *see also* *Tat* (periodical)
 Dilthey, Wilhelm 166, 225
 documentary 205–7, 212–16 *see also*
 journalism
 Doody, Margaret 49
 Dostoevsky, Fyodor 39–40, 158
 Dreiser, Theodor 181
 Duncan, Ian 196
 Dvořák, Max 166
 Dzerzhinsky, Felix 173
- Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of*
1844 (Marx) 122, 135n. 4,
 147–50
 Eiden-Offe, Patrick 7, 227
 The Eight 165–6
 Eisenstein, Sergei 207, 212
 environment 113, 116–18
 epic *see* literature
 Ernst, Paul 157–8, 162n. 8
Essays on Realism (ER) (Lukács) 170–3
 ethnicity 83, 98n. 3, 195–6, 198–200
 event 47n. 1
 everyday life 20, 24–33, 33n. 9, 159–60
 Expressionism 10, 160, 167, 170, 218n. 8
- Fabian, Johannes 193
 Farocki, Harun 207
 Fascism 181, 225
 Feenberg, Andrew 7, 227
 feminism 83, 98n. 3, 113
 Feuerbach, Ludwig 147–50, 152n. 5
 Fichte, Johann Gottlieb 39, 51, 74,
 77n. 6, 109, 128
 film 5–6, 41–4, 46–7, 205–7, 212–16
 First World War 186
 Fischer, Ernst 183–4
 Flaubert, Gustave 26, 158, 160, 167, 189
 Floyd, Kevin 98n. 3
 form
 aesthetic 4, 17–36, 160–1, 165–8
 social 4, 9–10, 17–36, 108, 115
 Foucault, Michel 6, 141
 Fourier, Charles 223, 225
 France, Anatole 181
- Frank, Leonhard 161, 163n. 12, 168–73,
 175n. 18, 175n. 19, 175n. 21
 Frankfurt School 84, 87, 103, 111–18,
 122, 139 *see also* Adorno;
 Benjamin; Bloch; Habermas;
 Honneth; Marcuse
 Freee 215, 216
 French Revolution 223–5
 Freud, Sigmund 170
 Fusillo, Massimo 51
 Futurism 174
- Gallagher, Catherine 17, 22
 gay politics 118 *see also* queer theory
 Gehlen, Arnold 226n. 2
 gender 83 *see also* feminism
 Genette, Gérard 34n. 12
The German Ideology (Marx and
 Engels) 148–9
German Realists in the Nineteenth Century
 (GR) (Lukács) 70–3
 German Revolution 169
 Geuss, Raymond 104
 Ghosh, Amitav 199–200
 Gibbon, Edward 223
 globalization 95, 138, 200–1, 208
 Godard, Jean-Luc 205
 Goethe, Johann Wolfgang von 27,
 77n. 5, 160, 221, 225
 Goldstücker, Eduard 183
 González, Marcial 98n. 3
 good life 121–37, 142–3
 Goodlad, Lauren 198
 Goppelt, Leonhard 74
 Gorin, Jean 205
 Gorky, Maxim 58, 168
 Grobmann, Ralph 170
 Grosz, George 170
Grundrisse (Marx) 88, 93, 136n. 10
- Habermas, Jürgen
 class consciousness 132
 communicative theory 111, 122
 rationality 112–13
 reification 81, 109, 127
 systems theory 108, 119n. 2
 Hall, Timothy 7, 228
 Harding, Sandra 98n. 3

- Hardt, Michael 90, 92, 141
 Hartsock, Nancy 98n. 3
 Hauptmann, Elizabeth 160, 203
 Hebbel, Christian Friedrich 160
 Hegel, Georg Wilhelm Friedrich
 Adorno on 1–2, 143
 on history 4, 10, 106, 126, 129–31
 as humanist 12n. 5
 and literary theory 5, 49–59, 61,
 62n. 7, 218n. 9
 on the real *versus* the rational 204–5
 and reification 129–31, 139
 and Romanticism 223, 226, 226n. 3
 Subject 88–9, 109–10, 129–31, 133
 and totality 143–52
 Heidegger, Martin 103–5, 108, 114
 Heine, Heinrich 73
 Hemingway, Andrew 8, 228
 Hermsdorf, Klaus 183
 historical materialism 38, 57–9, 74–7
 historical novel 8–9, 188–202, 222–3
The Historical Novel (HN) (Lukács) 8–9,
 36, 83, 188–202
 history
 causality 68
 human action 106
 and literature 27–43, 188–202,
 221–6
 proletariat as Subject of 1–7, 81–99
 and reason 129–32
 and totality 10–12
 and typology 72–77
History and Class Consciousness (HCC)
 (Lukács)
 commodity form 122–35, 144–6
 dialectics 136n. 14
 form 10
 and literary theory 21, 52–3, 164
 practice 150
 praxis 136n. 17
 reification 104–5, 110
 Subject of history 1–4, 81–99, 122–35
 and totality 144–6, 218n. 11
 and typology 65–77
 ‘History of the Development of the
 Modern Drama’ (Lukács) 23
 Hitler, Adolf 179, 225
 HIV/AIDS 118
 Hofmannsthal, Hugo von 160
 Holloway, John 90, 92
 Homer 159
 Honneth, Axel
 action theory 122
 commodity form 136n. 11
 on Habermas 119n. 2
 identity principle 132
 reification 7, 81–2, 101–4, 108–18,
 123, 127
 Horkheimer, Max 113, 125, 135n. 6
 Huillet, Danièle 205
 Hulme, T. E. 33n. 2
 humanism 2–3, 12n. 5, 110, 181–2,
 203, 216
 Hungarian Council Republic 173
 Hungarian Revolution 178–9, 183
 Ibsen, Henrik 160
 idealism 12n. 5, 38, 127–30, 132,
 136n. 14 *see also* Fichte; Hegel;
 Kant
 ideology 2–3, 36–8
 immanence 38–44
 immanent critique 6, 84–5, 90, 92–4,
 98, 152
 imperialism 150, 170, 181, 192–3,
 198–9, 225
 Impressionism 165–6
 imputedness
 of class consciousness 1, 75, 83–4,
 90, 96
 and form 4–5
 and typology 67–8, 70, 75
 individualism 50–7, 166, 188–202
 internet 116–17
 Iroquois 193
 irrealism 185–6
 Jameson, Fredric
 cognitive mapping 55, 218n. 13
 Marxist literary criticism 37, 52,
 82–4, 188–9, 201n. 1, 201n. 2
 narrative 18–19
 totality 55, 209
 Jarrells, Anthony 192

- Jay, Martin 108
journalism 125 *see also* documentary
Jung, Carl 225
justice 7, 101, 121–37
- Kadarkay, Arpad 8
Kafka, Franz 8, 60, 178–87, 223–4
Kaiser, Georg 160, 170
Kant, Immanuel
 aesthetics 4, 12n. 3
 freedom 136n. 15
 moral judgement 123, 127–9, 133, 135n. 5
 reason 97, 106, 127–9, 136n. 15
 subject *versus* object 4, 12n. 3, 110, 133, 145–6
- Keller, Gottfried 70–3
Kierkegaard, Søren 204
Klages, Ludwig 225
Kommunistische Partei Deutschlands (KPD) 169, 175n. 21
Krushchev, Nikita 178, 218n. 16
Krutik, Mikhail 213
Kurz, Robert 86
- labour
 biopolitical labour 141–2
 and class consciousness 62–3n. 8
 fetishized 87–8
 labour-power 76, 107, 152n. 1
 living labour 76, 140–3, 149, 210
 reification 90–1, 95–7, 102–3, 135–6n. 9, 147
 and value 93, 125, 140–3, 151, 152n. 1, 152n. 2
- Landauer, Gustav 169
Larsen, Neil 6, 228
Lazzarato, Maurizio 139
Lear, Jonathan 104
Lee, Yoon Sun 5, 228
Lefebvre, Henri 59
Lenin, Vladimir Ilich 65, 169, 172, 212–13
Lessing, Gotthold Ephraim 161
Leviné, Eugen 169
Libedinksi, Juri 162, 171–4
Lillo, George 222
- Linden, Marcel van den 90
literature *see also* modernism;
 naturalism; realism
 epic
 history of 61–2n. 2
 and the novel 38–47, 50–9, 62n. 5
 and Scott 189, 222
 and totality 62–3n. 8
 journalism 125
 narrative 17–35, 71–4
 novel
 bourgeois 5–6, 39–63, 158–61, 167–8, 189, 221–2
 historical novel 8–9, 188–202, 222–3
 historicity 39–63, 221–6
 proletarian 161–2, 168–74
 as still life 210–11
 novella 72, 171
 poetry 24, 27, 33, 62n. 7, 210
 theatre 27, 41, 221–2
- Lohoff, Ernst 86
Love Canal disaster 117
Löwith, Karl 135n. 7
Löwy, Michael 8–9, 58, 77n. 1, 164, 228
Luxemburg, Rosa 179
Lyotard, Jean-François 47n. 1
- MacIntyre, Alasdair 122
magic realism 62n. 3
Makhno, Nestor 175n. 27
Man, Paul de 201n. 1
Mann, Heinrich 181
Mann, Thomas 168, 179–84, 211, 216–17, 224–5
Manzoni, Alessandro 222
Marcuse, Herbert 104, 112–15, 118
Märten, Lu 157
Martin, Stewart 7–8, 228
Marx, John 8–9, 228–9
The Meaning of Contemporary Realism (MCR) (Lukács) 8, 58, 178–87, 210
mediation 87, 89–91, 107–11, 115, 117, 129–32
Meidner, Ludwig 170
Merleau-Ponty, Maurice 10, 132–3

- messianism 66, 74–5, 77n. 9
 Mignolo, Walter 61–2n. 2
 Miller, D. A. 198
 modernism
 and contemporary art 203–4
 and Kafka 179–86
 versus realism 1, 10–11, 19, 56,
 179–86, 201n. 2
 and time 17, 19, 31
 modernity 49–64, 110–11, 121–37, 191
 Mohawks 193
 moral theory 39–41, 101, 122 *see also*
 good life
 Moretti, Franco 49
 Mühsam, Erich 169
 Müller, Georg 158
 Munich Council Republic 169

 Nagy, Imre 178, 183
 Naipaul, V. S. 45
 narrative *see* literature; realism
 nationalism 175n. 17, 189–96, 198–201
 Native Americans 193, 201n. 4
 natural sciences 67–8, 77n. 2, 105–6,
 117–18, 150–1, 165
 naturalism
 and modernism 181
 and perception 150–1, 159
 and photography 206
 versus realism 62n. 7, 71–3, 211
 Nealon, Christopher 37–8
 Negri, Antonio 90, 92, 141–4, 152
 neo-Brechtianism 205, 207
 Neo-romanticism 160, 167
 New Left 82–4, 112–13, 205
 new social movements 83, 113–14
 Newton, Isaac 106
 Nexø, Andersen 161, 168
 Nietzsche, Friedrich 126, 170, 225
 nihilism 121–2, 134, 135n. 2
 Novalis (Georg Friedrich Philipp von
 Hardenberg) 74, 77n. 7, 77n. 8
 novel *see* literature
 novella 72, 171
 Nussbaum, Martha 122

 Ochilewski, Walter 157
The Ontology of Social Being
 (Lukács) 151

 Ottwalt, Ernst 171, 173
 Owen, Robert 225

 Perkins, Stephen 77 n. 2
 photography 42–3, 60, 206–7, 218n. 7
 Pinkard, Terry 136n. 15
 Plekhanov, Georgi 167, 175n. 8
 poetry 24, 27, 33, 62n. 7, 210
Political Writings, 1919–29 (PR)
 (Lukács) 172–3, 174n. 1
 Popkov, Victor E. 214–15, 218n. 16
 Post-Impressionism 165–6
 postmodernism 36, 205–6
 Postone, Moishe 6, 86–94, 98, 98n. 3,
 99n. 11, 135–6n. 9
 Poulantzas, Nicos 6
 Prague Spring 184
 praxis 10, 122–3, 127–9, 131–3, 136n.
 14, 136n. 17
 proletariat
 and consciousness 150
 as free actor 122
 and literature 37, 158–9, 161–2,
 166–74
 and Lukács's early work 115
 and reification 69–70, 81–99, 107, 126
 and socialism 109–10
 as Subject of history 1–7, 57–9,
 62–3n. 8, 126, 130–5
 and typology 73–77
 Pushkin, Aleksandr 221, 222

 queer theory 98n. 3 *see also* gay politics

 Raabe, Wilhelm 73
 Radek Community 212–13, 216
 Radek, Karl 212, 218n. 15
 Ragussis, Michael 196
 Rancière, Jacques 33
 Ranke, Leopold von 223
 Ransome, Arthur 172
 rationality *see* reason
 rationalization 107, 111–12, 121–8,
 134, 135n. 7
 realism
 and contemporary art 205–17
 critical irrealism 185–6
 critical realism 181–5, 205–11
 and the historical novel 188–202

- and history 37, 40–1, 58–9, 72, 164
versus modernism 1, 10–11, 19, 56,
 179–86, 201n. 2
 and narrative 18–22, 25–33, 70–2
versus naturalism 62n. 7, 71–3, 211
versus postmodernism 36
 and science 150–1
 Socialist Realism 58, 173, 179, 205,
 210–11, 214–16
- reason 82, 97, 101–20, 126–32, 136n. 10,
 150–1
- reification
 and crisis of capitalism 6, 81–98
 and everyday life 20
 Honneth on 7, 81–2, 101–4, 108–18,
 123, 127
 and literature 62n. 4, 167–8
 and proletariat 69–70
 and reason 127–33
 as social process 7, 101–18, 119n. 4
 and totality 139, 207–8
- 'Remarks on the Theory of Literary
 History' (Lukács) 32
- Rembrandt van Rijn 203
- Resch, Johannes 157
- Ressler, Oliver 207, 212, 218n. 6
- revolutionary party *see* Communist
 Party
- Riegel, Alois 226n. 1
- Rolland, Romain 168, 181
- Romanticism 24, 223–6 *see also*
 Neo-romanticism
- Rosenberg, Alfred 225
- Rosler, Martha 207
- Die rote Fahne* (periodical) 164, 171
- Rousseau, Jean-Jacques 97, 126
- Rudas, Lazslo 77n. 2
- Russian Revolution
 Cheka 175n. 28
 civil war 175n. 27
 as context for Lukács's work 58, 74,
 110
 disillusionment 93, 161
 in fiction 171–3
- Sartre, Jean-Paul 81, 98n. 2, 210
- Say's law 106–7
- Schelling, Friedrich Wilhelm
 Joseph 130, 226n. 3
- Schiller, Johann Christoph Friedrich
 von 129, 160
- Schmeling, Christian 175n. 19
- Scholem, Gershom 60, 180
- Scholz, Roswitha 86, 98n. 3
- Schwartz, Frederic J. 229
- science 67–8, 77n. 2, 105–6, 117–18,
 150–1, 165 *see also* technology
- Scott, Walter 8–9, 188–201, 222–5
- Seghers, Anna 183
- Sekula, Allan 205–7, 212, 216,
 218n. 17
- Sennett, Richard 200–1
- Serge, Victor 174n. 2
- Shakespeare, William 27, 159, 221
- Shaw, George Bernard 181
- Shelley, Percy Bysshe 27, 225
- Simmel, Georg 23, 115
- Simpson, David 195
- Sinclair, Upton 169
- Sismondi, Jean Charles Léonard de 225
- Sng, Zachary 229
- Social Democracy 157–8, 168–9,
 175n. 21
- social sciences 66–8, 77n. 2, 104–6,
 108, 134
- Socialist Realism 58, 173, 179, 205,
 210–11, 214–16
- Sohn-Rethel, Alfred 87, 89
- Soul and Form* (SF) (Lukács)
 and aestheticism 165–7
 and Ernst 157–8
 forms of life 145
 on longing 77n. 8
 and Marxism 3–4, 165–7
 time in 17–19, 22–5, 30
- Spengler, Oswald 225
- Stalingrad, Battle of 225
- Stalinism *see also* Communist Party
 Lukács's accommodation with 1,
 111, 164, 167, 174, 175n. 17
 Lukács's critique of 178–9, 210
- standpoint theory (non-Marxist) 83–4,
 98n. 3
- Stendhal (Marie Henri Beyle) 225
- Sternberg, Fritz 218n. 7
- Steyerl, Hito 207, 218n. 6
- still life 210–11, 216
- Storm, Theodor 24, 165

- Stössinger, Felix 169
 Straub, Jean-Marie 205
 structure *versus* agency 7, 101–2, 108–11
Studies in European Realism (SER) (Lukács) 17, 25–7, 29–32, 36, 167
 Subject of history
 bourgeoisie 56–9
 capital 58–9, 62–3n. 8, 63n. 10
 proletariat 1–5, 37, 81–99, 109–11, 121–2, 130–4
 Swift, Jonathan 184, 223
- Die Tat* (periodical) 157–8, 173 *see also* Diederichs
 Taylor, Frederic 117
 technology 102, 105, 109, 112–18
Tendenzkunst 160–1, 167–73
 theatre 27, 41, 221–2
 theology 74, 180
The Theory of the Novel (TN) (Lukács)
 and contemporary art 217
 on dissonance 9
 on Flaubert 167
 on form 22, 30–1
 as Hegelian 218n. 9
 and historical novel 188–9
 and literary theory 36–47, 49–61
 on time 20, 28
 and totality 209
 theory of value *see* value
 ‘Thoughts Toward an Aesthetic of the Cinema’ (TAC) (Lukács) 41–4, 46, 47n. 2
 time 5, 17–35, 75–6, 192 *see also* history
 Toller, Ernst 160, 170
 Tolstoy, Leo
 everyday life in 160
 and extreme possibilities 21, 29–30
 great writer 222
 and Romanticism 225
 time in 26, 32
 totality
 antinomies 107, 128, 132–4, 146, 218n. 11
 and contemporary art 203–17
 and crisis of capitalism 96–8
 and form 10–12, 18, 31
 and literature 50–61, 170–1, 189, 221–6
 and praxis 133–4
 and Subject of history 62–3n. 8, 88–91, 107
 Trenkle, Norbert 6, 86–7, 90–2, 95, 97–8, 99n. 11
 Trotsky, Leon 162, 173–4, 208
 Trotter, David 49, 53
 Trumpener, Katie 190–1
 Tucholsky, Kurt 182
 type 7, 25–8, 65–78
- value (Marx)
 and commodity form 125–7
 and living labour 138–42, 149, 152n. 1, 152n. 2
 and time 76
 and *Wertkritik* School 86–7, 93
 Vigny, Alfred de 225
 Vilensky, Dmitry 213
 Virno, Paolo 139
 visual arts
 cinema 5–6, 41–4, 46–7, 205–7, 212–16
 contemporary art 9, 203–19
 documentary 205–7, 212–6
 painting 165–6, 203, 211, 214–15, 218n. 16
 photography 42–3, 60, 206–7, 218n. 7
 theatre 27, 41, 221–2
- Watt, Ian 49–50, 52–3, 59, 61–2n. 2, 62n. 3, 190–1
 Webb, Beatrice and Sidney 157
 Weber, Max
 ideal type 67–8, 73
 limits of sociology 134
 and Marxism 77n. 2, 123, 135n. 7
 objective possibility 77n. 1
 Protestant ethic 165, 174–5n. 7
 rationalization 103, 126
 Weill, Kurt 203
Wertkritik School 6, 86–7, 91 *see also* Scholz; Trenkle
 Wilde, Oscar 160
The Wire (TV serial) 61, 63n. 9, 63n. 10

- Wittfogel, Karl 157
Wood, Ellen Meiksins 61–2n. 2
Woolf, Virginia 198–9
World War I 186
Writer and Critic (WC) (Lukács) 18,
20–1, 25–7, 62n. 6, 71–2, 83
Young, Edward 222
The Young Hegel (YH) (Lukács) 126,
147, 149–50, 152n. 5
Žižek, Slavoj 77n. 9, 94, 99n. 13
Zola, Émile 26