On Modernity and the Validity of its Artworks: Habermas’s *Theory of Communicative Action* and the Fate of Aesthetics

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ABSTRACT

Within the philosophy of Jürgen Habermas, considerations of aesthetics are noticeably scarce. This is the case from the beginning of his career and remains the case today. It is the objective of this thesis to explore why this is so, and in addition, to explore the consequences his philosophy might have for aesthetics. In order to address the issue fully, I will consider the whole of Habermas’s career, from his Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere to his Philosophical Discourse of Modernity. Although his works do not explicitly treat aesthetic issues, I find that they do have aesthetic consequences. Most critics of Habermas hold that the absence of aesthetic considerations leads necessarily to art playing a mitigated, ineffectual role in his philosophy. In addition, some critics hold that Habermas’s philosophy jeopardizes the value of both aesthetic experiences and artworks. In the end, I find the opposite of both claims to be true. In saving the project of modernity, Habermas is able to save aesthetics in turn.

In criticizing postmodern thinkers for using aesthetic experience as the tool for effecting a totalizing critique of reason, Habermas shows that such thinkers actually undermine the intentions of art in the process. This follows from his communicative action theory, which holds that a
differentiated reason has given rise to multiple, distinct cultural spheres, art being one of these, their individual existences depending on being communicatively open to other spheres while nevertheless maintaining independence. Postmodernity, for Habermas, de-differentiates the world, and in the process, takes the value of the aesthetic cultural sphere along with it. However, Habermas’s reconstructed modernity prevents this, and so in turn, saves art.

This abstract correctly represents the content of the candidate’s thesis. I recommend its publication.

Signed
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Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Habermas’s philosophy can be broadly characterized as an attempt to reconstruct modern reason. This project is seen to culminate in his works from the eighties and nineties, namely in his *Theory of Communicative Action* (1981) and *A Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (1984). In both works, remarks on aesthetic issues are noticeably scarce, a scarcity which Habermas has himself acknowledged forthright: “In every case these remarks had a secondary character, to the extent that they arose only in the context of other themes and always in relation to the discussions among Adorno, Benjamin and Marcuse.”\(^1\) In his earlier works however, aesthetic considerations feature much more prominently; it is only after he begins to outline his theory of communicative reason that they become, for the most part, omitted. There is, then, a certain fate of aesthetics in Habermas’s philosophy, which can be traced by examining his intellectual history. Beginning with his early involvement with the first generation of critical theorists and terminating in his reconstruction of the Enlightenment project, the role of aesthetics is regulated increasingly to the periphery of his philosophy.

The purpose of this thesis is to attempt to explain the fate of

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aesthetics in Habermas's philosophy by examining (1) his dialogue with the first generation critical theorists, (2) his ultimate break with those theorists, and (3) his reconstruction of modern reason. Moreover, it is also the purpose of this thesis to challenge a common criticism of Habermas. Some critics hold that Habermas's philosophy jeopardizes the value of both aesthetic experiences and artwork. I will show, however, that this is not in fact the case. Rather, in reconstructing the Enlightenment project, Habermas is able to save both aesthetic experiences, as well as modern artworks.
Chapter 2

ART AND THE CREATION OF THE PUBLIC SPHERE

Since Habermas is concerned with a reconstruction of modern reason, his critical analysis will necessarily include the accurate redescription of the historical mechanisms or conditions that make discursive reason possible in the modern era. In his first book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he does just this. He reconstructs the transition from the feudal era to the modern bourgeois era in terms of its creation of a public sphere. In the first half of the book, Habermas sketches the rise of the public sphere, and in the second half, sketches its decline. For Habermas, the primary importance of his first book is to be found in the conclusions to his analysis of the public sphere’s structural transformation as a whole—its rise and its fall taken together. What is only of secondary interest, however, is the role artworks play in the initial creation of the public sphere. But because the aim of this thesis is an understanding of the role of aesthetics in Habermas’s philosophy, we will consider as primarily important the latter.

The first part of Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*
Pieter Duvenage writes that for Habermas, “the public sphere is an institutional location for practical reason and for the valid, if often deceptive, claims of formal democracy”\(^2\) The public sphere is a modern phenomenon, which owes its existence to the socio-historical transformations that coincide with the Enlightenment. Pre-Enlightenment feudal society is characterized by Habermas as an historical moment that had not been yet separated into both the private and public spheres which come to characterize modern societies. Accordingly, the representation that characterizes the separation of the public from the private was also absent, so that representative democracy was impossible. Both culture and art were nevertheless ‘represented’, but for Habermas, representation in the sense in which the members of a national assembly represent a nation or a lawyer represents his clients had nothing to do with this publicity of representation inseparable from the lord’s concrete existence, that, as an ‘aura’, surrounded and endowed his authority. When the territorial ruler convened about him ecclesiastical and worldly lords, knights, prelates, and cities (or as in the German Empire until 1806 when the Emperor invited the princes and bishops, Imperial counts, Imperial towns, and abbots to the Imperial Diet), this was not a matter of an assembly of delegates that was someone else’s representative. As long as the prince and the estates of his realm ‘were’ the country and not just its representatives, he could represent it in a specific sense. They represented their lordship not for but ‘before’ the people.\(^3\)

\(^2\) ibid, p. 12

Art and culture, then, were manifested in the public sphere only as representations of the authority of the ruling classes over the people. Such a form of representation, then, is a direct indication of the power relations that characterized the feudal era. Accordingly, the transition from the feudal 'public' sphere to that of the modern bourgeoisie, required a transformation of the power relations between the ruling class and its subjects, as well as a restructuring of early capitalist commercial economy. The outcome of this transition is a truly public sphere, i.e., one that has been separated from the state on the one hand, and from the private sphere on the other. And for Habermas, two historical mechanisms may be viewed as having directly influenced this transition: (1) the reconstruction of the family as an intimate sphere represented by the patriarch in public, and (2) the emergence of the world of letters, or literary public sphere. It is the second of these two that we will turn to now, as it speaks directly to the role of aesthetics in the first phase of Habermas's philosophy.

For Habermas, the literary public sphere was found in those public institutional locations where readers of contemporary novels could debate and thereby critique the novels read. Examples of such institutional

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4 In addition to the locations themselves, the emergence of modern subjectivity was equally important for the advancement of the value of intersubjective literary criticism. Specifically important was modern subjectivity's ability for Empfindsamkeit, to empathize and identify with the fictive characters of novels. Indeed, this would be a prerequisite for the status-free, interest-free dialogue that constitutes these institutions.
locations are German table societies, French salons, and English coffee houses. Such locations forced the suspension of the laws of both the market and the state in a manner so as to bracket the members’ individual social and economic status, as well as to prevent any interference on behalf of the state. Accordingly, the voice of each member was to (in principle) be valued only in terms of its rational coherence. Hence, rational argumentation is the sole standard left for evaluative claims. And since every person is a participant insofar as he has access to the philosophical or aesthetic literature and can accordingly lay claim to a position, the literary public sphere is conceived as a ‘universal auditorium’. Indeed, such a conception becomes only possible when the state and the church are no longer the sole owners of such literature. Without interference by either the state or the church, a truly public sphere emerges comprised of a more inclusive class (educated and hence literate) and any issue becomes the potential subject matter for critical discussion.

In his first book then, we see that for Habermas, art plays an important role for the positive transition from feudal society to modern bourgeois society. Art objects became the occasion for the emergence of the literary public sphere, which fomented in turn an interest-free, critical dialogue among educated members who were obliged only to answer to their capacity for discursive reason. Also, Habermas views the literary public sphere as the precursor to the political public sphere, as the rational dialogue eventually came to debate non-aesthetic issues, viz. political
ones.

However, the transformation of the literary public sphere into a political one became possible only with the upheaval of an old economic order by the institutionalization of a new one: capitalism. With capitalism came a greater sense for the preservation of private interests in terms of productive capital and property. Accordingly, civil law extended various rights of privacy to the legal subjects who owned commodities on the market. And to be sure, even non-legal subjects were part of the larger, more inclusive, undifferentiated class of the generic ‘subject’, to which legal subjects also belonged. It is at this point that civil society experiences its greatest historical period of emancipation.

Habermas writes that,

> Only during this phase was civil society as the private sphere emancipated from the directives of public authority to such an extent that at that time the political public sphere could attain its full development: the bourgeois constitutional state.  

However he then points out that this period lasted only “one blissful moment in the history of capitalism”. It is on this note then, that we turn to the second half of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he sketches the public sphere’s decline.

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5 Habermas, ibid., 79.

6 Habermas, ibid.
The second part of Habermas’s *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*

For Habermas, the decline of the public sphere is attributable to the shift from rational discourse to ‘mere’ consumption. He places this shift at the end of the nineteenth century when “liberal competing capitalism was transformed into the monopolistic capitalism of cartels and protectionism”.

With monopolistic capitalism, the otherwise interest-free rational discourse concerning the public’s interests was undermined and supplanted by the intervention in the lifeworld by both the state and competing interest groups. Interest-free discourse was thereby necessarily compromised, and consequently the relationship between the public and the state was once again rearranged. Indeed, Habermas characterizes this rearrangement as the refeudalization of the public sphere, since its interests became again intertwined with those of the state.

Duvenage writes,

> the public (literary) sphere thus changed from a forum for critical and rational debate to an instrument for the manipulation of public discourse, in which bureaucratic and economic actors use advertising, marketing and ‘public relations’ to create a perfect ‘social engineering’ of voter behaviour and cultural consumption.

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7 Duvenage, ibid., 15
8 ibid., 16
Accordingly, the cultural enlightenment and emancipation of the public was no longer a viable project. Not unlike both Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas describes the remnants of the literary sphere as the sad splintering off of public art into a minority of private art connoisseurs, or ‘high art’ on the one hand, and the majority of pop art consumers, on the other. Whereas the former becomes isolated and divorced from public participation and constitution, the latter is used by those in power as a tool for manipulating the remaining public discourse with political and economic ends in mind. Manipulation only becomes more efficient with the arrival of new media technologies, supplanting in turn the effectiveness of literature.

With the arrival of the new media in the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact, therefore, more penetrating... than was even possible for the press. Under the pressure of the ‘Don’t talk back!’ the conduct of the public assumes a different form. In comparison with printed communications the programs sent by the new media curtail the reactions of their recipients in a peculiar way. They draw the eyes and ears of the public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under ‘tutelage’, which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to ‘exchanges about tastes and preferences’ between consumers -even the talk about what is being consumed, ‘the examination of tastes,’ becomes a part of consumption itself.9

Mass media then, for Habermas, significantly alters public discourse.

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9 Habermas, ibid., 170-171
Indeed, whereas the former literary circles constituted the public sphere, "the world of mass media is a public sphere in appearance only."\(^{10}\)

Individual-public appropriation of art is left at the wayside, and critical discourse about art is thereby removed from the public sphere. Where close-knit relationships between the consumers and producers of culture characterized the public sphere, consumers of culture no longer knew the producers of culture, nor did they have a forum for culture's criticism. Unquestioningly then, they appropriated what they were given; they were only entertained. Similarly, wherever literary circles served also as forums for the critical discussion of politics and social issues, individual-public appropriation of justified political and social beliefs were removed from the public sphere as well. And for Habermas, this second consequence of commodity capitalism is perhaps the most unfortunate. As with the mass consumption of culture, mass consumption of political and social values forges the loss of individuality and autonomy. For the bourgeois family, the socialization of its members is no longer mediated by reflective, rational heads-of-family, but occurs directly and indiscriminately by institutions no longer critically challenged.

It is clear that these conclusions regarding the transformation of the public sphere are greatly influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Nevertheless, Habermas does not share his

\(^{10}\) Duvenage, ibid., 16
predecessors’ more pessimistic conclusions concerning the instrumental nature of historical development, and a public sphere exhaustively instrumentalized from which there remains no possibility for the rehabilitation of the previous critical and public discourse that marked the literary public sphere.

Though much of his description of the transformation of the public sphere has been criticized, what remains of interest is his treatment of aesthetic-cultural goods and the essential role they play in the emergence of the first, truly public sphere. However, it was the treatment of the decline of this sphere that led Habermas away from considerations of the cultivation of individual subjectivity towards considerations of intersubjectivity and communicative reason, with an eye to the rehabilitation of a public sphere as well as to the greater, as of yet unfinished, project of modernity. This can also be seen as Habermas’s shift away from the treatment of historically specific phenomena to trans-historical phenomena, where the latter serves as the “basis from which to recover the normative ideal of formal democracy from early bourgeois political theory of practice”.11 As we shall see, the role of aesthetics greatly diminishes with this shift. Before we turn to Habermas’s attempt to reconstruct the Enlightenment project however, we must first consider in depth his position on Benjaminian aesthetics.

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11 ibid., 18
Chapter 3

HABERMAS ON BENJAMIN

For Duvenage, Habermas’s 1972 essay on Benjamin, “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique”, signals the end of the first phase of his position on aesthetics. This essay is still included within the first phase since it acknowledges the potential, critical role aesthetics has to play in public emancipation. However, it also points towards the second phase since it contains in germ a broad outline of what will later become his theory of communicative reason and action. Interestingly, it is this same theory that eventually curtails and minimizes the role of aesthetics. And because “Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique” is, to date, the essay in which Habermas deals most explicitly with aesthetics, it is an invaluable one if we are to fully understand his position on aesthetics over the whole of his career. Accordingly, I will here outline his position on Benjamin. However, in order to do this, I will first turn to Benjamin’s own essay “The Work of Art in the Age of Reproduction.”

Benjamin’s “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction”

In his essay, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical
Reproduction”, Benjamin analyzes the historical evolution of the modes of mechanical reproduction of artworks and their impact on mass society. At the outset, he acknowledges that artworks have forever, in principle, been reproducible; at the very least they have been imitable. However, mechanical reproduction is different from imitation in that closeness with the original work of art is no longer necessary. Benjamin outlines the evolution of the modes of artwork reproduction, beginning with the Greek techniques of founding and stamping. Only those objects which could be created through either founding or stamping, e.g. coins, terra cottas, were reproducible mechanically, and therefore reproducible in great quantity. Irreproducible objects, on the other hand, remained singular and unique. At the end of the analysis, the historical evolution of the modes of mechanical reproduction is seen to be characterized by long periods of technical stagnation, interrupted by moments of revolutionary innovation. These moments yield techniques that are increasingly more efficient and accurate in reproduction. From founding and stamping to woodcut technology, from lithography to photography, the more primitive modes becoming eclipsed by newer ones.

Benjamin understands some revolutions in technology as more important than others. Lithography, for example, presents the artwork with an entirely new characteristic, since for the first time, graphic art can be exchanged on the market. It can do this not only because of its ability to be reproduced in large quantities, but because its efficiency is such that
it can keep pace with social time, its content changing with the changing
days. As noted above, however, lithography was eventually eclipsed by
the invention of photography. Photography can keep pace with the
changing moments, and of course, as film has proved, it can even keep
pace with speech. Benjamin writes that, “around 1900, technical
reproduction had reached a standard that not only permitted it to
reproduce all transmitted works of art and thus to cause the most profound
change in their impact upon the public; it also had captured a place of its
own among the artistic processes.”12 Benjamin’s focus then turns to an
analysis of the effects of reproduction on the traditional work of art.

Perfect reproduction is not to be mistaken for perfect identity-
duplication. In this sense, no matter how perfect an artwork’s
reproduction, it remains distinct from the (original) artwork itself. They
are distinct because the reproduction lacks the original’s specific spatio-
temporal presence, “its unique existence at the place where it happens to
be.”13 The original’s specific origin determines its subsequent particular
history; a reproduction does not likewise have an historical existence.
Accordingly, they are also not substantively identical. And since a
specific origin is requisite for an artwork’s authenticity then,
reproductions lack authenticity. Indeed, since “the authenticity of a thing

13 ibid, 220
is the essence of all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to the history which it has experienced”, the authenticity of an artwork is endangered if either substantive existence or its historical testimony cease to matter. For Benjamin, both do cease to matter within the processes of mechanical reproduction. The authenticity of the artwork, the ‘most sensitive’ nucleus which Benjamin names the artwork’s ‘aura’ then, is accordingly eliminated through mechanical reproduction.14 The elimination of an artwork’s aura entails the artwork’s detachment from its place within tradition. Its previous, singular existence is supplanted by copies, which enable a transplantation of the artwork into other situations outside tradition, shattering in turn its own, particular life-history: “The cathedral leaves its locale to be received in the studio of a lover of art; the choral production, performed in an auditorium or in the open air, resounds in the drawing room.”15

An artwork’s authenticity, or aura, then, is inextricably bound-up with its particular substantive existence and particular tradition. This integration of art and tradition occurs first in ancient, cultic expressions, and is mediated by magic, then religion, and then is secularized in the Renaissance. Throughout its history of integration then, its aura does not disappear; its appearance only changes. Indeed, an evaluation of any

14 ibid, 221
15 ibid., 221
auratic artwork ultimately uncovers its essential connection to its original ritual-role. But, as noted above, for Benjamin, photography comes to destroy this integration process, since it destroys the aura of the artwork. Photography presents world history with the first truly revolutionary means of reproduction, coinciding with the rise of socialism, and anticipating in turn the modern crisis in art a century later.\textsuperscript{16} Photography is characterized as revolutionary because it liberates art from its “parasitic dependency on ritual”.\textsuperscript{17} Photography thusly cracks the fragile auratic nucleus, and authenticity no longer figures into the evaluation of the artwork. Since authenticity no longer figures into its evaluation, neither does its original ritual-role. But, as Benjamin points out, “the instant the criterion of authenticity ceases to be applicable to artistic production, the total function of art is reversed. Instead of being based on ritual, it begins to be based on another practice -politics.”\textsuperscript{18} This shift, from a vehicle for ritual to a vehicle for politics, is only possible with the simultaneous shift in artwork reception: from cultic evaluation to exhibition evaluation. This shift also influences the modes of artwork production themselves:

\begin{quote}
With the emancipation of the various art practices from the ritual go increasing opportunities for the exhibition of their products. It is easier to exhibit a portrait bust that can be sent here and there than to
\end{quote}

\textsuperscript{16} ibid., 224
\textsuperscript{17} ibid., 224
\textsuperscript{18} ibid., 224
exhibit the statue of a divinity that has its fixed place in the interior of a temple. The same holds for the painting as against the mosaic or fresco that preceded it.\textsuperscript{19}

For Benjamin, the modes of artwork reproduction that have the most exhibition value are photography and film. However, the displacement of their cultic value was not simultaneous with their inceptions; with photography, the “cult of remembrance of loved ones, absent or dead” is valued still for its auratic elements.\textsuperscript{20} But eventually, the exhibition value of photography proves superior to its cultic value; it lends itself to a political purpose since it serves the purpose of historical evidence. Its reception by the viewer then, is not identical to the reception of other artistic media; the latter call for a “free-floating contemplation” while the former does not. Rather, photographs “stir the viewer; he feels challenged by them in a new way”, i.e., politically and ideologically.\textsuperscript{21}

And perhaps most importantly, for Benjamin, “when the age of mechanical reproduction separated art from its basis in cult, the semblance of its autonomy disappeared forever”.\textsuperscript{22} As noted previously, photography revolutionized the essential make-up of art \textit{qua} art. Discussions as to whether or not photography qualifies as art are

\textsuperscript{19} ibid., 225
\textsuperscript{20} ibid., 226
\textsuperscript{21} ibid., 226
\textsuperscript{22} ibid., 226
fundamentally flawed, since in such discussions art is understood as ritual art, not, as it should be, art since revolutionized. To define photographic art in terms of its ritual value then, is to commit a category mistake; in the age of mechanical reproduction, the only art is photographic and filmic art.

For Benjamin, the mechanical reproduction of artworks have repercussions throughout society, since the two processes, (1) the destruction of the aura and (2) its transplantation outside tradition, are seen to be inextricably bound-up with mass movements. Indeed, these processes culminate in the most efficient mode of artistic mechanical reproduction, viz., film, as “its social significance, particularly in its most positive form, is inconceivable without its destructive, cathartic aspect, that is, the liquidation of the traditional value of the cultural heritage.”

Benjamin asserts that what is requisite for modern art to be modern art is an overcoming of distances; the art-spectacle must be able to bring the audience as close to the content as possible. Film does this best, since through editing and deft camerawork, its content is presented (as if) absent its mechanical equipment. Indeed, ironically, the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction is qualified as a transmission of reality with the appearance of the absence of mechanical equipment. And Benjamin believes that, above all, “that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of

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23 ibid., 221
The outcome of such an art then is social; the consequences are primarily public ones. That this is so, is because the public’s reception of art changes along with the changing modes of artistic reproduction. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the public’s reaction towards art turns progressive. A progressive reception is characterized by Benjamin as the “direct intimate fusion of visual and emotional enjoyment with the orientation of the expert.” The social consequence of filmic and photographic art is emancipation in reception, then. Indeed, “the camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulse.” It does this by exploding the limiting concepts of space, time and movement that the natural attitude and naked eye both supply.

For Benjamin, that the destruction of the aura can have far-reaching social consequences is ultimately itself a consequence of the dependency of sense perception on historical situation. That is, “the manner in which human sense perception is organized, the medium in which it is accomplished, is determined not only by nature but by historical circumstances as well.” New developments in art, as well as

24 ibid., 234
25 ibid., of course, this fusion is of social consequence only insofar as the public can understand and enjoy the art. Indeed, since autonomous art is by definition beyond the reach of mass appreciation, autonomous art is of no social consequence.
26 ibid., 237
27 ibid., 222
expressions of social transformations, directly result from new developments in perception. But because Benjamin is a dialectic thinker, such developments in perception cause socio-historical transformations, as well. For Benjamin, the contemporary form of perception is characterized by an auratic withering which creates in the contemporary masses the desire to "bring things 'closer' spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent toward overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction."²⁸ Moreover, "to pry an object from its shell, to destroy its aura, is the mark of a perception whose 'sense of the universal equality of things' has increased to such a degree that it extracts it from a unique object by means of reproduction."²⁹ And making use of this point, Benjamin distinguishes private art and public art by modes of reception. On the one hand, private art calls for contemplation; in contemplation, the spectator is absorbed by the artwork. On the other hand, public art calls for distraction; in distraction the spectator absorbs the artwork. The age of mechanical reproduction alters our modes of perception, and whether we approve of it or not, we have become distracted people. As Benjamin writes, "reception in a state of distraction, which is increasing noticeably in all fields of art and is symptomatic of profound changes in apperception, finds in the film its true means of

²⁸ ibid., 223
²⁹ ibid.
Accordingly, the structure of artworks in the age of mechanical reproduction is such that it prevents contemplation. It also disdains any pretense to autonomy. Unlike with a painting, it is impossible for an individual to contemplate a film; she cannot resign herself to her associations since the film’s quickly changing images interrupt them. This accounts for film’s shock effect. The result is that the spectator no longer thinks for herself, but profoundly distracted, absorbs the flickering screen.

As noted previously, socio-historical transformations effect changes in the reception of artworks and that likewise, changes in the reception of artworks effect socio-historical transformations. In the epilogue to his essay, Benjamin writes of the Fascist aestheticization of politics. The technological modernization of the world alters, dialectically, the masses’ modes of perception. Without a dramatic restructuring of the property system, such modernization leads inevitably to war; dialectically, the modes of perception correspond, and war is apprehended aesthetically; politics become aestheticized. Indeed, this phenomenon is characterized perhaps best by the futurist Marinetti as quoted by Benjamin:

War is beautiful because it establishes man’s dominion over the subjugated machinery by means of gas masks, terrifying megaphones, flame throwers, and small tanks. War is beautiful because it initiates the

30 ibid., 240.
dreamt of metalization of the human body. War is beautiful because it enriches a flowering meadow with the fiery orchids of machine guns. War is beautiful because it combines the gunfire, the cannonades, the cease-fire, the scents, and the stench of putrefaction into a symphony. War is beautiful because it creates new architecture, like that of big tanks, the geometrical formation flights, the smoke spirals from burning villages, and many others... Poets and artists of Futurism!... remember these principles of an aesthetics of war so that your struggle for a new literature and a new graphic art... may be illumined by them!"31

And as Benjamin points out, "communism responds by politicizing art."32

I will now turn to Habermas's essay on Benjamin, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique".

Habermas's "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique"

Habermas's essay on Benjamin, "Consciousness-Raising or Rescuing Critique" evidences his contention with the philosophical projects of both Marcuse and Adorno, as well as his support for a Benjaminian position on aesthetics.

Time and Mythic Fate

31 ibid., 242.
32 ibid., 242
Habermas characterizes the aesthetic positions of both Adorno and Marcuse as consciousness-raising critique. This critique posits a subject capable of using self-reflection to ‘arrive at some aesthetic truth about reality’. The concrete materials of consciousness-raising are autonomous artworks, such as Kafka’s novels and Schönberg’s music for Adorno. These artworks function by opposing ideal to reality which thereby “unmasks material relationships of life and initiates a self-reflective overcoming of everyday culture.”

In contradistinction to the that of Adorno and Marcuse, Habermas views Benjamin’s project to be a conservative one. Indeed, according to Habermas,

whereas Marcuse (by analytically disintegrating an objective illusion) would like to prepare the way for a transformation of the thus unmasked relationships of life and to initiate an overcoming of the culture within which these relationships of life are stabilized, Benjamin cannot see his task to be an attack on an art that is already caught up in a process of dissolution.

And though Benjamin is nevertheless still a critic of art, the point of criticism itself is to rescue what is true and ‘worth knowing’ from the medium of the beautiful, and transpose it into reality. This conservation of that which is ‘worth knowing’ is done in the name of present and

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33 Duvenage, 23

34 ibid.

subsequent generations, without which, those 'images of the past' are forgotten and future meaning-making is jeopardized. Indeed, tradition is always endangered and, for Benjamin, its security depends on criticism. Criticism rescues images from the past and incorporates them into the timeless, hypostasized realm of ideas. In this way, criticism trumps fate, or the marching continuum of empty time. Specifically, (and in contrast to ideology critique) criticism accomplishes this by ascertaining "the moment in which the artistic sensibility puts a stop to fate draped as progress and enciphers the utopian experience in a dialectical image - the new within the always-the-same." 36 Indeed, Benjamin's rescuing-critique aims at rescuing past moments charged with Jetztzeit.

For Habermas, what is also valuable about Benjamin's critique and his particular conception of time, is how it relates to his notion of mythic fate and demystification. For Benjamin,

the enemy that threatens the dead as much as the living when rescuing criticism is missing and forgetting takes its place remain[...] one and the same: the dominance of mythic fate. Myth is the mark of a human race hopelessly deprived of its vocation to a good and just life and exiled into the cycle of sheer reproduction and survival. 37

The mythic fate can be interrupted by criticism in the present, and those images salvaged constitute tradition itself. In the absence of rescuing-criticism then, mythic fate dominates and the value of art, and artistic

36 ibid., 138

37 ibid., 137.
sensibility are in danger of being lost. Progress, for Benjamin, is a misunderstood concept; it is not the result of the continuum of mythic fate or the continuum propelled by forces of production, but the interruptions of this continuum by the artistic instances of the emergence of the new within the always-the-same. Habermas writes,

Benjamin’s antievolutionary conception of history, in accord with which the Jetztzeit runs perpendicular to the continuum of natural history, is not rendered utterly blind toward steps forward in the emancipation of the human race. However, it judges ‘with a profound pessimism the chances that the punctual breakthroughs that undermine the always-the-same will combine into a tradition and not be forgotten. 38

However, as Habermas goes on to point out, the demythification and deritualization of art, which is necessary to its rescuing, is left unexplained by Benjamin. Habermas assumes that it must be similar to Weber’s disenchantment, or the world-historical rationalization of modern societies, where the continuity of the disenchantment process ends exactly with the loss of an artwork’s aura. As Benjamin writes,

In prehistoric times, because of the absolute emphasis on its cult value, the work of art was an instrument of magic. Only later did it become a work of art. In the same way today, because of the absolute emphasis on its exhibition value, the work of art becomes a structure with entirely new functions, among which the one we are conscious of; the artistic function, later may be recognized as incidental. 39

38 ibid., 138
39 ibid., 139
As Habermas understands it then, the disenchantment of art consists of the separation of artworks from their ritual function. Similar to his treatment of the literary public sphere, Habermas holds that this moment coincides and is made possible by the emergence of the bourgeoisie. This is the moment when ritual art becomes autonomous art; it is the moment in which art becomes separated off into its own cultural sphere, when the economic and political systems are severed from the cultural and religious systems. Fair exchange, then, is responsible for liberating art from its ritual context. The commodification of art makes possible, for the first time, the private enjoyment of art.

Adorno

This, for Habermas, is not unlike Adorno’s understanding of the emergence of autonomous art. Indeed, likewise for Adorno, it is with the rise of bourgeois consciousness that art becomes autonomous. Accordingly, prior to the emergence of this consciousness, and the subject’s emancipation which such an emergence entails, art is more immediately social. Art was more social in that it had not yet recognized itself as an independent domain, and so served a social and sometimes critical function. Prior to the modern bourgeois era, social controls were strong enough to mediate and control the content of art. Indeed, Adorno
reminds us that

there had been conflicts between art and society
desultorily ever since art was condemned in Plato's
state, but the idea of a fundamentally oppositional art
was inconceivable, and social controls worked much
more immediately than in the bourgeois era until the
rise of totalitarian states.\textsuperscript{40}

Like Habermas, Adorno acknowledges the bourgeoisie for having
incorporated art into society more intensely than any previous era, and that
this is evidenced most explicitly by the advent of the novel and the literary
sphere; in bourgeois art, its ubiquitous social dimension is made explicit
for the first time. Of course, prior to the bourgeois era, art is termed social
only by acknowledging the social modes of its production, as well as the
social content from which it is derived. But it is only with the bourgeois
historic moment that “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and
it occupies this position only as autonomous art.”\textsuperscript{41} Indeed, because it
recognizes itself as a domain distinct from society, the identity and value
of art is no longer determined by society’s evaluative standards, i.e. its
social utility. As autonomous, it recognizes itself as a pure, productive
force which is no longer immediately social. By merely existing as a
domain distinct from society then, it is critically opposed to society. For
Adorno, it is in its opposition and thus relation to society that autonomous


\textsuperscript{41} ibid.
art is social; it is not its manifest opinions. Art’s sociality is just its asociality; “Art’s asociality is the determinate negation of a determinate society.” At this point, the contribution of art to society is no longer communication, or the cultivation of a dialogue, as Habermas characterizes it. Rather, in its resistance to social commodification, art opens a space for novel social production. To do this, to be even intelligible, in must relate still to society, albeit in obscured forms.

Most importantly, for Adorno, the emergence of mass art signals the degeneration of art. Free market capitalism, which made autonomous bourgeois art possible in the first place, inevitably gives rise to a ‘culture industry that penetrates the pores of the work of art itself and, along with art’s commodity character, imposes on the spectator the attitudes of a consumer.’ Art was supposed to achieve something more, which it did at the moment of the emergence of civil society. At the very least, art was the preserve for a satisfaction, be it only virtual, of those needs that became, so to speak, illegal within the material processes of life in bourgeois society: the need for a mimetic relation with external nature and the nature of one’s own body, the need for life together in solidarity, and, in general, the need for the happiness of a communicative experience removed from the imperatives purposive rationality and leaving room for fantasy and spontaneous behavior. This constellation of bourgeois culture was by no means stable; it lasted, as did liberalism itself, only for a moment; then it fell prey to the dialectic of enlightenment (or, rather, to

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42 ibid., 226

43 ibid
For Adorno, like religion and philosophy, art eventually was seen to become sublated, albeit not until the twentieth century. Indeed, all three, (religion, philosophy and art), undergo devastating ideology critiques. However, the sublation of art proves a false overcoming when the truth of art is liquidated at the moment its aura collapses. For Habermas, when someone witnesses the false overcomings of religion, philosophy, and art, at the expense of their respective truths (as did Adorno), it may not be surprising that a hesitancy sets in ‘of the sort that one would rather be mistrustful of absolute spirit’s becoming practical than consent to its liquidation’. Indeed, this hesitancy is more than evident in Adorno and characterizes his aesthetic theory as a whole. Habermas views Adorno to be prescribing a ‘strategy of hibernation’ whereby art retreats entirely from the public sphere and only thusly resists mass commodification.

Habermas points out that Benjamin remains ultimately ‘ambivalent’ about the loss of an artwork’s aura. As previously noted, ‘in the aura of a work of art is enclosed the historical experience of a past

44 Habermas, ibid., 140
Jetztzeit in need of revitalization; the undialectical destruction of the aura would be a loss of that experience." On the one hand, Benjamin views as necessary the critical conservation of such an experience if “the messianic promise of happiness is ever to be redeemed.” On the other hand, however, Benjamin “treats the loss of aura in a positive way.” Indeed, this ambivalence is further noted in his “emphasis on just those achievements in autonomous art that are also distinctive of the deritualized work of art,” specifically the achievement of Baudelarian correspondances. That is, artworks which lose their auras share the objective of autonomous art, viz. ‘to experience objects within the network of correspondences as a counterpart that makes one happy.’

Benjamin writes,

> The correspondances constitute the court of judgment before which the object of art is found to be one that forms a faithfully reproduced image - which, to be sure, makes it entirely problematic. If one attempted to reproduce even this aporia in the material of language, one would define beauty as the object of experience in the state of resemblance.\(^{46}\)

This ambiguity is resolved, however, if we acknowledge that “the experience released by the shattered shell of aura, namely the transformation of the object to a counterpart, [or correspondence], was already contained in the experience of aura as well”. Benjamin’s main objective is just this: to allow for greater and greater instances of

\(^{45}\) ibid., 143

\(^{46}\) ibid., 144
Such correspondence is achieved when essences are grasped in immediacy, when there is no distance between an object and us. Indeed, "the proximity of the other refracted in the distance is the signature of a possible fulfillment and a mutual happiness."^47 With the overcoming of autonomous art, the ability for us and nature to correspond is situated within public appropriation. Habermas writes that,

Benjamin’s intention aims at a condition in which the esoteric experience of happiness have become public and universal, for only in a context of communication into which nature is integrated in a brotherly fashion, as if it were upright once again, can human subjects open up their eyes to look in return.^48

The possibility of such correspondences is predicated on a theory of art, which is at the same time, a theory of experience. This theory of experience is however not one of reflection. As noted above, Benjamin’s project is the elimination of distance between us and essences via a non-reflective, immediate apperception. Rescuing-criticism becomes absolutely necessary if the correspondence potential is not to be lost with the loss of the artwork’s aura. Rescuing-criticism must draw from the ‘semantic energies’ embedded in the mythic tradition; rescuing-criticism must offer up these energies for future meaning-making.

^47 ibid., 144
^48 ibid.
The Mimetic Capacity

According to Habermas,

Benjamin was obviously of the opinion that meaning was not a good capable of being increased, and that experiences of an unimpaired interchange with nature, with other people, and with one’s self cannot be engendered at will. Benjamin thought instead that the semantic potential on which human beings draw in order to invest the world with meaning and make it accessible to experience was first deposited in myth and needs to be released from it, and that this potential cannot be expanded but only transformed.

The reason why Benjamin holds that semantic potential, and hence meaning, is finite is owing to his theory of language; Benjamin subscribes to a mimetic theory of language. According to mimetic theories of language, words are not related accidentally to reality, but are instead ‘names’ which correspond either correctly or incorrectly to natural essences; ‘naming is a kind of translation of the nameless into names, a translation from the incomplete language of nature into the language of humans.’

In the fusion of mimesis and expression, correspondences are achieved; ‘whatever is expressed in linguistic physiognomy or in expressive gestures generally is not a mere subjective state but, by way of this, the as-yet-uninterrupted connection of the human organism with

49 ibid., 146
50 ibid.
surrounding nature'; 'expressive movements are systematically linked with the qualities of the environment that evoke them.' For Benjamin then, this mimetic process serves to establish the primordial, subhuman, semantic substratum, which when integrated fully into human language, circumscribes the possibilities for meaning-making. Accordingly, it is on this account that semantic energy, and thereby meaning itself, is finite in amount; there is only so much semantic energy to make use of, and when it's spent, it's spent. It cannot be created (by labor, for example) and if it were not for rescuing-critique, it would be lost to humanity. It can however be preserved and transformed via processes of production which change according to the 'changing interpretations' of human needs. On this very point, Benjamin writes,

> It must be borne in mind that neither mimetic powers nor mimetic objects or referents (which, one could add, have stored away in them something of the releasing qualities of whatever is compelling and pregnant) remain the same in the course of thousands of years. Rather, we must suppose that the gift of producing similarities (for example, in dances, whose oldest function was this), and therefore also the gift of recognizing them, have changed with historical development. The direction of this change seems definable as the increasing decay of the mimetic faculty.  

Habermas notes the ambiguous significance of this process. On the one hand, Benjamin sees the mimetic capacity as ultimately the source of

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51 ibid., 147
52 ibid., 148
human meaning, by which humans ‘humanize’ their world. On the other hand, he also sees the mimetic capacity as the “rudimentary form of the once-violent compulsion to become similar, to be forced into adaptation - the animal legacy”53; it is the residue of having been at one time entirely dependent on the forces of nature. This residue, the anxiety of such a relationship, has expressed itself in magical practices, myth, etc. It is the aim of humanity then, to shake off this dependency evidenced by the mimetic capacity itself, without losing the mimetic capacity at the same time. Or as Habermas puts it, “the vocation of the human species, then, is to liquidate that dependence without sealing off the powers of mimesis and the streams of semantic energies, for that would be to lose the poetic capacity to interpret the world in the light of human needs.”54 Ultimately for Benjamin, the history of art is the attempt to represent correspondences in images, or what amounts to the fruits of mimesis, while at the same time to ‘loose the spell that once rested on this mimesis.’ If we achieve this, we will have achieved happiness, or what Benjamin terms ‘secular illumination’.

Conclusion

53 ibid.
54 ibid.
At the end of Habermas’s essay on Benjamin, a suggestion is made which signals the beginnings of the formulation of his communicative theory of action. As Duvenage has pointed out, Habermas holds that any “theory of linguistic communication that wants to bring Benjamin’s insights back into a materialist theory of social evolution should consider the following two theses - the possibility of a proper sphere of mutual linguistic understanding, on the one hand, and the non-linguistic and dangerous trust in technology, on the other - at the same time.” We will see in the next phase how these suggestions flesh themselves out in Habermas’s own theory. In addition, and most importantly, we will see how this theory determines the fate of his position on aesthetics.

At the point in his career when the Benjamin essay is written, Habermas’s position on aesthetics is clearly a Benjaminean one; it acknowledges the role aesthetics will play in the emancipation of the masses. Because it evidences such a belief, this essay is situated within the first phase of Habermas’s aesthetics. But because it contains in germ the outline of what will become his communicative theory of action, it also marks the end of this phase, signaling in turn the beginning of the second phase.

We will now turn to the second phase of Habermas’s position on

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55 Duvenage, ibid., 26
aesthetics.
Habermas's main contribution to philosophy has been his theory of communicative action and reason. Communicative action/reason is the intersubjective communication among subjects who are sufficiently proficient in language and action. Habermas's theory may be seen as a challenge to the philosophy of consciousness, which has relied almost exclusively on the assumptions implicit in what Habermas calls the "objective paradigm". This communicative paradigm, then, for Habermas, is to replace the objective paradigm characteristic of the philosophy of consciousness.

According to Habermas, since Descartes, modern philosophy has made the mistake of assuming a one-world ontology. A one-world ontology lends itself to the characterization of the agent as monological; that is, the mind is self-referential and subject-centered. In turn, the agent becomes "one-dimensionally dependent on the objective world."

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56 Duvenage, ibid., 52
This one dimensional relationship, determined by a one-world ontology, then corresponds with a "teleological model of action orientated to success", or strategic action.\(^{57}\) Per Habermas, as well as Adorno and Horkheimer, strategic action cannot help but determine an agent to instrumentalize other agents in the process of achieving said agent's objectives; strategic action invariably implies the treatment of others as means to ends. In turn, we see that the particular rationality linked with strategic action is instrumental. That is, modern philosophers assume that the mind relies exclusively on "truth and effectiveness" as the sole criteria in the evaluative process of actions themselves. In turn, for modern philosophy, the one-world ontology and the implied strategic action/instrumental reason give rise to the myriad problems that concern the subject and what, all too often, appears as its unintelligible relationship to the world. Indeed, as Duvenage puts it, "the subject-object polarity provides the frame of reference into which all problems (inner versus outer nature, reason versus senses, mind versus body, culture versus nature, autonomy versus heteronomy, liberation versus alienation) are translated"\(^{58}\). Modern philosophy has, in other words, created its own irresolvable dichotomies by, in the first place, assuming a one-world ontology and, by extension, the model of strategic action/instrumental

\(^{57}\) ibid.

\(^{58}\) ibid.
reason. This, for Habermas, is a grave error, and if the modernity project is to be salvaged, this problem must be remedied by adopting (1) a different ontology, and (2) communicative rationality.

In replacing the objective paradigm with the communicative one, we see then that Habermas rejects the exclusive use of instrumental reason and the strategic model of action which follows. Instead, as noted previously, in adopting the communicative paradigm, Habermas adopts communicative reason and the "understanding-oriented" model of action. Further, the objectification model germane to the one-world ontology is replaced by an intersubjective model of language, characteristic of his proposed three-world ontology.

The three-world ontology, in addition to the objective world, entails a subjective world, as well as a social, or intersubjective world.59 Habermas, borrowing from Piagetean developmental psychology, holds that the human mind develops via the decentration of the subject such as to accommodate the differences among the three worlds; humans develop the ability to take up different relationships with the different worlds. Most importantly, each world determines the characteristics of each corresponding relation. We are able to have "an objective relationship to

59 See figure 10, "Formal-Pragmatics Relations" Habermas, Jurgen, The Theory of Communicative Action, p. 237, since this is the division of worlds and attitudes I am relying on. According to this figure, there are only three worlds: the objective world, social world, and a subjective world. There are also three basic attitudes with correspond to the three worlds. According to the figure, they are objectivating, norm-confirmative, and expressive, respectively.
the objective world, a normative relationship to the social world, and an expressive relationship to the subjective world.\textsuperscript{60} The success of communicative reason and action, viz. reaching understanding and/or consensus, requires the accurate differentiation of the aforementioned three worlds. Of course, we can fail to make this differentiation, as indicated by modern philosophy's assumption of a one-world ontology. Modern philosophy collapsed all three worlds into one, viz. the objective world, which determined in turn the type of relationship the subject would necessarily take up to the world. But this mistake is not the only possibility, and failing to differentiate between any of the various worlds causes problematic subject-world relationships. As Duvenage writes, "if we fail to differentiate between the various worlds, the following dangers surface: objectivism (an [exclusively] objective attitude to the world), moralism (an [exclusively] norm-confirmative attitude towards the world) and aestheticism (an [exclusively] expressive attitude towards the world)."\textsuperscript{61}

Habermas's theory of argumentation

\textsuperscript{60} ibid.

\textsuperscript{61} ibid., 53.
In order to understand communicative action fully however, we must also look to the validity claims made by agents and how these relate to the three worlds. For Habermas, in addition to there being three worlds, there are also three validity dimensions which correspond to those worlds. A decentered consciousness, in addition to being capable of successful differentiation of the three worlds, is also similarly capable of successful differentiation of the three validity dimensions. Since each validity dimension matches up to one world, the validation procedures particular to one world will be distinct from those of another. The validation procedures of a normative claim for example will be different from those of establishing an empirical truth claim. For Habermas, there is then a kind of validity claim appropriate for the objective world, a different kind for the social world, and yet a different kind for the subjective world. These claims are ‘truth’, ‘rightness’, and ‘sincerity’ respectively.

As we have seen then, the three worlds link up with three validity dimensions. Habermas also however links up validity claims to speech-acts, and in doing so shows how language is able to link up with society and action. Like Wittgenstein, Austin and Searle, Habermas views language as action; that in addition to speaking, participants also act with language, hence they invariably make use of “speech-acts”. As their name suggests, speech-acts have two constitutive dimensions: the locutionary and the illocutionary. The locutionary is the propositional content of the speech-act; the illocutionary is the performative power
behind the speech-act. We have then the content of speech, on the one hand, and its vehicle on the other. Both are to be considered as "bona fide categories of meaning." These dimensions, or categories of meaning, reflect the two constitutive structures of the intentionality presupposed by the very use of speech-acts.

A speech-act is a discursive offer that can be accepted or rejected in accordance with the stand taken by the participants toward the validity claims offered. Through the validity claim of every speech-act the speaker enters into an interpersonal relationship of mutual obligation with the hearer.

Speech-acts, as discursive offers, invite others to participate in a dialogue which aims to achieve both understanding and consensus. A dialogue is the location of reaching these achievements via argumentation. Argumentation requires the ability to respond to validity claims with the correct use of the correlating validation processes. Indeed, speech-acts, in inviting others to participate in a dialogue, presuppose the ability of others to differentiate between the three distinct validity dimensions. This also then presupposes the ability of others to differentiate between the three distinct worlds as well.

Habermas's theory of communicative action and reason can be understood then in terms of his notion of speech-acts and what the (correct) use of speech-acts necessarily entails, viz. the application of

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62 ibid., 54
63 ibid.
Habermas’s theory of argumentation.

For Habermas, speakers who are situated in the objective world take up an objectivating attitude to the external, objective world. In doing so, they discover and lay claim to propositional truth content. This ‘laying claim to propositional truth’ is characteristic of cognitive-instrumental rationality expressed via strategic action. The validation process for a speech-act as such is a theoretical discourse among participants who share propositional knowledge (specifically scientific and technical knowledge).64 That is, “the objectivating attitude toward external nature and society circumscribes a complex of cognitive-instrumental rationality, within which the production of knowledge can take the form of scientific and technical progress (including social technologies).”65

For Habermas, speakers who are situated in the social world take up a normative attitude to the intersubjective, social world. In doing so, they take a position on, or lay claim to normative rightness. This ‘laying claim to normative rightness’ is characteristic of moral-practical rationality, and the validation process for a speech-act as such is practical discourse.66 That is, “the norm-confirmative attitude toward society and inner nature circumscribes a complex of moral-practical rationality, within which the production of knowledge can take the form of a systematic

65 ibid.
66 see ibid..
treatment of legal and moral responsibilities.\textsuperscript{67}

Speakers who are situated in the subjective world take up an expressive attitude to the subjective world, laying claim on ‘sincerity’ thereby. This ‘laying claim to sincerity’ marks aesthetic-expressive rationality, and the validation process for a speech-act as such is aesthetic criticism.\textsuperscript{68} That is, “the expressive attitude toward internal and external nature circumscribes a complex of aesthetic-practical rationality, within which the production of knowledge can take the form of authentic interpretations of needs, interpretations that have to be renewed in each historically changed set of circumstances.”\textsuperscript{69}

Habermas writes, “these three complexes of rationality, derived in formal-pragmatic terms from basic attitudes and world-concept, point to just those three cultural value spheres that were differentiated out in modern Europe.”\textsuperscript{70} Accordingly, it is even more clear now why Habermas takes issue with the philosophy of consciousness, and its exclusive dependence on cognitive-instrumental reason and strategic action. Cognitive-instrumental reason, is only one form of reason, not the only, nor the best one. Indeed, as mentioned above, Habermas’s most important contribution to philosophy is an alternative form of reason and action, viz. communicative reason and action. As Habermas writes,

\textsuperscript{67} ibid., 237-8
\textsuperscript{68} see ibid., 237
\textsuperscript{69} ibid., 238
\textsuperscript{70} ibid., 239
This concept of communicative rationality carries with it connotations based ultimately on the central experience of the unconstrained, unifying, consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech, in which different participants overcome their merely subjective views and, owing to the mutuality of rationally motivated convictions, assure themselves of both the unity of the objective world and the intersubjectivity of their life world. 71

Habermas’s theory of societal rationalization

Habermas’s theory of argumentation ultimately links up with his theory of social rationalization. This is because his theory of argumentation presupposes a differentiated reason which is the product of social evolution. This model of social evolution accounts for the replacement of mythical understanding with modern, rational understanding. Habermas distinguishes between archaic and developed civilizations on the basis of the previously discussed three-world distinction. In archaic civilization no such distinction is made and hence, no distinctions are made between fact and fantasy, word and description, emotions and natural events either. Because these distinctions are not made, archaic civilizations have mythical-poetical cosmological, religious and metaphysical world-views. The process of moving away from such

world-views towards ones which are modern is two-fold. In the first place, disenchantment and differentiation both challenge and correct mythical accounts of natural phenomena. In the second place, the differentiation process is connected to the reconstructive learning and hence decentring process of the subject. The evolution of the social world via differentiation is coeval with the ‘moral and cognitive decentring’ of individual subjects. Accordingly, the childhood world is analogous to the archaic, mythical world in that no distinction is made between objective and subjective realities. Likewise, the adulthood world is analogous to the modern world in which such a distinction is made. Social rationalization then, is “not linked exclusively to the objectifying rationality of social production (labour), but also to the communicative rationality of internal learning processes.” 72 Accordingly, the emancipation of human relationships does not solely depend on a reconciliation with (or complete control over) nature, as philosophers of consciousness hold. Rather, such emancipation can occur within *communicative* logic; collective learning processes can be corrected and can thereby also evolve.

As we will see in the following two sections, Habermas then goes on to make use of his theory of societal rationalization to also explain the “historical differentiation between the *life-world* and the *system*.”

72 Duvenage, ibid., 56
On the lifeworld

Habermas’s understanding of the life-world is influenced by Husserl, Mead and Schutz and is broadly understood as “the unproblematic background for linguistic and symbolic interaction.” More specifically for Habermas, the life-world “consists of individual skills, the intuitive knowledge of how one deals with a situation; and from socially acquired practices, the intuitive knowledge of what one can rely on in a situation, not less than, in a trivial sense, the underlying convictions.”

Communication between people is only possible from within the life-world. This is because language is the expression of knowledge of the life-world. Indeed, as with Wittgenstein, Habermas holds that the “boundaries of one’s language are the boundaries of one’s world.” The life-world is social through and through, and therefore so too is language. And in addition, “the social space of a commonly inhabited life-world that opens up in a conversation provides the key to the communication-theoretical concept of society”. This is the result then of the (communicative) rationalization of the life-world. As the life-world becomes (communicatively) rationalized, concepts embedded within it are

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74 ibid.
discovered and brought to the surface of language. In turn, concepts made explicit via (communicative) rationalization and language-use can then become the object of investigation. Society *qua* communication-theoretical concept can be analyzed by looking to language, viz. its intersubjective nature. Husserl acknowledged the need for an account of intersubjectivity:

Only by starting from the ego and the system of its transcendental functions and accomplishments can we methodically exhibit transcendental intersubjectivity and its transcendental communization, through which, in the functioning system of ego-poles, the 'world for all', and for each subject as world for all, is constituted.  

The full account of intersubjectivity was left unresolved by Husserl, however. In looking for such an account then Habermas looks to Mead, since Mead has a more complete account of intersubjectivity than does Husserl. This account comes from his ‘theory of symbolically communicated interactionism’. Within this theory, the following argument is found:

In keeping with the socialized world where interaction takes place largely in the form of gestures, a whole new social structure asserts itself in the form of symbolically communicated interaction. This new social structure presupposes the equality of all participants. Therefore, the symbols must have the same meaning for all participants in the interaction. This is the point at which linguistic symbols emerge. Social structures then develop through language because language contains that which is necessary to form the structure of a society and, correspondingly, to allow the functioning interaction of the members of

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75 ibid., 22
Language then socializes individuals while simultaneously obliging the individuals to remain individuals. Whereas for Husserl, the process of moving from the individual 'I' to intersubjectivity appears a perhaps insurmountable problem, Habermas on the other hand, by drawing from Mead's philosophy, is able to solve this problem. Individuality and intersubjectivity are not the result of some genetic tendency. Instead, both are posited by language. Subjects become true individuals only by participating in and being shaped by a particular language community 'in an intersubjectively divided life world.' For Habermas, "in communicative educational processes, the identity of both the individual and the collective forms preserves itself simultaneously." And furthermore, "the system of personal pronouns provides an unrelenting compulsion toward individualization that is built into communicatively oriented language use; through the same medium of everyday speech, socializing intersubjectivity appears simultaneously."\[78\]

Mead explains this two-fold process in greater depth:

In the process of communication, the individual is another before he become himself. By addressing himself in the role of another, he experiences himself as self. The development of organized group

\[76\] ibid.

\[77\] ibid., 23

\[78\] ibid.
activities in human society -and the development of the organized game out of simple play in the experience of a child -provided the individual with a variety of different roles inasmuch as they were parts of social action and precisely out of the organization of these roles into a collective action the characteristic common to all of them appeared: they showed the individual what he had to do. The individual can now take a position for himself as "generalized other" in the attitude of the group or community. With this ability, the individual has become a definitive "self" relative to the social whole to which it belongs.79

Thus, the concept of the life-world proves an integral part of Habermas's theory of communicative reason and action.

On systems

Systems, for Habermas, broadly represent the outcome of the shift of "functions of material reproduction" of the lifeworld to "formally organized subsystems such as the market and the law".80 This is a further consequent of language's modern tendency to formalize itself, making explicit that which had hitherto been only implicit. Out of communication, specialized tasks emerge and are coordinated. Such coordination requires experts who decide, on the basis of expert authority, how specialized tasks ought to be coordinated. "Hence there is the danger that such systematic mechanisms may become detached from the life-

80 Duvenage, ibid., 57
world and steered by strategic action - for example, the exchange principle of the market economy and the institutionalization of political power and bureaucracy of the modern state.” More specifically, such systematization of the lifeworld allows for the possibility of non-linguistic media, such as money and power, to separate actions from validity claims, hence neutralizing the ‘requirements for communication and consensus in the life-world’, thwarting thereby, the communicative coordination of action. Indeed, as Habermas writes, “formally organized domains of action emerge that - in the final analysis - are no longer integrated through the mechanism of mutual understanding, that sheer off from lifeworld contexts and congeal into a kind of norm-free society.” This, of course, is the danger of cognitive-instrumental rationality. However, unlike Adorno and Horkheimer, Habermas maintains that this danger is not intrinsic to instrumental rationality per se. Rather, the danger of instrumental rationality is when it is generalized. That is, instrumental rationality becomes a danger to the lifeworld insofar as it goes unchecked. The colonization of the lifeworld by monetary and bureaucratic mechanisms, can indeed bankrupt the process of communicatively coordinating action, but it is not necessary that it does so. Habermas holds out hope for new social movements, such as the ‘ecological, anti-nuclear,}

81 ibid.

82 Habermas, Jurgen, Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. II, p. 307 (as quoted in Duvenage, p. 57)
feminist and liberation movements’ to ‘address the paradox that systems also need communication’. The point is not to “develop and institutionalize the different dimensions of reason (with its objective, normative and expressive moments) in a balanced way.” Social movements are, for Habermas, a way to keep cognitive-instrumental reason in check, since they evidence the necessity of subscribing to communicative reason.

Implications of the Theory of Communicative Action for Aesthetics

Habermas’s theory of communicative action contributes to the ultimate fate of aesthetics in his philosophy.

As previously noted, Habermas situates the claim to sincerity within the subjective world. Such a claim, or aesthetic speech-act, is distinct from the other kinds of speech-acts, however. This is because, unlike the speech-acts peculiar to the objective and social worlds, aesthetic speech-acts cannot be validated by making appeal to facts or theories. Rather, the sincerity of speech-acts can be validated only by reference to the subjective experiences of those involved in the claim; they cannot be tested directly through rational argumentation. And

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83 Duvenage, ibid., 58
accordingly, Habermas states that aesthetic speech-acts “raise no clear-cut validity claim”. They cannot be submitted to the process of critique and justification that characterizes intersubjective dialogue characteristic of moral-practical rationality and the will to understanding and consensus. Because participants cannot make appeals to facts, and/or theories in order to effectively argue a point, they are barred from true rational discursiveness. However, claims to sincerity are nevertheless speech-acts, albeit confusing ones at that. Indeed, all expressive-aesthetic speech-acts are both discursive invitations and invitations rescinded at the same time; they invite discursive participants and yet they are not discursively redeemable. As we shall see below and in the following chapters, this contradiction resolves itself when the culture of art experts, which is separated off from the lifeworld, becomes mediated intersubjectively and so able to be reintegrated into the lifeworld.

As was noted in the discussion on his *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas considers the transition from feudal to bourgeois society an important historical moment in art. It is the moment when art first began to be thought of as autonomous, since concepts such as the ‘beautiful’, the ‘sublime’, and the ‘picturesque’ are made possible by a separation from the evaluation of art in terms solely of either

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functionality or desire. As shown above, throughout the formulation of his communicative theory, Habermas emphasizes a theory of societal rationalization and the separation of cultural spheres such a theory entails. Hence, he does not fully abandon the consideration of the historical dimension of aesthetics qua cultural sphere. “Aesthetics, like science and law, acquired its own claim to validity -with its own inner logic, learning process and Eigensinn (meaning), leading to different functional action system.” The arrival then of art as its own modern cultural sphere brought with it the optimism characteristic of other bona fide Enlightenment disciplines. Indeed, Condorcet expected autonomous art to reach a moment when it “could fully control natural forces, interpret the world and the self, enhance moral progress, expand fair institutions, and increase human happiness.” Needless to say, no moment ever arrived. And as also noted in Habermas’s argument from the Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere, such Enlightenment optimism becomes suspect. This skeptical moment coincides with the rise of commodity capitalism, and the modern, cultural sphere of autonomous art is undermined by certain developments in technology. This historical moment signals then the beginning of the crisis of autonomous art. This crisis is characterized by the destruction of the artwork’s aura, its

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85 Duvenage, ibid., 62
86 ibid.
allegorical function, and ultimately the meaning of the organic artwork as a whole. As discussed previously, this destruction reflects, if not contributes to, changes within society overall. Art become popular is able to galvanize masses perhaps, or it can supply a cathartic experience; at the very least, it is certainly capable of entertaining them. Habermas, like Benjamin, and therefore unlike Adorno, approves of the new artistic media made available by technological innovation. Wellmer, writing on this very point, states,

Under the impact of technology, art becomes a vaccine against those collective psychoses in which the enormous tensions that technological innovations generate in mass populations would otherwise vent themselves ... it appears to me that Benjamin's analysis at least points towards a positive potential in modern mass culture -from film to rock music -which Adorno was unable to see because of his traditionalism and his theoretical preconceptions. 87

Again, we see a Habermas who sides with Benjamin. However, Habermas does go on to criticize the Surrealist rebellion, which he understands as having failed due to the following reasons: In the first place, the Surrealists propose the breaking open of the autonomous cultural sphere of art, so that its content spills into reality, admixing with the content of reality. The content admixed is at once both art and life and there is therefore a blurring of what had before been a clear distinction between the two. Indeed, were the Surrealist rebellion to succeed, this would

imply the negation of “the difference between art and life -fiction and praxis, appearance and reality -so that everything is art and everyone an artist.”

For Habermas, such a breaking open of an cultural sphere means the loss of its content, entailing in turn the loss of its emancipatory potential. He writes,

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\text{[E]veryday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another. Communication processes need a cultural tradition covering all spheres -cognitive, moral-practical and expressive. A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment by breaking open a single cultural sphere -art -and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes. The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction.}
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It is clear then that on the one hand, Habermas views the potential of popular art in a favorable light, while nevertheless, on the other hand, cautioning against potential abuses, notably those attributed to the Surrealist rebellion and to Fascist aesthetics.

Because Habermas acknowledges that technology has transformed the artist, the artwork, and its audience, he also acknowledges that the traditional concept of autonomous art has also been transformed. Most importantly however, he nevertheless wants to defend “the validity claims

\[88 \text{ Duvenage, ibid., 63}\]

of autonomous aesthetics against those of popular art. This is due to the retention of the ‘culture of experts’ particular to autonomous aesthetics.

Wellmer writes,

[1]t is not clear why a change in the function of art that is related to a democratic opening-up of society should exclude the idea of the great work of art. The opposite seems to me to be the case: without the paradigmatic productions of ‘great’ art, in which the imagination, the accumulated knowledge and the skill of obsessively specialized artists is objectified, a democratically generalized aesthetic production would presumably decline into an amateur arts-and-craftism.

In other words, just because popular art is popular does not entail the inability of an expert to positively evaluate it; popular art does not preclude standards, or criteria, which are no more than the prevailing body of norms particular to the art community. Such criteria are arrived at via critical discourses involving artists, expert critics, students and the surrounding, informed public. Drawing from the social repository of established criteria, we can apply them to the artwork and thereby evaluate it. It is indeed legitimate for Habermas to ask whether or not an artwork is valid. “Against this background his proposal can be read as a mediation between elements of Adorno’s normative and autonomous aesthetics, on the one hand, and the radical integration of art and life as advocated by the avant-garde and Surrealism, on the other.”

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90 Duvenage, ibid.

91 Wellmer, ibid., 3

92 ibid.
It is clear then that Habermas opposes the extremes of both mass and autonomous art movements. He opposes the overall collapse of the three world ontology, or the de-differentiation of categories, which both extremes can entail. Indeed, he “polemicizes against both a false Aufhebung of art (mass art) and an aestheticization of the life-world (autonomous art).”\(^\text{93}\) The upshot of his critique of both forms of art is that they both, in falsely totalizing or aestheticizing the life world, preclude the possibility for a discursively mediated interface of art and the lifeworld. And Habermas, of course, wants to hold out for such a possibility, which necessarily requires the full differentiation of forms of knowledge and categories in the first place. There is in fact for Habermas something like aesthetic truth, albeit mediated by intersubjectivity. And for him, this truth is able to reach “into our cognitive interpretations and normative expectations and transforms the totality in which these moments are related to each other. In this respect modern art harbors a utopia that becomes a reality to the degree that the mimetic powers sublimated in the work of art find resonance in the mimetic relations of a balanced and undistorted intersubjectivity of everyday life.”\(^\text{94}\) Habermas thus situates art within a process of intersubjective reintegration, rendering expressive-

\(^{93}\) ibid.

aesthetic speech acts discursively redeemable, albeit indirectly so. In this way, he avoids having to characterize artworks according to the 'strict distinction between high and low art'. High art, for Habermas, participates willy-nilly in the social world; autonomous artworks are always already commodities, or legal objects, or objects of social discourse. Situated in intersubjectivity, autonomous art no longer excludes social systems and therefore no longer runs the danger of aestheticizing the lifeworld. It becomes Habermas's hope that the presence of social systems does not endanger the possibility of mediated aesthetic truths, which it does if, as mentioned previously, cognitive-instrumental reason and strategic action are not kept in check and in balance. For Habermas, aesthetic experiences must "enable us to live in a world of social as well as cultural differentiation that is not dissolved in a discredited subject-central rationality or an ecstatic community of subjectless heterogeneity and endless differance." Instead, aesthetic experience must exist within the (communicatively) rational discourse of intersubjectivity, if it is to exist at all.

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95 Duvenage, ibid., 66
Chapter 5

HABERMAS ON MODERNITY

Two case studies: Schiller and Hegel

In his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas discusses his own aesthetics as they relate to the positions of Schiller and Hegel. As we shall see, both positions reinforce his own, viz. that aesthetic experience must be situated within and mediated by intersubjective discourse.

Habermas inherits much of Kantian ontology and Kant’s account of the conditions for aesthetic experiences are no exception. For Habermas, Kant combines the senses with a disinterested reason to account for the emergence of “taste”. Taste then for Kant is not *a priori* but is rather cultivated *via* “education and the critical discussion of values in the public sphere.”96 And for Habermas, Schiller follows suit since his aesthetics ought to be interpreted in terms of “a natural mimetic drive (*Strofftrieb*) and a rational reflexive drive (*Formtrieb*) being communicatively mediated in a play drive of public art (*Spieltrieb*).”97 As with Habermas’s own aesthetics, Schiller’s avoids the de-differentiation of

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96 Duvenage, *ibid.*, 66

97 *ibid.*
knowledge categories and learning processes, on the one hand, while also avoiding the aestheticization of the lifeworld, on the other. When artworks are situated within intersubjectivity, they can be evaluated intersubjectively. And in the intersubjective evaluation of artworks, the social desires, wants, impulses, etc. are posited, and thereby enter into a 'public sphere of (communicatively) rational debate and communication.'

According to Habermas, Kant did not problematize the differentiation of reason into different cultural spheres and knowledge categories. Hegel did do so, however, in his 'discourse of rational synthesis.' Indeed, it is the negative consequences of the differentiation of modern reason that Hegel concerns himself with in his meta-project of absolute reconciliation. Differentiation is for Hegel the cause of the various dichotomies his philosophy seeks to overcome, viz. "theoretical and practical reason, knowledge and faith, judgement and imagination". Strikingly similar here is the parallel between the evolution of Hegel’s aesthetic position and Habermas’s own. This last objective of Hegel, to preserve the project of modernity while nevertheless overcoming the dichotomies it itself occasions, was arrived at only at the end of his career. Like Habermas’s own, the first phase of Hegel’s career treats art in terms of its public function.

In his Early Theological Writings, Hegel defends a ‘national religion’ which is responsible for mediating the ‘expressive-emotional and the rational’. In contrast to the rather abstract nature of Enlightenment,
Hegel sees established religion as a positive, concrete structure which is powerful enough to bring pre-modern life forms and modern ones in reconciliation. Needless to say then, Hegel at least here falls in step with the Romantics. In his second phase, Hegel sees art as the means whereby a differentiated modernity can be reconciled, or unified again. And finally, in the later phases of his career, he completely abandons these aesthetic arguments in favor of interpreting modernity as a dialectic.

This dialectic process which accounts for the progressive differentiation and yet reconciliation of the different spheres of modernity may be broadly characterized as the process whereby the mind takes itself (practically) as distinct from nature in order to investigate and eventually understand itself (theoretically). In other words, the dialectic of modernity is the process whereby the subject objectifies itself in order to understand itself subjectively. Art, like religion and philosophy, represents only steps along modernity's evolution towards knowledge acquisition; they “represent various levels of how truth and the objective/subjective unity of reason can be known.”

Reason thusly is responsible for the reconciliation of the objective and subjective dimensions of reality; reason employed avoids gross subjectivism. Indeed, “rationality is thus a positive power of self-objectification, whereby particular motives and natural feelings make their way under universal

98 ibid., 67
moral laws." It is evident then that, not unlike the case with Habermas, the importance of art’s role is significantly mitigated in Hegel’s later career. Interestingly, Habermas explicitly points out that Hegel preferred Romantic art over Classical art and that this, according to Duvenage, is because “Romantic art necessitates the transcendence of the sensual art medium in the direction of philosophical reconciliation, whereas Classical art stresses the unparalleled beauty and aesthetic harmony of art with the world.” Like Habermas then, Hegel wants to make sure that art and aesthetic experience are kept in check by reason. Of course, the difference between the two is the emphasis on distinct breeds of reason, i.e. whether the speculative reason of Hegel, or the communicative reason of Habermas.

Indeed, although the career of Hegel and Habermas share some commonalities, Habermas is quick to dissociate his concept of reason based on communicative intersubjectivity from Hegel’s concept of reason based on a ‘self-objectifying subjectivity.’ Hegel’s concept is unable to truly function as a mediator within modernity since it cannot participate in ‘actual world processes’. These only occur, for Habermas, within the non-objectified social world. The unity of reason then does not take place within a subject, but among subjects who participate in everyday

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99 ibid.

100 ibid.
communicative praxis. Everyday participants then can collectively unify reason via the mediation that marks undistorted intersubjective discourse. According to Habermas, this process is an intuitive one for humans; it does not require speculative abstraction. As Duvenage writes, Habermas cautions that “a philosophy that wants to bring this intuition to a conceptual level must consequently reconstruct the diffused tracks of reason in communicative practice without getting trapped in a discredited theoretical image of the world as a whole.”

Habermas’s “Modernity versus Postmodernity”

In 1980, Habermas was awarded the Theodor W. Adorno prize from the city of Frankfurt. In reception he gave a paper entitled, “Modernity versus Postmodernity”. Because it refers to aesthetic categories and the potential role they might play in the emancipatory project of the Enlightenment, it is important for the purposes of this thesis to briefly outline this paper.

At the outset of “Modernity versus Postmodernity”, Habermas describes the emotional landscape of the times to be a result of

postmodernity, which has evidently announced itself as antimodernity. Yet to clarify why this is so, he begins by clarifying the term ‘modern’. Historically, the term ‘modern’ has been employed by those epochal European generations which defined themselves anew in relation to the ancients. However, the French Enlightenment signaled a new use of the term, which was more forward-looking, corresponding more appropriately to its expectation of infinite progress in science and knowledge. This term however did not become a fixed concept. Indeed, with 19th century Romanticism, the concept of modernity becomes profoundly ahistorical. And it is this aesthetic modernity of which we are inheritors. What, for example, marks modern artworks as modern is their moment of novelty. Needless to say, particular moments of novelty are overcome by time, in order to make room for new moments of novelty. But, for Habermas, all truly modern artworks become classics, not in virtue of a relationship to past generation, but in relationship to their own. That is, “the emphatically modern document no longer borrows this power of being a classic from the authority of a past epoch; instead, a modern work becomes a classic because it has once been authentically modern.”

Our own notion of modernity generates and arbitrates its own classics. Hence, “the relation between ‘modern’ and ‘classical’ has definitely lost a fixed

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102 Habermas, “Modernity vs. Postmodernity”, p. 269
historical reference.” 103 And this temporal ambiguity is the consequence of the changed time-consciousness that characterizes aesthetic modernity.

Aesthetic modernity, which roughly begins with Baudelaire and reaches its zenith with Dadaism and Surrealism, changes the temporal landscape in its emphasis on the present. By teasing out the new from the always-the-same, it is apparent that what is of value is not tradition itself, but as Benjamin would have it, its interruptions. As Habermas understands it, “the new value placed on the transitory, the elusive, and the ephemeral, the very celebration of dynamism, discloses the longing for an undefiled, an immaculate and stable present.” 104 It is historical reference then, that can defile the present. Indeed, “modernity revolts against the normalizing function of tradition; modernity lives on the experience of rebelling against all that is normative.” 105 This is an obvious account then for Surrealism’s tendency towards profanation. Yet, as Habermas points out, aesthetic modernity is not fully ahistorical. Rather, it appropriates history in a new way, not unlike Benjaminian criticism; it incorporates past moments charged with Jetztzeit.

By the 1970s however, aesthetic modernity appears to be taking its last breaths, and most of its critics call for its dismantling. But because

103 ibid., 269
104 ibid.
105 ibid.
Habermas retains the emancipatory potential of the Enlightenment project, he must analyze and redescribe its particular vehicle, viz. modernity itself. In doing this, Habermas abandons modernity’s traditional emphasis on art. Modernity as such is no longer aesthetic modernity, but a larger, cultural modernity rehabilitated. Accordingly, Habermas looks to Max Weber’s account of cultural modernity as “the separation of the substantive reason expressed in religion and metaphysics into three autonomous spheres. They are: science, morality and art.”106, which hitherto had been united and subsumed under religion and traditional metaphysics. But because of the demystification process that marks Weber’s modernity qua modernity, religion and traditional metaphysics experience a crisis and collapse. The substantive content of religion and metaphysics did not however disappear; “since the eighteenth century, the problems inherited from these older world-views could be rearranged so as to fall under specific aspects of validity: truth, normative rightness, authenticity and beauty.”107

As discussed previously at length, these distinct categories, or cultural dimensions, are able to appropriately address questions of knowledge, morality and aesthetics. These cultural dimensions then become institutionalized, and for the first time, expert knowledge is possible in each of these areas, which is able, in turn, to expose the rational structures

106 ibid., 272
107 ibid.
particular to each cultural dimension. For both Weber and Habermas, these are: “the structures of cognitive-instrumental, moral-practical, and of aesthetic-expressive rationality.”108 Experts of each of these domains thusly analyze and interpret the cultural domains, the contents of which are necessarily derived from the contemporaneous life-world of the larger public. However, the reintegration into the life-world of the conclusions derived from cultural analyses as such is difficult and uncommon. The result is an increasingly large division between expert knowledge on the one hand, and public, lay-knowledge on the other. And consequently, the life-world instrumentally rationalized is one culturally impoverished. But, as Habermas points out, such an impoverishment of the life-world was not the intent of eighteenth century Enlightenment philosophers.

The project of modernity formulated in the eighteenth century by the philosophers of the Enlightenment consisted in their effort to develop objective science, universal morality and law, and autonomous art, according to their inner logic. At the same time, this project intended to release the cognitive potentials of each of these domains to set them free from their esoteric forms. The Enlightenment philosophers wanted to utilize this accumulation of specialized culture for the enrichment of everyday life, that is to say, for the rational organization of everyday social life.109

The twentieth century has become exceedingly pessimistic as to the possibility for the successful realization of the Enlightenment’s humanistic intentions. Nevertheless, Habermas attempts to salvage the

108 ibid.

109 ibid., 273

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potential of the modernity project as such.

According to Habermas, the history of modern art has followed a development towards greater and greater autonomy. As is familiar by now, he situates the beginning of its autonomy with the emergence of civil society, the separation of art from its original, ritual context. The splintering off of artistic media into music, literature and fine arts leads ultimately to the aestheticist notion of art which marks the latter half of the nineteenth century. This notion is embodied in the claim of creating art for art’s sake, signaling that,

the autonomy of the aesthetic sphere could then
become a deliberate project: the talented artist could
lend authentic expression to those experiences he had
in encountering his own de-centered subjectivity,
detached from the constraints of routinized cognition
and everyday action.\footnote{ibid.}

With autonomous art, we see the loss of faith in the potential for reconciliation \textit{via} art; art retreats from the lifeworld. With surrealism however, we see the attempt to force such a reconciliation and ‘level art and life, fiction and praxis, appearance and reality to one plane’.\footnote{ibid., 274} And for Habermas, surrealism is nothing more than a ‘nonsense experiment’.\footnote{ibid} Moreover, the surrealist experiment took an unexpected, ironic end. In exploding the artistic category, and thereby bleeding its contents into the

\begin{thebibliography}{99}
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\bibitem{ibid} ibid.
\bibitem{ibid., 274} ibid., 274
\bibitem{ibid} ibid
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lifeworld, the intention was for aesthetic structures to dissolve. Instead, the experiments “gave a new legitimacy, as an end in itself, to appearance as the medium of fiction, to the transcendence of the art work over society, to the concentrated and planned character of artistic production as well as to the special cognitive status of judgments of taste.” In the negation of art, surrealists ironically justify the structures it had intended to dissolve; the object domain circumscribed by Enlightenment aesthetics still stands.

For Habermas then, the surrealist revolt failed because of two reasons. In the first place, whenever an autonomous cultural sphere is split open, its content spills out. And accordingly, “nothing remains from a desublimated meaning or a destructured form; an emancipatory effect does not follow.”113 In the second place, and most importantly,

In everyday communication, cognitive meanings, moral expectations, subjective expressions and evaluations must relate to one another. Communication processes need a cultural tradition covering all spheres -cognitive, moral-practical and expressive. A rationalized everyday life, therefore, could hardly be saved from cultural impoverishment through breaking open a single cultural sphere -art- and so providing access to just one of the specialized knowledge complexes. The surrealist revolt would have replaced only one abstraction.114

By extension, the negation of art parallels the similar negations of other spheres. Of course, since the Young Hegelians, there has been the attempt

113 ibid., 275
114 ibid.
by some to negate philosophy. For Habermas, the negation of philosophy leads to the same consequences that the negation of any specialized cultural sphere leads to, viz. the loss of emancipatory potential. As we’ve seen multiple times, Habermas calls for a balanced relationship between the different spheres and the different kinds of rationality that correspond to those spheres, where the differing spheres stand communicatively open to one another. The project of modernity can be saved only thusly. Habermas must reconstruct modernity so that it keeps potentially ‘terrorizing’ forms of reason in check, while saving in the process the emancipatory potential of the differentiated spheres.

Accordingly, Habermas also wants to salvage what remains of the emancipatory potential of modern art. Since this is only possible within a balanced intercommunicative three-world ontology, modern art must communicate with other spheres. Habermas points out that civil society required that in the appreciation of artworks, the audience member was to (1) educate himself to the level of expert and (2) ‘behave as a competent consumer who uses art and relates aesthetic experiences to his own life problems.’ Habermas wants to focus on the second of these two expectations since in the process of relating art to an individual’s life history, art intermingles with the aspects of validity corresponding to different spheres. Instead of relying exclusively on the validation process

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115 ibid., 275
specific to the aesthetic sphere, (as the aesthetic critic does), the lay audience integrates art experiences into the lifeworld, bringing it in turn into an evaluative relationship with cognitive and moral aspects of validity.

Habermas writes that,

[As soon as such an experience is used to illuminate a life-historical situation and is related to life problems, it enters into a language game which is no longer that of the aesthetic critic. The aesthetic experience then not only renews the interpretation of our needs in whose light we perceive the worlds. It permeates as well our cognitive significations and our normative expectations and changes the manner in which all these moments relate to one another.]^{116}

Habermas gives a concrete example of this position: he describes the process, undertaken by a group of laborers, of integrating European art history into their lifeworld, which had hitherto been ‘systematically distorted by the Nazis’ then in power. In order to bring this integration about, these laborers made repeated visits to art museum. Habermas writes,

These were young people, who, through an evening high school education, acquired the intellectual means to fathom the general and the social history of European art. Out of the resilient edifice of the objective mind, embodied in works of art which they saw again and again in the museums in Berlin, they started removing their own chips of stone, which they gathered together and reassembled in the context of their own milieu. This milieu was far removed from that of traditional education as well as from the then existing regime. These young workers went back and forth between the edifice of European art and their

^{116} ibid.
own milieu until they were able to illuminate both.\textsuperscript{117}

This ultimately is Habermas's position on aesthetics, as well as the greater objective of the modernity project: the knowledge of expert culture must be reappropriated by non-experts and integrated communicatively into the intersubjective lifeworld.

\textsuperscript{117} ibid., 276
Chapter 6

POSTMODERNITY CRITIQUED

The second phase of Habermas's aesthetics concretizes further in his debate with the leading proponents of postmodern thinking. Habermas's position within this debate is clearly defined in his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*. Mentioned previously, this work sees the modern discourse to have begun with Descartes and Voltaire, continuing on to the rational systems of Kant, Hegel and Fichte. In outlining this debate then, Habermas acknowledges an anti-modernity discourse, which should be understood as having begun with Nietzsche, and continuing on to Derrida, Bataille and Foucault. Specifically, Habermas sees Nietzsche as the instigator of an antimodernity project which implicates the philosophies Derrida, Bataille and Foucault in an aesthetically-informed critique of modern (instrumental) reason.\(^{118}\)

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**Habermas on Nietzsche**

Habermas associates Nietzsche with Romanticism, and specifically

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\(^{118}\) In should be noted that Habermas's readings of postmodern thinkers are questionable ones; they are of course non-appreciative ones. For a more robust analysis, the reader would do well to look to the primary sources themselves.
with the Romanticism of Schlegel. Schlegel, like Nietzsche, leaves “the possibility of a philosophical system behind to shelter in Homer’s temple of new poetry.”\textsuperscript{119} For Habermas this move is representative of the anti-Enlightenment discourse which is “a philosophically informed mythopoetics, coupled with a messianic hope.”\textsuperscript{120} This discourse proposes a look to ‘archaic sources of social integration that constitute the original state of human nature’. Habermas then writes on Schlegel that,

> Schlegel no longer understands the new mythology as rendering sensuous of reason, the becoming aesthetic of ideas that are supposed to be joined in this way with the interest of the people. Instead, only poetry that has become autonomous, that has been cleansed of associations with theoretical and practical reason, opens wide the door to the world of primordial forces of myth. Modern art alone can communicate with the archaic sources of social integration that have been sealed off within modernity. On this reading the new mythology demands of a disrupted modernity that it relate to the ‘primordial chaos’ as the other of reason.\textsuperscript{121}

Romantics in general drew allegorical inspiration from Dionysus, ‘the god of intoxication and endless forms’, but Nietzsche uses Dionysus in a novel way. For Nietzsche, Dionysus represents the ability of an intoxicated subjectivity to transcend the ‘objective boundaries of reason, social convention and action’. By becoming intoxicated the subject is able to slough off these objective boundaries and in doing so loses itself. Indeed,

\textsuperscript{119} Duvenage, ibid., 77

\textsuperscript{120} ibid.

\textsuperscript{121} Habermas, Jürgen. \textit{The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity}. Trans. Frederick Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press 1987, p. 90 (as quoted in Duvenage, p. 77)
“only when the subject loses itself, when it shrugs off pragmatic experience in space and time, when the norms of everyday life are destroyed and the illusion of normality collapses -only then is an unforeseen world disclosed: ‘the realm of aesthetic illusion, which neither hides nor reveals’.” This realm is located beyond the reach of cognitive-instrumental rationality, as well as moral-practical rationality.

Accordingly, this move of Nietzsche’s may be understood as a reaction against instrumental/practical reason, and Habermas’s critique of such a move should be obvious by now.

Since, Nietzsche does not see yet the possibility for a different breed of reason, viz., communicative reason, he takes issue with instrumental reason. In rejecting instrumental reason, Nietzsche proposes the rejection of social emancipation. That is, “Dionysian aesthetic phenomena are purified of all theoretical, practical and moral action”, which, of course, are necessary for social emancipation. In addition, Habermas holds that Nietzsche’s anti-modern aesthetics are unjustifiable. In stripping artworks of social and cognitive dimensions, Nietzsche also prohibits their evaluation; standards of aesthetic judgment derive from just those dimensions as well as the corresponding lifeworld and systems.

With Nietzsche, “aesthetic experience is carried back to an archaic past,

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122 ibid., pp. 93-4

123 Duvenage, ibid., 77
and the critical ability to appreciate art is severed from rational argumentation or a procedural rationality."^{124}

**Habermas on Derrida**

Derrida’s poststructural linguistic theory offers yet another example of the anti-modern discourse. Derrida problematizes the relationship between signifier and signified. Whereas for Saussure, the two correspond, for Derrida, the relationship is more complex and accordingly, yields far less transparency. The presence of a word, for Derrida, brings with it the presence of the traces of the absences of other words; “texts are testimonies to the non-identical."^{125} Derrida’s linguistic theory then, as contrasted with Saussure’s, takes absence into consideration in the investigation of meaning. "The similarity between Heidegger and Derrida, according to Habermas, is that both regard truth (or meaning) as a process related to disclosure and closure where each text contains its own subtext, each meaning its own nonsense, each literary construction its own deconstruction, and each identity its own

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^{124} ibid., 78

^{125} ibid., 77
In the introduction to *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida asserts his intention to deconstruct Husserl, where deconstruction should be understood as the laying open of internal contradictions of the philosophy at hand. In the analysis of Husserl’s concept of language, Derrida criticizes Husserl for understanding language as something reducible to pure ideality which separates indication from expression in the mind, therefore entailing the separability of language from the world. Here, Derrida points out that Husserl’s phenomenological reduction has already assumed too much, viz., the ideality of ideality, along with an *a priori* and purely logical grammar. Derrida holds that such assumptions directly frame any phenomenology of presencing and cannot for that reason (of facticity), put language successfully out of play, just as the “unity of living [...] escapes [any] transcendental reduction”. Indeed, if one could, and contrary to Husserl’s whole intent, it would signal the bracketing of the transcendental and worldly egos themselves, for “no language can cope with the operation by which the transcendental ego constitutes and opposes itself to its worldly self [...]”. Here, Derrida reminds us of the inescapable *living voice*, which mediates the self and the world, the very

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126 ibid. 82


128 ibid., 12
unity of life, which inevitably precludes any “originally silent, ‘pre-expressive’ stratum of experience”. A language which is to convey anything meaningful is necessarily restricted to expression, as expression alone is capable of conveying sense. Accordingly, no language can be entirely private, and logic and grammar become secondary to rhetoric.

For Derrida, language is something inextricably socio/historical; we find ourselves always already situated within language and the linguistic structure that unifies it; we do not invent it, we participate in it. We are ourselves, then, contextualized by language and linguistic structure. From the examination of linguistic structure, two main principles are uncovered, viz., the arbitrariness of signs and the exclusion of other possible signs when a particular sign is used, or in other words, differentiation. Both of these dimensions give rise to the Derridean concept of differance.

With his (ontological) claim of differance, Derrida challenges the primacy of direct language in two ways, viz., by his method of indirect articulation, as well as the exposition of the ambiguity of what is. In the first place, Derrida attempts to articulate a concept that is neither a concept nor a word, as differance cannot be said to even exist. Because it does not exist, it is impossible to speak of differance, directly. Instead, he resorts to indirect speech, where through a ‘graphic intervention’, which

129 ibid., 15
corrects a ‘gross spelling mistake’, turning an e into an a, he gestures towards the origin of the differences of the verb to differ, i.e., differance itself, which alone is capable of subsuming both differences, viz., spacing/temporalizing as well as the signification of nonidentity. By correcting a spelling mistake then, Derrida’s intent is to “aggravate its obtrusive character”, so that what is invisible becomes more apparent\textsuperscript{[130]}. Derrida’s differance, similar to Saussure’s concept of difference, is itself the condition for the possibility of language, as language relies heavily on non-phonetic signs. But more than Saussure’s claim, Derrida’s differance is itself the “possibility of conceptuality, of the conceptual system in general”; conceptual meaning exists only to the exclusion of other signs and arises only in the spaces between signs, and these empty, yet also pregnant, spaces are themselves conventionally derived\textsuperscript{[131]}. Because conceptual identity is derived from differentiation, concepts themselves are not self-identical. In conceiving language as such, Derrida signals “that a certain period of metaphysical thought has come to a close”\textsuperscript{[132]}. Indeed, for Derrida, the very nonexistence of differance as nonidentity rejects the Platonic notion of timeless Ideas. We see then, that for Derrida, any ontological claim, such is differance, is only possible through

\textsuperscript{130} ibid., 131
\textsuperscript{131} ibid., 140
\textsuperscript{132} ibid, xl
indirect language, as no language is ever direct.

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Habermas on Derrida writes, “even before it makes its appearance, every text and every particular genre has already lost its autonomy to an all devouring context and an uncontrollable happening of spontaneous text production. This is the ground of the primacy of rhetoric, which is concerned with the qualities of texts in general, over logic.” The primacy of rhetoric worries Habermas of course, since it is used to criticize the specialized language of philosophy (and science) for its ‘lack of metaphor and rhetoric’. From such a critique, the proposal would be for the languages of philosophy and science to include more metaphor and rhetoric. This however contributes to an erasure of the boundaries between philosophy and science, on the one hand, and literature on the other, philosophy becomes literature, literature becomes philosophy.

Needless to say, Derrida proves yet another attempt to aestheticize reality, albeit via an aestheticization of language. Habermas critiques Derrida’s philosophy of language by making use of the general arguments of his theory of communicative action. The upshot of this critique, per Duvenage, is that “the problem with an aestheticized understanding of language, one in which rhetoric triumphs over logic, is that it

133 Habermas, Jürgen, The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity, p., 182 (as quoted in Duvenage, p. 82)
underestimates the normative implications of individualization, critical interpretation, cultural transfer, social integration and the attainment of knowledge on the basis of consensus-oriented linguistic performance." 134 Habermas contends that there is a difference between the fictive and nonfictive versions of reality on the basis of the distinction between poetic use and ordinary use of language. He quotes the literary critic Ohmann on this point,

[A] literary work creates a world … by providing the reader with impaired and incomplete speech act which he completes by supplying the appropriate circumstances … A literary work is a discourse whose sentences lack the illocutionary forces that would normally attach to them. Its illocutionary force is mimetic … Specifically, a literary work purportedly imitates a series of speech acts, which in fact have no other existence. By doing so, it leads the reader to imagine a speaker, a situation, a set of ancillary events. 135

The position conveyed in this quote, and shared by Habermas, looks similar to the account of the rise of the literary public sphere from Habermas’s earlier writings. Readers are indeed capable of empathizing with the fictive characters of novels, and this of course is a valuable capacity. However, Habermas points out that the readers remain readers; they do not confuse themselves with the characters themselves, or take them to be truly real. Consequently, the characters of novels have no

134 Duvenage, ibid., 83

135 Habermas, ibid., p. 201 (as quoted in Duvenage, 83)
claim on us. And likewise, we cannot respond to them critically. Indeed, readers cannot have a intersubjective critical dialogue with fictive characters. Poetic language is distinct from everyday language then, in the same way that fictive reality is distinct from that of the lifeworld.

Habermas explores this point further in his essay on the novelist Italo Calvino. Specifically, Habermas contrasts speech-acts in the context of intersubjective communication with those present in literary texts. The claims made by speech-acts in the former mode function as calls to action; they possess value magnetism. The claims automatically involve all participants, those speaking and those listening. In literature, no value magnetism, no motivation for action is conveyed to the reader by speech-acts. Rather, such claims only possess a ‘binding force’ for the other characters in the novel. Therefore, and most importantly, “the transfer of validity in this context is interrupted at the boundaries of the text; it does not extend, via communicative relations, all the way down to the reader.”

Hence, Habermas not only understands texts as having boundaries, but they have boundaries that cannot, and ought not, be transcended.

In short, Habermas is critical of Derrida for not accounting for “the tension between the world-disclosing or poetical function of language, on the one hand, and the prosaic, inner world character or literal function of

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136 Duvenage, ibid., 84
language, on the other.” Derrida bleeds the boundaries between the two, and like Nietzsche, explodes the aesthetic sphere and overwhmms in turn the three-world differentiated ontology. Also, in abandoning the differentiation between expert culture and everyday culture, Derrida abandons both philosophy and literary criticism, since for Habermas, both philosophy and literary criticism are predicated on expert and everyday cultures in the first place.

According to Habermas, literary criticism, which since the eighteenth century has figured as an autonomous discipline in Europe, represents a “specialized, differentiated discourse of taste—a tradition which judges literary texts by criteria such as ‘artistic truth’, aesthetic harmony, exemplary validity, innovative force and authenticity.”

Habermas therefore understands literary criticism as tied to the sciences (in its reliance on logic) to have theoretical and practical import. Although it is a discipline constituted by experts, it nevertheless avoids esotericism, as it is necessarily mediated by the everyday lifeworld.

Aesthetic criticism in general functions just so. It mediates between artworks and the everyday lifeworld. As Duvenage writes,

[Aesthetic criticism] mediates between the experimental content of a work of art and ordinary langue use. The communicative function of a language act does not remove fictive elements from life practices. The world-disclosing function of literary language use is not totally independent of

137 ibid., 85

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This indicates then that for Habermas, philosophy and aesthetic criticism have the ability to stand in as mediator between the expert culture and the everyday one; between the content specific to one validity dimension and the translation of that content to the everyday lifeworld in which all linguistic functions and aspects of validity are interwoven. As mediators, both philosophy and criticism stand equipped with a specialized expert language on the one hand, and the rhetorical and metaphorical devices necessary for translation, on the other. Nevertheless, these devices are always controlled, always under the watchful eye of (communicative) reason; they never make philosophy literature for example, as this would cancel out the objectives of both endeavors.

Habermas on Bataille and Foucault

Like Nietzsche and Derrida, both Bataille and Foucault join the anti-modern assault on (instrumental) reason as well. However, Bataille and Foucault are both methodologically distinct from the other thinkers as they rely on an ‘empirical-anthropological’ approach, or genealogy. The

138 ibid.
task of their approach is to lay naked the monological, Nietzschean 'will to power' entrapped within (instrumental) reason.

Bataille's genetico-critico approach leads him to conclude that, since the beginning of civilization, social structures and societal taboos regarding the 'sovereign surplus of nature', e.g. sex and death, are coeval, and to an extent, inextricably bound-up with one another. In order to preserve themselves successfully, social systems remove this surplus *via* the construction of taboos. 'World religions, for example, removed the erotic, destructive and ambiguous dimensions of society in a prescriptive manner.' This allowed instrumental reason to rationalize life to a disastrous proportion, resulting in the well known 'catastrophic forms of wasted consumption - war, civil violence and environmental destruction'.

Bataille holds that the only way for modernity to curtail devastation as such is for reason to realize a relationship with 'the sovereign surplus of nature.'

Bataille, like Nietzsche then, rejects rational form in order to reconcile humans with their primordial nature, in order to grasp the 'other of reason' which lies beyond cognition and manipulation. Accordingly, Bataille is seen to aestheticize life. Habermas writes that,

[In this concept, Bataille condensed the basic experience of the surrealist writers and artists who wanted shockingly to proclaim the ecstatic forces of intoxication, of dreamlife, of the instinctive and impulse generally, against the imperatives of utility, normality, and sobriety, in order to shake up conventionally set modes of perception and]
For Habermas, Bataille makes mistakes such as these because he is ignorant of communicative reason. Moreover, he is ignorant of its ability to hold different kinds of rationality in balance with each other, as well as its ability to 'integrate disparate elements in a systematic way'.

According to Habermas, Foucault, like Bataille, adopts, in his earlier writings, the assumption that modern social systems and institutions reflect a rational and instrumental embodiment of Nietzsche's 'will to power'. This embodiment comes to dominate society, nature and the individual. In addition, Foucault's genealogical method uncovers the source of the various achievements of (instrumental) reason in the struggle of systems to power. That is, the notions of justice, of truth, of validity, of freedom, and of logic itself, are to be seen as derivative of the 'violent arbitrariness of power' struggles'. Since this is the case, discourse and its general parameters serve regulative functions for the dominant system at hand. Utilizing his method, Foucault aims to 'go beyond the façade of scientific universality and objectivity in order to counter the ever growing proliferation of modern techniques and manipulative practices such as detention strategies, behaviour conditioning, statistical measurement, classification and controlled therapy, which are extended by modern

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139 Habermas, ibid., 212 (as quoted in Duvenage, p. 86)
Habermas concludes, of course, that Foucault makes many of the same mistakes that other postmodern thinkers make in the attempt to effect a ‘totalizing critique’ of reason. With Foucault, however, Habermas takes issue with what is a performative contradiction in his methodological approach and its aim. Indeed, Foucault cannot avoid making use of (moral-practical) rationality in order to perform its ‘totalizing critique’. Specifically, he uses the normative concepts of ‘domination’ and ‘oppression’ critically, in order to participate in the ‘discourse of civil liberties and democratic reforms.’ Ultimately though, for Habermas, Foucault’s ‘totalizing critique’ fails to acknowledge the ambiguity of modernity, i.e. that it is constituted by both achievements and failures; it is not constituted solely out of failures. Like Derrida’s own critique, Foucault’s leads to the genre collapse between philosophy and literature. Again, such critiques are unsuccessful ones because they deny the existence of communicative reason.

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140 Habermas, ibid., 271 (as quoted in Duvenage, p. 87)
Chapter 7
AESTHETICS RECONSTRUCTED

Conclusion

The focus of this thesis has been Habermas's position on aesthetics. Because there is such a lack of writings on aesthetics, it was necessary to construct his position based on his writings on other topics for the most part. We looked at his career as divided into two phases on this topic. In considering the first phase of his aesthetics, we briefly outlined the main argument of his debut book, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he describes the historical evolution of the public sphere. In this account, he gives a great deal of importance to the literary public sphere which precedes and gives rise to the modern, bourgeois public sphere. Artworks are seen by Habermas here to play an invaluable and critical role in the historical evolution of world differentiation. And although the second half of the *Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* paints a bleaker picture of the fate of this evolution, reminiscent of the bleak pictures painted by Adorno and Horkheimer, he nevertheless retains the hope for a rationally successful public sphere. This emphasis on the public sphere leads Habermas in the 1960s and 1970s to construct a theory of rationality based on public communication.

It is during this time of transition that Habermas writes his
Benjamin essay, in which he indicates his preference for a Benjaminian aesthetics, over and against the positions of both Marcuse and Adorno. Specifically, Habermas agrees with Benjamin that aesthetics should stand "communicatively open to public reason giving." Since it is the last thing he writes before the explicit formulation of his communicative action theory, Habermas's Benjamin essay signals the end of the first phase of his position on aesthetics.

The second phase, as we considered it, begins with his Theory of Communicative Action, in which any considerations of aesthetics follow from Habermas's linguistic turn. In this work, Habermas develops a theory of argumentation which is based on the 'differentiation of worlds and forms of rationality'. Within this theory, aesthetics is relegated to a relatively ineffectual place since aesthetic claims are not (directly) discursively redeemable; rather, they must be translated into language in order to participate in an intersubjective discourse. He then links his theory of argumentation to a theory of societal rationalization. This second theory acknowledges the value of art more than the former theory in that art here is understood to be its own differentiated modern cultural sphere with its own specialized learning processes. According to Habermas, these learning processes surround two main aesthetic positions: autonomous art and mass art. Autonomous art has the objective of

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141 Duvenage, ibid., 73
reconciling humans and nature, but in the process, runs the risk of aestheticizing the lifeworld. Mass art, on the other hand, also seeks a reconciliation but one between itself and society via technological innovations. Mass art therefore runs the risk of over systematizing the lifeworld to exhaustion, since instrumental reason and strategic action are its means of reconciliation. Habermas views both to be falsely dichotomized, and he attempts to overcome this.

In the place of both alternatives, Habermas sees the potential of a reconciliation that avoids the aforementioned dangers. Art must be acknowledged as belonging, not on the other side of reason or tightly locked away from the public, but to the lifeworld and systems. In order for reconciliation to occur, in order for art to have truly emancipatory potential, art as its own cultural sphere must stand communicatively open to the other spheres derived from a ‘modern differentiated reason.’ It must do this since it must conform to (communicative) rational discursiveness. As noted above, for art to exist successfully, it must in the end be situated within intersubjectivity. In order to situate aesthetics as so, aesthetic claims, which as noted above are otherwise not discursively redeemable, must be translated into claims which are.

The second phase of Habermas’s position on aesthetics continues with his reconstruction of the discourse on modernity and postmodernity. This position is also his present position on the matter. In his *Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, Habermas critically assesses the
anti-Enlightenment, anti-modernity discourse characteristic of postmodern thinkers, viz. Nietzsche (as the instigator), Derrida, Bataille and Foucault. All of these thinkers, for Habermas, utilize a radicalized aesthetic experience as the main tool in effecting a totalizing critique of modern reason. The critical assessment of these thinkers is only a further concretizing of the major themes developed in his *Theory of Communicative Action*. Indeed the main concern of Habermas is the retention of criticizable validity claims within language. On the basis of these very claims, which are present in any example of everyday communication, the differentiation of learning processes occurs. Because of the rational components to language, the world itself becomes (communicatively) rationalized *via* differentiated learning processes (which nevertheless stand communicatively open to one another); language creates the difference between the learning processes of philosophy, science, law and art, for example. Postmodern thinkers, like Derrida, effect an aestheticization of language, leveling the genre distinctions between, say, philosophy and literature, and thereby effect an aestheticization of life.

Habermas’s own theory of communicative action stands as an alternative to postmodern philosophies. The totalizing critique of reason, performed by a radicalized aesthetic experience, was not an inevitable move for critics of instrumental reason. Indeed, for Habermas, it is the result only of an instrumental reason gone unchecked and believed thereby
to be anything but salutary for humanity. Moreover, it is the result of not having an alternative form of reason, viz. communicative reason.

Consequently, Nietzsche and the postmoderns prefer the 'singular', the 'particular', the 'exceptional', and the 'other', over and against the 'plural', the 'universal', the 'ordinary', and the 'self-identical'. As noted above, Habermas views all of these as false dichotomies. Modernity certainly has had its share of disasters, and Habermas, growing up in Nazi Germany, is no stranger to the dangers of instrumental reason and strategic action. But modernity has many successes, which for Habermas, ought not be condemned along with the condemnation of instrumental reason.

In a critique of radical versions of feminism, John Dryzek has written something worth quoting for our purposes,

Enlightenment does have a dark side, in the form of instrumental reason in the service of anthropocentric arrogance, underwriting uncontrolled economic growth, oblivious to the constraints imposed by the natural world, and to the damage done to the conviviality in the social world. The brighter side of the Enlightenment involves hostility to unquestioned hierarchy, a corresponding commitment to equality (at least among humans), basic human rights, and the possibility of free dialogue as the essence of rational social relationships. For Enlightenment is also a matter of open-ended and critical questioning of values, principles, and ways of life - which opens the door to critical ecological questioning.¹⁴²

It is thus apparent that to rob human consciousness of these Enlightenment

ideals is much to its detriment. Indeed, doing so would inevitably lead to the replacement of rational accounts with mythic ones, the epistemological blurring of truth and falsehood, and the overall inability to foster social critical thinking and reflexive learning. And this is Habermas’s whole point. Rejecting modernity is tantamount to rejecting the whole of it. Rejecting the whole of a differentiated rationality, then, is tantamount to rejecting the differentiation of the world and its learning process. In effect then, we de-differentiate the world; the three-world ontology collapses into one. The differentiated cultural spheres bleed into one another, their learning processes blurred. In rejecting modernity, we invariably reject philosophy and aesthetic criticism.

Perhaps surprisingly, we have found that in reconstructing the philosophical modernity, not only does Habermas save differentiated reason via the communicative alternative, he also saves art.
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