



BANK



ART PROMOTIONS
PRESENT

COCAINE ORGASM

...An idealization makes life poorer. To beautify is to take away its character of complexity - it is to destroy it. Leave that to the moralists, my boy. History is made by men, but they do not make it in their heads. The ideas that are born in their consciousness play an insignificant part in the march of events. History is dominated by the tool and the production - by the force of economic conditions. Capitalism has made socialism, and the laws made by the Capitalist for the protection of property are responsible for anarchism. No one can tell what form the social organization may take in the future. Then why indulge in prophetic phantasies? At best they can only interpret the mind of the prophet, and can have no objective value. Leave that pastime to the moralists my boy.

With this speech by Michaelis, Joseph Conrad begins the third chapter of his novel, 'The Secret Agent'.

To take this speech at face value, what becomes immediately apparent, in a starkly-lit clarity, is that the character Michaelis has never read even the basic writings of the French Philosopher, Louis Althusser.

In his attempts to demonstrate the differences between Marx's materialist dialectic and Hegel's idealisations, Althusser rejected the domination of the cultural superstructure by the economic base. The relationship of the base and superstructure is generally formulated by other thinkers in one of two ways- Althusser dismissed them both. Firstly it is usually assumed from speeches like the one above that there is a 'linear causality' in effect: two discreet structures at work, the first directly operating upon the second, that is to say, the economic affecting the cultural. Alternatively, and secondly, there is often held to be an 'expressive causality' at stake. This is the treatment of the economy as constituting the essence of the social whole. In this second reading the cultural superstructure appears as merely different expressions of the inner economic reality and the two are inextricably linked and share the same structural formation.

Althusser argues against both of these concepts since they are, according to him, essentially reductionist. He maintains instead that all social formations are made up by a multiplicity of practices. This multiple character is always to be found in theoretical, political and ideological formulations. It is an always already presence when dealing with politics, theory or ideology, it cannot be collapsed into a single economic comprehension.

With this position Althusser was able to posit the autonomy of theoretical science - the super-science - and by implication the other kinds of sciences too. This widening of the possibilities for practices and meanings, established through Althusser's manoeuvres, allowed an escape from the reductionist critiques that had sought to establish a split between Bourgeois and proletarian sciences, between 'Bourgeois' and 'proletarian' physics and genetics.

It should be added, of course, that Althusser never tried to suggest that the economic and the cultural were independent, or unlinked; instead, according to him, there was actually a Freudian link between the two. An overdetermination then always takes place, and although the economic determines in the last instance, it is through an indirect determination.

This is because every formation possesses a structure of dominance; the one practice which is to become dominant, from within the multiplicity that are present, is the choice of the economic. There is no simple 'knock on effect' and determination is conducted through the economic in concert with the other irreducible factors of the political, theoretical and ideological. (Contradiction and Overdetermination, 1962.)

All this allowed for the play of a relative autonomy for theoretical discourse. Althusser had had problems relating the position of his own text - was it science or theory? How could it remain outside social practices? etc. His own breaking point was to come much later, but at this juncture he broke with classical Marxist scholars by declaring that all human beings always live under a condition of mystification in relation to themselves, each other and consequently to the world. Althusser went even further: he stated that, necessarily, all human societies live under the condition of an ideological relationship to the world, even if they were to find themselves in a future Communist Utopia.

This was enough to earn him some real enemies and he was often called on to account for his views in important discussions and meetings. He never really attended any of these debates, and when he was called on to answer for something serious, he was fortunate enough to find that the ideological state apparatus had actually taken his side and protected him from the harsh judgements of the law.

It is easy to see from all this that the quest for a little autonomy can lead to real trouble, even when conducted by a radical thinker. Some have gone on from questions like this one to suggest that on hi-jacking and lashing the Hegelian three-parter to the material fence, Karl Marx himself had inadvertently left the gate open to autonomy. More worryingly, this had also let aesthetics slip in too. So when writing off Hegel's notion of Geist as 'metaphysical bourgeois speculation of a rather German kind' and therefore not worthy of serious consideration instead of exorcising an old ghost, Marx had left the door unguarded to the worst possible adventurer. This is the piratical short-hand argument that suggests that because Marx had disallowed the notion of Geist (the spirit-mind) and the relationship of the individual to an all encompassing reality (God), which is in fact that selfsame individual, then upon the moment of self-realisation, the individual recognises the end of History (for Hegel). Where as for Marx, denying any God or Geist-like reality, the material reality is all. Material History can only be recognised and achieved by material, terrestrial advance. Thus the only means of change are on the Earth, the only goal of change is life on the Earth, and the Earth itself is split from all external considerations or influences. It is (it has become) the object that fills Marx's gaze, and as such it is autonomous. Marx's gaze becomes that of the lascivious connoisseur, and he in turn is transformed into the aesthete that regards the object of his attentions as unsupported, free of the constraints of any context, unfettered by the adorning blandishments of mundane or glittering surroundings and consequently wholly autonomous.

It could be mentioned here in passing, that although characters like Michaelis might argue that there were great differences between the two, like the business of whether or not you should think in terms of a system or process, all this talk of Marx criticising Hegel for thinking that the end of history had come about when he received the position of the chair of philosophy in Berlin, is strangely reminiscent of Friedrich Nietzsche.

But let us return to the colder crisper ground of dialectical certainty.

In his short, but richly descriptive 'Kammerspiel' (198-), Jeff Wall warmly asserts the idea that the most interesting debates concerning aesthetics have been the 1930's debates conducted by Lukacs, Adorno and the other Frankfurt School thinkers. Jeff Wall re-enters these debates and places them around his perception of the failure of conceptual art - its bureaucratic language and forms and so on. This creates an interesting ploy which allows him to narrate a larger history, clearly, on paper. This history is the failure of modernist architecture (some kind of weird literary metaphor for ideology seems to be at large within the text) and the trajectory of possible strategies for a subversive avant-garde culture of resistance in the period of the late 1950's to early 1970's.

However this seems to be roaming from the point, let us return to consider the important aesthetic debates of the 1930's without any distractions.

In the 'Theory of the avant-garde' (1974), Peter Burger thoughtfully rakes over the dispute between Georg Lukacs and Theodore Adorno on the nature of the organic and the non-organic work of art.

Burger says - 'The avant-gardiste work is defined as non-organic. Whereas in the organic work of art, the structural principle governs the parts and joins them in a unified whole, in the avant-gardiste work, the parts have a significantly larger autonomy vis-a-vis the whole. They become less important as constituent elements of a totality of meaning and simultaneously more important as relatively autonomous signs.'

Burger moves from this to contrast the relative differences between Adorno and Lukacs, pausing only to note that they are both Hegelians of one sort or another. Thus both wish to historicize aesthetics to produce a theory of the avant-garde, but differ in their conception of what this might be. For Lukacs 'the organic work of art' ('realistic' in his terminology) is 'an aesthetic', and 'from that perspective rejects avant-gardiste works as decadent.'

For Lukacs with the end of the bourgeois emancipation movement in 1848, the bourgeois intellectual progressively loses the ability to realistically portray bourgeois society in its totality. This dissent of the work of art is traceable from that point through to the blurring confinement of naturalistic detail and on to the dissolution of the avant-gardiste work.

Whereas, Burger says, for Adorno 'the avant-gardiste work is the only possible authentic expression of the contemporary state of the world'. Simply put, for Adorno the avant-gardiste work is the historically necessary expression of alienation in late capitalist society. Any attempt to measure it against previous historical models, such as the classical or the romantic is merely improper. Adorno does, however, maintain a normative structure in his criticism by what Burger holds to be 'a more radical historicizing'. Adorno seems to reverse Lukacs values, to stand them on their head.

Lukacs holds that while the avant-garde is the expression of alienation in late capitalist society, it is also the totem of the blindness of the bourgeois intellectual to that society, to the dialectical enactments taking place which will move that society onto a socialist transition. It is this potential for a 'political realistic art form' of the present that Lukacs values. Adorno however does not share this perspective and so avant-gardiste art becomes authentic for him as Burger reports 'any attempt to create organic, coherent works (which Lukacs calls 'realist') is not merely a regression beyond an already attained level of artistic techniques, it is ideologically suspect. Instead of bearing the contradictions of the society in our time, the organic work promotes, by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole, even though the explicit contents may show a wholly different intent'.

This is historical debate and what is at stake is the princely prize of bourgeois art. Here, it must be admitted that art is viewed, at best, as authentically awful, generally as effete and worst of all as blind to all and sundry. However, this still remains a vast improvement on the previous idea of art as striking an aristocratic figure, standing before us, with elegant clothes, light locks of graying hair brushed around a noble brow and profound eyes that gaze out and seem to pass right through us onto infinity. As we stand facing this glittering figure, he is so hard to focus on we forget where we are. In our rags, with our caps in our hands, our grimy faces are dazzled. Someone whispers from behind that this prince lives in shining halls where doors hang on diamond hinges, but his presence here is the only whiff of them we'll ever get.

All this can rouse nothing but exasperation and so we return to the question of a historical debate, by which we mean, of course, dialectics and teleonomy. Derrida puts it all down in 'The Truth in Painting' (1987) as:

'Once again this is the active interpretation of x-rayed fragments, the epic stenography of a European unconscious, the monumental telescoping of an enormous sequence. It is statistical but simultaneously biographical, historical, economic, technical, political, poetical, theoretical. An edgeless textuality deconstructs and re-inscribes the metaphysical motif of the absolute referent, of the thing itself in its final instance: neither that formalist and non-figurative scripturalism which would come to efface or deny the scene supporting it (a scene which is historical, theoretical, political), nor a 'left realism', the codified simplification or the politician stereotype which would annul the scientific event, also squeezing out the layer of discourse, the thickness of culture, ideological efficacy'.

Having nailed down what History is at last, we can bring in one or two more characters.

'The truth in Painting' is a wry book written by a man who retains a serious purpose, and so avoids the charge of merely trivializing a 'great subject'.

For example the quote above comes from a very sober section on Walter Benjamin about whom no joking should be allowed. Who could write now on aesthetics and not mention Walter Benjamin in general and 'the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction' (Illuminations 1936) in particular?

A strangely ungainly yet important figure, his famous mistakes are almost as celebrated as his theory, so much so that the term 'that fat bungler' takes on a quasi conceptual importance. He bestrides the dialectical history of 20th century cultural theory like a colossus. He is not the subject but seems inextricable from it, almost reminiscent of something Derrida wrote about the par-ergon again in 'The Truth in Painting':

'The par-ergon stands out both from the ergon (the work) and from the milieu, it stands out first of all like a figure on ground. But it does not stand out in the same way as the work.'

The latter also stands out against two grounds, but with respect to each of these two grounds, it merges into the other. With respect to the work which can serve as a ground for it, it merges into the wall, and then, gradually into the general text. With respect to the background which the general text is, it merges into the work which stands out against the general background. There is always a form on a ground, but the par-ergon is a form which has its traditional determination not that it stands out but that it disappears, buries itself, effaces itself, melts away at the moment it deploys its greatest energy. The frame is in no case a background in the same way that the milieu or the work can be, but neither is it's thickness as margin a figure. Or at least it is a figure which comes away of its own accord.'

All this seems to beg only one question: what could be simpler than that?

If there is an objection it probably comes from Michaelis who will probably argue that instead of discussing the Historical Materialist, we seem to have slipped back to Kant. He would go on, like as not, to complain that he can't be expected to have read all this, since he is only a fictional character from a different book.

This last point can be answered away easily enough. With an airy wave of the hand, as all of the texts mentioned above, himself included, are all bourgeois literature - even this one itself which tries to contain them. To deny any one of them 'their own place in a counterfeit world' would be as sensible as trying to draw a line somewhere in the snow and say 'such and such and no further'...