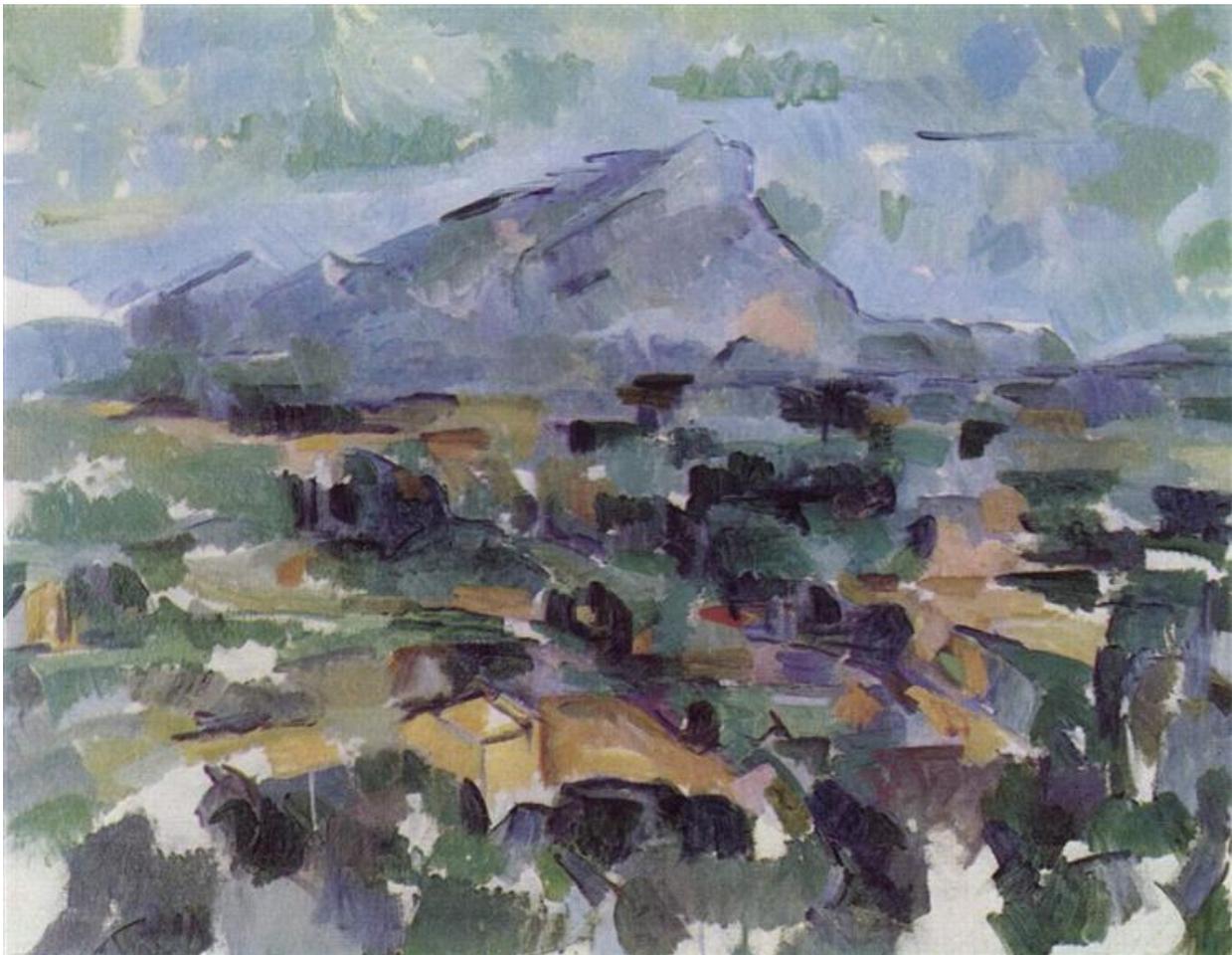


**PHL 890, Summer 2021:**  
**Art and Aesthetics in Phenomenology and  
Critical Theory**



**Participants:**

**Hollingsworth, Ramirez, Blacklock, Henrikson, Lotz**

**Ten sessions: 5/17-7/22, 2021**

## **FIRST PART: HERMENEUTICS & PHENOMENOLOGY**

## SESSION I (May 17): GADAMER I

### Reading: Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp.1-56 (essay)

1. *Introduction (against Hegel's claim that art is a thing of the past; G focuses on the historical dimension alone; Hegel's position is far more complex than how he presents it)*
  - a. Hegel, art as a thing of the past 4
  - b. Against Hegel: not loss, but the difference between present and past constitutes contemporaneity (tradition) 9, 46, 49
  - c. Historical consciousness = understanding = fusion of horizons
  - d. Beauty
    - i. Objective (Plato), B as the way in which the Good shines, truth is accessible
    - ii. Subjective (Baumgarten), B as a particular form of reason (perception); theoretical reason is not the only way in which truth is accessible
    - iii. Kant
      1. Aesthetics = autonomy (particular type of rationality) 18
      2. Taste = communicative 19 (important for G)
      3. Genius (G rejects this); In §47 of *the Critique of Judgement*, Kant famously declares that the artistic genius, whom he opposes to the pedant's rigid adherence to rules, is "entirely opposed to the spirit of imitation [Nachahmungsgeiste]" precisely to the extent that the genius "gives rules to art," that is, invents or produces a work that redefines the rules of the artistic game.
      4. Aesthetic judgments are based on the play of human faculties (G turns this into an ontological principle)
    - iv. Gadamer (anthropology)
      1. G tries to find *universal* characteristics that go beyond the conflict between subjectively and objectively oriented aesthetics = "regaining the idea of universal communication" 12
      2. Hermeneutics as the merging of the subjective into the objective (historically&aesthetically); we might say: experience of art is part of the "work" of art (=participation)
2. *Play (against Kant's subjective interpretation of play)*
  - a. Participation 24
  - b. Hermeneutic identity 25, "something stands before us" 15, not simply some thing; judgement is based on identification (not on perception), recognition of content
  - c. Difference 26, focus on the work
  - d. Activity = synthesis 28
  - e. Seeing = interpretation = reading 29, 48
3. *Symbol (against the claim that the work of art is a sign)*
  - a. Totality (sensuous idea)
  - b. Art = work (not message, not bearer+meaning)
  - c. Presentation 33
  - d. Representation = that what the work is "about" presents itself *in* the work and "is there" 34; the work of art is not a sign and meaning is not external to the work

- e. Mimesis 36 - The function of authentically “imitative” art is to create “living works” (lebendige Werke) *that contain their own principle of existence within themselves* (Schlegel)
  - f. Recognition, 36, 47
  - g. Listening 36
  - h. Communication 39
  - i. For G the work of art is *activity* on both sides the listener and the work itself; a synthesis must be established in which the listener *participates* in the work and the *work* communicates itself as something that transcends particularity
4. *Festival (against the claim that the experience of art is private/solitary)*
- a. Temporal unity, the work *enacts* its own time, it establishes its own unity *in itself* 39, 41
  - b. The work breaks through the everyday and useful activities, there is a “standstill” 41
  - c. Work = *living* unity, example rhythm 44
  - d. Dwelling 45
5. *Art*
- a. Art = establishes community as a transcendence of particularity towards universality, 50
  - b. Also see point 1
6. *Contemporary aspects*
- a. Meese: performance as “free play”
  - b. Mimesis as a concept that bridges Marxist aesthetics and hermeneutics
  - c. G’s concept of presentation in performance aesthetics

## SESSION II: GADAMER II

Gadamer, *The Relevance of the Beautiful*, pp.74-83; 92-105; 105-116; 116-131

### 1. *Image and Gesture*

- a. Art became “mute” in our times, no longer a unifying language 74
- b. Can something be saved from the humanist tradition?
- c. Historical consciousness: only the difference between past and present allows for a proper contemporary horizon; the humanist tradition allows us to encounter modern art as speechless 76; past and present “interpenetrate” 78
- d. Today
  - i. Images as gestures = meaning is at once present *in* the gesture and not fully disclosed, as it remains enigmatic 79
  - ii. Paintings of Werner Scholz (Expressive Realist): “They are themselves pictorial gestures” 80
  - iii. These works of art still *reflect our own world*, now in its enigmatic quality: “They are symbols of the unfamiliarity in which we encounter ourselves and our increasingly unfamiliar world” 82; here: mimesis&realism; these works still reveal a larger cultural meaning and world *in them*

### 2. *Art and Imitation*

- a. Today
  - i. Rejection of audience expectations 92
  - ii. Shock (Benjamin)
  - iii. Obsession with experiments 93
  - iv. Again, the rejection of traditional art is based on what G calls “historical consciousness”
  - v. Refusal of meaning, distortion of reading process 95/96
  - vi. Even if Aristotle’s concept presupposes some kind of shared horizon, today we still recognize something in the “fragmentary gestures” 100 of modern art
  - vii. Despite universal commodification and its destruction of the historical 102 art still mimetically reveals “order” 103 check also 129 culture industry
  - viii. “In the midst of a world in which everything familiar is dissolving, the work of art stands as a pledge of order” 104 --- well... Adorno might disagree
- b. Tradition of aesthetic thought (as resource for making sense of contemporary art)
  - i. Traditional aesthetic concepts
    1. Imitation
      - a. Certain formal assumptions: harmony, organism, proportion, etc
      - b. Not copy 94
    2. Expression
      - a. Display of feeling 95
    3. Sign
      - a. Traditional artworks need to be read
  - ii. Philosophy
    1. Kant (against the thesis that Kant offers a theory of ornament)

- a. For K, the work of art has an intellectual horizon 97
    - b. K's concept of genius is opposed to experiment 97
  - 2. Aristotle (against the thesis that we can no longer use mimesis)
    - a. Mimesis = Recognition (truth) 98
    - b. Mimesis = making something present 98
    - c. Mimesis = not copy! The represented is "more real", we might say 99
    - d. Mimesis = "what imitation reveals is precisely the real essence of the thing 99
  - 3. Pythagoras (against the thesis that the work of art is no longer connected to a universal "cosmic" experience)
    - a. Mimesis = cosmic order 101
- 3. *Poetry and Mimesis*
  - a. Mimesis = no utility
  - b. Poetic mimesis as the *ideal* form of mimesis 119 in the sense of *poiesis* it underlies all art forms
  - c. Mimesis = "letting something be there" 119
  - d. Mimesis = *not* based on comparison 119 = recognition
  - e. Mimesis = something is "emphatically there" 119 (i.e., increase of being)
  - f. Mimesis originally occurred in festivals/rituals = identification 120 = taking distance away 121
  - g. Mimesis is *paradigmatic* "The onlooker does not see anything in the representation beyond what it is represented there, any more than the player distinguishes himself from the role in which he is totally absorbed" 120
  - h. Recognition = knowledge of something essential and ideal = "Where something is recognized, it has liberated itself from the uniqueness and contingency of the circumstances in which it was encountered" 120 removed from chance
  - i. What G tries to do is to save traditional aesthetic concepts for the modern experience (which *seems* to be directed against mimesis, identification, etc.) = "aesthetic nonidentification" 121
- 4. *The Play of Art*
  - a. Intended play: games, rules, rituals, acting
  - b. Art as a particular human activity emerges out of a freedom that "accompanies the forms it produces" 125
  - c. This form is connected to *variability* 125 (so, G tries to argue that freedom is to be found on the side of the work!!)
  - d. The work of art is not utility; it is like an "as if" 126 (think of C. Oldenburg here)
  - e. Work of art establishes something ideal, a *formed image* (Gebilde), it stands on its own and does *not* refer back to the act of creation (i.e., the work of art cannot be reduced to a subjective process or the artist); instead, it "demands to be apprehended in itself as pure manifestation" 126 it communicates itself 127
  - f. The work of art is communicative, insofar as we must *participate* in it in order to "understand" 128 in this sense art is *not* based on escapism that the consumer desires 130

- g. "Play is less the opposite of seriousness than the vital ground of spirit as nature, a form of restraint and freedom as one and the same time" 130

## SESSION III: CASSIRER

### Cassirer, Art, in: *Essay on Man*, 176-217

#### 1. *Main theses*

- a. Art, for C, is a *symbolic form* through which human beings not only represent themselves and their world, but also make sense of themselves and the world. These representations are [1] objectifications and in this, at the same time, [2] reflexive. As such, art is on one level with religion, science, history, etc.
- b. C tries to establish the *autonomy* of art without referring to usual sociological interpretations (art became independent from religion, etc.): as such, “art is an independent ‘universe of discourse’” (194)
- c. In the course of this chapter C. argues in particular against naturalist, expressive/psychological theories of art, theories that are based on analogies, and theories that point to irrationality or reduce it to anthropological “functions” such as play.
- d. Art is [1] formative, [2] interpretatory, [3] rational, [4] revelatory, and [5] reflexive (objectification)
- e. Remember: the German term *Darstellung* (representation) refers to all of the above: art shows something in its formed content (it is concrete, not abstract)
- f. “Even the greatest admirers of art spoken of it as if it were a mere accessory, an embellishment or ornament, of life. But this is to underrate its real significance and its real role in human culture. A mere duplicate of reality would always be of a very questionable value. Only by conceiving art as a special direction, new orientation, of our thoughts, our imagination, and our feelings, can we comprehend its true meaning and function.” (215)
- g. Art “is one of the ways leading to an objective view of things and of human life. It is not an imitation, but a discovery of reality” (183)
- h. “The forms of art, on the other hand, are not empty forms. They perform a definite task in the construction and organization of human experience” (212)
- i. “art gives us order in the apprehension of visible, tangible, and audible appearances.” (213)
- j. “Even art may be described as knowledge, but art is knowledge of a peculiar and specific kind” (216)

#### 2. *Main theories that C rejects*

- a. Reductions, such as naturalism and imitation (implies that art is inferior to other “discourse universes”)
  - i. Both are “disturbed” by the artist (178); i.e., they are disturbed by the mediation of activity and the “productive process” (182)
  - ii. 19<sup>th</sup> Century realism is not to be confused with naturalism
- b. Reductions to expression (Rousseau), inner imitation
  - i. Art is formative (180), insofar as an *object* is formed: “Art is indeed expressive, but it cannot be expressive without being formative” (181)
  - ii. Poets are “*masters of emotion*” (190; emphasis mine)
  - iii. Expressions needs to be *externalized* (formed) (197)

- c. Both external and internal naturalisms overlook the “constructive process” (182); note: this constructive process occurs on both the side of the artist and the side of the work itself!
  - d. Psychologisms
    - i. Beauty is not in the “eye of the beholder;” rather it is based on a process of “perceptualization” (193) [Gadamer: participation]; the audience needs to appropriate the constructive principles of the work (Adorno: formative idea)
    - ii. The apprehension of beauty is not simply a “feeling;” rather, it is based on contemplation and judgement (so, it has rational aspects)
    - iii. Art is not reduceable to hedonism; it is more than simply the outward expression of pleasure; delight must be related to their formation and objective qualities of beauty (204)
  - e. Irrationalisms & analogies
    - i. Art is not the escape from law, reason, and an escape into fantasy 205; also think of psychoanalytic theories of art (surrealism, automatic writing, etc.)
    - ii. C argues against Nietzsche here: art is an autonomous form; it should not be analogized with dreams, intoxication, etc. (213)
  - f. Play theories
    - i. Although play and art are both not reduceable to practical ends (208), artistic imagination is not simply “playing around with elements.” Instead, it is the “power of invention” (208); note: C is not too far away from Gadamer’s concept of play
3. *Main concepts*
- a. Formation=the work as *formed content* (so, by form, C does not mean just lines, shapes, etc.); formation for C means that works of art reveal how particular aspects of reality *are*
  - b. Representation and Interpretation (183, 188)
  - c. Condensation and concentration (183)
  - d. Intensification and concretion (184)
  - e. Discovery (184)
  - f. Form = *formed* images; forms are not reducible to causes or effects (185)
  - g. Concrete forms (185), they are not abstract (impoverishment of reality): “The Infinite finitely presented” (201) (Tarkovsky, Schelling)
  - h. Judgments are based on *contemplation* (187, 188)
  - i. Universal communicability (187)
  - j. Objectification and selection (187)
  - k. *Particular* disclosure (187)
  - l. Formed content is not temporary; they reveal synthesis, unity, continuity, “structural whole” (208), “one indivisible whole” (192) (i.e., they are not objects of consumption); they are “alive” (similar to Gadamer) 188; they are not loosely connected instances, but reveal “the dynamic process of life” (190)
  - m. As such, they “penetrate into their nature and essence” (189)

## SESSION IV: HANS JONAS

### Jonas, *Homo Pictor and the Differentiae of Man*

#### 1. *Main points*

- a. Although this essay is an essay in philosophical anthropology, at certain points we can develop a horizon for philosophical aesthetics.
- b. The essay lays out how artistic activity (in a general sense) can be traced back to the general human imagining faculty.
- c. Note: the German term *bilden* means “to bring into image,” “formation.” The English term “fine arts” in German is “*Bildende Kunst*” [i.e., *forming arts*]; a “*Gebilde*” is a formed image and can equally refer to a sculptured image; the sculptor in German is called a “*Bildhauer*” [image carver]
- d. So, we should read this essay as an attempt to understand the *image forming faculty* of human beings as the fundamental symbolic activity; by “symbolic” is meant the way in which we can transcend the perceptual immediacy of our environment through the production of objects and reach into the universal. Although J does not reflect further on this, he tries to reveal the imaging faculty as the *basic* faculty that is in play even before speech.
- e. The main point that I find important in this essay is Jonas’ attempt to understand the image as a *triple negation* (even if he does not use the word “negation”): [1] the image *negates* its own being as a copy of something, and only *therefore* can it be “similar” to something; [2] the image negates the causal nexus from which it stems; i.e., it is an *idealization*; [3] the image *internally* negates its own material basis, although the latter remains in play as a “disturbance” of the image. Jonas call’s this the “expressive” (208). I think that this triple negation can be used for further reflections on painted images.

#### 2. Main image characteristics (taken from Schirra&Sachs-Hombach 2010, 152-153)

- a. Resemblance
- b. Internal intentionality
- c. Representationality
- d. Inconsistency
- e. Degrees of (un)similarity
- f. Emancipation from literality
- g. Visuality
- h. Creation of distance
- i. Inactivity
- j. Self-denial of the picture substance

#### 3. *Representation*

- a. Representations – even when conceived as *objects* through which we appropriate the world - are biologically useless (202).
- b. Likeness: something has to be recognized (203) & it has *intentional content* (by this Jonas does not refer to an intention in the mind of the image maker; rather, he means “intrinsic intentionality in the product” (203).
- c. Important: the likeness *cannot* be perfect (=internal negativity); this is important because one can extend this point towards the materiality of art works; he calls this

“ontological incompleteness” (204); an image is as a being always *less* than what it is 😊. I wonder whether Zizek stole this from Jonas.

- d. We might be able to trace back human freedom to this incompleteness.
  - e. The internal negativity at the same time makes *idealization* possible (205) = abstraction and stylization (206); insofar as the latter presuppose *freedom as differentiation*.
  - f. The idealization can further be spelled out as the difference of form and variation (207); form is a manifold unity of something; for example, the image rests while it may depict movement (207).
  - g. Important: The “presence” (208) and “self-giving presence” (212) of the image is based on its independence from the natural causal nexus (208); the internal negativity of the image can be “disturbed” by its materiality (footnote 4) though; Jonas calls this the “expressive function” (208); this is important for further considerations about painting.
4. *Perception/Visuality*
- a. The negativity of the image already contains its conceptual dimension (broadly construed); images are characterized by their *inner* intentionality; they are *of something* (even if this of ‘x’ cannot be identified) (211); the object as one that is completely ideal = *eidos*.
  - b. Again: if I perceive an image, then I am not “doing” anything; the presence of the *eidos* is “self-giving” (212).
  - c. The only precondition is a “disengagement from the causality of the encounter” (213); see point 2.g
  - d. Seeing pictures = “visual abstraction” (213); in this abstraction, phases of an object and “aspects” can be idealized as being *of something*.
5. *Representation and perception*
- a. The *eidos* separates from the thing (215), though, I would argue, the *eidos* of the image can only be thought of in connection with its thing-character. Jonas emphasizes too much, in my view, the ideal character of the image.
  - b. The first images in human history are based on *memory*; i.e., by turning the *eidos* of something memorized into an image (think of cave drawings and painting before it became possible to paint “in” nature: they are painted or drawn from memory).
  - c. Also: think about the important difference between drawing and painting, line and color, most assume that in the European tradition van Gogh and Cezanne broke through this, which, in turn would force us to think about the image as an “*eidos*” that cannot be independent from its material *enactment* (which in modernity becomes more and more central for the arts).
  - d. In this vein, the image making process is always based on “eidetic control of motility” (218) and has bodily aspects (I think that this can also be used for the arts in general); the arts take place *in the flesh* (also important for Merleau-Ponty)
    - i. how about conceiving the process of painting and bodily intentionality (!) as a form of dancing (even if we need to think about brushes, tools, hands, substance of paint, size of canvas, etc.)!
6. *One last point*
- a. Image making process = the realization of human freedom = negation (so, we find here the exciting prospect to localize freedom in the aesthetical realm, whereas usually

philosophers tend to localize freedom either in the theoretical realm (nature/mind stuff) or in the practical realm (action/morality).

- b. Sartre's essay on imagination would be a good addition to all of this: "Sartre is a philosopher of the imaginary. In an interview late in life, he admitted: 'I believe the greatest difficulty [encountered in my research for my Flaubert study] was introducing the idea of the imaginary as the central determining factor in a person.' If one takes 'imaginary' in the broad sense we have been using it, namely, as the locus of possibility, negativity and lack, articulated in creative freedom, this can be taken for an autobiographical remark as well." (Flynn, *Sartre. A Philosophical Autobiography*, 76)

## SESSION V: MERLEAU-PONTY I

### Merleau-Ponty, Cezanne's Doubt (in: *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*)

#### Cezanne, *Mont Sainte-Victoire*, 1906

1. *Background (from Galen A Johnson's introduction in The Merleau-Ponty Aesthetics Reader (Northwestern UP, 1993))*
  - a. For me, MP's essays (not only the two that we are discussing) are the pinnacle of philosophical essay writing; as to the question of the essay and philosophical thought, check also Lukacs and Adorno on the concept of the essay.
  - b. Published in 1945, after M-P's first main work *Phenomenology of Perception*; in *Sense and Non-Sense* he says that this particular essay contributes to his effort to "form a new idea of reason, one not restricted to logic and mathematics, but wide enough to comprehend the meanings expressed in novels, poems, and paintings" (quoted in Johnson, 8)
  - c. As such, C is treated in this essay as someone who can give us a pre-scientific and pre-objectified, "lived" experience of the world, here, the natural world.
  - d. MP: "by these words, the 'primacy of perception' we mean that the experience of perception is our presence at the moment when things, truths, values, are constituted for us, that perception is a nascent *logos*; that it teaches us, outside of dogmatism, the true conditions of objectivity itself; that it summons us to the tasks of knowledge and action" (quoted in Johnson, 8).
  - e. Cezanne is treated as an exception in modernity and therefore he is treated as an exemplar; in later essays Paul Klee becomes more important.
  - f. Cezanne is for MP a phenomenological philosopher who paints; we might say that Cezanne perceives *in the form of painting*, like a painter thinks, but not *in the medium of thought*. Even more, C stated: "The landscape thinks itself in me and I am its consciousness" (77, important also for the next text). Cezanne is presented as someone who remains *faithful to the phenomena* (i.e., no objectifications, rationalizations, perspectival constructions, etc.)
  - g. For MP, perception is identical with the embodiment of the world; so, the act of painting becomes important.
  - h. Realism: C stated that he did not paint from nature; instead, he attempts a "piece of nature" (quoted in Johnson, 11)
  - i. Remember from our last session: the conflict between line and color can be found in the history of philosophy between essence and appearance as well as between primary and secondary quality of things. Traditionally, the line was conceived of as primary. Here: "The drawing and the color are no longer distinct." (75)
2. *Main elements (from Johnson)*
  - a. Bracketing of scientific and objectifying assumptions.
  - b. Emphasis on the lived perspective in embodied perception.
  - c. The primacy of secondary and lived qualities in perception.
  - d. Artistic creation as a *fusion* of self and world.
  - e. The rejection of reductive views of art and art as overdetermined meaning.

### 3. *How art should not be approached.*

#### a. *Biography*

- i. Though it seems as if MP begins the essay with a *biographical* take on Cezanne's art, the point is ultimately exactly the opposite: "These conjectures nevertheless do not give any idea of the positive sense of his work; one cannot thereby conclude that his painting is a phenomenon of decadence [...] The sense of his work cannot be determined from his life." (70-71)
- ii. The relation between biography and art is then taken up later in the essay. MP argues that biography and work *fuse* into a unity; i.e., that we should not conceive of their relation as one of cause and effect (80); we might say that MP outlines an existentialist approach to painting.
- iii. "Painting was his world and his mode of existence." (69); "it is impossible to distinguish in me the given and the created" (81); i.e., the same counts for the work itself.
- iv. Overall, MP tries to reject psychoanalytic reductions without rejecting psychoanalytic interpretations as a whole; also see Sartre on Freud; the idea is that we inhabit our past; rather than being the result of it: "Whatever is arbitrary in Freud's explanations cannot in this context discredit the psychoanalytic intuition." (83)

#### b. *Art history*

- i. Though it seems that Cezanne should be seen in line with impressionist developments, MP argues that C turns away from how impressionists used color; he detects a turn from "atmosphere" to "represent the object" (72), and a turn from air/light to the "solidity and material substance" (72) of the world without creating a "picture" (72). Overall, MP wants to say that there is no *direct* deduction of Cezanne's "method"; instead, we should turn to the work itself.
- ii. "Rather than apply to his work dichotomies, which moreover belong more to the scholarly traditions than to the founders—philosophers or painters—of these traditions, we would do better to let ourselves be persuaded to the proper sense of his painting, which is to challenge those dichotomies." (73)

### 4. *Cezanne & Painting*

- i. "His painting would be a paradox: investigate reality without departing from sensations, with no other guide than the immediate impression of nature, without following the contours, with no outline to enclose the color, with no perspectival or pictorial composition. This is what Bernard called Cézanne's suicide: aiming for reality while denying himself the means to attain it." (72)
- ii. MP seems to say that C somehow tried to go back to what I would call the "In-Between"; i.e., the world as it exists in perception as something *between* subject and object, *between* mind and world, *between* self and nature, *between* object and representation of the object, *between* the artist's action and the painting (as an object of that action): "He wanted to paint matter as it takes on form, the birth of order through spontaneous organization" (73); the object *emerges* from

color (75); i.e., objects are not simply “there” and *then* painted in the painting; rather, they come out of the painted image itself.

- iii. Us-thing-relation = “we are anchored in them” (73); we “live in the midst” (76)
- iv. C moves away from the geometric construction of the world and returns to the truth of the lived world: “the lived perspective, that of our perception” (73).
- v. Seeing = non-objective and non-representational *living through* our having of the world (think of how you would describe the world from the perspective of the swimmer *while* swimming); seeing is no longer conceived of as a separated sensational capacity: “We see the depth, the smoothness, the softness, the hardness of objects; Cézanne even claimed that we see their odor.” (75)
- vi. Lived perception = synaesthetic fields (75); already Husserl argues that the sensational fields are the result of genetic processes.
- vii. What we conceive of as “distortions” of the “correct” view of the world; are in truth more proper to the way in which we live *in* the world.
- viii. Space is encountered through depth (74).
- ix. As the thing painted no longer exists *before* or independent from the painting; we should say that there is not *first* thought and *then* representation or creative action; instead, we should say that thought and representation *fuse* into one process = the painting “thinks” or perceives: “The sense of what the artist is going to say does not exist anywhere” (78).
- x. “Expression cannot, therefore, be the translation of a thought that is already clear, since clear thoughts are those that have already been said within ourselves or by others. ‘Conception’ cannot precede ‘execution.’” (78)
- xi. Penetrating the lived world and “to join the wandering hands of nature” (77) = true realism (76): “Émile Bernard’s statement that a realistic painter is only an ape is therefore precisely the opposite of the truth” (76)
- xii. Painting = knowledge, now conceived of phenomenologically as “breathing”: “Everything he did was done knowingly, and the artistic process, like the act of breathing or living, is not beyond his knowledge.” (81)

## SESSION VI: MERLEAU-PONTY II

### Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind* (in: *The Merleau-Ponty Reader*)

#### 1. *Background*

- a. In my opinion, this is one of the most beautiful texts written by a philosopher. You need to read it slowly and carefully. It is a masterpiece. MP had Proust in mind when he wrote it. The essay could perhaps be called “poetic philosophy,” as it invokes rather than argues.
- b. EM is a late text, written in 1960; it should be seen in the context of MP’s late main work *The Visible and the Invisible*.
- c. The publication was supposed to contain reproductions of works by Cezanne, Klee, Giacometti, Matisse, Rodin and others.
- d. Though not immediately clear from the essay, Rodin’s sculptures play an important role for this thinking about painting, as well as Klee’s pedagogical writings based on work at the *Bauhaus* in 1924.

#### 2. *Science/Life-World/Painting*

- a. The first paragraph opens up with the leading “theme”: science remains in distance to the world of perception and the world we live in; it turns things into variables, and turns beings into “objects in general”; it operates on the basis of “models.”
- b. MP warns that these reductions lead to a different way of thinking, a positivist form of thinking, in which it (and philosophy) turns into “collecting and capturing techniques” (351).
- c. Goal of MP’s phenomenology (extended from Husserl): “It must see itself as a construction based on a brute or existent world and not claim for its blind operations the constitutive value” (352).
- d. Phenomenology = “what we know about humanity and history through contact and through location”; i.e., not through scientific idealizations that construct a world “behind” the experienced world; MP wants thinking “be placed back in the ‘there is’” (352).
- e. MP warns that scientific positivism will lead to a “cultural regimen in which there is neither truth nor falsehood concerning humanity and history” (352) – I think that’s extremely contemporary!!
- f. Science is hostile to philosophy: positivism = “technized thought”, “operational thought” (366), philosophy = “thought in contact” (366).
- g. Painter = is able to enter the world of the “there is” beyond “knowledge and action” (353); i.e., beyond theoretical and practical reason; i.e., the painter is the phenomenologist *par excellence*.

#### 3. *Embodiment*

- a. Living in the “there is” is based on embodied perception: we should not think of perception and being in the life-world as one of “a mind seeing things” or “a brain taking in information;” rather, we inhabit our perception; mind and body, we might say, take place on the same level; it is an “overlapping” (354).

- b. Vision depends upon movement (from Husserl) (353); I do not move my body; I do not decide about movements; “my body moves itself” (354); there is not causal relation between mind and body and world; I am *in it*.
- c. Vision and perception cannot be constructed, advised from above, etc.: “his vision in any event learns only by seeing and learns only from itself.” (356).
- d. The “I can” constitutes vision: think of the moon that we see as one that we can grab with our hands; distance and depth is an embodied category, before every objectification of it in numbers; I do not need to measure the distance between me and the keyboard that I use for typing; I “know” that it is “within reach”; Wittgenstein: I do not need to check whether I have still legs when I sit down on the chair.
- e. “The enigma derives from the fact that my body is simultaneously seeing and visible.” (354) – “He sees himself seeing; he touches himself touching; he is visible and sensitive for himself” (354); self-touching=the distinction between subject and object breaks down.
- f. My body – *Me* – is not there like a thing among things; I am with things, in them, not in opposition to them; I cannot objectify myself and see myself from the outside; I cannot “beam” myself out of my place in the world; *I am body* = self-entwined and self-touching = flesh.

#### 4. *Painting*

- a. MP now “applies” what he said about embodiment to painting: “Now, as soon as this strange system of exchanges is given, all the problems of painting are there. These problems illustrate the enigma of the body and the enigma justifies the problems. Since things and my body are made of the same stuff, it is necessary that my body’s vision be made somehow in the things, or yet that their manifest visibility doubles itself in my body with a secret visibility” (355).
- b. Image = “the inside of the outside” (356); the image is a self-reflection of the world, insofar as it is, at the same time, both *in the world* and *outside the world*: “The imaginary is much nearer to and much farther away from the actual.” (356); it can only come about through incarnation (nearer) and it cannot be objectified (further)
- c. Painted images can only come about through and in *painting them*: “The painter, any painter, while he is painting, practices a magical theory of vision.” (357). Painting, we might say, “de-distances” ourselves from the world; we *enter* it; we “celebrate” the enigma of vision in painting, namely, the fact that the world is visible *although* we are in it; it is both distance and presence.
- d. In painting it is not us making the world visible; rather *the world makes itself visible to us*: “It is the mountain itself which from over there makes itself seen by the painter” (357); that’s a reference to Cezanne’s statement that the world thinks in him.
- e. Painting – in a non-objectifying way – makes vision visible (we can see ourselves seeing), as we usually just live through our perceptions and everyday activities (we do not “make” perceptions; we have no causal relation to our body); again, painting makes visible, but *not* in absolute distance; it distances us from our vision *by* not distancing us: “But it worked in them without them; it dissimulated itself in order to show the thing. In order to see the thing, it was not necessary to see the play of shadows and light around it. The visible in the profane sense forgets its premises; it rests upon a total visibility

which is to be re-created and which liberates the phantoms captive in profane vision.” (358, refers to the play of shadows and light in *The Night Watch*); painting “knows” something without putting us into a subject-object position.

- f. The non-causal and a-subjective incarnated being in the world is nicely illustrated by Klee’s statement that he felt as if the trees were looking at him (358)
  - g. Check the use of the mirror in van Eyck’s famous *Arnolfini Portrait* (1434) (MP, 359): <https://www.nationalgallery.org.uk/paintings/jan-van-eyck-the-arnolfini-portrait>
  - h. We need to look at (a) painting as *an act*: “The painter’s vision is an ongoing birth” (358)
5. *Against Epistemology*
- a. MP now outlines how Descartes’ epistemology is opposed to his own position: “A Cartesian does not see himself in the mirror; he sees a puppet, an “outside,” which, he has every reason to believe, other people see in the very same way, but which is no more for himself than for others a flesh. His “image” in the mirror is an effect of the mechanics of things. If he recognizes himself in it, if he thinks it “looks like him,” it is his thought that weaves this connection. The specular image is in no sense a part of him.” (360-61)
  - b. In general phenomenology is anti-Cartesian because [1] it argues that the dualisms that determine Cartesian epistemology and metaphysics are *founded* upon a world & experience that underlies these dualisms; [2] it argues that the “mind” exists as mind only in its embodiment. However, it remains Cartesian because it does not give up on the idea that intentionality and the ego should be thrown out; i.e., they do not follow the Spinozist route, as in Deleuze and Althusser.
  - c. Descartes
    - i. Descartes operates with a causal relation between mind/world, mind/body.
    - ii. The body is conceived of as an object/thing.
    - iii. Images are like texts (meaning pointing away from the material bearer, as we said earlier) (361).
    - iv. Resemblance is conceived of as a result of operations (361).
    - v. Painting is determined by the line (362).
    - vi. Depth is only secondary (362).
    - vii. D has a mechanized vision of seeing (365).
    - viii. D conceives of as seeing as thought (i.e., one that is not embodied).
  - d. MP against Descartes
    - i. “The soul thinks according to the body, not according to itself, and space, or exterior distance, is also stipulated within the natural pact that unites them.” (365)
    - ii. Body is not a means (367), organs are not instruments (367).
    - iii. Space = “I live it from the inside; I am immersed in it. After all, the world is around me, not in front of me. Light is found once more to be action at a distance.” (367).
  - e. Depth
    - i. Depth is a property of incarnated seeing itself; it comes about through movement and the relation between overlapping things that cannot be seen from God’s perspective; in the world of incarnated vision, things are not

“behind” each other (this already presupposes an objectified position towards the world”: “What I call depth is either nothing, or else it is my participation in a Being without restriction, first and foremost a participation in the being of space beyond every particular point of view.” (363).

- ii. Space is *of* itself: think about how you describe the experience of a room from being in it and not from looking from the outside on a building.
- iii. Renaissance paintings try to idealize space via perspectival constructions (364), especially in the Protestant tradition (especially Dutch paintings), see Svetlana Alpers: *The Art of Describing: Dutch Art in the Seventeenth Century*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983.
- iv. Depth = “I see things, each one in its place, precisely because they eclipse one another; they are rivals before my gaze precisely because each one is in its own place. The enigma is their known exteriority in their envelopment and their mutual dependence in their autonomy. Once depth is understood in this way, we can no longer call it a third dimension.” (369).
- v. Depth = “Pictorial depth (as well as painted height and width) comes ‘I know not whence’ to germinate upon the support. The painter’s vision is no longer a view upon an outside, a merely ‘physical-optical relation with’ the world.” (370)

#### 6. Conclusion

- a. “Now perhaps we have a better sense of how much is contained in that little word ‘see.’ Vision is not a certain mode of thought or presence to self; it is the means given me for being absent from myself, for being present from the inside at the fission of Being only at the end of which do I close up into myself. Painters have always known this.” (374)
- b. “The eye accomplishes the prodigious work of opening the soul to what is not soul—the joyous realm of things and their god, the sun. A Cartesian can believe that the existing world is not visible, that the only light is of the mind, and that all vision takes place in God.” (375)

## **SECOND PART: CRITICAL THEORY & MARXISM**

## Session VII: BENJAMIN

Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction (3<sup>rd</sup> version)*, in *Writings, Vol.4*, 251pp

### 1. Background

- a. B's essay is one of the most discussed and cited essays written during the last 150 years; the amount of research literature is massive; the editorial comments in the German collected works alone run up to 100 pages (*Gesammelte Werke*, Vol.I.3, 982-1063); a 150-page commentary is available in Suhrkamp's *Studienbibliothek* (commentary by D. Schöttker, pp.99-249); B was extremely well read in philosophy and literature; the essay contains many hidden references to excerpts and notes that he collected throughout his lifetime. It should be read in connection with the *Arcade Project* and his essays on photography.
- b. The second version that Horkheimer received and discussed with B in Paris at the end of 1935 was not discovered before 1989 and later added to the *Collected Works*; B himself worked on a French version of the essay which is influenced by Horkheimer's interventions and terminological shifts. In addition, manuscripts are available in which Benjamin works with excerpts from film theory in Arnheim, Balasz, Kracauer, Chaplin, Huxley, and others. The editor of the *Benjamin Handbuch* proposes an "integral reading" (230) of the essay that takes all versions into account. We are unable to perform such a reading in this independent study.
- c. Adorno was very critical of the essay (which has contributed to Hannah Arendt's claim that B was mistreated by Adorno and Horkheimer); however, Adorno's extensive critical interpretation in a letter written in March 1936 is the only detailed response that B received during his (short) lifetime. Selected aspects that Adorno brings up: B remains too close to Brecht; A rejects the revolutionary potential that B sees in film; A points out that the text is not sufficiently dialectical; A rejects B's thesis that modern conditions take away the autonomy of art; A argues that the work of art has its own technical conditions (art advances through pushing its own techniques forward)
- d. Adorno: "When I spent a day in the studios of Neubabelsberg two years ago, what impressed me most was how little montage and all the advanced techniques that you emphasize are actually used; rather, reality is everywhere constructed with an infantile mimesis and then 'photographed'. You under-estimate the technicality of autonomous art and over-estimate that of dependent art; this, in plain terms, would be my main objection." (Adorno, letters, in Jameson, 124)
- e. Adorno: "To a certain extent I must accuse your essay of this second romanticism. You have swept art out of the corners of its taboos - but it is as though you feared a consequent inrush of barbarism (who could share your fear more than I?) and protected yourself by raising what you fear to a kind of inverse taboo. The laughter of the audience at cinema - I discussed this with Max, and he has probably told you about it already - is anything but good and revolutionary; instead, it is full of the worst bourgeois sadism. I very much doubt the expertise of the newspaper boys who discuss sports; and despite its shock-like seduction I do not find your theory of distraction convincing - if only for the simple reason that in a communist society work will be organized in such a

way that people will no longer be so tired and so stultified that they need distraction.” (ibid., 123)

- f. First sketches of the essay appear in 1935 and are announced in a letter to Horkheimer in 1935; in a letter to W. Kraft B calls the essay a “telescope” for breaking through “bloody fog” and for getting through to that which he calls the 19<sup>th</sup> century’s *fata morgana* (cited in *Benjamin Handbuch*, 229); i.e., he wants to get to the true changes that took place in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, overcoming the nationalist and imperialist politics of his time.
  - g. Benjamin was a master of (German) language; all essays are *composed* pieces; the text reads like a *compressed* version of what could have been a 1000 page book.
2. *Political context*
- a. The French version came without section I (B was unable to convince the editors to include the opening in the essay); the essay basically remained without any reception for a long time; the main reception of the essay does not begin before the 60s; the German student movement recovered this essay as an “intellectual bomb” (because of the last section).
  - b. Benjamin – in contrast to Adorno and Horkheimer – saw the war coming; he has a better sense of political developments than Adorno. Still in 1938 Adorno claims that “according to their theory, war will not take place” (Benjamin/Adorno, *Briefwechsel*, 328), due to their stance on capitalism at that point in time (later revised).
  - c. Section I begins with a reference to Marx; Benjamin himself calls this opening an indication of the “political fighting spirit” of his theses that is supposed to be based on (new) concepts that are unable to be appropriated by fascism and, instead, could be used in the context of a revolutionary “politics of art” (SW4, 252) [*Kunstpolitik*].
  - d. Accordingly, the text can also be understood as a contribution to Marxist debates about the theory-praxis relation. The Anglo-American reception, as far as I can tell, tends to underestimate the revolutionary aspects of the essay.
  - e. B still believed at that point that a peaceful communist development of technology would be possible and that these can be differentiated from fascist technologies of destruction, imperialism, and war. Later Frankfurt School figures tend to give this up; due to their thinking about “state capitalism” in East and the West.
  - f. B does not assume that a universal commodification of life and art has taken place (compare to the culture industry chapter in AH’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*).
  - g. B does not outline how art would look like in a classless society or under proletarian rule; rather, he wants to outline the tendencies of art production “under current conditions of production” (SW4, 251-252).
  - h. B wants to overcome traditional concepts (appropriated by fascism), such as creation, geniality, a-historicity, mystery (GW1.2, 435; SW4, 252). With the downfall of the concept of genius individualism is supposed to fall (also think about movements such as Bauhaus, Werkbund, Novembergruppe who tried to close the gap between art and life and between art and society). Again, this is both philosophical reflection and political strategy.

- i. The first and the last sections with their comments on the fascist aestheticization of politics (check SW4, 270) need to be read together. This gets lost in the French version of the essay.
  - j. Again, do not lose sight of B's thesis that the loss of art (Hegel) can be compensated via the politicization of art.
3. *Title*
- a. B does not simply say "reproduction;" rather, he uses "reproducibility": works always had been reproduced; he wants to point to a break in the way in which art – as such – becomes reproducible through new, modern, media technologies. In the first version of the essay B. points to photography as the first "true revolutionary means of reproduction" (GWI.2, 441).
4. *The New Technologies and Perception*
- a. As to film and photography, chemical light recording replaces the *sensuality of perception* (this is important for B's thesis that new art forms change the way we perceive the world). Changes in world perception are *collective changes*. Pointing to the changes of how we perceive the world is a critique of old-style Marxism that does not take the revolutionary potentialities of the superstructure (politics, culture, law, etc.) into account. Culture = "perception of society as a whole"; philosophy of history is conceived of as cultural history.
  - b. The question is not whether photography is an art; rather, the question is 'how did photography change art?' (GW2.1., 447).
  - c. The new technologies of reproduction culminate in sound film which now can reach far broader audiences (which is important for the political aspect of the text).
  - d. The *material basis* of the reproduction changes with phonograph, photography and film (chemistry, electricity, mechanics, industry, etc.).
  - e. The new media technologies produce a new desire to *grasp* the original *in* the reproduction: "live" (illustrated papers were very popular when B was writing his essay; also think of mass propaganda events).
  - f. B describes the shift from *experience* to *perception*.
  - g. The new media technologies destroy the enclosed space of the museum; the work of art becomes *transportable* (think especially of recordings); how contemporary: Valery said that images "will appear and disappear at a simple movement of a hand" (SW4, 253). The work of art becomes de-localized and unrooted.
  - h. The exhibition value replaces the cult value of art.
  - i. The new changes are based on *habituations*; i.e., the masses perceive the world differently without really reflectively knowing it; the new media unconsciously change collective perception. Fascist aestheticized politics uses this for its own purposes.
  - j. We need to take into account that B is not interested in a general theory of technical reproduction; his interest is focused on the consequences for art. Rather than being exclusively an essay on media theory, it has philosophical underpinnings.
5. *Art*
- a. The concept of aura is a *philosophical* concept; it is used for a new philosophical aesthetics.
  - b. Main properties of the work of art: here and now, authenticity, aura.

- i. Here and now = unique *presence* in a particular place or location; art is *out of itself* “there” [*da*]; Heidegger: art = “check”; Adorno: art = “the sudden”; the work of art depends on tradition, forgetting, and re-appropriation *because* it is experienced as “here and now” within the emergence of tradition.
- ii. Authenticity = B does not mean “original”; see footnote 4 (SW4, 271): authenticity is the result of tradition = experience.
- iii. Aura = phenomenon of distance and inclusion in ritual; in a note B calls the aura “the holy” quality of the work of art (GW7, 677); i.e., “untouchability” (*not* visibility); aura = uncanny mix of an *absence that is present in the experience of the work*; the uniqueness and authenticity of the work is not an “objective” property of the work of art; rather, it emerges in the unique experience (i.e., presence of the audience) of the work as something that “stands on its own” (to use a term by Gadamer here); though a work of art can be reproduced, its aura cannot be reproduced!
- c. Perhaps we can think of contemporary attempts to regain the aura: De Maria’s land art, Beuys’ happenings, Rothko chapel in Houston.
- d. One might ask how B’s analysis of the revolutionary break in modern art is related to Hegel’s theses that beauty no longer is the way in which truth exists and that art is a thing of the past.

#### 6. *Film*

- a. Film is one step ahead of photography, insofar as art film comes about through montage, cut, etc.; i.e., processes that come *after* the recording event.
- b. The actors no longer perform in the presence of an audience; they perform in front of an apparatus; the actor becomes a *requisite* (Arnheim) on the level of things; the actors are *alienated* from their own humanity.
- c. The audience in film is potentially *unlimited*.
- d. The apparatus *turns acting into a performance* (contemporary: sports, politics), result: stars, presidents, dictators.
- e. The audience is connected to an *apparatus*, not the content (later TV, today computer).
- f. Members of the film crew become *operators*, also think of *operations* (surgeons vs. doctors). Painters are magicians, modern artists are technicians.
- g. Whereas the painter is related to totality, the film operators are related to pieces and parts and portions of a whole that is no longer present to them. We might think about how a few modern directors try to go against this tendency: Tarkovsky, for example.
- h. Film is the “proper” art for industrial capitalism; one might ask whether digital technologies are the proper superstructure for financialized capitalism.

#### 7. *Freud*

- a. We find an important passage on Chaplin, Mickey Mouse, and American film in version 1 and 2 of the essay that was deleted in the third version.
- b. Film = the “optical unconscious” (GW2.1., 461); B compares here film to Freud’s *Psychopathology of Everyday Life*, insofar as the film camera is directed at a different level to nature and its knowledge (through movement, time lapse, zoom, background, focus, etc.) [also think about contemporary cell phone cameras or security systems]

- c. On the one hand, American movies produce *collective* laughter and echo “psychotic” experiences; they can produce “mass psychosis” and collective repressions; on the other hand, Chaplin’s films have the potential for “therapeutical detonations of the unconscious” (GW2.1., 461) and for resisting fascist sadomasochistic fantasies. [I am not sure what to do with this when thinking about our own time...]
  - d. Chaplin = a laughing self-therapy that cannot be appropriated by fascist aesthetics; psychoanalysis becomes practical in film.
8. *Selected Observations*
- a. Intro
    - i. The conditions of production under capitalism are not restricted to the economic (in a narrow sense); rather, they can be found in the superstructure; it seems that B argues that cultural change now follows the capitalist changes during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> Century.
    - ii. I have the impression that B goes further: we are at a point at which the superstructure/culture *has passed* the economic; i.e., the true revolutionary potential is in culture. He has the Russian avantgarde in mind: “Historical materialism aspires to neither a homogeneous nor a continuous exposition of history. From the fact that the superstructure reacts upon the base, it follows that a homogeneous history, say, of economics exists as little as a homogeneous history of literature or of jurisprudence.” (Benjamin, *Arcade Project*, 470; GS5, 588)
    - iii. B stresses that this is precisely the reason for why not only praxis, but also theory needs to resist fascism via developing concepts that cannot be appropriated by the political enemy.
  - b. Section I
    - i. Reproduction is not new.
    - ii. The revolution begins with photography, as the eye is *freed from* the hand and replaced by technology.
    - iii. Reproduction accelerates perception of the world. It penetrates the reality.
    - iv. Technological reproduction can be applied *universally* to the arts, *and* it becomes an art itself (in art film, nowadays in photography).
    - v. Technological reproduction revolutionizes the classical concept and existence of works of art.
  - c. Section II
    - i. See my remarks in point 5.
    - ii. Technological reproduction de-tradionalizes art (SW4, 254). Again, the authenticity of the work of art is not an objective property.
  - d. Section III-IV
    - i. The new reproduction technologies are *collective* and change the *collective* character of perception; they reorganize the senses (on this, also see the early Marx; in the *German Ideology* are famous passages on the historical character of human sensual organization)
    - ii. To some extent, we can say that technological reproduction offers a bridge between economic development and superstructural (cultural) development;

the revolutionary technologies in the 19<sup>th</sup> Century belong to both spheres: “truly revolutionary means of reproduction” (SW4, 256).

- iii. Aura = “the unique apparition of distance, however near it may be” (SW4, 255).
- iv. Today: mass desire for being “live” = “the alignment of reality with the masses” (SW4, 256).
- v. The social function of art changes = collective = means for politics (SW4, 257).

e. Section V-VII

- i. The cult value becomes replaced by the exhibition value of art, not without struggle though. B points to portrait photography and conservative theoreticians (SW4, 259).
- ii. Photographic unconscious = photography can “unsettle” the viewer (SW4, 258); language is introduced as a control of vision [think of today’s role of images on social media].

f. Section VIII-X

- i. The recording apparatus destroys the “integral whole” (SW4, 259).
- ii. The recording process becomes a “series of optical tests” (SW4, 259).
- iii. The audience - actor relation becomes an audience - apparatus relation; however, this allows the audience to take a position of judgement [also think here of our contemporary world: blogs, social media, TV, etc.].
- iv. Theater actor = auratic.
- v. Film actors = alienation, destruction of empathy, identification, etc.; think of an actor who is forced to repeat a single move again and again before the camera operator accepts the shot [think of TikTok nowadays].
- vi. The apparatus = consuming audience; film actor = industrial worker.
- vii. The aura is supposed to be recovered through “stars” (SW4, 261).
- viii. Film can only be revolutionized if we destroy the property relations behind film capital (let us nationalize Hollywood!!).
- ix. The technological reproduction turns everyone into a “quasi-expert” (that’s not necessarily negative, B has democratization in mind) (SW4, 262).
- x. The audience becomes potentially an author (SW4, 262) [how contemporary this is!]; the difference between reader and writer falls apart; literary competence can be produced by training and no longer belongs to elites [B thinks here of some ideas of the Russian avantgarde].
- xi. The filming process ultimately destroys the myth of an “equipment free aspect of reality” (SW4, 263); this is eminently Marxian.

g. XII

- i. The entire relation between the masses and art changes [Adorno was afraid of this, B was not].
- ii. Here Brecht’s influence: a Chaplin film merges emotion and pleasure with rationality; it demonstrates a new model for how to unify identification (pleasure) and critical distance (critique).
- iii. From now on painting and theater can only be defined *through* their struggle with technological reproduction (SW4, 264).

h. Section XIII

- i. See my comments above in 7.
    - ii. Art gets a new “field of action” (SW4, 265).
  - i. Section XIV-XV
    - i. Contemplation vs. distraction and attention.
    - ii. Tactile nature of Dadaism (also film).
    - iii. Thinking vs. shock effect (SW4, 267).
  - j. Epilogue
    - i. There are two reactions to the newly proletarianized masses: “aestheticizing of political life” (=barbarism) or “politicizing art” (communism).
    - ii. Fascism appropriates aura for its own purposes: cult of the leader, fascination with technology and destruction
    - iii. Futurism is in its core fascist; the means of production become *out of line* with social development; self-destruction becomes an object of beauty; human alienation has come to its inner logical end; only communist revolution can harmonize means of production with social development; fascism is the sign of a failed revolution [how contemporary!].
    - iv. Think of Hollywood’s (fascist and sadomasochistic) fascination with apocalyptic visions and “spectacular” mass killings; this is a sort of contemporary futurism.
- 9. Last comment
  - a. If you want to write a paper on Benjamin, read the footnotes!

## Session VIII: LUKACS/BLOCH/EXPRESSIONISM

Lukacs, *Realism in the Balance* (in: Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics*); Bloch, *Discussing Expressionism* (in: Jameson, *Aesthetics and Politics*)

### 1. Background

- a. Lukacs was a famous intellectual around 1915, his works on the novel and drama are milestones in the aesthetics of literature; he turns toward Marxism around 1918 and becomes an active member of the CP; *History and Class Consciousness* appears in 1923. The book is the most important publication for what then becomes “Western Marxism.” The book was not well received by the official cadres of the CP; Lukacs distances himself from it later, especially after being forced to take back his “Blum Theses” (1928).
- b. The essays against Expressionism were received by Western intellectuals as a Stalinist position, insofar as the fundamentals for what later became “socialist realism” were developed in the 30s and 40s.
- c. Lukacs defense of classical modern literature from Goethe, Mann, and Gorky was neither appreciated by Western intellectuals nor by the Soviet intelligentsia. However, from an aesthetical point of view it is interesting to see how L tries to make a judgment about what is preferred.
- d. L moved to Hungary after the second WW and was active in the Hungarian parliament; for a short term he was the culture minister under Nagy’s reformist and pro-democracy government but was forced to leave after the 1956 uprisings failed. He was no longer allowed to teach or publish. The exclusion from the party was revised in 1967.
- e. Lukacs already published in 1934 a long article that evaluates Expressionism as an intellectual and artistic movement (Bloch reacts to this essay). In this essay he interprets the modernist avantgarde movements as a form of “escapism” (=romantic anti-capitalism).
- f. Lukacs’ seems to position himself here as an anti-modernist, but I think that a better way of approaching the 1938 essay (in Jameson) is a political perspective. What does it mean to approach art politically?
- g. On a sidenote, the entire Vol.4 of L’s *Collected Works* is devoted to the concept of realism (around 650 pages in small print); a few essays are translated in an edition entitled “*Essays on Realism.*” The essays do not exclusively deal with Expressionism; rather, they are devoted to developing a concept of *critical* realism. An important contribution to aesthetics can be found in the 1954 essay “*Art and Objective Truth.*” Lukacs’ later 1500 page two volume work on aesthetics remains untranslated.
- h. The debate on Expressionism largely focused on literature; however, I wonder with Bloch how this is related to Expressionist painting (nowadays the popular spearhead of Expressionism)
- i. L is at times terribly reductive: just think of artists such as Otto Dix and Heartfield (L thinks that it is all simply determined by the principle of “montage”).

### 2. Bloch

- a. B points to the absurd relation between Expressionism and Fascism (L never responds to this).
- b. He mentions that L excludes everything, except literature (11) (L never reacts to this)

- c. L “does not go to the core of the matter” (12).
- d. B claims that we find “the revolutionary element” in the “cries” of these modernist movements (14); L responds and argues that this “cry” remains subjective and is not related to social totality; i.e., remains fashioned protest.
- e. “all forms of opposition to the ruling class which are not communist from the outset are lumped together with the ruling class itself” (15).
- f. B questions the concept of social totality in L (16). L responds and defends the concept of totality with Marx.
- g. Confusion is not a phenomenon of decadence; L does not try to understand the modernist art movements from their own standpoint. L responds and argues that decadence is based on an alienation from life.
- h. The Expressionists were not elitist; they discovered again the folk elements in art (I agree with B here, though it is true that there are some “nationalist” overtones in Expressionism) (18).

### 3. *Lukacs*

- a. Lukacs opens up his essay with pointing out that the concept of modern art is itself not clear and that his opponents identify modernity with “literary trends” (24); i.e., he makes a distinction between “trend” and “epoch,” which, in turn, allows him to relate Expressionism to capitalism *as a whole*. As a consequence, these “trends” become trends *within* capitalist society.
- b. Progressive art movements are against “classicists”, claiming that they are the “true modernists”. L interprets this as a move of no longer taking the totality of the capitalist system into account.

### 4. *Totality*

- a. The concept of social totality is crucial for Lukacs: [1] it secures the possibility of a theory *of* society; [2] it secures a methodological Marxism and its categorial structure; [3] it is presupposed for a revolutionary position; [4] it secures the anti-naturalism of Marxist philosophy (i.e., capitalism cannot be derived from some underlying teleological or natural principles).
- b. Capitalism is the first social form of social organization in which its totality appears as a “series of elements” (27). The key word here is “appears”, as L wants to say that everyone who no longer acknowledges the systematic unity and totality of capitalism as a total organization of reality [1] remains ideological (this is a blow against Bloch) and [2] gives up a revolutionary position (insofar as this presupposes the possibility of total change).
- c. L assumes that, when he is writing, a revolutionary situation is in place. Objectively this is visible as social crisis; subjectively this is visible in the experience of disintegration (28); i.e., though modern avantgarde movements are the “echo” of this experience of disintegration, objectively it is capitalism that is at stake.
- d. Consequence: art as an intellectual activity *must* have a relation to the objective (social) reality. The belief that the artist stands somehow “outside” of society is bourgeois fetishism.

### 5. *Subjectivism and Realism*

- a. The language and the principle of “montage” (31) remain subjective; Expressionists only give us an account of how reality is *experienced* but exclude how this experience is related to the reality *that* is experienced (31).
- b. L argues against this subjectivism because it goes hand in hand with philosophical idealism.
- c. Thomas Mann: “He knows it after the manner of a creative realist: he knows how thoughts and feelings grow out of the life of society and how experiences and emotions are parts of the total complex of reality. As a realist he assigns these parts to their rightful place within the total life context. He shows what area of society they arise from and where they are going to.” (32)
- d. Realism, see the very influential passage on 35/36: the “goal is to penetrate the laws governing objective reality and to uncover the deeper, hidden, mediated, not immediately perceptible network of relationships that go to make society.”
- e. Only when the immediacy of life can be removed in art, then it can be “true.” For many successors of L this assumption is problematic, as it presupposes Marxist theory as the “correct” theory of social reality.

#### 6. *Modernist principles*

- a. The modern avantgarde remains “pseudo-radical” and a “mood” (32); they “remain frozen in their own immediacy” (33); they remain reactionary and do not probe the real world (34); prophetic figures can only be found in realist art (45).
- b. Immediacy and abstraction (=something either taken in isolated fashion or without content; see 37) go hand in hand (34); abstraction “involves the obliteration of all mediations” (35) and remains fetishistic.
- c. To be sure, for L art is always “abstract”, but only insofar as it remains oriented towards the essential as a “direction” (35); realism allows the “essence to shine through” (36).
- d. Realism should not be confused with naturalism (=positivistic).
- e. Aesthetic types = synthesis of essence and appearance.
- f. Consequently, the confrontation with reality, seen as a political praxis, remains abstract.
- g. What L criticizes is the underlying “stance towards reality” (40) on which modernist art is based.
- h. Avantgarde remains decadent, insofar as it removes itself from the totality of contemporary life (for L this is capitalism); i.e., they remain implicitly unpolitical (if by “political” we mean a position towards the social whole in its entirety).
- i. Subjectivism: chaos, isolation, mosaic, abstraction, solipsism, composite, fashion.

#### 7. *True Avantgarde*

- a. The true avantgarde are those who subject their work to the “objective human tendencies of society and indeed mankind of a whole” (46); though accused of dogmatism here, what L has in mind is that the “progressivism” and radicality of modern art movements remain “formalist” and are only pseudo-progressive.
- b. L seems to completely dismiss the inner logic of art that comes out of what Adorno calls the increasing “control over its materiality” (46); L translates art into an epistemology and attitude towards reality.

#### 8. *Political Position*

- a. L relates in section 6 of his essay the subjectivist but critical position of the Expressionist avantgarde to existing political positions during the Weimar Republic.
- b. What L wants: revolutionary position; what L does not want: “protest”, romantic anti-capitalism (48), or a position close to the USPD.
- c. Protest = pseudo-freedom (33)
- d. Side note: it is ironic that Adorno who disliked Lukacs, later makes similar points about US-American “protest songs” during the 60s; in addition: when Adorno says that we should philosophize from the standpoint of reconciliation, I wonder whether we can interpret this as a practical point of view, turned upside down.
- e. Seen from this point of view, the Expressionist avantgarde becomes an “ideology” with anarchist elements, “abstract pacifism”, etc. (50).
- f. Truly popular art has nothing to do with fashions or being eclectic about the past (52/53); it possesses a “living relationship to the cultural heritage” (53); the translation is not good, as Lukacs uses the term “volkstümlich” for “popular”, which indicates “being close to the people” (folk art); I think that this point is problematic from our own viewpoint, insofar as it presupposes a national homogenous cultural heritage.
- g. The avant-garde (Eisler) reduces the past as material to be used (54).

#### 9. Conclusion

- a. L’s position remains an intellectual scandal, seen from our viewpoint today, insofar as he implicitly (at the end of the essay) turns the modernist avantgarde into pre-fascist movements that, because of their subjectivism, prepare what came after. Given that the Nazis tried to eradicate all modernist intellectual and artistic movements, this implicit claim is just absurd (see Bloch’s essay).
- b. His at times “top down” attitude towards artists such as Eisler are truly bothersome; Brecht reacted with a mix of amusement, anger, and scorn.
- c. Nevertheless, the political radicality is fascinating and the frankness with which these artists and philosophers exchanged their positions remains unmatched in a left-liberal universe that by now seems to be taken over by political correctness, empty moralism, accusations via labels, and false niceties.
- d. Reminder: a *true* political analysis of works of art is difficult! I think that L’s concept of “attitude towards reality” is the right way to go, insofar as every artist must – explicitly or implicitly – position him- or herself *through the work* in this spectrum (in the end, as Sartre said, everything is political, and unfortunately even philosophers remain often completely oblivious).
- e. Though L’s essay remains tied to its context, I wonder how we could update his overall position for a critique of contemporary aesthetics based on identity politics and culturalist pluralism.

#### 10. Coda

- a. “The heritage of Expressionism has not yet ceased to exist, because we have not yet even started to consider it” (Bloch, 22)

## Session IX: MARCUSE

### Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension*; Marcuse, *The New Sensibility* (in *Essay on Liberation*)

#### 1. Preface

##### a. General

- i. I should underline that the “orthodoxy” that Marcuse attacks no longer exists in our contemporary discourse, though sometimes we see bad “sociology” of art and literature (in English departments 😊).
- ii. Autonomy thesis: M argues that the “political potential” of art lies in its form that transcends possible determinacies by social relations and can therefore subvert “ordinary experience” (so, this differs from Lukacs for whom the content is more important; M has the same preferences in terms of literature though).
- iii. “transhistorical substance of art: its own dimension of truth, protest and promise, a dimension constituted by the aesthetic form” (xii).
- iv. The difference between good and bad art is historically constituted; i.e., M trusts historically constituted judgements via *common sense* (stems from Kant).

##### b. Art and Liberation:

- i. Art is genuine if it is able to subvert “perception and understanding” (xi); the *sensual* aspect is important for M., as this points to a world in which technical rationality can be overcome by a new “sensibility”.
- ii. “The aesthetic rationality is twofold: (1) it establishes and preserves the internal link between the given universe and that of the work of art, (2) it invokes the images of liberation as those of a possible reality, viewed from the given reality.” (AL, 184)
- iii. New sensibility = “Creative work, not as hobby, as mere relaxation from alienated labor, but as the development of faculties set free in the total reconstruction and reproduction of society. Then, artisan work would not replace the technological, automated production; on the contrary, it would presuppose and preserve its achievements, it would emerge on the basis of technology and science. This would be the aesthetic formation of things ‘also according to the laws of beauty’ as Marx once noted: creation of an environment for the development of free individuals, of their desire, imagination, intelligence, of their peace, their triumph over violence and fear.” (AL, 188)
- iv. Art can only serve *for* the revolution if there is a revolutionary class (182); today: there is no working class (AL, 183); instead, we have integration (*Aesthetic Dimension*, 30).
- v. Transition to socialism = “The transformation of the mental faculties (receptive and creative) can become an impulse of radical social transformation only on a specific stage in the development of capitalism and communism, namely, the stage where the established social organization and division of labor, and the existence of men and women as performers of full-time jobs, have become manifestly unnecessary.” (AL, 187)

- vi. This change can only occur when we are no longer *forced* to labor and be integrated in the social process. However, art gives us a “pre-view” of a liberation from what M calls in his Freud book the “performance principle.”
- c. Subversive force
  - i. M rejects the Surrealist attempts to reach “directly” into the Unconscious; instead, art is always a mediated process (=subversion) (AL, 186), insofar as art consists not only in opening up new worlds, perceptions, imaginary possibilities, etc. but also in changing the libidinal structure of human beings; i.e., their desires, instincts, etc.
  - ii. Art is mediated because it can only work with *existing* material that comes from the existing society and the history of art; it is a process of *rationalization* (Vernunft) (AL, 185)
  - iii. “Art is the imagery of the potential appearing in the established universe of existence.” (AL, 181)
  - iv. “normal action and reaction are “suspended,” interrupted; people, things, and nature confront each other in a new, silent world of their own, without their business, function, performance, without their exchange value.” (AL, 181)
  - v. “a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle” (19)

## 2. Section I-II

- a. Orthodox Marxism
  - i. OM presses art into a “rigid schema” (3).
  - ii. OM reduces the superstructure to something secondary.
  - iii. OM does not see the centrality of subjectivity (consciousness, intelligence, passions, desire, etc); here Sartre’s influence on Marcuse is visible; also his Freudianism and the heritage of German Idealism; M does not give up the concept of individuality (=humanist and existentialist Marxism; this gets lost in structuralist Marxism, for example).
  - iv. OM dissolves subjectivity in extreme notions of collectivity (class determinism); against this M poses as the goal of liberation “the freedom and happiness of the individual” (69) as the core of aesthetic reason (we should say: “all” individuals!).
  - v. Subjectivity is not a bourgeois concept.
  - vi. Psychological aspects are part of radical praxis (5); i.e., love, hate, joy, sorrow are part of liberation (6); I think that this aspect of M’s thinking is really important.
  - vii. All of this makes clear why Marcuse was *so* popular during the 60s. He gave the 68-generation their concepts.
- b. Theses
  - i. “Rebellious subjectivity” is contained in the form of art, insofar as it sets free a new sensibility that “opens up a new dimension of experience” (7).
  - ii. The work of art “stands out” and transforms and reshapes elements to be found in “normal life”, such as language, senses, etc. Content becomes form (8).

- iii. Art confronts us with another vision of the world through its form: “emancipation of sensibility, imagination, and reason in all spheres of subjectivity and objectivity” (9); “cognitive and emancipatory power of this sensuousness” (66).
- iv. Art is committed to Eros (11); it has a libidinal base.
- v. Critique of Lukacs
  - 1. Lukacs functionalizes art and confuses art with *theory* (think of L’s claim about art and totality) (12).
  - 2. M criticizes L’s concept of type; however, check p.25; isn’t the absorption of social dynamics in a *particular* individual (in literature) precisely what L means by “type”?
  - 3. Art is in a certain sense ideological because it transcends the economic “base” (13).
- vi. Art cannot be reduced to “social content” analyses (15); i.e., it is not relative and has a universalist core that transcends every social aspect towards *humanity* (16), it consists of a transcendence of destructive and aggressive energy (17); this could also be used for a critique of contemporary identity politics in film and theater. Art is “transhistorical” (56).
- vii. Universality = “stylization reveals the universal in the particular situation, the ever recurring, desiring Subject in all objectivity” (23).
- viii. Art is not based on class (18); it transcends class society (24); in Western society the concept of class is no longer applicable (34).
- ix. In a liberated society art would become life (28); also think about how we would build cities in a world that would not be determined by the performance principle and the “rule of exploitation” (36)!
- x. Even inwardness might still be resisting existing society in which everything is “administered” (38).

### 3. Section III-IV

- a. The formation of material is the essence of art and establishes its transcendence = stylization (44); I tend to use the term *formed image* for this.
- b. “Mimesis is representation through estrangement, subversion of consciousness. Experience is intensified to the breaking point” (45) – think of Cassirer here!! - “transforming mimesis” (64).
- c. Promise = “It invokes an image of the end of power, the appearance of freedom” (46); perhaps we can say that the formation of materiality in art overcomes a destruction of the material (Adorno: there is still violence); also important for this thesis: Bloch
- d. Visionary aspect (*Vor-Schein*, Bloch) = the imaginary quality presupposes that life (history) could be different (46)
- e. The difference between art and life cannot be overcome (50); I am not completely clear about this: how about in a liberated society? The question would be whether a fully liberated society is possible.
- f. Does he interpret Warhol’s soup cans and brillo boxes as “renunciation of the aesthetic form” on pp.51-52? If so, I might not agree.

- g. Essence = “Only in the ‘illusory world’ do things appear as what they are and what they can be” (54)
4. *New Sensibility (3<sup>rd</sup> chapter, Essay on Liberation)*
- a. “Technique would then tend to become art, and art would tend to form reality” (EL, 24; this reminds me of Nietzsche, but also Arts/Crafts & Bauhaus); goal: “transformation of the *Lebenswelt*” (EL, 45)
  - b. “The new sensibility, which expresses the ascent of the life instincts over aggressiveness and guilt, would foster, on a social scale, the vital need for the abolition of injustice” (EL, 23); this is philosophically important since M argues that justice is a *vital* need (also check the interview with Habermas).
  - c. Socialism and liberation are based on a “new human being”: “no economic and political changes will bring this historical continuum to a stop unless they are carried through by men who are physiologically and psychologically able to experience things, and each other, outside the context of violence and exploitation.” (EL, 25)
  - d. “so that the aesthetic can become a gesellschaftliche Produktivkraft” (EL, 26); new sensibility as a productive force!
  - e. Protest movements of the 60s: “And the political protest activates in this dimension precisely the foundational, organic elements: the human sensibility which rebels against the dictates of repressive reason, and, in doing so, invokes the sensuous power of the imagination” (EL, 30)
  - f. Aesthetic reason as aesthetic praxis: “They can emerge only in the collective practice of creating an environment: level by level, step by step — in the material and intellectual production, an environment in which the nonaggressive, erotic, receptive faculties of man, in harmony with the consciousness of freedom, strive for the pacification of man and nature.” (EL, 31)
  - g. Aesthetic Form, mimesis as *formed image*: “In the aesthetic Form, the content (matter) is assembled, defined, and arranged to obtain a condition in which the immediate, unmastered forces of the matter, of the “material,” are mastered, “ordered.” Form is the negation, the mastery of disorder, violence, suffering, even when it presents disorder, violence, suffering. This triumph of art is achieved by subjecting the content to the aesthetic order, which is autonomous in its exigencies. The work of art sets its own limits and ends, it is in relating the elements *sinngebend* to each other according to its own law: the ‘form’ of the tragedy, novel, sonata, picture . . . The content is thereby transformed: it obtains a meaning (sense) which transcends the elements of the content, and this transcending order is the appearance of the beautiful as the truth of art” (EL, 43).

## Session X: Wrap-Up

2 page reflection papers, submitted by the end of Saturday, 7/17