

VIII

NEGATION AND CONSUMPTION IN THE CULTURAL SPHERE

Do you seriously think we shall live long enough to see a political revolution? – we, the contemporaries of these Germans? My friend, you believe what you want to believe. . . . Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history – and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever papers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy. . . .

– Ruge to Marx, March 1843

180 CULTURE IS THE GENERAL sphere of knowledge, and of representations of lived experience, within a historical society divided into classes; what this amounts to is that culture is the power to generalize, existing *apart*, as an intellectual division of labor and as the intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society, according to Hegel, “when the power to unify disappeared from the life of man, and opposites lost their connection and living interaction, and became autonomous” (“The Difference between the Philosophical Systems of Fichte and Schelling”). In thus gaining its independence, culture was embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that was at the same time the beginning of the decline of its independence. The history that brought culture’s relative autonomy into being, along with ideological illusions concerning that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And the whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as the history of the revelation of culture’s insufficiency, as a march toward culture’s self-abolition. Culture is the locus of the search for lost unity. In the course of this search, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

181 THE STRUGGLE BETWEEN tradition and innovation, which is the basic principle of the internal development of the culture of historical societies, is predicated entirely on the permanent victory of innovation. Cultural innovation is impelled solely, however, by that total historical movement which, by becoming conscious of its totality, tends

toward the transcendence of its own cultural presuppositions – and hence toward the suppression of all separations.

- 182 THE SUDDEN EXPANSION of society's knowledge, including – as the heart of culture – an understanding of history, brought about the irreversible self-knowledge that found expression in the abolition of God. This "prerequisite of every critique," however, was also the first task of a critique without end. In a situation where there are no longer any tenable rules of action, culture's every *result* propels it toward its own dissolution. Just like philosophy the moment it achieved its full independence, every discipline, once it becomes autonomous, is bound to collapse – in the first place as an attempt to offer a coherent account of the social totality, and eventually even as a partial methodology viable within its own domain. The *lack of rationality* in a separated culture is what dooms it to disappear, for that culture itself embodies a call for the victory of the rational.
- 183 CULTURE ISSUED FROM a history that had dissolved the way of life of the old world, yet culture as a separate sphere is as yet no more than an intelligence and a sensory communication which, in a *partially historical* society, must themselves remain partial. Culture is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.
- 184 THE END OF THE HISTORY of culture manifests itself under two antagonistic aspects: the project of culture's self-transcendence as part of total history, and its manage-

ment as a dead thing to be contemplated in the spectacle. The first tendency has cast its lot with the critique of society, the second with the defense of class power.

- 185 EACH OF THE TWO aspects of the end of culture has a unitary existence, as much in all spheres of knowledge as in all spheres of sensory representation – that is, in all spheres of what was formerly understood as *art* in the most general sense. The first aspect enshrines an opposition between, on the one hand, the accumulation of a fragmentary knowledge which becomes useless in that any endorsement of existing conditions must eventually entail a rejection of *that knowledge itself*, and, on the other hand, the theory of practice, which alone has access, not only to the truth of all the knowledge in question, but also to the secret of its use. The second aspect enshrines an opposition between the critical self-destruction of society's old *common language* and its artificial reconstruction, within the commodity spectacle, as the illusory representation of non-life.
- 186 ONCE SOCIETY HAS LOST the community that myth was formerly able to ensure, it must inevitably lose all the reference points of a truly common language until such time as the divided character of an inactive community is superseded by the inauguration of a real historical community. As soon as art – which constituted that former common language of social inaction – establishes itself as independent in the modern sense, emerging from its first, religious universe to become the individual production of separate

works, it becomes subject, as one instance among others, to the movement governing the history of the whole of culture as a separated realm. Art's declaration of independence is thus the beginning of the end of art.

- 187 THE FACT THAT the language of real communication has been lost is what the modern movement of art's decay, and ultimately of its formal annihilation, expresses *positively*. What it expresses *negatively* is that a new common language has yet to be found – not, this time, in the form of unilaterally arrived-at conclusions like those which, from the viewpoint of historical art, *always came on the scene too late*, speaking *to others* of what had been experienced without any real dialogue, and accepting this shortfall of life as inevitable – but rather in a praxis embodying both an unmediated activity and a language commensurate with it. The point is to take effective possession of the community of dialogue, and the playful relationship to time, which the works of the poets and artists have heretofore merely *represented*.
- 188 WHEN A NEWLY INDEPENDENT art paints its world in brilliant colors, then a moment of life has grown old. By art's brilliant colors it cannot be rejuvenated but only recalled to mind. The greatness of art makes its appearance only as dusk begins to fall over life.
- 189 THE HISTORICAL TIME that invaded art in fact found its first expression in the artistic sphere, beginning with the baroque. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its

center with the demise of the last mythic order recognized by the Middle Ages, an order founded, both cosmically and from the point of view of earthly government, on the unity between Christianity and the ghost of an Empire. An *art of change* was obliged to embody the principle of the ephemeral that it recognized in the world. In the words of Eugenio d'Ors, it chose "life as opposed to eternity." Theater and festival, or theatrical festival – these were the essential moments of the baroque, moments wherein all specific artistic expression derived its meaning from its reference to the decor of a constructed space, to a construction that had to constitute its own unifying center; and that center was *passage*, inscribed as a vulnerable equilibrium on an overall dynamic disorder. The sometimes excessive importance taken on in modern discussions of aesthetics by the concept of the baroque reflects a growing awareness of the impossibility of classicism in art: for three centuries all efforts to create a normative classicism or neoclassicism have never been more than brief, artificial projects giving voice to the official discourse of the State – whether the State of the absolute monarchy or that of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas. What eventually followed the baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, renewed its assault time after time until the fragmentation and destruction of the artistic sphere were complete. The disappearance of a historical art, which was tied to the internal communications of an elite whose semi-independent social basis lay in the relatively playful conditions still directly experienced by the last aristocra-

cies, also testified to the fact that capitalism had thrown up the first class power self-admittedly bereft of any ontological quality; a power whose foundation in the mere running of the economy bespoke the loss of all human *mastery*. The baroque ensemble, a unity itself long lost to the world of artistic creation, recurs in a certain sense in today's *consumption* of the entirety of the art of the past. The historical knowledge and recognition of all past art, along with its retrospective promotion to the rank of world art, serve to relativize it within the context of a global disorder which in turn constitutes a baroque edifice at a higher level, an edifice into which even the production of a baroque art, and all its possible revivals, is bound to be melded. The very fact that such "recollections" of the history of art should have become possible amounts to the *end of the world of art*. Only in this era of museums, when no artistic communication remains possible, can each and every earlier moment of art be accepted – and accepted as *equal in value* – for none, in view of the disappearance of the prerequisites of communication *in general*, suffers any longer from the disappearance of its own *particular* ability to communicate.

- 190 ART IN THE PERIOD of its dissolution, as a movement of negation in pursuit of its own transcendence in a historical society where history is not yet directly lived, is at once an art of change and a pure expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its demands, the further from its grasp is true self-realization. This is an art that is necessarily *avant-garde*; and it is an art that *is not*. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

- 191 THE TWO CURRENTS that marked the end of modern art were dadaism and surrealism. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they paralleled the proletarian revolutionary movement's last great offensive; and the halting of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere that they had declared dead and buried, was the fundamental cause of their own immobilization. Historically, dadaism and surrealism are at once bound up with one another and at odds with one another. This antagonism, involvement in which constituted for each of these movements the most consistent and radical aspect of its contribution, also attested to the internal deficiency in each's critique – namely, in both cases, a fatal one-sidedness. For dadaism sought *to abolish art without realizing it*, and surrealism sought *to realize art without abolishing it*. The critical position since worked out by the situationists demonstrates that the abolition and the realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single transcendence of art.
- 192 SPECTACULAR CONSUMPTION preserves the old culture in congealed form, going so far as to recuperate and rediffuse even its negative manifestations; in this way, the spectacle's cultural sector gives overt expression to what the spectacle is implicitly in its totality – *the communication of the incommunicable*. Thoroughgoing attacks on language are liable to emerge in this context coolly invested with positive value by the official world, for the aim is to promote reconciliation with a dominant state of things from which all communication has been triumphantly declared absent. Naturally, the critical truth of such attacks, as

utterances of the real life of modern poetry and art, is concealed. The spectacle, whose function it is *to bury history in culture*, presses the pseudo-novelty of its modernist means into the service of a strategy that defines it in the profoundest sense. Thus a school of neo-literature baldly admitting that it merely contemplates the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something truly new. Meanwhile, beyond the unadorned claim that the dissolution of the communicable has a beauty all its own, one encounters the most modern tendency of spectacular culture – and the one most closely bound up with the repressive practice of the general social organization – seeking by means of a “global approach” to reconstruct a complex neo-artistic environment out of flotsam and jetsam; a good example of this is urbanism’s striving to incorporate old scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technological forms. All of which shows how a general project of advanced capitalism is translated onto the plane of spectacular pseudo-culture – that project being the remolding of the fragmented worker into “a personality well integrated into the group” (cf. recent American sociology – Riesman, Whyte, et al.). Wherever one looks, one encounters this same intent: to *restructure society without community*.

- 193 A CULTURE NOW wholly commodity was bound to become the star commodity of the society of the spectacle. Clark Kerr, an ideologue at the cutting edge of this trend, reckons that the whole complex system of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* is already equivalent to 29 percent of the annual gross national product of

the United States, and he predicts that in the second half of this century culture will become the driving force of the American economy, so assuming the role of the automobile industry in the first half, or that of the railroads in the late nineteenth century.

- 194 THE TASK OF the complex of claims still evolving as *spectacular thought* is to justify a society with no justification, and ultimately to establish itself as a general science of false consciousness. This thought is entirely determined by the fact that it cannot and does not wish to apprehend its own material foundation in the spectacular system.
- 195 THE OFFICIAL THOUGHT of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized *subcommunication* that it has to defend. It does not see that conflict is at the root of every feature of its universe. Spectacular power, which is absolute within the unchallengeable internal logic of the spectacle’s language, corrupts its specialists absolutely. They are corrupted by their experience of contempt, and by the success of that contempt, for the contempt they feel is confirmed by their acquaintanceship with that genuinely *contemptible individual* – the spectator.
- 196 A NEW DIVISION of tasks occurs within the specialized thought of the spectacular *system* in response to the new problems presented by the perfecting of this system itself: in the first place modern sociology undertakes a *spectacular critique of the spectacle*, studying separation with the sole aid of separation’s own conceptual and material tools;

meanwhile, from within the various disciplines in which structuralism has taken root, an apologetics of the spectacle is disseminated as the thought of non-thought, as an authorized amnesia with respect to historical practice. As forms of enslaved thought, however, there is nothing to choose between the fake despair of a nondialectical critique on the one hand and the fake optimism of a plain and simple boosting of the system on the other.

- 197 THERE IS A SCHOOL of sociology, originating in the United States, which has begun to raise questions about the conditions of existence created by modern social development. But while this approach has been able to gather much empirical data, it is quite unable to grasp the true nature of its chosen object, because it cannot recognize the critique immanent to that object. The sincerely reformist orientation of this sociology has no criteria aside from morality, common sense and other such yardsticks – all utterly inadequate for dealing with the matter in hand. Because it is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, this mode of criticism is obliged to concentrate on describing a sort of surplus negativity that it views as a regrettable irritation, or an irrational parasitic infestation, affecting the *surface* of that world. An outraged goodwill of this kind, which even on its own terms can do nothing except put all the blame on the system's external consequences, can see itself as *critical* only by ignoring the essentially *apologetic* character of its assumptions and method.

- 198 PEOPLE WHO DENOUNCE incitements to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous in a society of economic abundance do not understand the purpose of waste. It is distinctly ungrateful of them to condemn, in the name of economic rationality, those faithful (albeit irrational) guardians without whom the power of that same economic rationality would collapse. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book *The Image* describes the spectacular consumption of commodities in America, never arrives at a concept of the spectacle because he mistakenly feels able to treat private life, like something he calls an “honest product,” as quite independent of what he sees as a disastrous distortion or “exaggeration.” What he fails to grasp is that the commodity form itself lays down laws whose “honest” application gives rise not only to private life as a distinct reality but also to that reality's subsequent conquest by the social consumption of images.
- 199 BOORSTIN TREATS the excesses of a world that has become alien to us as excesses alien to our world. The “normal” basis of social life to which he refers implicitly when he describes the superficial reign of images, in terms of psychological and moral judgments, as the product of “our ever more extravagant expectations,” has no reality at all, however, either in his book or in the historical period in which he lives. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past – even in a past of religious passivity – he has no way of comprehending the true depth of society's dependence on images. The *truth* of that society is nothing less than its *negation*.

- 200 A SOCIOLOGY THAT believes it possible to isolate an industrial rationality, functioning on its own, from social life as a whole, is liable likewise to view the technology of reproduction and communication as independent of overall industrial development. Thus Boorstin accounts for the situation he portrays in terms of an unfortunate and quasi-serendipitous coming together of too vast a technology of image-diffusion on the one hand, and, on the other, too great an appetite for sensationalism on the part of today's public. The spectacle, in this view, would have to be attributed to man's "spectatorial" inclinations. Boorstin cannot see that the proliferation of prefabricated "pseudo-events" – which he deplores – flows from the simple fact that, in face of the massive realities of present-day social existence, individuals do not actually experience events. Because history itself is the specter haunting modern society, pseudo-history has to be fabricated at every level of the consumption of life; otherwise, the equilibrium of the *frozen time* that presently holds sway could not be preserved.
- 201 THE CLAIM THAT a brief freeze in historical time is in fact a definitive stability – such is, both consciously and unconsciously expressed, the undoubted basis of the current tendency toward "structuralist" system building. The perspective adopted by the anti-historical thought of structuralism is that of the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never disappear. This fantasy of a preexisting unconscious structure's hegemony over all social practice is illegitimately derived from linguistic and anthropological structural models – even from

- models of the functioning of capitalism – that are misapplied even in their original contexts; and the only reason why this has occurred is that an academic approach fit for complacent middle-range managers, a mode of thought completely anchored in an awestruck celebration of the existing system, crudely reduces all reality to the existence of that system.
- 202 IN SEEKING TO UNDERSTAND "structuralist" categories, it should always be borne in mind, as in the case of any historical social science, that categories express not only the forms but also the conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge a man's value according to the conception he has of himself, one cannot judge – or admire – this specific society by taking the discourse it addresses to itself as necessarily true. "One cannot judge such a period of transformation by its consciousness, but, on the contrary, this consciousness must be explained from the contradictions of material life." Structures are the progeny of the power that is in place. Structuralism is *a thought underwritten by the State*, a thought that conceives of the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an absolute. Its fashion of studying the code of messages in itself is merely the product, and the acknowledgment, of a society where communication has the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Thus it is not structuralism that serves to prove the transhistorical validity of the society of the spectacle; but, on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its massive reality, that validates the chill dream of structuralism.

- 203 WITHOUT A DOUBT, the critical concept of the *spectacle* is susceptible of being turned into just another empty formula of sociologico-political rhetoric designed to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract* – so serving to buttress the spectacular system itself. For obviously no *idea* could transcend the spectacle that exists – it could only transcend ideas that exist about the spectacle. For the society of the spectacle to be effectively destroyed, what is needed are people setting a practical force in motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it joins forces with the practical movement of negation within society; and this negation, which constitutes the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, cannot for its part achieve self-consciousness unless it develops the critique of the spectacle, a critique that embodies the theory of negation's real conditions – the practical conditions of present-day oppression – and that also, inversely, reveals the secret of negation's potential. Such a theory expects no miracles from the working class. It views the reformulation and satisfaction of proletarian demands as a long-term undertaking. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle – for, on the basis here defined, the very constitution and communication of a theory of this kind cannot be conceived independently of a *rigorous practice* – we may say with certainty that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the path of the practical movement that occurs at the level of society as a whole.
- 204 CRITICAL THEORY has to be communicated in its own language – the language of contradiction, dialectical in

- form as well as in content: the language of the critique of the totality, of the critique of history. Not some “writing degree zero” – just the opposite. Not a negation of style, but the style of negation.
- 205 EVEN THE STYLE OF exposition of dialectical theory is a scandal and an abomination to the canons of the prevailing language, and to sensibilities molded by those canons, because it includes in its positive use of existing concepts a simultaneous recognition of their rediscovered fluidity, of their inevitable destruction.
- 206 THIS STYLE, which embodies its own critique, must express the mastery of the critique in hand over all its predecessors. The mode of exposition of dialectical theory will thus itself exemplify the negative spirit it contains. The truth, says Hegel, is not “detached . . . like a finished article from the instrument that shapes it.” Such a theoretical consciousness of dialectical movement, which must itself bear the stamp of that movement, is manifested by the *reversal* of established relationships between concepts and by the diversion (or *détournement*) of all the attainments of earlier critical efforts. Thus the reversed genitive, as an expression of historical revolutions distilled into a form of thought, came to be considered the hallmark of Hegel's epigrammatic style. As a proponent of the replacement of subject by predicate, following Feuerbach's systematic practice of it, the young Marx achieved the most cogent use of this *insurrectional style*: thus the philosophy of poverty became the poverty of philosophy. The device

of *détournement* restores all their subversive qualities to past critical judgments that have congealed into respectable truths – or, in other words, that have been transformed into lies. Kierkegaard too made use of *détournement*, and offered his own pronouncement on the subject: “But how you twist and turn, so that, just as Saft always ended up in the pantry, you inevitably always manage to introduce some little word or phrase that is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections” (*Philosophical Fragments*). The defining characteristic of this use of *détournement* is the necessity for *distance* to be maintained toward whatever has been turned into an official verity. As Kierkegaard acknowledges in the same work, “One further remark I wish to make, however, with respect to your many animadversions, all pointing to my having introduced borrowed expressions in the course of my exposition. That such is the case I do not deny, nor will I now conceal from you that it was done purposely, and that in the next section of this piece, if I ever write such a section, it is my intention to call the whole by its right name, and to clothe the problem in its historical costume.”

- 207 IDEAS IMPROVE. The meaning of words has a part in the improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress demands it. Staying close to an author’s phrasing, plagiarism exploits his expressions, erases false ideas, replaces them with correct ideas.
- 208 *Détournement* IS THE ANTITHESIS of quotation, of a theoretical authority invariably tainted if only because it has

become quotable, because it is now a fragment torn away from its context, from its own movement, and ultimately from the overall frame of reference of its period and from the precise option that it constituted within that framework. *Détournement*, by contrast, is the fluid language of anti-ideology. It occurs within a type of communication aware of its inability to enshrine any inherent and definitive certainty. This language is inaccessible in the highest degree to confirmation by any earlier or supra-critical reference point. On the contrary, its internal coherence and its adequacy in respect of the practically possible are what validate the ancient kernel of truth that it restores. *Détournement* founds its cause on nothing but its own truth as critique at work in the present.

- 209 WHATEVER IS EXPLICITLY presented as *détournement* within formulated theory serves to deny any durable autonomous existence to the sphere of theory merely formulated. The fact that the violence of *détournement* itself mobilizes an action capable of disturbing or overthrowing any existing order is a reminder that the existence of the theoretical domain is nothing in itself, that it can only come to self-knowledge in conjunction with historical action, and that it can only be truly faithful by virtue of history’s corrective judgment upon it.
- 210 ONLY THE REAL negation of culture can inherit culture’s meaning. Such negation can no longer remain *cultural*. It is what remains, in some manner, at the level of culture – but it has a quite different sense.

211 IN THE LANGUAGE of contradiction, the critique of culture manifests itself as *unified*: unified in that it dominates the whole of culture – culture as knowledge as well as culture as poetry; unified, too, in that it is no longer separable from the critique of the social totality. It is this unified theoretical critique that goes alone to its rendezvous with a *unified social practice*.