

THE LOCUS OF TRUTH/IDEOLOGY IN THE GERMAN DEBATE:  
A REAPPRAISAL OF LUKACS, BENJAMIN, BRECHT, AND ADORNO

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In the wake of the proletarian defeat in Central Europe during the years 1918-23 and the Fascist victories thereafter--both taking place under conditions presumably favorable for Marxist causes--thinkers on the left initiated a serious investigation into cultural matters and questions of consciousness in an effort to understand the stabilizing features of capitalism (Lunn 5). In such an atmosphere of political frustration and powerlessness, emerging technological advances--especially in the visual arts such as photography and film-making--brought on immense implications as well as new challenges to existing concepts of artistic presentation, provoking quite different responses among the left. On the one hand, the fashionable preoccupation with the juxtaposition of disparate images and disjunctive moments and other technical matters was seen by some, such as Georg Lukács and Theodor Adorno, as consuming the energies of the artistic world while distancing artistic productions from the reception of the general public. Thus, in an effort to situate the new techniques so as to contain their application in the domain of the arts, such leftist critics resorted to what are now classified as "ideological analyses" to demonstrate and thus expose the possible impact of such techniques upon the reading public. On the other hand, these breakthroughs in the arts were also seen by others on the left, such as Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin, as holding out new inspirations and suggesting new strategies for their cause, who in turn wrote to extol how powerfully the new techniques and new artistic works might serve as forms of political resistance.

It is then widely accepted that the German debate in the 1930s over art and ideology had as its focus the (ideological) effects of certain elements of modern culture (art especially) which might hinder or further the cause of a proletarian revolution.<sup>1</sup> Yet, knowledge of the more than apparent dissension among the left during the 1930s encouraged many later commentators to characterize the debate as nothing more than a partisan-based war of labels frequently waged among contending factions on the left, with the participants merely dishing out favorable or unfavorable labels according to factional policy or sectarian interests. As a result, the political dimension of the German debate tends to gather most of the attention of the latecomers (e.g. Kidless).

Along with this valorization of the political dimension of the debate, another historical development also operated to shape later perception and evaluation of the

participants. This has to do with the increasing problematization of the reflection theory of art, which is taken to be the focal point of the debate. The debate participants are then frequently evaluated by the distance they are said to have maintained from that reflectionist model. Such a line of reasoning, upon the ensuing dominance of the Frankfurt School in the West (overwhelmingly friendly toward the avant-garde and the modern) as well as the corresponding decline of orthodox Marxist views in most countries in the wake of Stalin's rule, usually leave Georg Lukács in ill favor because of his unwavering promotion of a seemingly rather rigid reflectionist model of art and his negative writings upon expressionism and modernism (e.g., Lunn). Many unfriendly commentators have attacked Lukács for his alleged "Stalinism," "literary terrorism," and "literary dictatorship," thus further diminishing his status in historical accounts of the debate (cf. Jameson, "Reflections in Conclusion" 202-3).

By thus (willingly or unwittingly) over-politicizing and stigmatizing the debate, many commentators have slighted one important aspect that is heart and soul of the debate, an aspect that has become all the more relevant since the 1980s--the epistemological assumptions that informed and provided justification for the participants's interest-laden positions. To be more specific, the debate articulated serious concerns over the central issues of truth--of our perception or beliefs about truth, and of the consequences of ways of presenting such beliefs in cultural artifacts--all of which are topics presently debated in scholarly circles. In the following pages, I hope to examine the thoughts of the participants in terms of their epistemological coloring so as to demonstrate that the German debate may be losing its relevance less because the participants were too political for the taste of the present but more because their presuppositions are no longer seen as viable for the current, predominantly skeptical generation. Yet, even in this respect, the debate participants are not so easily pigeonholed.

As our present generation has been discussing the question of truth mostly in relation to the concept of ideology, I shall begin my discussion with an analysis of the ways in which truth/ideology was conceived in the German debate.

The term "ideology," embodied in Lukács' discussion of reification and Adorno's critique of the culture industry, was central to their contemplations of the specific nature of a society thoroughly saturated by the capitalistic mode of production. Their concern was that the commodity structure, as an ideology, had penetrated all aspects of the society to such an extent that people viewed it only as natural that the structuring principle in capitalist production should also be the structuring principle of human life and human thought (Lukács, *History* 85; Horkheimer & Adorno 127).<sup>2</sup>

Such a general framework certainly does not do justice to the complexities surrounding truth and ideology in the debate. To begin with, contrary to the popular perception that he flatly equates ideology with "false consciousness" (e.g. Eagleton, *Criticism* 69; McDonough 33), Lukács holds a rather neutral notion of ideology as it relates to literary style.<sup>3</sup> When he observes that some critics are overly concerned with stylistic and technical matters to the extent that they pay little attention to other underlying or determining principles of artistic creation, Lukács stresses that a writer's stylistic or technical choices are not isolated occurrences, but derive from and are expressive of the writer's outlook on his world. This worldview, termed a writer's ideology, has everything to do with the writer's artistic style:

What determines the style of a given work of art? . . . It is the view of the world, the ideology or *weltanschauung* underlying a writer's work that counts. And it is the writer's attempt to reproduce this view of the world which constitutes his 'intention' and is the formative principle underlying that style of a given piece of writing. (Lukács, "The Ideology of Modernism" 19)

More specifically, Lukács holds that "[a] writer's ideology is merely a synthesis of the totality of his experience on a certain level of abstraction" ("Narrate or Describe?" 143). Ideology is simply how the writer perceives and conceives of the world; it is the mediation through which he cognizes the objective reality out there. In fact, the observation and description in a novel are "mere substitutes for a conception of order in life" ("Narrate or Describe?" 143).

As a writer's "intention/perspective," ideology not only determines the stylistic dimension of a literary work, it is what makes the work possible in the first place. As Lukács puts it, "the writer himself must possess a firmly established and vital ideology; he must see the world in its contradictory dynamics to be able to choose a hero in whose life the major opposing forces converge." In other words, the truth of the world--i.e. its contradictory dynamics--which is supposed to constitute a writer's ideology turns out to be what enables a writer to write. Lukács cites the example of Flaubert who wrote to George Sand, complaining about not being able to write because he "lack[s] a firm, comprehensive outlook on life." With this example in mind, Lukács concludes, "without ideology there is no composition" ("Narrate or Describe" 142).

Such a general view of ideology might be interpreted as being rather individualistic; after all, Lukács does claim that the sum of a writer's own personal life experiences makes up his ideology (worldview). It is exactly such an interpretation that forms the basis for Brecht's criticism of the bourgeois novel that Lukács so admires:

Today the bourgeois novel still depicts 'a world.' It does so in a purely idealistic way from within a given *Weltanschauung*: the more or less private, but in any case personal outlook of its 'creator'. . . in other words, we find out something about the author and nothing about the world. (Brecht 48)

While Lukács does seem to put emphasis on the subjective, individual side of ideology, there is still room for a collective dimension to his notion of ideology. In fact, as Lukács immediately goes on to say in the same article, "When a writer is isolated from the vital struggles of life and from varied experiences generally, all ideological questions in his work become abstractions" ("Narrate or Describe?" 143). Such a position conceives of the world as an arena in which social groups are seen as constantly entangled in vital struggles with one another. In order for a writer to write well, to write in a way that provides concrete meaning for his readers who are likewise agents in such vital struggles, he must not isolate himself from what is going on in the society. He must develop a feel for the world from his involvement in the "vital struggles" of that society. And to push the argument one step further, he must view his own practices as part and parcel of the actual practices of his social group(s) entangled in "vital struggles" with other social groups. In other words, only when a writer sees his own practices as embedded within a "world in its contradictory dynamics," can he be a good writer (Lukács, "Narrate or Describe" 142).

By transforming a discussion of technical or stylistical choices into an issue that has much to do with the whole scope of social life in which these formalistic choices are to find their roots, Lukács zeroes in upon the ultimate purpose of doing ideological analyses. That is, artistic creations, as part and parcel of the social practices of writers, could have serious political implications or actual consequences, highlighted and propagated by the writers' and the works' social position and influence. In other words, the representations (of reality) in a writer's work can be read as his statement about the social life in which the writing activity is embedded; and this statement, in many cases, can be seen as constituting his effort to further promote or intervene with the conduct of that social life. Likewise, and maybe more significantly, when a critic--such as Lukács himself--comments on the ideology of a writer's creative choices, such discursive activity also constitutes the critic's effort to promote or intervene. In fact, it is in this spirit of intervention that Lukács takes the initiative to chastise both the modernist works and the critics who are favorable to them.

Still, there is good reason why Lukács is frequently read as simply equating ideology with false consciousness (and more often than not, he himself is responsible for

this perception). I believe such a reading of Lukács results from a conflation of two distinct terms for him--the SOURCE of literary styles (i.e., the ideology/worldview of an author) in which ideology is used in the neutral sense, and the FUNCTION of literary styles (i.e., the production of true knowledge or false consciousness) in which a certain ideology/worldview is seen as damaging to the revolutionary cause. I would also like to argue that when the function of literary styles is considered, modernism was chastised by Lukács not because of its truth status of being "ideology" per se (false, illusive consciousness), but more importantly because of its functionalist status in which the presence of the modernist authorial ideology in literary works produced effects that did not measure up to the demands of the cognitive function accredited to literature by Lukács.<sup>4</sup>

In other words, it was when the modernist worldview was entrusted with the noble mission of literature to lead the reader to true knowledge of reality that it needed to be investigated and then criticized. Such a belief in the important cognitive function of literature was not uncommon among the participants in the debate. In fact, it explains why Adorno and his friends did not find it troubling when Lukács characterized the nature of the modernist ideology as "static," "apathetic," "pathologic," or "passive"; yet they were deeply troubled by Lukács' accusation that the modernist worldview distorted our true knowledge of reality ("Reconciliation" 160).

If the development of modern science (the systemization of knowledge) is accompanied by a gradual marginalization and eventually an exclusion of literature from any claims to knowledge, then the participants of the German debate were operating to assert a contrary belief, a belief in the necessary cognitive function of literature.<sup>5</sup> Just as Engels believe that the novels of Balzac reveal the truth about early nineteenth century French society, the 1930s critics also believe literature is a special mediation through which we could get a better understanding of how things really are in the world.

Such a belief that literature had to do with reason rather than with emotions was put into practice by many modernist writers. Brecht for one iterates that Brechtian epic theater aims not at the emotional engrossment of the audience, but at the mobilization of their powers of reflexive thinking. "The essential point of the epic theater is perhaps that it appeals less to the feelings than to the spectator's reason. Instead of sharing an experience the spectator must come to grips with things" (Brecht 23). In other words, it is through the provocation of epic theater that the audience is motivated to strive for and perhaps eventually achieve a better (truer) understanding of things. Consequently, when Brecht argues for the use of the alienation effect in his theater, his main concern lies with its impact upon the "understanding," rather than the emotion, of the audience.

As he sees it, the laws of cause and effect are exposed only with the force of what is startling, what is unexpected by the usual habits of thinking. "When something seems 'the most obvious thing in the world' it means that any attempt to understand the world has been given up" (Brecht 71, my underline). That is to say, it is through defamiliarizing what has been cognitively taken for granted that Brecht hopes to heighten the sense of awareness among his audience and thereby fulfil the cognitive function of literature.

Besides practitioners such as Brecht, critics such as Adorno also emphasized the cognitive function of art. For Adorno, since the valorization of exchange value in commodity fetishism has permeated the whole society with a kind of "identity-thinking" that equates incommensurable things with one another, thus erasing all contradictions or differences (Eagleton, *Ideology* 125; also cf. Horkheimer & Adorno 120-29), the only way to fight this unifying and homogenizing tendency in capitalist society is to emphasize antinomy and discrepancy through art's insistence to follow its own formal laws (Horkheimer & Adorno 131). It is worth noting here that in privileging art as a form of resistance, Adorno has his eyes mainly on art's capability of becoming "true and conscious knowledge." He believes that only by virtue of the "aesthetic distance" that art is said to maintain from objective reality can the work of art "become both work of art and valid consciousness" ("Reconciliation" 160, my underline). Such a cognitive thrust fits in nicely with the concerns of the other participants in the debate.

What is more, because of the resisting efforts initiated by the artist, even the objects treated by art attain, by extension, a certain degree of resistance against being sucked into the world of commodity. This is Adorno's idealism in its purest form:

Art and reality can only converge if art crystallizes out its own formal laws, not by passively accepting objects as they come. In art knowledge is aesthetically mediated through and through . . . In the form of an image the object is absorbed into the subject instead of following the bidding of the alienated world and persisting obdurately in a state of reification. The contradiction between the object reconciled in the subject . . . and the actual unreconciled object in the outside world, confers on the work of art a vantage-point from which it can criticize actuality. Art is the negative knowledge of the actual world. ("Reconciliation" 160, my underline)

In such a picture of a thoroughly commodified society, art is privileged as the last fortress of resistance against the alienating tendencies of commodity fetishism. Art is the last citadel of clear-headed perception. Art's refusal to give in--or to identify--is its most

important mission.

As to the question of how literature or art comes to be empowered with this cognitive function, how literature could possibly reveal the truth about the world, we find only an indirect answer in Lukács, an answer that is best understood in terms of an Aristotelian conception of part-whole relationship.

As an integral part of the social whole, literature, according to Lukács, must necessarily manifest the essence, the truth, of that whole. It must display the immanent tendencies of immediate reality. What then is this essence, this truth of the social reality? In Lukács's conception, the truth about social reality is its "totality," i.e., a unified historical process to which every manifestation, every action of human life, including art, science, recreation, family life, etc., is only an integral part. This truth, however, is no longer accessible except through a complicated process of mediation, "by means of which the merely immediate reality becomes . . . the authentically objective reality" (*History* 150).

By "objective" Lukács means the true significance of immediate reality in its organic and dynamic relation to other parts of that reality. In other words, in our immediate experience objects and relations may seem to be autonomous and operating according to laws inherent to themselves (*History* 87); yet, we must overcome the immediacy of experience and raise it to a level of "consciousness" through the operation of specific categories of mediation, such as literature and science. Then we can integrate individual objects and social phenomena into a system of relations in which the objects and phenomena will become comprehensible and meaningful as parts of an immanent and organic whole. After all, "the *developing tendencies of history constitute a higher reality than the empirical facts*" and it is to this higher reality that we should try to approximate in cognition (Lukács, *History* 181). Herein lies Lukács' representationalist foundation.

Knowledge of totality, of the truth of social reality, would have been accessible if it were not for the universality of what Lukács conceives as the biggest fault with capitalism: commodity fetishism. In other words, it is because of the delusive operations of the commodity form that human labor and its fruits are seen as something isolated and independent of the subject, governed by laws invisible to man. As a result, the seeming relations between commodities are reified and have thus displaced the real, definite, social relations between people (*History* 86). The rationalization that accompanies the commodity mode of thinking further breaks with "the organic, irrational and qualitatively determined unity of the product" (*History* 88), leaving the subject with no other choice but to conform to the laws that are said to govern the reified object. Thus, Lukács

proposes his solution: "only portrayal of the overall process can dissolve the fetishism of the economic and social forms of capitalist society, so that these appear as what they actually are, i.e. (class) relations between people" ("Reportage or Portrayal?" 53).

Literary mediation is then de-fetishization. And as a specifically designated category of mediation, art has a grave task to perform: it has to recreate that vision of totality which has been lost in commodity fetishism. As Lukács puts it, "The goal for all great art is to provide a picture of reality in which the contradiction between appearance and reality, the particular and the general, the immediate and the conceptual, etc., is so resolved that the two converge into a spontaneous integrity in the direct impression of the work of art and provide a sense of an inseparable integrity" ("Art and Objective Truth" 34). In other words, as "a created totality," as "the visionary reality of the world made to our measure" in our alienated existence (Lukács, Theory of the Novel 37), art's highest priority is to re-present ("reflect") the essence--the totality--of the social reality, an essence that is now divorced from the immediate cognition of human beings.

Adorno's answer to the same question of how literature/art could possibly tell us the truth about the world is a lot simpler: it just does. I have mentioned before that, like Lukács, Adorno does not hold a negative view toward "ideology" (see note #3). In fact, to him, ideology is "necessary illusion," "a shape of truth, no matter how distorted," and as necessary illusion, ideology, while false, is also part of the truth (Aesthetic Theory 331). That is why Adorno finds it no problem to claim that art contains both ideology and truth. Because of this faith in the partial truthfulness of ideology, Adorno agrees with Lukács when the latter criticizes the modernist technique as unduly creating visions of worldlessness and solitariness; yet Adorno would assert that the picture of man in all his worldlessness and solitariness has some truth to it, too. And only the modernist text in its choice of content and form can embody the irreconcilable contradictions of capitalist society by displaying the gulf "between the overwhelming and unassimilable [sic] world of things, on the one hand, and a human experience impotently striving to gain a firm hold on it, on the other" ("Reconciliation" 153).

While Lukács uses the *monologue interieur* to demonstrate the solipsism of modernist styles, Adorno uses the same example to demonstrate its usefulness as a form of resistance:

The *monologue interieur*, the worldlessness of modern art which makes Lukács so indignant, is both the truth and the appearance of a free-floating subjectivity--it is truth, because in the universal atomistic state of the world, alienation rules over men, turning them



into mere shadows of themselves . . . The free-floating subject is appearance, however, inasmuch as, objectively, the social totality has precedence over the individual . . . The great works of modernist literature shatter this appearance of subjectivity by setting the individual in his frailty into context, and by grasping that totality in him of which the individual is but a moment and of which he must needs remain ignorant. ("Reconciliation" 161)

In other words, Adorno accepts Lukács' critique but thinks the aesthetic distance that the modernist technique creates between the literary text and reality will still be a moment of knowledge. The distance or difference will automatically help the reader see reality for what it is.

Because of the presence of this non-hostile attitude toward what may be ideological, Adorno's writings invoke different readings from his commentators. Let us take his discussion of jazz as an example. Martin Jay presents Adorno as seeing jazz as artificial and deluding, merely a strengthening of alienation, and altogether "a capitulation before the powers of the status quo" (*The Dialectical* 188). Jazz does little more than holding out false images of a return to nature or of sexual liberation, leaving the listener only in "masochistic passivity" (Jay, *The Dialectical* 186-88). Another just as important critic, Susan Buck-Morss, on the other hand, reads a possibility of negation in Adorno's treatment of jazz. For the combination of contradicting forces in jazz--"the salon-music individualism on the one hand and the military-march collectivism on the other"--unintentionally displays a social contradiction (Buck-Morss 265). Buck-Morss thus believes that by pointing out this inherent contradiction as displayed in jazz, Adorno recognizes jazz as one of the sites of resistance. In other words, if only the listeners could listen to jazz with a critical attitude, a non-identifying attitude, then they would recognize the social contradiction and would have a chance to reflect on how to deal with it.

What remains unexplained here in Buck-Morss as well as in Adorno is the familiar question of what guarantees such presentations of contradiction to be read or listened to "as such" by the readers/listeners, whoever they might be. Without any consideration for the possible heterogeneity among people who are consuming these literary or musical works, or the dynamics and conditions of reading/viewing/listening, Adorno's faith can only be built upon an essentialist notion of art, which claims that the contradictions are inherent and objectively present in artistic works. It is also built upon an essentialist notion of audience, which treats all of the readers/listeners as having the same concerns, interests, and purposes so that the effect of art upon them would be uniform too. In another respect, when Adorno emphasizes distanciation, negation, or difference, he is

thinking only of how the artistic creations can maintain their identity and resist the homogenizing tendencies of capitalism. As to the question of how the resistance in art can be translated into the resistance on the human front, again Adorno has only his faith in a universal, non-instrumentalist rationality to fall back on.

Such an implicit essentialism in Adorno is strengthened by his diagnosis of society under the "universal imposition" of the commodity form (Horkheimer & Adorno 128). For Adorno, "The culture industry as a whole has molded men as a type unfailingly reproduced in every product" (127, my underline). The saturation is so thorough that "The might of industrial society is lodged in men's minds" (127). There is simply no way to avoid the uniformity and identity through which the whole world is filtered: "culture now impresses the same stamp on everything" (Horkheimer & Adorno 120). Consequently, there is only the feeble possibility of passive resistance put up by art.<sup>6</sup>

While faith in the cognitive function of art leaves Adorno in a kind of essentialism that focuses on the art work as the latter distances itself from alienated reality, Lukács, on the other hand, is more interested in the effect of that art. After all, if literature is to be entrusted with the cognitive function to manifest the truth of social reality, to give us that sense of an integrated whole again, to resist the co-opting tendencies of a commodified world, then Lukács holds that it must do the job and do it correctly. "If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface" ("Realism in the Balance" 33, my underline). Lukács is willing to grant that the modernist presentation of the world in literary works is not untrue to the way things are, yet it is to be taken only as the most immediate, the most limited, the most superficial aspect of things. On the basis of adherence to the way things "truly" are--the dynamic, integrated totality of things--knowing the social whole becomes a sort of cognitive and even moral imperative. By the standard of this imperative, the modernist ideology, though not untrue, is judged as highly undesirable: for it depicts human events as "static"; it emphasizes the "unalterability" of historical reality; it condemns man to a life of solitariness and denies him any possibility of meaningful relationships; it reduces life to "a sequence of unrelated experiential fragments"; it results in "a condition of apathy, punctuated by manic fits"; and finally, it leads to "the destruction of literature itself."

It is significant that Lukács' criticism of modernist ideology may have stemmed from his concern over the cognitive function of literature, yet none of the negative labels he used carried any cognitive meaning. Words such as "false," "illusory," or "wrong" were nowhere to be found. Instead, what we get is a string of negative terms that

highlight the impossibility of the modernist ideology to work in the contemporary context for the liberation and future development of mankind. This signals that what ultimately bothered Lukács was not so much whether the modernist presentation is correct or not in relation to the way things "really" are. Such an insulated, purely philosophical question has significance for him only when it is seen to be the flip side of another question: what would be the actual effect of the modernist worldview upon the reader? In short, in Lukács' conception, the cognitive function of literature is to be conceived not in terms of the truth status of literature, but in terms of the practical consequences of literature. A correct outlook on reality would lead to correct actions on the reader's part, which will then work for the progress of history. Conversely, a wrong outlook on reality may lead readers to take the wrong action or not take any action at all, which will surely hinder the progress of history.

Such a conflation of cognition and practice was widely practiced by the participants in the 1930s debate. They believe that an accurate cognition is indispensable to the cause of human emancipation, that a correct understanding of objective reality is necessary to and sometimes even equals the transformation of that reality (particularly in the case of proletarian consciousness). The cognitive function of literature becomes then a site for struggle for the 1930s critics exactly because it is taken to be the fountainhead of human action.

This belief in the inherent and necessary relationship between cognition/knowledge and action/practice derives from a string of related presuppositions. To begin with, it presumes the existence of a universal truth/reality which is knowable and communicable, and which is situated at a transcendental vantage point impervious to the contamination of particularities and contingencies. At the same time it presumes a universal power of reason shared by all, which will recognize and accept that universal truth/reality when the latter is demonstrated. Furthermore, it presumes that, once rid of ideological mystification, man will always act according to the decrees of universal reason, and if he does, his actions will surely be correct. It is the assumed validity of such a string of presuppositions that immediately confers a sense of urgency on the issue of literature in relation to knowledge.

Unfortunately, the links in the knowledge-action model have now fallen into jeopardy. The conception of an unproblematic and universal truth/reality has been recognized as at best wishful thinking and at worst ideological mystification. The advocacy of the universal power of reason has come to be seen as merely a rationalization for the privileged position that a certain kind of (bourgeois) rationality already occupies.<sup>7</sup> Various recent theories of psychoanalysis and genealogies of human reason have further

sensitized this generation to the fragility of rational behavior and the plurality of types of reason. Within such contexts, the direct connection between knowledge and action is severely eroded.

The questionable connection between knowledge and action is only one less noted area in which the reception of the German debate has run into problems. More damaging may be the insistence of Lukács, Brecht, and the others on the necessary relationship between literature and reality. Yet even there, the debate participants are not so helplessly dogmatic as is widely believed.

The debate participants are often characterized as sharing a common faith in a reflectionist theory of literature, which in turn is propped up on a representationalist (correspondence) notion of knowledge. I think such a characterization is oversimplified. While the debate participants do seem to adhere to various versions of a reflectionist theory of literature, their subscription to the representationalist notion of truth and knowledge is constantly complicated by a simultaneous belief in a world-constructionist theory of knowledge that denies the existence of a given reality to which all knowledge is to approximate. In other words, the debate participants' effort to approximate the truth about the world, their urge to "get it right" on the question of knowledge, is often countered by their equally dedicated effort to emphasize the necessary and important role of the human (especially proletarian) initiative in "creating" history (under given conditions). Still, while they hope to leave room for the participation and practice of a thinking and acting subject, they can not help but feel the need to constrain the possible initiative of that subject by reverting back to an objectivist notion of reality. Let us take a closer look at this ambivalence.

Lukács has often been faulted for holding an orthodox reflectionist view of art, and some of his words do present him as such:

Any apprehension of the external world is nothing more than a reflection in consciousness of the world that exists independently of consciousness. This basic fact of the relationship of consciousness to being also serves, of course, for the artistic reflection of reality. ("Art and Objective Truth" 25)

The wording here is quite close to a representationalist theory of knowledge. The metaphor of the mind (consciousness) as the mirror reflecting the image of the objective world is vividly transposed unto art. It is such parallel depictions that have earned Lukács the reputation of the great advocate for a reflectionist theory of art.

Yet, for Lukács, direct reflections are never all there is to cognizing the world, nor are they so "direct" after all. While these reflections of the external, objective world

upon the consciousness of cognizing subjects make up "the foundation, the point of departure for all knowledge," Lukács does not stop there. He goes on to say: "But they are *only* the point of departure and not all there is to the process of knowing" ("Art and Objective Truth" 26). The italicization is Lukács' and it demonstrates his insistence that the issue must not be simplified thus. The dynamics of human perception of reality cannot be fully grasped in a simple imprinting of an image; it needs the continuous application of a dialectical method which resists any tendency to privilege one dimension of the cognizing process over another. As Lukács writes in the preface to the Hungarian edition of an anthology of the aesthetic writings of Marx and Engels, "The essence of the dialectical method lies in its encompassing the indivisible unity of the absolute and the relative: absolute truth has its *relative* elements (depending on place, time and circumstances); relative truth, on the other hand, so far as it is really truth, so far as it reflects reality in a faithful approximation, has an *absolute* validity" ("Marx and Engels on Aesthetics" 63).

The metaphor of art as a reflecting mirror may invite Lukács' readers to infer that art passively receives the imprint of reality and faithfully re-presents it. Yet Lukács' constant emphasis on the dynamics and dialectics of cognition does not allow such a simple and static view of reflection. He insists that alongside depictions of the existing richness and subtleties of life, the artist must introduce "a new order of things" which structures ordinary life experiences into even richer and stricter forms ("Art and Objective Truth" 39-40). Such a new order of things is never a simple and direct mirror reflection of reality as it appears to us. Lukács insists that if art achieves any illusion effect at all, it is accomplished with the reader's realization that the artistic representation "is not reality but simply a special form of reflecting reality" ("Art and Objective Truth" 41). Thus, Lukács finds the bourgeois epistemology highly inappropriate exactly because it "one-sidedly emphasized one approach to apprehending reality, one mode in the conscious reproduction of reality" ("Art and Objective Truth" 27). To counter such tendencies, Lukács quotes Lenin:

The approach of human reason to the individual thing, obtaining an impression (a concept) of it is no simple, direct, lifeless mirroring but a complicated, dichotomous, zigzag act which by its very nature encompasses the possibility that imagination can soar away from life . . . . (qtd. in "Art and Objective Truth" 28)

Here in this passage, Lenin's fascinating idea of the role of imagination in our cognition of reality illustrates a faith in the constructive role subjects could play in making sense of the world. And such a proclamation provides Lukács with just the right justification

to make room for subjectivity in his own discussion of artistic "reflections."

In Lukács' conception, art always involves the participation of subjectivity. In fact, art is able to penetrate the crust of reality exactly because of the careful work of the artist, which is motivated and informed by none other than his own "partisanship":

This partisanship of objectivity must therefore be found intensified in the work of art--intensified in clarity and distinctness, for the subject matter of a work of art is consciously arranged and ordered by the artist toward this goal, in the sense of this partisanship. ("Art and Objective Truth" 40, my underline)

In other words, as truthful reflections of reality, art always involves a point of view, a vantage point from which things are organized to make sense. Impartial imitation--since it is lifeless, takes no stand, and provides no call to action--is nothing but "false objectivity."

Had Lukács stopped here with his perspectivism, he would have enjoyed a warmer reception in our day and age. Yet, like the other participants in the debate, Lukács still wants to hang on to the representationalist goal of "getting it right" when it comes to acquiring knowledge. So even as he recognizes the important role of the subjective vantage point, he still wants to tie it in with an objective entity. Thus Lukács iterates:

. . . this partisanship is not introduced into the external world arbitrarily by the individual but is a motive force inherent in reality which is made conscious through the correct dialectical reflection of reality and introduced into practice. ("Art and Objective Truth" 40)

What we are witnessing here is Lukács' desperate effort to reconcile subjectivity and objectivity. Subjective imagination can have legitimacy in his theory of knowledge only when it coincides with "the motive force inherent in reality." And in tying down the subjective element in cognition, Lukács partially neutralizes the possible dynamics associated with the power of imagination. In the final analysis, the demand for correspondence establishes the limit against which any subjective constructivism is turned back.

Such ambivalent attitudes are not uncommon among the debate participants. Walter Benjamin, another participant in the German debate, finds that the mysterious but comforting sense of wholeness that accompanies traditional works of art has been so relentlessly shattered by modern mechanisms of reproduction that the only way to cope with the numbness and mechanization of modern-day living is to generate from the new technology sharper and more concrete physical images in which we come face to face with the way things "really" are (Norris 20; Jameson, Marxism and Form 75-78). With an undercurrent of nostalgic sadness for the passing of traditions, Benjamin considers the

artistic form of film desirable for the modern age because it better represents the reality uncontaminated by mechanization, the reality that lies beyond the limitations of the numbed experience in our dulled modern day existence:

. . . for contemporary man the representation of reality by the film is incomparably more significant than that of the painter, since it offers, precisely because of the thoroughgoing permeation of reality with mechanical equipment, an aspect of reality which is free of all equipment. And that is what one is entitled to ask from a work of art. (Benjamin 234)

Thus when Benjamin compares the revelations provided by the camera and the naked eye, he favors the former because it shows "what really goes on" in the actual movements of, say, a hand reaching for a lighter (237, my underline). The camera can transcend the limitation of the eye and pierce through the physical crust that veils the real. "Here the camera intervenes with the resources of its lowerings and liftings, its interruptions and isolations, its extensions and accelerations, its enlargements and reductions. The camera introduces us to unconscious optics as does psychoanalysis to unconscious impulses" (Benjamin 237). In short, the "true reality" that we are unconscious of can be evoked only through the penetrating power of the camera.

In other words, for Benjamin, while technological advances bring on the numbness that characterizes modern labor, they are somewhat redeemed by the heightened cognition that they can effect. Because of mechanical reproduction, there is for the first time the possibility of shaking loose from the ritualistic confines of auratic art to gain insights into not only how things really are but also how things could be once we move beyond the traditional limits. Therein lies the revolutionary potential of film through which Benjamin tries to transcend the limits of representationalism and venture forward into the unknown and unexpected. For film holds out the promise that it "extends our comprehension of the necessities which rule our lives"; it also opens up for us "an immense and unexpected field of action" (Benjamin 236).

Ironically, it is also in such descriptions of the unique and inherently liberating power of certain art forms that essentialism catches up with the critics. It is as if the nature of film naturally exposes "the necessities that rule our lives" and creates the "unexpected field of action" among viewers; the nineteenth century realist novel automatically enlightens its reader to the totality of reality; the use of the alienation effect necessarily wakens the audience to the limitations of their daily experiences; or the modernist or avant-garde artistic creations constitute an automatic attack on dominant capitalistic ideas. As I have mentioned before, such essentialist beliefs claim that, regardless of the context, there is something inherent in certain artistic styles or creations

that will automatically and necessarily create a certain set of favorable effects in their readers/viewers. In such a simple stimulus-response model, little room is left for the operation of thinking and acting subjects, nor is there room for the operation of factors other than universal human reason. Readers and viewers are simply passive receivers or at most passive collaborators in an inevitable process. It is this line of essentialism, sometimes referred to as "formalistic determinism" or "technological determinism," that is encountering great problems in our anti-determinist and anti-essentialist atmosphere.

In addition to the question of essentialism in the German debate, there is also the question of representationalism. Lukács' unrelenting faith in art's mission to re-present the objectivity of the truth of reality has led many latecomers to rank him as the staunchest modern believer in representationalism. Yet the other so-called more open-minded participants in the debate are not really that different from and sometimes are even more rigid than Lukács in demanding that artistic representations be checked against "the way things really are." The urge to "get it right" is all the more blatant in these participants.

To take a first example, when expressionism was severely criticized by Lukács, Ernst Bloch wrote a strong reply. Yet as much as he disagreed with Lukács' description of the ultimate truth of reality, Bloch still could not bring himself to part with the basic notion of representation. Thus against Lukács's indictment of expressionism, Bloch could only offer this feeble defense:

But what if Lukács's reality--a coherent, infinitely mediated totality--is not so objective after all? . . . What if authentic reality is also discontinuity? ("Discussing Expressionism" 22)

The "what if" is quite telling of Bloch's sense of insecurity. His faith in the expressionist techniques stands or falls with the verdict on the agreement between the world as presented by those techniques and the real nature of authentic reality, of which not even he is sure.

As a second example, Brecht has been frequently characterized as anti-reflectionist because of his insistence on defamiliarizing the habitual through the alienation effect. Yet the success, or the very possibility, of such defamiliarization procedures hinges upon an already existing familiarity, shared by the actors and audience alike, with the way things "really" are, so that all of them can at every moment of the performance proceed to check the theatrical representations against that pre-existing knowledge.

. . . the achievement of an A-effect absolutely depends on lightness and naturalness of performance. But when the actor checks the truth of his performance (a necessary operation, which Stanislavsky is much concerned with in his system) he is not just thrown back on his



'natural sensibilities,' but can always be corrected by a comparison with reality (is that how an angry man really speaks? is that how an offended man sits down?) and so from outside, by other people. He acts in such a way that nearly every sentence could be followed by a verdict of the audience and practically every gesture is submitted for the public's approval. (Brecht 95)

In other words, for Brecht the ultimate decision concerning whether an artistic creation satisfactorily fulfills its cognitive function has to be made through a constant and rigid verification process that involves a positivistic comparison between the world in the performance and the actual world out there. Such a comparison downplays the role of any subjective input on the actor's part; his "natural sensibilities" are simply not enough. He needs to constantly check his own acting against "the reality" and be subject to the same examination by the audience. Such a strong demand for (non-)correspondence, though with an eye to the dynamics of changes in reality, is made with the full force of representationalism:

In each individual case the picture given of life must be compared . . . with the actual life portrayed . . . If we want a truly popular literature, alive and fighting, completely gripped by reality and completely gripping reality, then we must keep pace with reality's headlong development. (Brecht 112)

Fortunately, Brecht's representationalism is occasionally tempered by his concern for audience reaction. (After all, it is in the theater that audience feedback is most direct and obvious.) Thus Brecht thinks a realistic theater must be "popular," meaning "intelligible to the broad masses, taking over their own forms of expression and enriching them/adopting and consolidating their standpoint . . ." (108). Furthermore, in meeting the needs and the tastes of the masses, Brecht has gradually become aware of developing complexities in the audience. In a letter to Max Gorelik, Brecht talks about the changes that he sees as taking place in the theater:

The sharpening of the class struggle has engendered such conflicts of interests in our audience that it is no longer in a position to react to art spontaneously and unanimously. (160)

Notwithstanding some degree of awareness of the developing heterogeneity among members of the audience, Brecht does not go on to contemplate how such heterogeneity in the audience would challenge his own idea of an epic theater that is defined by alienation effects uniformly construed against the background of a known and non-problematic reality. Nor does he reconsider how the verification against reality, which he demands for theatrical performance, is to be conducted with such heterogeneity among the audience.

Such a lack of accommodation for the possible diversity among audience (or readership) is shared by most of the German debate participants. It reveals their continued faith in the overriding power of an allegedly universal rationality which promises to even out the differences among viewer's other possible interests, concerns, or emotions. Such a privileging of the cognitive powers implicitly justifies a privileging of the artists, performers, or critics, who are thought to be somehow more perceptive than the faceless masses. It presumes that the audience or readership is always passive in the viewing/reading process. Thus, if any resistance is to be created, it is to be prepared by the artistic creators--through a demonstration of the totality of reality, through alienation effects, or through a negation of the immediacy of things. But it is always the artists or performers or critics who initiate the production of that resistance. Such is the implicit elitism of the 1930s critics.

Traces of essentialism and representationalism in the German debate have to a certain extent crippled its relevance for the present generation. The entanglement of the parties on the issues surrounding truth and ideology have also left observers hesitant about the possible use of debate arguments. Yet, as we examine their writings in the light of the epistemological assumptions which have captured the attention of the present generation, we find that the map is not as neat as we thought, that there is plenty of room for a reconceptualization as well as a re-appraisal of the participants as well as the issues in the German debate.

### Endnotes

1. The interchangeability of literature and art during this period signaled a conception of their inherent commonality as residing in the creative and imaginative aspects of human labor, a conception that puts emphasis on the unique efforts of the artistic or literary minds. Such a conception gradually faded out until a new interchangeability was established between literature and culture in the second half of the 1970s. The new coupling emphasizes the totality of all cultural experiences, treating all aspects of human labor as equally significant and differing only in their varied valorization by the existent cultural hegemony.

2. The terms in which the 1930s critics discussed the issues may be too humanistic or too general for some commentators who have lived through the boom of anti-Hegelian, anti-humanistic theories of ideology since the '60s. For example, Lukács' seeming lack of attention to the institutional apparatuses that sustain ideology has certainly attracted a lot of criticism (Larrain 74; McDorough 41). Yet, as we are now entering a different historical phase in which Hegelian and humanistic ideas are coming back in new forms equipped with a new vocabulary and making connections with all the fashionable trends of thought, the 1930s critics have gained both in stature and in circulation (cf. Wexler). And it may be beneficial for us to take another look at the German debate.

3. Adorno also declined from seeing ideology as antithetical to truth/reality. "Truth and Ideology do not represent good and bad respectively. Art contains them both" (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 332). Following Marx, Adorno acknowledges the difference between ideology and truth and sometimes even incorporates ideology into truth: "Ideology is socially necessary illusion, which means that if it is necessary it must be a shape of truth, no matter how distorted" (Aesthetic Theory 331). In fact, Adorno seems to think that ideology and truth become polarized only when the society falls into the process of becoming increasingly totalitarian. Then ideology is assigned to be the function of certain propagandistic forms of art: "The more openly society moves towards ever greater totalization, assigning art (along with everything else) its specific function, the more completely it polarizes art into ideology and protest. This polarization is likely to be detrimental to art. Absolute protest hems art in, impinging on its *raison d'être*, whereas absolute ideology reduces art to a thin, authoritarian copy of reality" (Adorno, Aesthetic Theory 332).

4. Larrain has also noticed that for Lukács, "bourgeois class consciousness is false not because it is ideological, but because the bourgeois class position is structurally limited" (73). While Larrain does not explain what these limitations are, I am arguing, based on Lukács' discussion of modernism, that the limitations have to do with the absence of connections between knowledge and liberation.

5. It needs to be noted here that both the move to deprive literature or the move to empower literature are embedded in a more general belief in the close relationship between knowledge and action, or put in different terms, a general concern with the possible effects of literature.

6. Lukács, on the other hand, provides a description of reification that avoids this sense of absoluteness. To be more precise, Lukács leaves plenty of room for history's contingencies, which may provide the exact crack through which resistance may break through. Thus, Lukács insists, life may seem to be firmly held together by impenetrable natural laws; "yet it can experience a sudden dislocation because the bonds uniting its various elements and partial systems are a chance affair even at their most normal" (History 101, my underline). Instead of paying exclusive attention to the all-encompassing rationalization that Adorno sees as devouring the modern world, Lukács would like to examine "the relative irrationality of the total process" (History 102). Likewise, he has faith in art because "form is therefore able to demolish the 'contingent' relation of the parts to the whole and to resolve the merely apparent opposition between chance and necessity" (History 136). Such an attention to the contingencies of domination has become a key issue in the 1980s, especially in the work of neo-Gramscians such as Stuart Hall, Ernst Laclau, and Chantal Mouffe. Yet, because of the thickness of historical sedimentation, Lukács is rarely cited as one of the precursors.

7. While both Lukács and Adorno have learned from Max Weber's concept of "rationalization" and are aware of the privileging of instrumental reason in the capitalist mode of production, they still cherish a persistent belief in, respectively, the possibility of overcoming reification or of negating the cooptation of the culture industry through the activation of another, non-instrumentalist, yet likewise universal form of rationality.

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