In West Germany the politicization of aesthetic theory and literary criticism began during the second half of the 1960s. If one were to describe everything that took place in the fifteen years between 1965 and 1979, the resulting recitation of names and projects would contribute little to our understanding of the matter. I have therefore chosen to focus on themes and categories that can aid us in laying out the internal logic of the theoretical discussion. This approach assumes that one can organize the processes of theory formation into a historical pattern. As a consequence, the years between 1965 and 1979 are presented as comprising a unified epoch or phase that differs from the preceding and following years. The legitimacy of this assumption can be assessed only by critically examining the theoretical material itself. My approach thus relies on a schema whose validity can be demonstrated only by investigating its contents.

In 1969 Hans Robert Jauss alluded to Thomas Kuhn by speaking of a paradigm shift in literary criticism. Jauss foresaw a new theoretical model emerging from reception aesthetics. As Jauss himself later admitted, this claim proved rash; yet, in the

1. Please consult the Postscript to this chapter for some remarks on the decade of the 1980s in Germany.
mid-1960s, significant changes do indeed begin to occur in West Germany. Nevertheless, these changes do not so much take place because new theorems are developed; rather, they result more from a rediscovery of older, obscured approaches and positions. In retrospect, this turn can be characterized as a break with the modernist and avant-gardist aesthetics variously represented by Theodor W. Adorno and Gottfried Benn. This is not to claim that Adorno's theory played no role in influencing later developments. On the contrary, it is precisely his theory that became extraordinarily important to the debates and self-understanding of the 1970s. This initial break is instead a matter of rejecting particular elements of Adorno's thought: his attachment to the great names of modernism like Franz Kafka, James Joyce, and Samuel Beckett, and his conception of the social function of art as it is expressed in his essays on Jean-Paul Sartre, Georg Lukács, and Bertolt Brecht. Those who opposed the modernists' aesthetics concentrated on the defensive stance of postwar modernism vis-à-vis the contemporary social contradictions that became evident in West Germany with the formation of the Great Coalition in 1966. This division was a thoroughly painful and, for the most part, deeply traumatic event for both sides, for the student movement's theory of art was profoundly indebted to the crucial stimulus of Adorno's work.

I will not even attempt to sketch out Adorno's aesthetic theory here; it is enough to name those features of his theory that were received by the New Left and then wielded against him:

1. In contradistinction to traditional academic aesthetics, Adorno's theory is historically oriented, both in relation to its object and in respect to its own position. In each case, it ad-

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dresses the work of art only in the context of its historical emergence and reception.

2. We are not dealing with a historicist but an ideologically critical historical approach. This means that the encounter with the work of art that deserves the name of criticism interrogates the structure of the work of art by attending to the element of historical truth it contains.

3. Adorno is indebted to the Marxist analysis of commodities for crucial insights into the conditions of aesthetic reception and production under capitalism. The rubric of "culture industry" summarizes this approach, which ultimately relates the aesthetic to the economic sphere.

4. Lastly, Adorno formulates a theory of aesthetic autonomy that radically departs from the concept of the organic work of art and the notion of aesthetic reflection.

This extremely broad characterization nevertheless allows for a more precise delineation of the paradigm shift. Adorno's theory denies itself a political application of its own insights and negates the step from a contemplative to a practical attitude. This can in no way simply be attributed to personal idiosyncrasies. Adorno rejects the politicization of aesthetics, which would of course include his concept of art, because his social theory ruled out any essential transformation in the global system of organized capitalism. In the face of the proletariat's integration into existing society, the resistance of late Critical Theory was confined to the level of reflection. This political resignation dramatically affects the aesthetic sphere, which for Adorno becomes the sole realm in which freedom from and opposition to the omnipresent system can be articulated.

The theoretical kernel of this position is already formulated at an early stage in Adorno's thinking. In the essay "On the Fetish Character in Music" from the year 1938, which should be understood as a confrontation with Walter Benjamin's essay "The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction," Adorno resists his friend's attempt to draw political conclu-
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sions from the destruction of the aura—that is, of aesthetic autonomy. 4 Adorno expressly repudiates Benjamin's hope that the technical grounding of art as it was emerging in film might have progressive political implications. The theory of the culture industry anticipated here by Adorno is not interested in technology as a new force of production but in the exchange value of art, an exchange value that unswervingly guarantees art's degradation. This difference of opinion between Adorno and his older friend is not mentioned out of caprice, for precisely this conflict becomes a crucial catalyst in the confrontation between Adorno and the New Left. The rediscovery of Benjamin's later writings, which were only partially represented in the 1955 edition of his works overseen by Adorno, changed the emphasis of the debate with help from theories that had already been developed in the 1930s—most significantly by Benjamin and Brecht. The increasingly embittered 1967 debate between the Frankfurt School and the journal alternative over the authentic form of Benjamin's writings is symptomatic of the intensification of what I would like to designate as the political aesthetics of the 1960s. 5 It would certainly be precipitous at this point to trace back this materialist aesthetics, which clearly relies on Marx, exclusively to the rediscovery of Benjamin. The search for a materialist theory of art leads in the late 1960s to a series of different, to some extent conflicting, efforts that take issue with Critical Theory.

In a schematic way, one can distinguish between four different schools of thought. During the first phase of the movement, that is, between 1967 and 1969, Herbert Marcuse and his writings were particularly important for the self-understanding of the Left, for they directly met the demand for


5. See alternative 56/57 (Oct./Dec. 1967) and 59/60 (Apr./June 1969).
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a political aesthetics. Marcuse answered the question In what way can art and literature play a role in transforming society? Although Marcuse's theories certainly receded into the background after 1969, they continued to exercise a considerable degree of influence in the 1970s, particularly among those who continued the tradition of Critical Theory. Nevertheless, after 1972—above all with his *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (1972)—Marcuse revised his thesis of the total transposition of art into praxis and spoke out against a desublimated praxis, thus preparing the way for the turn against political aesthetics. Christian Enzensberger's literary theory, for instance, which strictly separates political praxis and utopia, is deeply indebted to Marcuse's approach despite its polemic against Critical Theory.

Commodity aesthetics, which likewise arose from Critical Theory, took a different path. The commodity aesthetics developed by such authors as Wolfgang Fritz Haug, Hans Heinz Holz, and Friedrich Tomberg grappled with Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. At first, these efforts followed Adorno's use in his aesthetic theory of Marx's analysis of commodities; yet, over time, commodity aestheticians clearly distanced themselves more and more from the premises of the Frankfurt School in their stringent development of a materialist commodity aesthetics. By 1970 this process resulted in these theorists' seeing themselves in pronounced opposition to the Frankfurt School. The debate over commodity aesthetics dwindled away over the course of the 1970s after Hannelore Schlaffer contributed what she viewed as the critical conclusion to this debate, until W. Martin Lüdke renewed the discussion in 1977. A similar process of rediscovery, in this

instance of Georg Lukács and Bertolt Brecht, encouraged the group around the journal *Argument* to draw closer to an orthodox Marxist position. This retrospective reflection on buried traditions, whose onset can be dated at about 1967, intensified theoretical discussion even as it simultaneously problematized anyone's claim already to possess a consistent materialist theory. The intensive appropriation of these materialist traditions necessarily led to the insight that an avant-gardist position, as it was represented by Benjamin and Brecht in the 1930s, could not be reconciled with the theory of Georg Lukács. The treatment of the expressionism debate and the later concern with the polemics of the *Linkskurve* made it evident that absolutely no consensus obtained in the Marxist camp about essential theoretical questions such as the problem of realism, the function of art, the assessment of specific artistic means, and so on. Helga Gallas's work *Marxistische Literaturtheorie* (1971) created a historical explanation, even as it deepened the conflict by taking up a pronounced Brechtian position while critically distancing itself from Georg Lukács and East German literary criticism.7

Thus, it is difficult to find a common denominator in the literary theory produced within the leftist camp during the 1970s. One does encounter fragments of and approaches to a materialist theory that clearly share a certain hostility to academic literary criticism and its aesthetics. This opposition was not least aimed at the Constance school, which fielded a phenomenologically grounded reception aesthetics as an innovative alternative to orthodox Marxism.8 Otherwise, one can only

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note the variety of opinions and viewpoints that were pro-
mulgated in such journals as Kursbuch, alternative, Das Ar-
gument, or Aesthetik und Kommunikation. One could make
similar statements about the situation in France or the United
States at the beginning of the 1970s. Yet when one carefully
examines the period between 1965 and 1979 and compares the
developments in the German debate with those taking place
in French or American discussions, profound differences appear
in the objects granted critical attention, the premises granted
validity, and the methods that form the basis of discourse. If
one wishes to grasp the aesthetic theory of the 1970s as a
historical process, one must concentrate on the points where
contradictions and oppositions become immediately apparent.

I begin with the political aesthetic that, primarily under the
influence of Herbert Marcuse, radicalized the Frankfurt
School’s theory of art. Marcuse’s earlier works, such as his
famous 1937 essay on the affirmative character of culture, char-
acteristically centered on a critique of ideology that opposed
the concept of an autonomous culture transcending social pres-
sures.9 After his intensive study of Freud, however, Marcuse’s
interests began to focus on the utopian element of art. In Eros
and Civilization (1955) Marcuse construes the opposition be-
tween art and reality found in classicism’s aesthetic concept
of autonomy in such a way that art comes to have an essential
role in the emancipation of humanity. Art undermines the
reality principle of analytical reason by advocating the principle
of sensuousness. Marcuse develops the theory of a sensual lib-
eration through aesthetic experience that prepares the way for
political emancipation. What was chiefly a theoretical problem

Germany, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Aesthetik und Sozialismus: Zur
neuen Literaturtheorie der DDR,” in Literatur und Literaturtheorie in
der DDR, ed. Peter Uwe Hohendahl and Patricia Herminghouse (Frankfurt,
1976), 100–162.

9. Herbert Marcuse’s famous essay, first published in the Zeitschrift
für Sozialforschung in 1937, has been translated as “The Affirmative Char-
acter of Culture,” in Herbert Marcuse, Negations (Boston, 1968), 88–133.
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at the time *Eros and Civilization* first appeared became an immediate political problem in the late 1960s. In the preface to his *Essay on Liberation* (1969), Marcuse not only ascertains that his position accords with that of the radicals in France and the United States, he also emphasizes the utopian character of their demands: “The radical utopian character of their demands far surpasses the hypotheses of my essay; and yet, these demands were developed and formulated in the course of action itself; they are expressions of concrete political practice.”

Marcuse achieves the transition from art to politics by attributing the character of social praxis to the new sensibility and aesthetic experience. The way in which Marcuse develops this thesis explains the initially surprising claim that the new sensibility itself already possesses the quality of praxis. Marcuse’s gaze is no longer primarily directed at the artistic product, but at the moment of experience, which, as sensual reason, opposes instrumental reason. City planning, conservation, and ecological reforms are subsumed under the aesthetic sphere, which itself thereby becomes a political sphere. With Marcuse, aesthetics becomes political by freeing us from conventional politics. At the same time, this liberation embodies the sublimation of art. Art and reality coincide as soon as art gives up its autonomous status and becomes the daily practice of human beings. In 1969 Marcuse approaches Benjamin’s conception of a postauratic art that belongs to the masses.

Among the German journals of the Left, the *Kursbuch* represented—at least temporarily—Marcuse’s political aesthetics. Peter Schneider’s 1969 essay “Die Phantasie im Spätkapitalismus und die Kulturrevolution” (Fantasy in late capitalism and the cultural revolution) exemplifies this tendency within the *Kursbuch.* Writing under the influence of the failed May revolt in Paris, Schneider draws a distinction between the

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economic-political and the cultural revolution. He then follows Marcuse by concluding:

Simultaneously, De Gaulle's tanks have shown what the economic-political revolution cannot do. It cannot beget the revolutionary consciousness which corresponds to the state of development of industrial productive forces; it cannot transform the emancipation of the oppressed class into the emancipation of the individual; it cannot develop the liberation of society from capital further into the liberation of fantasy from the performance principle; and it cannot win if it does not begin as a cultural revolution and become a cultural revolution once more.13

In this instance, the cultural and aesthetic sphere is designated the realm in which revolutionary praxis must develop if it is to shatter the organization of late capitalism, for this system is comprised not only of classes and organizations but also of elements of consciousness that serve oppression. Schneider thus views the cultural revolution as a culminating step: "After the demolition of the state apparatus and the socialization of the means of production, it [the cultural revolution] transforms the emancipation of society from private property into the practical supercession [Aufhebung] of all relations of servitude which are modifications and consequences of alienated labour."13 Again, Marcuse's theory serves as a bridge between the repressive culture of capitalism and ultimate liberation.

The union of Marx and Freud proposed by Schneider in 1969 obviously relies on Marcuse. It is certainly remarkable how Schneider, who was probably not yet aware of the Essay on Liberation, politically hones the position of Eros and Civilization. Whereas in 1955 Marcuse had addressed the utopian moment of art as art's political dimension, Schneider sharply

12. Translated from Schneider, Atempause, 127. All translations from articles and books in German, here and throughout the chapter, are provided by Brian Urquhart unless otherwise noted.
13. Ibid., 128; first interpolation, mine.
separates these aspects and notes a contradiction between the practice-free utopia of bourgeois art and the revolutionary action upon which a political aesthetics should be founded. With this distinction, Schneider breaks with Marcuse, whom he accuses of formalism. It is evident that the step with which Schneider would like to surpass his predecessor is precisely the one Marcuse himself takes in 1969—the desublimation of art into social praxis. In the words of Schneider: "Under late capitalism, the progressive, usable phantasy is absolutely no longer at home in art; instead, it is at home where it seeks its satisfaction in the revolutionary, rather than imaginary, transformation of society." According to Schneider, both traditionalist and avant-gardist works of art have lost their revolutionary force in late capitalism. "Form in art no longer expresses the promise of a future realization of desires; on the contrary: form makes a kind of promise out of real suffering and the real destruction of desires by still allowing the promise to become an object of imagination." 14

From this criticism of Adorno’s and Marcuse’s aesthetics, Schneider draws the conclusion that in the context of late capitalism, one can identify only two meaningful functions for art: the agitative and the propagandistic. This conclusion remains noteworthy for its theoretical grounding. Although Schneider’s approach remains beholden to Marcuse and Critical Theory, his social theory relies more on an orthodox position, such as Lenin’s or Paul Sweezy’s theory of imperialism. This attempt to modify the aesthetic theory of the Frankfurt School and simultaneously provide it with a new theoretical foundation seems characteristic of the situation of the New Left after 1969.

The same holds true of commodity aesthetics, which does not proceed so much from political as from economic analysis. The first attempts to develop a materialist commodity aesthetics link up with Critical Theory, namely, with Horkheimer and Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. This is true of Wolf-

14. Ibid., 146, 152.
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Fritz Haug's 1963 essay "Zur Aesthetik von Manipulation" [Toward an aesthetics of manipulation]. Intent on providing an ideological critique, the essay tracks down the purpose and form of advertising in late capitalism: "The advertisement appears with the deceptive appearance of mediating universality," whereas in reality it only represents the interests of capital. The use of aesthetic signs boils down to channeling the existing needs of the population in such a manner that they benefit consumption and, as a result, profit. Commodity aesthetics clearly became significant only in its second phase, when it departed from Critical Theory. In the 1970 preface to Kritik der Warenästhetik [Critique of commodity aesthetics], Haug settles accounts with the approach of the Frankfurt School by rebuking it for proceeding from surface phenomena and ignoring essential structures. According to Haug, this produces a speculative theory in which the particular and the whole are related to one another in an unmediated fashion. Nevertheless, the target of his critique is not the concept of totality, which Haug in no way relinquishes, but the ontologization of a particular phase of late capitalism by the Frankfurt School. The materialist grounding called for by Haug from that point on relies on the Marx of Capital and not on the Paris manuscripts of 1844, whose emphatic concept of alienation provided the basis for the project of Critical Theory. "The task which I set myself," commented Haug in 1970, "was therefore to derive the phenomena of commodity aesthetics economically and to develop and present their systematic connection."  

Haug's theory, which proceeds from Marx's analysis of commodities, can scarcely be considered a theory of art; the scope of the aesthetic realm is defined in much broader terms than is the case with Adorno. Haug uses the concept of the aesthetic

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on the one hand to designate sensuous knowledge (as does Kant) and on the other hand to designate the realm of the beautiful. The subject matter is clearly not primarily works of art but commodities that use the semblance of the beautiful in order to sell themselves. Since works of art certainly have offered themselves on the market as commodities ever since the eighteenth century, however, the next obvious step would be to apply the aesthetics of the commodity to the work of art.

Hans Heinz Holz took this step by formulating an argument that closely resembles Benjamin's analysis of the aesthetic aura and its disappearance. He follows Benjamin in discerning a precapitalist phase in which the work of art appears above all as a cultic object. When the cultic value of the object vanishes and the work of art's new function centers on display, then the work of art approaches the commodity:

The work of art become commodity now shares all features of the essence of the commodity: it participates in an art market which is subject to the play of supply and demand, and in which the sales practices are in principle no different than those found in the market dealing in commodities of utility [Gebrauchs­güter]. The sales strategy employed in the two markets differ only in that the art market does not claim that the commodities it offers possess an immediate use value, but a spiritual value for the purchaser.17

Yet, at the same time the reception of the work of art changes, so too does its form of production: that is, the artist must offer his or her works to an anonymous market in order to make his or her way. The artist becomes "constrained by a product form which is compatible with the market." For Holz, the essential significance of commodity aesthetics lies in its refusal to examine the work of art without reflecting on the context in which it is rooted. In his view, commodity aesthetics is concerned with "analyzing the structural determinants which lie

17. Hans Heinz Holz, Vom Kunstwerk zur Ware (Neuwied, 1972), 16.
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in the relations of production and distribution.” This analysis of art as a commodity does not lead to political aesthetics, since, like Critical Theory, Holz places great emphasis on the commercialization of art. Yet the concept of aesthetic autonomy familiar to Critical Theory no longer plays a decisive role for Holz. Under developed capitalism, loss of autonomy is the fate of works of art: “The degradation of the work of art to a commodity implies the loss of the particularity of the aesthetic: from now on, the aesthetic object can only be exalted above other, random objects of utility by a decisionistic act of arbitrariness.”

Evidently, Holz goes one step beyond Haug’s position. Whereas Haug still attributes some significance to the aesthetic sphere—that is, the realm of art—Holz stresses that criticism may not stop at the level of the work of art. In other words, the theory of art will dissolve into art history and the sociology of art. “The relative autonomy of the aesthetic,” he argues against Adorno, “is annulled [aufgehoben], instead of serving as a medium of reflection, the aesthetic becomes a mere function of society, an ideological simulacrum.” According to Holz’s definition of art’s present crisis, art has lost its authentic function. Moreover, in contrast to Marcuse, Holz promises art no new function. Holz extends the scope of commodity aesthetics by denying any difference between works of art and objects of utility.

This all-inclusive identification, which could not draw on Adorno for support, becomes the main target of Hannelore Schlaffer’s critique, mentioned above. Her goal is to do away with commodity aesthetics by proving that the autonomy of art was left essentially untouched by the development of a capitalist market. According to Schlaffer, it was only in the area of distribution that the work of art was pulled into the

18. Ibid., 25, 27, 37.
19. Ibid., 10.
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market and transformed into a commodity. Indeed, neither pro-
duction nor reception were substantially affected by these con-
ditions: "A commodity is the union of exchange value and use
value provided that it is transferred in the exchange between
buyers. The artist and the purchaser only apparently enter into
an exchange relation, for artistic value cannot be determined
and clearly cannot be paid for." Against commodity aesthet-
ics, Schlaffer argues that artistic labor or aesthetic production
is not socialized and therefore not subject to the laws of the
market. Since aesthetic production is not alienated, the auton-
omy of the work of art is in principle secured. The commodity
aspect is secondary. This argument, as Lüdke rightly objected,
underestimates the social character of artistic production.
Lüdke refers to the historically changing context influencing
the work of the artist and his or her artifacts.

Generally speaking, one must ask whether the opposition
between aesthetic autonomy and social determination can be
specified on an abstract level. Indeed, it would appear that this
relationship must be understood as a historical one that
changes qualitatively between the eighteenth century and the
present. It matters less, then, that the work of art cannot be-
come an object of utility because it is spiritual, than does the
circumstance that the work of art's function—like its recep-
tion—changes over time. Hence the category of autonomy,
which Schlaffer derives from the very nature of works of art,
itsel itself proves to be historical. In this respect, Holz appropri-
ately grasps the present situation as a historical crisis that cannot
simply be resolved on the level of theoretical reflection. Holz's
argument nevertheless clearly lacks a careful distinction be-
tween material and aesthetic production. Schlaffer's much-
needed objection to this form of commodity aesthetics criti-
cally questioned precipitous, globalizing judgments and theo-
retical clichés. Lüdke's contribution demonstrated that the

21. Ibid., 277.
22. Lüdke, "Der Kreis, das Bewusstsein und das Ding," 133.
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discussion did not come to an end with Schlaffer; he not only summed up the debate, he also articulated the possibility of its theoretical solution.

With good reason, Lüdke stresses that, as a rule, earlier approaches apply categories from political economy too directly to the aesthetic realm and do not sufficiently take into account the process of reification. At this juncture, however, the discussion is referred back to its starting point, namely, the reification theory of the early Lukács, which supplies the basis for the Frankfurt School. Thanks to Lüdke’s attentive reconstruction, Adorno’s theory of art again becomes visible as the starting point of the debate. It appears that the polemical turn against the Frankfurt School did not necessarily overcome it; rather, it led to an elaboration of certain possibilities already present in Adorno’s thought. Both the thesis that in late capitalism all art is degraded to the status of a commodity and the thesis that the autonomy of art is inalienable can be found in Adorno. Thus, the discussion returns to Adorno, where the original formulation of the problem could be found. Lüdke argues that the critique of commodity aesthetics cannot restrict itself to specific conclusions, such as those put forward in the thesis of the commercialization of art or its autonomy vis-à-vis the market. On the contrary, this critique must deal with the Marxian concept of the commodity and the reification theory derived from it: “The thesis of the commodity character of art only obtains its real explanatory value by relying upon the Marxian conception of the fetish-character of commodities. In the meantime, it has become problematic for the thesis of the commodification of art to draw upon a reification theory developed from the fetish-character of commodities.”

Lüdke’s critique here is directed against the hidden orthodoxy of Critical Theory. Considered systematically, commodity aesthetics rests upon the theory of reification, which in turn is

23. Ibid., 150.
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derived from Marx's analysis of the commodity in *Capital*. As a result, any doubt about Marx's economic theory must correspondingly affect commodity aesthetics and the theory of reification.

Lüdke brings this critique to bear in his discussions of Habermas, Claus Offe, Wolfgang Pohrt, and Luhmann. Lüdke would like to fill the gap in the argument with a theory of pure aesthetic experience that "could break through the reified structures of contemporary experience"; but because Lüdke quite clearly perceives that aesthetic experience always is mediated socially, he cannot relinquish the category of reification he just repudiated.24 This contradiction becomes clearer as soon as Lüdke outlines his program. He would like to avoid the rigid conclusions of a theory that can offer only the concepts of degradation or autonomy to aesthetic experience. In other words, he wants to develop a theory that does justice to immediate experience and the subjective aspect of social reality. "If need be, the agenda can be expressed in a formula: to attain a maximum of immediate experience with a minimum of instrumental mediation." 25 This formula nevertheless simply displaces the problem, since it refers to the opposition between subjective experience and positivistically formed objective concepts. The primary focus of commodity aesthetics, however, is on the "historical" dialectic in the relationship between material relations of production and aesthetic creations. This problem cannot be solved by recourse to the concept of immediate experience, the current feasibility of which would first have to be demonstrated. Lüdke's proposed solution ignores the social mediation of experience and thereby becomes not so much untheoretical as unhistorical.

Let me briefly summarize the outcome of the first phase of the theory discussion. About 1970 a consensus existed in the leftist camp on the inadequacy of the aesthetic theory of the

24. Ibid., 152.
25. Ibid., 153.
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Frankfurt School. Furthermore, both political and commodity-aesthetic theories were in agreement that the work of art as an artifact no longer could remain the central object of aesthetic theory. For both approaches, although for differing reasons, it was no longer immediately evident that the work of art possesses a self-sufficient value. The discussion of the 1970s can be grasped as a response to this zero-point situation. The assertion that the theory of art had to abandon the category of the work of art turned out to be hasty; and the elimination of Critical Theory proved to be easier to demand than to accomplish theoretically. The ensuing development certainly cannot be understood as a mere restoration of an earlier state of affairs. Instead, the unsolved problems of materialist aesthetics forced a revision. This is above all true of the thesis that art can continue to claim legitimacy only as propaganda or agitation. I will use three examples to introduce the possibilities and limits of the West German theoretical debates of the 1970s: in the case of Thomas Metscher’s theory I will discuss the reclamation of the concept of art under the aegis of Marxist orthodoxy; in connection with Christian Enzensberger’s study I will look at the critique of political aesthetics; and lastly, I will examine the work of Peter Bürger, his historicization of Critical Theory, and the problems it leaves unresolved.

Since Bürger’s historicization of Critical Theory also encompassed Lukács’s theory of art, a conflict between Metscher’s and Bürger’s positions was unavoidable. I would like to begin with this debate, which was carried out in 1975 in the journal Das Argument. At the core of this debate stands the question What approach should the aesthetic theory of the 1970s acknowledge as its legitimate theoretical predecessor? Metscher, after turning away from Adorno, decides to fall back on Lenin’s reflection theory and from there develop a theory of the work of art that is in close proximity to Lukács. Bürger, by contrast, responds to the same set of circumstances by drawing the conclusion that only historical reflection—that is, the continuation and radicalization of Critical Theory—can resolve the
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aporias of the situation. In his reply to Bürger's polemic, Metscher sums up the orthodox position and stands by the theory of reflection and an aesthetics of realism. Relying on the reception theory of East Germany, Metscher argues that the Leninist theory of reflection embraces both productive and reproductive aspects of society and, as a result, takes into account more than Peter Bürger admits. Art production based on reflection has an effect on reality through its product—the work of art. This concession to reception theory's arguments does not prevent Metscher from subsequently expounding his position without responding in any greater depth to the core of Bürger's objections. The argument that aesthetic theory is tied to certain historical preconditions and that, as Bürger asserts, it is finished as a normative theory is not accessible to Metscher because his conceptual apparatus is produced deductively and lays claim to logical correctness. This does not mean that Metscher is not aware of his historical situation—on the contrary, he understands the return to reflection theory as part of a strategy that is important for West Germany in particular; even so, this political task cannot simply be assigned to a theory that derives from general epistemological principles rather than reflection upon a specific historical situation.

Metscher's designedly abstract approach is indicative of his theory's systematic character: "The epistemological approach necessitates a procedure which in the first instance proceeds not historically but systematically. Since it remains largely abstract, it may be capable of breaking through to the concrete only sporadically.... The epistemological principles of Marxism-Leninism possess a degree of generality which continually stands in need of concretization." Metscher integrates the theory of art into the general theory of reflection by conceptualizing aesthetic production as a "cognitive act," that is,

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as a particular form of knowledge—the aesthetic. The tradition of Hegelian aesthetics is perceptible here: like Hegel, Metscher places his emphasis on the truth content of works of art. In Metscher’s own formulation: “According to Hegel, in beauty the idea is actualized in the form of appearance [Schein] as the ‘concrete intuition’ [Anschauung]—that is, a sensuously objective appearance in which, as Lenin said, the ‘entire wealth of the world’ is enclosed.” Lenin’s materialist reinterpretation of the Hegelian idea allows Metscher a definition of art that finds the essential preserved in the representation reflecting reality. “Art is therefore not—in the Platonic sense—a copy reproducing empirical phenomena but an articulation of the concrete ‘concept’ constituting the world of the empirical; art is the sensuous manifestation of the lawfulness of social processes.” In short, the truth content of works of art does not refer to empirical objects but to the totality of reality. Metscher’s aesthetic theory of reflection is unmistakably close to Lukács’s theory of realism, even though it does not follow Lukács rigorously.

Metscher expressly supports Lukács against Ernst Bloch and the objections of radical leftists while he also, as might be expected, strictly defends Lukács’s use of the category of totality. Metscher’s critique of Lukács commences at the point where Lukács conceptualizes totality as something closed. For Metscher, Lukács’s inability to do justice to the work of Brecht marks the one-sidedness of his theory, which does not sufficiently take into account the active role of consciousness. Certainly, one should not overlook Metscher’s tendency to integrate Brecht’s theory in a harmonizing rather than critical manner into his own theory, which is more influenced by Lukács. As a result, Metscher ends up taking the bite out of

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Brecht's polemic against Lukács. Since Metscher commits himself to Leninist reflection theory and passes it off as the logical continuation of Marxian theory, the dialectic of being and consciousness is brought to a standstill. Theory ossifies into a doctrinal edifice from which one then makes deductions. In the following formulation, Metscher collapses art and historical praxis, imitation, and activity: "Art is a concretion of social experience, of historical praxis in the form of a sensual copy, whereby the particular structure of this copy is primarily determined by the structure of the duplicated reality."\(^{29}\) It is noteworthy that Metscher places more value on the structural homology than on the act of producing. As a result, for Metscher the objective dialectic of a specific social situation becomes decisive for the representation \([\text{Darstellung}]\). Without wanting to, Metscher here inherits Lukács's objectivism.

Bürger's critique of this position is above all directed against its deductive approach, which in his view must repress problems essential to present-day aesthetic theory. "Preliminary decisions \([\text{Vorentscheidungen}]\) are arrived at which are not secured by historical investigation, but legitimated solely through the appeal to Leninism."\(^{30}\) The neoorthodox theory of art suffers from simply appropriating the classics rather than taking up a historical-hermeneutic—and therefore critical—stance. For Bürger, in contrast, the evolution of art is itself the historical precondition upon which every theory must reflect: "An aesthetic theory which does not reflect this radical change [brought about by the modernists and the avant-garde] in its categories, cuts off its access to its object from the very start." Furthermore, concludes Bürger, such a theory is not in a position to orient itself in the present. Bürger then criticizes Metscher as follows: "What is missing from Metscher's dis-

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29. Ibid., 202.

30. Peter Bürger, "Was leistet der Wiederspiegelungsbegriff in der Literaturwissenschaft?" *Das Argument* 90 (May 1975): 227.
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cussion is a precisely articulated standpoint in the present.\textsuperscript{31} What is at stake in this debate is the Marxist legacy. While Metscher takes the classical texts as his models and renovates them for the present day, Bürger deprives them of their unquestioned normative status by consistently following his historical-hermeneutical approach. For Bürger, who thereby radicalizes the method of Critical Theory, historical reflexivity also applies to theory itself. Theory is therefore precluded from having recourse to older positions in its search for a materialist aesthetics. Bürger finds historical reflection lacking already in Lukács's invocation of the authority of reflection theory to denounce modernism and the avant-garde as decadent. The struggle between historical critique and normative aesthetics, which in Lukács is ultimately resolved in favor of the latter, is nonetheless—as Bürger rightly points out—the central problem of every aesthetic theory that directly or indirectly rests on Hegel. Historical criticism must object to Lukács's theory on the grounds that the historical logic of art had to lead, not to realism, but to the emergence of new forms and the transformation of the function of art altogether.

Like many aesthetic theories in the 1970s, Bürger's own attempt to resolve the problems of the materialist theory of art starts out from a critique of Adorno's aesthetics. This critique develops the approach of Critical Theory up to the point where Adorno's philosophy of art proves to be just as historical as that of Lukács. Since Adorno's theory is considered the appropriate theory for the avant-garde, it simultaneously takes on the role of a theory whose validity is historically determined and qualified. Adorno puts forward a theory of the nonorganic, avant-gardist work of art that does not yet take into account the obsolescent character of the avant-garde: "The debate between Lukács and Adorno concerning the legitimacy of avant-gardiste art is confined to the sphere of artistic means and the change in the kind of work this involves (organic versus avant-

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid., 220 (my interpolation), 221.
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gardiste]. Yet the two authors do not thematize the attack that
the historical avant-garde movements launched against art as
an institution.”32 In other words, Adorno upholds a normative
aesthetics no less insistently than Lukács and does not carry
out the historicization of the theory of art that begins with
Hegel to its logical conclusion. This is precisely what Bürger
attempts to do when he reduces theoretical conflicts to out-
dated, dogmatic struggles and incorporates them into the his-
tory of the institution “art.”

The decisive step in this historical argument is the following:
the avant-gardist movements of the early twentieth century
did not simply radicalize the demand for aesthetic autonomy;
rather, they furnished a self-critique of art and urged the sub-
limation of the traditional division between art and life-
practice. Bürger concludes, “But once the historical avant-garde
movements revealed art as an institution as a solution to the
mystery of the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of art, no form
could any longer claim that it alone had either eternal or tem-
porally limited validity.” The legacy of Hegel’s and Marx’s
philosophies of history liquidates the possibility of a normative
aesthetic theory: “the normative examination is replaced by a
functional analysis, the object of whose investigation would
be the social effect (function) of a work, which is the result of
the coming together of stimuli inside the work and a socio-
logically definable public within an already existing institu-
tional frame.”33

Bürger’s historicization of aesthetic theory changes the char-
acter of the discussion vis-à-vis the 1960s. In the first and sec-
ond phases of the student movement, the search for a
materialist aesthetics was carried out in the form of a polemical
confrontation between certain given positions (Adorno, Lu-
kács, Brecht, Benjamin), while in the third phase—which has

32. Peter Bürger, Theory of the Avant-Garde, trans. Michael Shaw [Min-
neapolis, 1984], 86.
33. Ibid., 86, 87.
been exemplified in this essay by Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*—one encounters an increasingly pronounced consciousness of the contemporary historical situation and, as a result, a growing distance from the earlier models. Bürger warns, for example, against the unmediated appropriation of Brecht's theory. It is clear that neoorthodox theory did not take this warning to heart. It ended up paying a dear price for this disregard. Neoorthodox theory disengaged from the specific literary and political situation in West Germany and displayed features of a certain alexandrine hermeticism absent even from East German theory once it had parted company with Lukács.

Ultimately, as the example of Christian Enzensberger's *Literatur und Interesse* (Literature and interest, 1977) makes clear, this revision also takes hold of the political aesthetics of the student movement. The central thesis of political aesthetics held that belles lettres had lost the socially critical function that Adorno imputed to it and that it therefore had to be replaced by an agitational literature that could exercise direct political influence. Enzensberger's theory can be understood only against the background of this thesis. In contrast to Marxist orthodoxy, Enzensberger's theory reflects West German circumstances much more concretely. The unnamed starting point of this theory is the failed leftist cultural revolution. Enzensberger did not embark on the privatization of literature under way at that point, but instead—and in this respect he became the consummate successor to Critical Theory—examined the aporias of political aesthetics: the failure of literature to induce social change and the rigid instrumentalization of literature for the class struggle. Marcuse had already repudiated the radical desublimation of art into social praxis and returned to the concept of the work of art in his 1972 book *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Enzensberger expands this skepticism into a general theory by making the category of lack of meaning (*Sinndefizit*) into the starting point of aesthetic

34. Ibid., 88.
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production. According to Enzensberger, all known societies manifesting division of labor and social differentiation suffer from lack of meaning. The unequal distribution of resources and opportunities leads to inadequacies that then, in order to appear meaningful, demand legitimation. "The lack of meaning consequently remains; it derives from social shortcomings, cannot be eliminated by ideology, and fundamentally asks for redress."35 At least deficiencies can be overcome in fantasy. As the product of fantasy's activity, literature has the function for Enzensberger—as for Freud—of compensating for inadequacies. This compensation theory is obviously at odds with the tradition of Critical Theory, particularly with Adorno's philosophy of art, since it essentially disputes the claim of purposelessness. For Enzensberger, aesthetic production is always already and primarily responding to an unsatisfactory state of affairs. It is therefore part of the ideological consciousness that serves to legitimize this condition. Furthermore, where the Frankfurt School continued to maintain the oppositional power of the authentic work of art, Enzensberger views the aesthetic coherence of the work of art as more of an argument for its affirmative character. The opposition between art and reality typically found in Critical Theory is reinterpreted in such a way that art furnishes what reality withholds. In Enzensberger the beautiful appearance becomes deception: the emergence of literature begins with a need for deception about reality. Ineluctably harnessed to this set of relations, literature serves privileged interests. The core of this theory is the function of art; for this reason, Enzensberger's theory is fundamentally concerned with the question of reception, even if he completely repudiates the reception aesthetics of the Constance school. The act of reading or seeing (in the theater) is for Enzensberger always an act of identification: the reader sympathizes with the heroes, takes on their points of view, and in this way

achieves gratification. The intention of this description of reception is to prove that literature can have no real effect. Contrary to the assumptions made by political aesthetics or reception aesthetics, since literature appeals to needs that demand immediate satisfaction, the recipient's consciousness remains unchanged.

This pessimistic conclusion may correspond with what came to be known in the West German discussion as the *Tendenzwende* (change in tendency or commitment). Yet Enzensberger does not limit himself to recanting political aesthetics. He simultaneously attempts to redefine the social contribution of aesthetics and thereby continues to follow the model of Critical Theory in spite of himself. Nevertheless, this is done with the help of new methodological instruments. Enzensberger relies on phenomenology in order to illuminate and clarify the concept of meaning (*Sinn*). By drawing a distinction between the category of meaning and the concept of interest, Enzensberger creates a utopian realm where art reposes: “Art shares the structure of utopia and the redeemed relation of meaning, but not their content.” 36 As would be expected, this constellation has crucial consequences for the definition of the work of art and the beautiful in art. In conspicuous proximity to classical aesthetics, Enzensberger defines the work of art as a self-referential, self-contained organism. Part and whole stand in a necessary relation to one another. The language of literature does not refer to reality in a traditional way and does not fulfill any pragmatic function, while the work of art is removed from any historical referent.

What Enzensberger refers to as the utopian structure of art is, as aesthetic autonomy, thoroughly familiar to aesthetic theory. Because it is elevated above social history and the realm of interest, the work of art manifests its negation of lack (*Mangel*) as a fictitious fulfillment of meaning. The question then arises, what separates Enzensberger's theory from Schiller or

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36. Ibid., 131.
Herbert Marcuse? Enzensberger reproaches utopian idealism for being largely determined by class interests. While this argument can be used against Schiller because in his case his social agenda and his aesthetic theory do not coincide, the same can hardly be said for Marcuse. What separates Enzensberger from Schiller and Marcuse is, upon closer inspection, not so much the different definition of utopia as the oppositional function of the utopian moment in literature. Enzensberger conceptualizes the contents of literature as basically ideological; they are replicas of the bad status quo. "Art is there to superscribe the bad status quo with utopias." Only aesthetic structure allows one to understand the experience of living a life which has a consistent meaning. "Aesthetic mimesis is not in the first instance concerned with the objects, but with the structural imitation of social utopia." Enzensberger thus concludes that art is free from ideology only when it is pure structure, form, or figure. By way of contrast, the transfiguration of contents necessarily proves ideological because there the received elements of reality are idealized until the contradictions disappear.

It is evident that Enzensberger cannot be interested in the real effects of literature. They have no place in his theory. It is precisely the utopian structure that is the reason for literature's "profound indifference toward current politics." Literary theory in this instance manifestly reflects on its own task: it criticizes the demand it had articulated during the 1960s. Enzensberger renounces political aesthetics as well as ideology critique and withdraws to a metahistorical theory that is first developed in purely phenomenological terms and only subsequently applied to history. The result of this move is an irresolvable contradiction: from a systematic philosophical perspective, the abolition [Aufhebung] of aesthetic autonomy cannot take place simply because works of art in principle cannot

37. Ibid., 145, 147.
38. Ibid., 150.
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be assimilated to life-practice. Yet, in the conclusion of the theoretical section of his work this is precisely the move that Enzensberger heralds as the political solution to the aesthetic problem. In his view, the revolt of the Parisian students in May of 1968 completed what had only been anticipated in trivial literature: "Art and life have become one and the same." These historical reflections, which bear on the manifestations of crisis in art during the 1960s, burst the systematic framework of Enzensberger's theory. As a result, one encounters the following comment: "Art has become boring, and ideology hackneyed." Art's traditional social function—to demand that the social lack of meaning be remedied—has lost its power of conviction. Yet for Enzensberger, in contrast to Adorno, this disappearance of art (Entkunstung) is not a regression but the sign of a positive societal turn. For, through its decline, art at the same time loses something of its complicity with hegemonic consciousness.

Was there a common denominator in West German theories of art at the conclusion of the 1970s? As one can see from the examples discussed above, this was certainly not the case at the doctrinal level. There is no new aesthetic theory that occupies the same central position as the theories of Lukács and Adorno did during the 1950s and early 1960s. It is more relevant to speculate on why the kind of philosophy of art represented by Lukács, Bloch, Adorno, and Marcuse—who all inherit the legacy of Hegelian aesthetics—became exhausted. With reference to Adorno's Aesthetische Theorie, Otto K. Werckmeister speaks of subjective conceptual studies that are no longer capable of asserting a general claim to validity. In other words, theory decays to the level of private confessions. With the use of a concept from Adorno, Dieter Wellershoff described the situation more generally as the de-aestheticization of art (Entkunstung).

39. Ibid., 178, 179.
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kunstung der Kunst): "The posture of the consumer is the subjective correlate of the untrammeled character of art arising from the disappearance of any normative expectation which would limit the expansion of production. The last phase of this production is to dismiss the prerogative of art itself." Wellershoff allows the various positions to pass review once more (Bloch's utopianism, Marcuse's philosophy of praxis, and Adorno's theory of autonomy), without expecting a breakthrough from any of them. For Wellershoff, this means the end of the aesthetics informed by the philosophy of history, the aesthetics that always assumed, regardless of the approach it took, that the work of art—to borrow Adorno's metaphor—is the sundial of history. Although neither Lukács nor Adorno wants to admit it, art has shifted to the periphery; its emphatic significance has diminished along with the cultural traditions (religion, morality) that customarily nourished it. It was only in the course of the 1970s that these problems of aesthetic theory turned out to be the significant ones. At the end of the 1970s it was no longer a matter—as it was for Lukács and Adorno—of the structure of the work of art under the conditions of progressing capitalism, but a matter of taking stock of the crumbling or already lost cultural traditions that gave rise to art in the first place.

This point of view first gained primacy in Habermas's 1972 essay on Walter Benjamin. Upon its appearance this essay was wrongly read as a defense of Adorno's position against a materialist interpretation of Benjamin. If one scrutinizes Habermas's comments on Adorno more closely, however, it is impossible to overlook the fact that Habermas no longer sees any future for Adorno's theory of art. For Habermas, Adorno's theory belongs to an earlier epoch by reason of its pessimistic

41. Dieter Wellershoff, Die Auflösung des Kunstbegriffs (Frankfurt, 1976), 81.
esotericism. It offers nothing that could help confront the problems arising from the radical loss of tradition in late capitalist societies. Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner have rightly pointed out that the Benjamin essay must be regarded as preparing the way for Habermas’s theory of legitimation crisis.\textsuperscript{43} To the extent that Habermas distances himself from the Marxian concept of praxis and distinguishes more clearly between labor and communication, the problem of language advances into the foreground. And in this connection, Benjamin’s contribution becomes important for Habermas by virtue of precisely that element of Benjamin’s thought that does not fit into the orthodoxy of the Frankfurt School.

Both Lukács and Adorno, to a certain degree, still assumed the bourgeois legacy in the concept of culture as a matter of course. Culture must be critically examined insofar as it drags along false consciousness; however, the authentic core of culture can in each case be reconstructed in the autonomous work of art. The ties to the aesthetic theory of idealism have not yet been severed. Within the framework of his crisis theory, Habermas throws open an issue whose radical nature was not anticipated in the classical form of Critical Theory: the achievement of conditions under which cultural traditions in late capitalist social systems can no longer renew themselves. In light of this situation, not only traditional hermeneutics but also the classical critique of ideology turn out to be ways of appropriating cultural tradition. “To this extent, critique is no less a form of appropriating tradition than hermeneutics. In both cases appropriated cultural contents retain their imperative force, that is, they secure the continuity of a history through which individuals and groups can identify with themselves and with one another.” Habermas compares this situation to others in which culture is either strategically-

\textsuperscript{43} Philip Brewster and Carl Howard Buchner, “Language and Critique: Jürgen Habermas on Walter Benjamin,” \textit{New German Critique} 17 (Spring 1979): 15–29.

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functionally organized or historically-objectively refashioned. The conclusion thus presents itself: "Apparently traditions can retain their legitimizing force as long as they are not torn out of interpretive systems that guarantee continuity and identity."44

Yet this process of extraction occurs when the state systematically intervenes in the cultural realm by subjecting long-standing traditional relations to rational planning. A lack of meaning arises which cannot be compensated for. Habermas maintains the thesis that capitalist societies were "always dependent on marginal cultural circumstances" and that bourgeois culture "was never able to reproduce itself from itself."45 Bourgeois culture is not completely compatible with the capitalist system—it is, on the contrary, largely tied to traditionalistic worldviews. This interpretation puts Habermas markedly closer to Benjamin than to Adorno, whose theory of modernity highlights its correspondence to the capitalist market. According to Habermas, who in this instance follows Arnold Hauser as well as Benjamin, the radicalization of aesthetic autonomy in the theory and praxis of modernity leads to the division between the bourgeoisie and the avant-garde. "Under the sign 'art for art's sake,' the autonomy of art is carried to the extreme. The truth thereby comes to light that in bourgeois society art expresses not the promises but the irretrievable sacrifice of bourgeois rationalization, the plainly incompatible experiences and not the esoteric fulfillment of withheld, but merely deferred, gratifications."46

With this sentence Habermas definitively parts company with Adorno's and Marcuse's theories of art, which adhered to art's esoteric promise despite the prevailing deprivation. Like Benjamin, Habermas assumes that the art of the avant-garde has lost the aura and forfeited its autonomous status. "Modern

45. Ibid., 77, 76 (translation modified).
46. Ibid., 85 (translation modified).
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art had already shed the aura of classical bourgeois art by making the process of production evident and presenting itself as something that was produced. But art infiltrates the ensemble of use values only when it surrenders its autonomous status."

Without slavishly committing himself to it, Habermas absorbs essential elements of Benjamin’s theory, particularly the connection between avant-garde movements and the decay of the aura, which Habermas interprets as an important aspect of the motivation crisis of the late capitalists. This occurs not least of all because Habermas in some degree appropriates the critique of the cultural heritage Benjamin had advanced in the “Theses on the Philosophy of History.” Habermas not only makes use of the critique of historicism—one could also find this in the works of Horkheimer and Adorno—he also brings to bear Benjamin’s critique of tradition as the conception of historical continuity.

Habermas conceives of the liquidation of autonomy as a consequence of the societal process of rationalization Max Weber had described. Naturally, Habermas is aware of the fact that Adorno never accepted this step when Benjamin took it. Habermas sums up Adorno’s position once again so that he can append the following comment: “In contrast, for arts received collectively—architecture, theatre, painting—just as for popular literature and music, which have become dependent on electronic media, there are indications of a development that points beyond mere culture industry and does not a fortiori invalidate Benjamin’s hope for a generalized secular illumination.” Habermas concludes from Benjamin’s theory that postautonomous art harbors within it the possibility that the experience of happiness residing in mimetic behavior can become exoteric and universal. In the context of this essay, the question of whether Habermas’s solution is sound is not under discussion; it is much more significant that here, in confront-

47. Ibid., 86.
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ing Walter Benjamin, the theory of postautonomous art is recognized as the central theme of the 1960s, and indeed, not simply as a continuation of the discussion about the de-aestheticization of art (Entkunstung der Kunst)—as Wellershoff would have it—but as an articulation of contemporary possibilities.

Postscript

When I assessed the development of German aesthetic theory in 1979, the question of politics was being raised mainly within the Marxist tradition. Hence the discussion took place among various Marxist positions while traditional criticism (historicism or formalism) maintained its distance from political questions. Even reception aesthetics (Jauss, Iser, and the Constance school), after initially competing with Marxist theory, soon relegated these issues to the background and focused on the "implied reader," that is, the relationship between textual structures and reading processes. In doing so, reception theory formalized the critical moment of the art work at the level of individual reader consciousness. Already during the early 1970s, Jauss's theory took an anthropological turn that de-emphasized his partial sympathy with Adornian theory, and consequently turned away too from attention to a historical grounding of aesthetics.49 On the whole, reception aesthetics, after claiming a radical position during the late 1960s (as both a response to the student movement and an antidote to Marxism), returned to a more moderate position, a stance that acknowledges its indebtedness to the hermeneutical tradition.

Looking back at the theoretical debates of the late 1970s and 1980s, it seems to me that, by and large, they did not follow and develop the discussions of the previous decade. Much of radical Marxist theory (orthodox as well as neo-Marxist) dis-

49. See Hans Robert Jauss, Aesthetic Experience and Literary Hermeneutics (Minneapolis, 1982).
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appeared without leaving many traces in the current discourse. The exception is Critical Theory, especially the work of Jürgen Habermas, which tends to overshadow the other disciples of Horkheimer and Adorno. Yet Habermas, particularly during the 1980s, has been more interested in problems of moral and political philosophy than aesthetic theory. As a result, the discussion about the political meaning of aesthetic theory has not advanced significantly among his students. The recent resurgent interest in Adorno's theory, on the other hand, has shifted its emphasis more toward the problems of grounding and epistemology at the clear expense of social questions, which stood at the center of the debate between 1965 and 1975. The return to Adorno, in other words, has to be seen in the context of the influx of a poststructuralist discourse from France, beginning in the late 1970s and gaining some momentum during the mid-1980s. In the context of this new discourse, the political question has resurfaced in a different form: whereas the previous debate centered on the political implications of the artwork and then searched for the appropriate theoretical articulation of the problem, the discussions of the 1980s focused on the political character of theory itself, bringing into the foreground not only the politics of theory (the political position of a specific theory) but also the political meaning of the internal structure of theories.

This became particularly apparent in the Habermas/Foucault debate in which Habermas took initially the position that poststructuralist theory implicitly supported the conservative forces by embracing a postmodernist stance. While the exchange between Habermas and Lyotard or Derrida received a great deal of attention also in this country, both its political and its philosophical contexts have not been fully understood, since the theoretical and political configuration in West Ger-

many only partly overlaps with the American situation. What has to be taken into consideration here is the growing tension among the disciples of Adorno and Horkheimer, on the one hand, and the emergence of a poststructuralist camp, on the other. The political debate of the 1980s has occurred primarily between Habermasian theory and a Foucauldian position, as it was developed by critics like Friedrich A. Kittler, Heinrich Fink-Ertel, and Harro Müller. This discussion was certainly not limited to the status of art and literature; in fact, these traditional questions played a relatively minor role. Even for the hermeneutic camp, which had been almost invisible during the early 1970s, the theory of interpretation did not focus primarily on the work of art. The involvement of post-Gadamerian hermeneutics in Germany with poststructuralist theory—in the work of Manfred Frank, for instance—clearly radicalized the hermeneutic project in various ways, though not always in clear alignment with the main debate as it was carried out between Habermasians and Foucauldians.

As these few remarks indicate, the discursive map of West Germany has changed so radically during the 1980s that the positions of the 1960s and early 1970s can hardly be recognized anymore, even within Critical Theory. Most obvious is the lack of an orthodox Marxist position. To some extent, this is the result of external forces—namely the purge of German universities of radicals after 1972. *Berufsverbot* certainly helped to marginalize orthodox Marxism (Leninist or Maoist). On the whole (and this assessment includes the New Left), the Marxist paradigm, which so clearly shaped the debates of the 1960s, lost its momentum after 1980. A good indication of this phenomenon is the fate of social history in German literary criticism. The idea of politicizing literary history through the paradigm of social history, leading to a number of major mul-

51. See Manfred Frank, *Das individuelle Allgemeine: Textstrukturiierung und -interpretation nach Schleiermacher* (Frankfurt, 1977); and his *Das Sagbare und das Unsagbare: Studien zur neuesten französischen Hermeneutik und Texttheorie* (Frankfurt, 1980).
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tivolume projects, came under increasing criticism from various sides when the first volumes appeared. By 1985, there was almost a consensus that the project had failed because of its problematic theoretical core. Progressive literary history collapsed under a critique coming from two theoretical positions, namely Foucauldian discourse analysis and post-Gadamerian hermeneutics. In both cases, the central categories of the project—historical evolution, social totality, classes, mediation, and so on—came under attack. In the field of literary criticism, these scattered debates were, I think, more important than the exchange between Habermas and French post-structuralists.

The most crucial development in the political dimensions of literary theory, however, and therefore a good starting point for an overview of the 1980s in West Germany, is the appropriation of Foucault’s work, which began in the late 1970s: the reception of Foucault rather quickly changed the parameters of the debate and with it the nature of the political. Helga Gallas’s work can serve as a good example of this transition. While her early work, especially her discussion of German Marxist criticism of the 1920s and 1930s, drew on the authority of Karl Korsch and Brecht (in opposition to Lukács), her later readings of Heinrich von Kleist retreat from traditional political issues, focusing instead on the nature of writing and the subject in the text. In this transition, the former commitment to Marxist theory seems to disappear, or is even replaced by hos-

52. A number of prominent publishing houses, among them Hanser, C. H. Beck, and Metzler, planned multivolume literary histories. None of these was completed. The best example of this type would be the volume edited by Rolf Grimminger, Deutsche Aufklärung bis zur Französischen Revolution 1680–1789, vol. 3 of Hansers Sozialgeschichte der deutschen Literatur, 11 vols. (Munich, 1980). For a detailed analysis, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Bürgerlichkeit und Bürgertum als Problem der Literatursoziologie,” German Quarterly 61 (Spring 1988): 264–83.

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tility toward historical criticism. This gesture of rejection is equally strong in the early writings of critics like Horst Turk and Friedrich A. Kittler in their attempt to establish a counterdiscourse in German criticism.\(^5\)

To a large extent, their energy went into deconstructing the critical models of the previous decade. This critique would also include the concept of the political, as it was used by the New Left or orthodox Marxists. Much of the leftist polemic against the West German state was now discarded as merely “utopian.”

This anti-utopian element has shaped the understanding of political issues, both on the level of academic politics (political position of camps or groups) and the level of theoretical models. It is primarily the concept of discourse analysis, taken over from Foucault, that informs the critical debate of the 1980s. Exemplary is the introduction of Jürgen Fohrmann and Harro Müller to the volume *Diskurstheorien und Literaturwissenschaft* (1988), which defines the agenda of the collection of essays by a critique of Hans Robert Jauss’s reception model, one version of the post-Gadamerian hermeneutic approach. In defining the Jaussian model (they could have used Iser’s model as well) as “Sinn-Bildungsprozess,” that is, as a model in which reading is supposed to create *meaning*, they link it to the hermeneutic tradition that dominated the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries.\(^5\)

Its goal, Fohrmann and Müller argue, is to make the text speak, to answer the questions of the inquiring critic. Hence critical reading results in a commentary that claims to be a reconfirmation of the text. Fohrmann and Müller intend to deconstruct this model, first, by linking it with a dialogical model grounded in a traditional concept of the subject and, second, by questioning the viability of this concept of the subject (invoking Luhmann’s systems theory).


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The reduction of the subject to the level of an element in the social process has significant implications. It tends to deflate, for instance, the political rhetoric of the New Left that emphasized subjectivity as the core of political praxis. Yet, this new political stance is also directed against the Habermasian version of Critical Theory, in particular its assumption that society can be defined in terms of communicative interaction. The attack on the "autonomous subject," legitimized by the authority of Lacan, Derrida, Foucault, and Luhmann, undermines the terms of the theoretical discourse of the 1960s and 1970s.

The American reader will find most of this familiar. Fohrman's and Müller's introduction sums up and repeats many of the theoretical developments that took place in the United States in the 1970s. More interesting and important than this parallel, however, is the question How does this paradigmatic leap affect the conception of the political? One would look in vain for an explicit answer. For Fohrmann and Müller, there is no reason to believe in the oppositional force of the art work itself, nor is it plausible to have faith in the impact of the work (Jauss, Iser), not to mention the critical force of the author (Sartre, Lukács) or the critical community (Habermas). What remains is Diskursanalyse (discourse analysis): "This entry ticket into discourse analysis conceives of constellations and hence also of texts as constructed and artificially closed-off, dispersed unities, which arise out of differences. In this sense, one can speak of the plurality of a text, which is always constituted out of the judgment-statements [Aussagen] of various discourses, and even in its solitary existence always already attests to intertextuality or interdiscursivity."

56. Ibid., 16.

In other words, textual analysis can be identified as part of the social process but not used as a lever to engage in political action. In fact, Fohrmann and Müller do not offer a political agenda; their questions are concerned primarily with the in-
ternal structure of the discourse model (definition of rules and relations). It is not accidental that among the contributors both Manfred Frank, as the proponent of hermeneutics, and Peter Bürger, as a critic close to the Frankfurt School, directed their polemic against the category of discourse. Frank, after examining Foucault's concept of the discourse, tries to show that the elimination of the subject is the result of a restrictive methodology, a repressive act that confronts Foucault with a considerable contradiction: on the one hand, Foucault declares discourses to be unhintergehbar (something one cannot "get behind"); on the other, he asks for an enlightened critique of these discourses in spite of the fact that this critique cannot be grounded (without a subject). Bürger is even more explicit in his critique: Foucault's decentered theory is constructed in such a way that it creates its own center. In the attempt to break away from transcendental philosophy Foucault is bound to return to his premises.

Obviously, in this exchange the focus of the political debate has shifted: since the beginning of the 1980s, that is, after the impact of poststructuralism, political issues have been articulated as epistemological issues or, conversely, epistemological problems have been treated as political questions. This modification occurred not only in the poststructuralist discourse; it is equally noticeable in the post-Gadamerian hermeneutic debate, where the conservative celebration of tradition (as a pre- and postsubjective position) has been replaced by a radical examination of the subject and/or individual.

It was especially Manfred Frank, a student of Gadamer, who defined the new task of literary criticism already in 1977 as a dialogue between the hermeneutic tradition (coming from Schleiermacher) and the semiotic tradition (following Saussure). What makes this dialogue important and meaningful for

57. Manfred Frank, "Zum Diskursbegriff bei Foucault," in ibid., 25–44.
58. Peter Bürger, "Die Wiederkehr der Analogie: Aesthetik als Fluchtpunkt in Foucaults Die Ordnung der Dinge," in Fohrmann and Müller, Diskurstheorien, 45–52.
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Frank is the challenge of the structuralists and poststructuralists, their polemical stance toward the hermeneutic tradition. Yet, Frank—and this is noteworthy—refuses to perceive this exchange as a conflict between conservative and radical (progressive) forces; rather, in *Das individuelle Allgemeine* (1977) these political terms are cautiously avoided, since Frank wants to underscore the dialectic link between hermeneutics and semiotics. For this reason, Frank carefully outlines the contemporary debate before he returns to Schleiermacher’s theory, emphasizing the intrinsic connections between positions that have been described as incompatible. In any case, the epistemological discussions remain completely abstract. It was only almost a decade later that Manfred Frank, in his lectures *Was ist Neostrukturalismus?* (1984), more explicitly put the political implications of the debate between “French” and “German” theory into the foreground. In 1984, Frank claimed for the hermeneutic tradition “critical and utopian potentials,” which had left their traces on the radical students of 1968.59 Also, Frank at least alludes to the Frankfurt School and its oppositional character. He suggests that only a combination of existential-ontological hermeneutics (Heidegger) and Critical Theory could articulate a progressive political critique of the contemporary situation. The dialectical treatment that Frank offered in his lectures is supposed to overcome the humanism/antihumanism opposition that defined the theoretical and political agenda of the 1980s. In this respect, but only in this, Frank’s introduction is comparable to the agenda of the New Historicism—an attempt to bring together and integrate structuralist and hermeneutic approaches, clearly not by adding their elements but, rather, through a historical critique of the conflicting positions.

What remains unsaid and unexamined in this articulation of the task is its exclusion of theoretical positions that were central during the 1960s and 1970s. While the orthodox Marxist

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tradition has disappeared almost entirely in Manfred Frank's program, Critical Theory is allowed to survive as a marginal position through its connection with hermeneutics (Karl Otto Apel, Habermas). Even those West German critics (like Kittler) who would strongly disagree with Frank's agenda (the structure/subject relationship) would share Frank's chart of the contemporary debate, marked by the surprising absence of Marx. In other words, the critical discourse has returned to its philosophical beginnings, articulating a strong preference for epistemological issues over social problems.

The notable exception would be the feminist movement(s) in West Germany, although even here the nature of the political involvement, as inside observers have noted, has undergone considerable changes. Still, compared with the general discourse of literary criticism, feminist approaches have retained a more explicit political agenda, ranging from the struggle against section 218 (the law against abortion) to poststructuralist criticism, in which the work of leading French feminists (Hélène Cixous, Luce Irigaray, Julia Kristeva) has been appropriated. The political impetus of the West German women's movement expressed itself both in the peace movement and the ecological movement (the Greens), where it reached larger segments of the population. At the same time, the project of emancipation, as it was formulated during the late 1960s and early 1970s by leftist women's groups, has lost its impact. In a recent essay, Cornelia Klinger concludes that a theory of emancipation and human progress has been relegated to the past. 60 Klinger, who is ready to defend such a project—at least up to a point—considers herself as somewhat "old-fashioned," since this defense entails also a defense of the subject and subjectivity—precisely the categories that have come under attack.

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The continuing politicization of German feminism thus owes its force to a new agenda in which Critical Theory plays only a marginal role. Aesthetic theory in particular, the legacy of Adorno and Benjamin, is no longer central to the political debate. To some extent—and here we see a clear parallel to the general discourse in literary criticism—poststructuralist theory has taken its place and simultaneously redefined the meaning of the political. Among other things, this approach has resulted in a far-reaching critique of the concept of emancipation as it was used by the New Left. Under the influence of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, Lyotard, and Lacan, the notion of the subject has come under attack; also, with the growing impact of Lacan and Foucault, the question of power has been revised in a different way and with it the definition of women’s political struggle. In this new constellation, the question of power refers to knowledge, its acquisition and dissemination, rather than traditional political conflicts, which were carried out under the banner of equality. Since poststructuralist theory, especially through its critique of the subject, is not compatible with more traditional women's demands based on the idea of emancipation and since these demands have not been fulfilled in West Germany, the German women's movement has witnessed considerable tensions about the nature of the political struggle during the 1980s.

In this context, aesthetic theory in its post-Adornian form has contributed to the subversion of conventional politics, but

61. This distance is due, to some extent, to the initial rejection of the male-dominated New Left in 1968, which was very much under the influence of the Frankfurt School. The gap has never quite closed again. As a result, the fruitful elements in Critical Theory, for instance, the Odysseus excursus in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, were never appropriated. For an account of the feminists’ rejection of the Sozialistischer Deutscher Studentenbund, see Helke Sander, “‘Rede des Aktionsrechts zur Begründung der Frauen,’” in Anders, *Autonome Frauen*, 35–47.

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the general relation of aesthetics and politics as it was conceived in Critical Theory stands in an uncertain position. It remains to be seen whether the new political criticism—whether in its feminist, its Habermasian, its Foucauldian, or its poststructuralist form—will continue its heavily epistemological course, or if different questions about art and late capitalist society will reopen the central issues in Critical Theory.