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transitions

Marxist Literary and Cultural Theories

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make, it is perhaps that your novel is not quite realistic enough. Realism, to my mind, implies, besides truth of detail, the truthful rendering of typical characters under typical circumstances' (April 1888). The idea of 'typicality' would later be explored by Georg Lukács.

The legacy of Engels's preference was, however, much less nuanced. Communist marxism adopted this preference for realism as a prescriptive formula, and constructed an extremely narrow definition of it which lasted for several decades. At the Soviet Writers' Congress in 1934, Andrey Zhdanov (then Secretary of the Central Committee of the Soviet Communist Party) opened the congress with a speech in which he contrasted 'socialist' realism with the literary decadence of bourgeois art. The early twentieth century had witnessed the flourishing of 'modernism', a term which came to describe an international artistic movement which encompassed a range of experimental and anti-realist aesthetic movements, including symbolism, expressionism, imagism, vorticism, dada, cubism, futurism, constructivism, and surrealism. Modernism is often understood as a reaction to the urbanisation, the bureaucratisation and the rapid social change associated with modernity. In specifically aesthetic terms, modernism appeared to embody this in its reaction against realism and naturalism, denying the representationalism which characterised the dominant nineteenth-century modes. In contrast, socialist realism would 'express' the social reality of the new political system, a 'reality' which would be narrowly defined as a roseate portrayal of communism. Zhdanov urged Soviet writers to combine such realism with 'revolutionary romanticism': 'Soviet literature should be able to portray our heroes; it should be able to glimpse our tomorrow. This will be no utopian dream, for our tomorrow is already being prepared for today by dint of conscious planned work'. Thus Zhdanov was able to redefine 'romanticism' as a form of 'realism'. Such debates found few adherents outside of communist administrations. Adorno, for example, dismissed the official communist doctrine of socialist realism as the 'imbecility of the boy-meets-tractor literature' (Adorno et al. 1960, 173). But it did, of course, powerfully impact on those within communist parties and states, such as Brecht in East Germany, who devised his 'dialectical' theatre as a marxist rejection of the naturalist theatre of realism, officially sanctioned by the Soviet Union. Throughout his career Georg Lukács defended a 'critical realism' which, rather more cautiously, rebutted

One of the most common attacks on 'vulgar' marxist literary theories is that, in examining literature in its ideological, historical and social contexts, all considerations of specifically literary modes are forgotten. Yet marxist theories have, since their inception, been preoccupied by the nature of literary form, and this is especially apparent in the debates concerning realism and modernism. Realism as a literary mode is both aesthetic and cognitive, since it demands to be read against the context of what it is representing. Realism implies the possibility of 'knowledge'. It is not surprising therefore that realism has always had an intrinsic interest for marxist theorists. Realism is the form in which the interaction between literature and society appears to be most obvious. In realist texts, literature might be seen to reflect society, or history. The marxist critic therefore need only 'read' the contents of the text to see an image of society, and from there pursue the more interesting topic of society itself. This is rather unfair to such early marxists as Engels, who expressed a strong preference for literary realism. Engels knew that literary texts could not straightforwardly 'reflect', but needed to be made to do so. This would necessitate choices, selections, deliberation. We can see something of Engels's consideration of realism in a letter he wrote to Margaret Harkness concerning her novel, A City Girl: 'If I have any criticism to

'Eagleton 1981, 1, 159)
the programmatic definitions of realism by the Communist Party of which he was a member.

Lukács's realism

'The decisive ideological weakness of the writers of the descriptive method [or naturalism] is in their passive capitulation to these consequences, to these phenomena of fully-developed capitalism, and in their seeing the result but not the struggles of the opposing forces. And even when they apparently do describe a process – in the novel of disillusion – the final victory of capitalist inhumanity is always anticipated. In the course of the novel they do not recount how a stunted individual had been gradually adjusted to the capitalist order; instead they present a character who at the very outset reveals traits that should have emerged only as a result of the entire process.'

(Lukács 1970, 146)

Lukács, the most consistent defender of literary realism, was an extremely prolific writer of marxist aesthetics, largely because his political writings were denounced by the Hungarian Communist Party. His ‘Blum theses’ (1928) argued that communist attacks on all democratic-capitalist and reformist moves were ill-advised (see Anderson 1979, 30) and, although he published a recantation of this draft, his literary criticism and philosophy suggest that he did not change his private views. Like Marx, Lukács did not believe that all ‘bourgeois’ elements needed to be eliminated in socialism, and thus his championing of the novel, that ostensibly ‘bourgeois’ form, and specifically of ‘critical realism’, its appropriate mode, was of a piece with his earliest, ‘unorthodox’ communism. Lukács’s celebration of critical realism was opposed both to the modernism of many contemporary aesthetic movements and (if a little more obliquely) to socialist realism. He was opposed to the mechanistic form of reflection theory first espoused by Plekhanov and later adopted by Zhdanov, which viewed literature as the passive recorder of social trends and events. In its most extreme form, this argued that, in a politically decadent society, art would itself inevitably be decadent. Lukács countered this determinism in proposing a renewal of the classical realist novel of the nineteenth century, in a form appropriate to an epoch of socialist revolution.

Lukács’s defence of realism is as a genre in which human existence can be portrayed as resolutely social. In ‘The Ideology of Modernism’ (1957), Lukács argues that, while modernism portrays humans as essentially solitary and asocial, with only accidental or superficial contact with others, realism portrays individuals in their social and historical environment. Lukács traced the impulse of aesthetic modernism to philosophers such as Kierkegaard and Heidegger. As Heidegger, for example, wrote of human existence as ‘thrown-into-being’, so too the hero of modernist literature is portrayed as without purpose or design, as if his existence and experiences are merely accidental. With no pre-existent reality beyond him, he is confined within the limits of his own experience. The modernist hero is also confined within the moment, since his personal history is not portrayed. He does not develop through contact with the world. Lukács conceded that modernist writers, such as Joyce, Kafka and Musil, are rarely as abstract as this. But, he argued, the social, historical context against which they portray their characters (Dublin or the Hapsburg Monarchy) is merely a background. And the isolation of the characters is only compounded by the pervasive use of interior monologue.

Underpinning Lukács’s aesthetic theories is a philosophy of society and consciousness. He believes that, even in the fragmentary, disruptive context of capitalism, society is a unity and that it is the task of the marxist critic to recognise this unity. Under capitalism, the economy achieves unprecedented autonomy, and this is obvious when financial crises can arise directly from the circulation of money. Consequently, capitalism itself appears to ‘disintegrate’ into a series of elements all driven towards independence. The underlying unity of capitalism, the interrelatedness of all these seemingly autonomous elements, is then visible only in times of crisis. Knowledge of capitalism thus requires a dialectical grasp of both surface and depth, appearance and essence. Knowledge requires a recognition of ‘surface’ autonomies, separations, disunity and the ‘essential’ unity below. This philosophy explains why Lukács wanted to sketch a particular kind of ‘critical’ realism:

If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately and on the surface. (Adorno et al. 1980, 33)
Thus critical realism is distinguished from 'naturalism', which, in
confining itself to surface details, accepts that 'reality' is equivalent to
the immediacy of appearances. Naturalism arose in the second half of
the nineteenth century and is most often associated with the novels of
Zola. For Lukács the popularity of naturalism at this time is itself a
reflection of the alienation which people experience under capitalism.
(Although his criticisms of naturalism also need to be read as covert
criticisms of socialist realism, which Lukács could not attack openly.)

Lukács's clearest expression of the distinctions between naturalism
and critical realism is an essay entitled 'Narrate or describe?'.
Whereas naturalism describes events from the standpoint of an
observer, critical realism narrates such events from the standpoint of
a participant. Naturalism frequently presents abstract, schematic
characters, instead of realism's focus on action as the moment in
which 'typical characters with a richly developed inner life are tested
in practice' (Lukács 1970, 124). Naturalist writers overprivilege detail
and, in aspiring to ever greater precision, tend to replicate the divi-
sions of specialised labour by using 'correct', professional jargon.
(Lukács's example here is Zola's confident discussion of 'flats' in
the theatre; 136.) Realist writers aspire to the omniscience and com-
prehensive vision of ancient epic writers. Naturalism might portray social
problems, as indeed Zola's novel *Nana* describes the state of theatre
under capitalism and the capitalist connections between the life of the
actress and that of the prostitute, but, Lukács argues, these prob-
lems are stated as facts, rather than seen, or 'narrated', in the process
of becoming social problems. In order to avoid the excessive detail of
such techniques as naturalism, Lukács's definition of critical realism
requires that it does not portray those aspects of reality which are
immediately obvious, but those which are 'permanent and objectively
more significant', those which will 'outlast mere fashion' (Adorno et
al. 1980, 48). Critical realism will capture the tendencies of develop-
ment, the lasting features of society, if it can achieve both generality
and singularity. This it can do through the mediation of particularity
('besonderheit'), and its embodiment in the creation of characters as
types. These types must embody both the typical and the particular.
In Dickens's *Little Dorrit* (1855–7), for example, Merdle is the
financier of reputedly enormous wealth, but is 'imprisoned' by the
falsity of his status, and by the trappings of that false wealth, a spend-
thrift wife and an arrogant butler. For Leonard Jackson, Merdle is an
example of Lukács's type, since he figures both as an individual and as

a symbol of capitalism itself: 'Merdle ... would not be an allegory of
capitalism, a mere embodied generalisation about it; but nor would
he be a mere individual with some interesting personal idiosyn-
crasies, such as being a fraud with thousands of financial victims;
rather, he is a type, and general truths about capitalism inhere in
him' (Jackson 1994, 155). Thus for Lukács, critical realism is the genre
which accommodates the dialectical relationships between essence
and appearance, general principle and individual case, concept and
immediacy.

Lukács's warmest praise was thus for 'historical novels' in which the
hero is caught between two factions, whose conflict both defines the
hero's character and produces the emergent nation for which he
comes to stand. In Sir Walter Scott's novel *Waverley* (1814), for
example, Bonnie Prince Charles, who represents one side of the
Scottish-English conflict of the mid-eighteenth century, is an ostenta-
tiously minor character within the narrative, while Edward Waverley,
a character invented by Scott and designed to play the role of someone
caught between the two sides, is presented as an 'ordinary' and
'typical' character. His typicality is defined precisely by his having
experienced two sides of the conflict (not, as in vulgar marxist use, in
being a mere symbol of a class). This is dramatised in the first chap-
ters of the novel in the opposition between Waverley's father and
uncle. His uncle (Sir Everard) is politically Tory, a 'High Church'
Anglican and sympathetic to the exiled House of Stuart and is thus
sympathetic to the cause of the Scottish rebellion. Waverley's father, in
contrast, is Whig and supports the Hanoverian succession. Waverley is
formed by both of these men, as his father elects to share his upbring-
ing with Sir Everard. In order to be representative, such heroes as
Waverley are also necessarily portrayed as passive, rather than active,
played on by events rather than mastering them. Lukács's typical hero
is a 'middle-of-the-road hero' (Lukács 1962, 71) in the sense that the
action of the novel revolves around him as a passive 'hub'. And in
other ways Waverley might appear rather 'un-average'. With his poetic
fantasies he often appears as much of a 'literary' character as 'lifelike'.
But in Lukács's terms, Waverley is located in a precise way within the
form of the novel, in such a way that he draws together and reveals the
conflicts between three historically significant social groups (his Tory
uncle on the land, his Whig father in town and the Jacobite-rebel life of
adventure epitomised by the Highlanders). Waverley goes to Scotland
with a commission from the English Whig government which his
father procures for him. But his association with his uncle secures him an invitation to the Baron of Bradwardine, who is a Lowland Jacobite, and through him he meets the Highlanders, led by Fergus MacIvor. Throughout the novel Waverley's loyalty is split between such rival factions. For example, even though he fights for the Jacobite cause at Prestonpans, he retains some feeling for the army of which he was once part (see Scott 1906, 331). Waverley, like all Scott's central characters, has the function of bringing into contact with each other the extremes whose struggle fills the novel and the clash of these extremes expresses artistically a great crisis in society. The character of Waverley is thus not a historically significant type in himself but a vehicle for presenting typicity, the fusion between the individual and the general in history. Lukács found Scott's heroes interesting because they made history visible, even though, or rather because, by their 'middling' nature, they really did not participate in history. Rather, the great struggles and contradictions waged around them while they stood on 'neutral ground'. Thus while the relationship between the part (the 'typical' hero) and the whole (the social and historical context) is not that of pure reflection, the part does mirror the whole, if in mediated fashion. It is this formal mediation which differentiates his theory of realism from Zhdanovian socialist realism.

Lukács argued that the historical consciousness in literature, initiated by Sir Walter Scott, declined after 1848, when the bourgeoisie, having abandoned its conflict with the nobility for a struggle against the proletariat, turned decadent. Thereafter the bourgeoisie entered a phase of ideological decadence, in which the primary aesthetic expression is at first naturalism, before developing into twentieth-century modernism. For Lukács, modernism, like naturalism, is also a reflection of alienation under capitalism. Modernism accurately portrays modern consciousness as disintegrating, with discontinuities, ruptures, 'crevices'. But, he argues, modernism cannot know or reveal the extent of distortion because such distortion can be known only by comparing it with reality. Thus the consciousness of characters must be contrasted with a reality independent of them. (This explains why Lukács can praise the use of interior monologue only when this technique is set into relief by other perspectives.) Unaware of the limits of immediacy, the expressionists, for example, portray human existence as one-dimensional. This is the context for Lukács's advocacy of contemporary realism (especially the novels of Thomas Mann) and his argument that critical realism should renew the tradi-

tion of Scott and his nineteenth-century followers (identified as Fenimore Cooper, Manzoni, Pushkin, Balzac and Tolstoy).

In the late twentieth century, critical realism continues to be theorised by feminist literary theories, theories of film and popular fiction. Rita Felski reads contemporary feminist debates as re-enacting the marxist aesthetic debates of the 1930s (Felski 1989, 3), in which Felski, in her readings of autobiographical realist fiction, and Elaine Showalter in her criticisms of the modernist aesthetic of Virginia Woolf, continue in the tradition of Lukács (see Moi 1985, 4-8). Lukács's concept of the 'typical' is still present, though redefined, in black women's writing of the later twentieth century: instead of the 'middling' character Lukács identifies in the novels of Walter Scott, black women's fiction develops protagonists whose 'typicality' (the quality that best allows them to understand and represent a particular era) is their marginality. There is an important parallel here too with the positioning of the working classes in Lukács, what Jameson has called his 'standpoint theory' (in Corredor 1997, 92). In History and Class Consciousness (1922), the proletariat is a privileged site for dialectics: this class alone is able to view society from the 'centre' as it were, as a coherent whole because of their 'standpoint'. Because the proletariat is simultaneously, and uniquely, the subject and the object of the socio-historical process, the proletariat 'know' capitalism in a way which the bosses and administrators never can. Thus Jameson redefines realism as the coming-to-articulacy of an emergent group. The influence of Lukács, and the 'Hegelian marxism' we associate with his work upon Jameson means that he continues to exert an influence upon marxist debates today. But before turning to these contemporary debates, I need to sketch other marxist voices: those of Bloch, Adorno, Brecht and Benjamin.

The modernist response

'It is only with the second or monopoly stage of capitalism, and the emergence of a classical imperialist system beyond the confines of the various national experiences, that a radical aesthetic and epistemological doubt about the possibility of grasping society as a whole begins to be felt: and it is precisely this radical doubt that inaugurates modernism as such and constitutes the representational drama specific to it.' (Jameson 1990, 244)
Lukács was opposed by many contemporary marxists who defended modernism from the censures of both Lukács and orthodox marxism. These debates were particularly vigorous in the 1930s. The most famous of these interventions are Ernst Bloch’s defence of expressionism and Lukács’s subsequent reply, both published in 1938 in Das Wort (a Paris-based literary journal for writers in exile and a forum for anti-fascist writers and critics); and a series of essays by Brecht attacking Lukács’s theories (first published posthumously in 1967, though written also in 1938). Lukács’s attack on expressionism was because, he argued, its fragmentary style obscured society’s true interconnections which form a ‘totality’. In his view, the world only seems chaotic, but beneath this surface level is an underlying totality which makes surface appearance ideological. When expressionist works replicated this fragmentation, they thus colluded in perpetuating this ideological illusion. Bloch’s reply was to ask: ‘What if authentic reality is also discontinuity?’ For Bloch, the experience of capitalism is an experience thoroughly characterised by confusion and fragmentariness. Expressionist art explores the real fissures in society, an experiment which might be ‘in demolition’ but is not necessarily, as Lukács would argue, a ‘condition of decadence’ (Adorno et al. 1980, 22).

Brecht’s most trenchant criticism was that Lukács’s theory was insufficiently historicist. He questioned how bourgeois artists of the nineteenth century could be appropriate models for a new age. By denying the historicity of genres, Lukács had fallen into exactly the kind of empty formalism of which he accused modernist writers and their defenders. Brecht did not disagree that art ought to explore and reflect reality. With the rise of fascism in 1930s Germany, it seemed that the ruling classes were more able than ever before to disseminate their own ideas as ‘the truth’. The importance of art as a vehicle for countering those ideas was now urgent. But Brecht argued that writers and theoreticians could not afford to be rigidly prescriptive about kinds of realism, they needed to use whatever means suited the particular moment: ‘Reality changes; in order to represent it, modes of representation must also change’ (in Adorno et al. 1980, 82).

Brecht also criticised Lukács’s exclusive interest in the novel as narrowly prescriptive. Brecht himself of course was primarily a poet and dramatist. Speaking from his experiences as an experimental director and playwright, he questioned that realism was the more ‘popular’ form. Lukács’s definitions of ‘popular’ were conceived in the same way as those for ‘realism’: in both cases contemporary models were compared with previous models. But like realism, the nature of ‘popularity’ would and could change too: ‘There is not only such a thing as being popular, there is also the process of becoming popular’ (Brecht in Adorno et al. 1980, 85). Brecht’s arguments are certainly significant but he did not reply to Lukács with a comparable theory. Today this might be seen as a potential strength in Brecht’s own argument, but it did prevent him from really engaging with the terms of Lukács’s own theory and from providing his own comparable philosophy of aesthetics and the relationship between literature and society.

In an interesting discussion of the Brecht-Lukács debate, Terry Eagleton suggests that Brecht’s most significant manoeuvre was in shifting the terms of Lukács’s fixation with the ‘reflection’ of the ‘real’ (Eagleton 1981, 84–90). In criticising Lukács’s theory as ahistorical, Brecht also argued that ‘realism’ could only be judged retrospectively. Realism was not intrinsic in a particular form, what was ‘realistic’ for one period would not necessarily be so for another. Eagleton argues that: ‘[a] text may well “potentialize” realism, but it can never coincide with it; to speak in this way of “text” and “realism” is in an important sense a category mistake. Texts are no more than the enabling or disabling occasions for realist effectivity’ (88). Similarly the audience of the play is just as qualified to judge its ‘realism’ as the playwright, and if its response is that the play is not suitably ‘realistic’, then perhaps it is the audience itself, not the formal properties of the text, which needs to be altered. Brecht thus altered Lukács’s definitions of realism, which were aesthetic and ontological, to the political and philosophical definitions raised by his own artistic practice.

Brecht’s theatre was inspired by Erwin Piscator and the new workers’ groups, who turned their backs on the proscenium-arch theatres of bourgeois drama and performed instead in the street, at factory gates or in workers’ clubs. Brecht, like them, created a theatre which would radically oppose the prevailing naturalism. For Brecht, the effect of naturalism was to naturalise the unacceptable and this it did by persuading its audiences to identify so fully with the characters and situation that they unquestioningly accepted what they perceived. Brecht wanted his audiences not to suspend all disbelief, but rather to recognise the constructed nature of the stage’s representations, to recognise that all things could have been and might be otherwise. His theatre attempted, not to absorb its spectators, but to ‘estrange’ them. Actors might change into costume on-stage, or switch roles midway through performances, no curtain would screen
scene-changes, conflicting arguments might be displayed on film simultaneously with the stage action — all of these were common devices which Brecht used to create the estrangement (verfremdung) by which the audience would be roused to think rather than passively consume the ‘meaning’ of the play. Brecht outlined the differences between his own ‘epic’ or ‘dialectical’ theatre and the traditional ‘dramatic’ theatre explicitly:

The dramatic theatre’s spectator says: Yes, I have felt like that too — Just like me — It’s only natural — It’ll never change — The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are inescapable — That’s great art; it all seems the most obvious thing in the world — I weep when they weep, I laugh when they laugh.

The epic theatre’s spectator says: I’d never have thought it — That’s not the way — That’s extraordinary, hardly believable — It’s got to stop — The sufferings of this man appal me, because they are unnecessary — That’s great art: nothing obvious in it — I laugh when they weep, I weep when they laugh. ... (Brecht 1990, 71)

By making the everyday seem strange, Brecht’s theatre would expose assumptions of inevitability as ideological. Brecht’s theoretical writings are a necessary corrective to the ways in which ‘Brechtian’ techniques have subsequently become de-politicised. ‘Brechtian’ has become a cliche, applied to any production which shocks the audience, allows its actors to perform half of the performance in casual, rehearsal clothes, or changes scenery in view of the audience. Peter Brook’s production of King Lear starring Paul Scofield (1962) was widely received by the critics as ‘Brechtian’ because it alienated sympathy for Lear. But, as Margot Heinemann notes, this production was anti-Brechtian in its simplification of the play’s message: the servants who resisted Cornwall and Regan and tried to help the blinded Gloucester were cut from this production because Brook did not want the audience to be given the ‘reassurance’ that goodness existed. ‘[T]he crucial turning point, when the oppressed common people begin to resist the bullies and torturers, has to go ... ’ (Heinemann in Dollimore and Sinfield 1994, 247).

This detail in King Lear is one which Brecht would have fastened on, not just because it provides a marxist opportunity to demonstrate the possibility of revolution, but because it is in such details that Shakespeare’s plays display their ‘realism’. For Brecht, realism was not a matter of verisimilitude so much as the embodiment of contradictory material: ‘True realism has to do more than just make reality visible on the stage ... One has to be able to see the laws that decide how the processes of life develop’ (Brecht 1977, 27). In this, Brecht begins to resemble Lukács, insofar as his definition of realism is not reflectionist. In contrast to Eagleton, I would view Brecht as the ‘materialist realist’ which Eagleton considers as lacking from twentieth-century marxist theories. Brecht’s theatre company, the Berliner Ensemble, performed not just avant-gardist and expressionist plays (often Brecht’s own) but also adaptations of classical, even ‘realist’ play such as Kleist’s Zerbrochener Krug, Mollière’s Don Juan, Farquhar’s The Recruiting Officer, Goethe’s Urfaust, Lenz’s Der Hofmeister and Shakespeare’s Coriolanus. This last adaptation is the most interesting for us because the company recorded the discussions they had before rehearsing the first scene (see Brecht 1990, 252–65).

Coriolanus opens with a group of mutinous citizens (the plebeians) who complain that the Roman nobility feed plentifully and profit from corn while they starve. Particular hostility is directed towards the patrician Coriolanus, a successful leader, puffed up with his own pride and patriotism. Their revolt is suppressed by the news of imminent war against the Volscians, for which they will provide cannon-fodder, their loyalty bought by the granting of plebian commissars. The Berliner Ensemble celebrate the complexity and realism with which this scene interweaves class and nationalist struggles and discuss how they might perform the scene so that a marxist interpretation (here, sympathy towards and understanding of the plebeians) is true to the text itself. For example, the senator Agrippa tells the plebeians a parable of the ‘belly’ to justify patrician extravagance, but the Ensemble note that there is no textual evidence that the plebeians are convinced by this parable. No edition of Shakespeare included stage directions, and those accepted by traditional productions use merely those directions which were added later, when the plays were first transcribed. Thus one of the Ensemble suggests that the legionaries could come on stage slightly earlier than in usual performances: their silent presence on stage would suggest that the union between patricians and plebeians is not an ideological one (produced by Agrippa’s persuasive rhetoric), but because, more expeditiously, war is imminent and the legionaries themselves are better armed than the plebeians (258). Other elements of theatrical production permit
similar interpretations: costume (the second citizen who hesitates about revolution could be dressed slightly more prosperously, 257) and props (if the plebeians are armed with improvised weapons which display their inventiveness and craftsmanship, they will win respect and suggest that they are a real threat rather than comic 'low-lifes'). These interpretations are in marked contrast to performances in the bourgeois theatre, in which the scene is performed as an exposition of Coriolanus's character and the production identifies itself with the patricians' cause, not the plebeians' (255). But the Ensemble do not present their version as straying from the text. At one point, one of the actors protests: 'Coriolanus is written for us to enjoy the hero!' But the answer to Brecht's project is given by another: 'The play is written realistically, and includes sufficient material of a contradictory sort' (257). The Ensemble also situate the production within their own context: rehearsing in 1953, they consider the ways in which the play will be received by an East German audience after the Second World War: 'Spectators many of whom were still under the influence of Nazi myth and glamour, brought up in SA or Hitler Youth, could all too easily see the story in terms of the true patriot and military hero, stabbed in the back by the cowardly masses under Red labour leaders. The production must show no leader, however talented, is indispensable' (Heinemann in Sinfield and Dollimore 1994, 245).

Heinemann's essay on 'How Brecht read Shakespeare' notes how Brecht viewed Shakespearean theatre as prefiguring 'epic' theatre, its staging full of such estranging effects as daylight performances, boys playing girls, direct addresses to the audience (e.g. the choruses in Henry VI), the collective nature of constructing the play, the Elizabethan audience with its mixture of classes, and the ways in which the groundlings participated in the play (heckling, hissing, laughing), rather than the 'eavesdropping' which characterises bourgeois audiences (in Sinfield and Dollimore 1994, 232). Classical performances of Shakespeare had fostered a tradition of concentrating on the psychology of the hero and encouraging the audience to identify emotionally with his plight: Brecht argued that empathy was only ever intermittent in Shakespeare's theatre and that the plays' focus was on storytelling. This made Shakespeare closer to, say, Piscator's 'epic' theatre, in which the 'hero' was not the individual but the epoch itself, than so-called 'traditional' productions in which the impressive naturalism of the leading roles was the defining feature of the production.

(The psychological impersonation which we associate with 'traditional' productions was only instituted in 1741, when David Garrick played Richard III in a way which he described as 'bringing [acting down to Nature', in opposition to the more 'stilted' declamations of earlier acting modes.) When political theatre in the early twentieth century (Piscator, agit-prop, Tairov, Vakhtangov) began to practise anti-naturalistic techniques, their 'estrangement' techniques thus remind us of the historicity of stage-practice itself. The Russian director Tairov recalled that in the 'stylized theatre' launched in 1905–6, actors strove 'not to experience emotional suffering, anger, love, hate, or joy, but only coldly and calmly to represent them'. And one actor who worked with Vakhtangov in 1922 wrote: 'It should appear as if the actor were saying to the spectator: 'Now I am crying, but I, the actor, know about it. Look, I'm wiping my tears, and look, I'm not only wiping my tears, but notice how I'm doing it. ... One must ... feel one's attitude to the character and to history as a whole' (Drain 1995, 79). This kind of theatre is not anti-representational; instead it saves representation for dialectics, it is a kind of reflexive realism. Brecht's most significant response to Lukács is therefore not to be found in the reply which he intended for Das Wort but in the more radical definition of realism which his own dramaturgy implied.

While Bloch defended expressionist practice and Brecht defended the experimental techniques of his own theatre and poetry, the most sustained opposition to Lukács's critical realism came later, with Adorno's defence of modernism, an artistic movement which was only identified as such in the 1950s. Many of the modernist forms were non-representational, so that traditional theories of 'reflection' were inadequate in accounting for their particular ways of expression. And Lukács's analysis of realist fiction was unable to read those experimental works which foregrounded the process of literary production rather than communicating an unambiguous content. It is significant therefore that Adorno's aesthetic theories drew so often on music. (After completing his doctorate in music, Adorno studied composition under Alban Berg in Vienna and wrote extensively on Schoenberg, Stravinsky, Beethoven and Wagner, among other composers.) How might music be said to 'reflect' contemporary society? Such a question could only be answered on the basis of its form. Adorno's argument in Philosophy of Modern Music (first published 1949) was that music had been one of the principal art forms of the bourgeoisie since the baroque period. However by the
early twentieth century, radical modern music of the kind composed by Schoenberg and his associated composers, Berg and Webern, provoked a disjuncture between classical music and its middle-class audience. Their music was radically opposed to the everyday world of listeners, and indeed, in its extreme virtuosity, to many performers, but this entailed that its extreme alienation from society registered the meaninglessness of contemporary society: ‘The shocks of incomprehension, omitted by artistic technique, undergo a sudden change. They illuminate the meaningless world’ (Adorno 1973a, 131). A literary equivalent of this music might be found in a modernist writer like Samuel Beckett, celebrated also in Adorno’s theories. (Indeed, among the notes for Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory, published posthumously, was the intention to dedicate that work to Beckett.) Lukács’s ‘reflectionist’ theories of literature could only dismiss a writer like Beckett as ‘decadent’. (Lukács wrote that Beckett’s Molloy ‘presents us with an image of the utmost human degradation – an idiot’s vegetative existence’; in Eagleton and Milne 1996, 152) Adorno, in contrast, celebrated Endgame in terms which are similar to his analysis of contemporary music: ‘The interpretation of Endgame cannot pretend to proclaim the play’s meaning with the aid of philosophical mediation. Understanding it can involve nothing else than understanding its incomprehensibility, or reconstructing its meaning-structure – to the effect, that it has none’ (Adorno 1982, 120–1).

Adorno’s discussions of literature were thus not primarily considerations of ‘content’ or ‘subject matter’ but of such elements as form, style and technique which distinguished art as a form of knowledge from science. It was artistic form which determined how the artist ‘portrayed’ the objective world, and thus formal laws could not be reduced to Lukács’s consideration of form as arbitrary, an addition made by the ‘over-inflated subjectivism’ of the author. The modernist ‘portrayal’ can never be real in the same sense as social reality, since the relationship between the object (social reality) and the subject (the artist) is mediated by the creative process itself, the formal laws of art. Thus art is not a reproduction of the real but an aesthetic representation, or image of it. This distance between the artwork and reality then permits art to contradict and even critique the real. Thus, in Adorno’s famous phrase, ‘art is the negative knowledge of the actual world’ (Adorno et al. 1980, 160). It is in the distance between reality and its artistic representation that the work of art is both aesthetic and a valid mode of knowing reality:

Art does not provide knowledge of reality by reflecting it photographically or ‘from a particular perspective’ but by revealing whatever is veiled by the empirical form assumed by reality, and this is possible only by virtue of art’s own autonomous status. (Adorno et al. 1980, 162)

In Negative Dialectics Adorno argues that realism ‘equips a fallible language with the attributes of a revealed one’ (1973b, 111), exactly the kind of mistake Adorno also attributes to Lukács. Thus while Lukács criticises such writers as Joyce and Proust for over-subjectifying, Adorno’s response is that he has mistakenly conflated subject and object, and failed to recognise that their novels preserve a critical distance from the reality which they portray. While Lukács argues that the pervasive use of interior monologue entails that the characters of their novels are cut off from society, Adorno argues that this style reveals the ways in which individuals are isolated in capitalist society. This alienation is still a relation to the ‘social’, the individual is still positioned within the social totality, albeit one in which she is overshadowed or dominated by it. David Forgacs highlights this: ‘... Adorno adopts the view that the work must be read attentively in order to bring out what we could call the “double-reality” it contains. ... [I]t is not sufficient to see how Proust and Joyce reproduce an alienated condition, ... one must also see how their work transcends this condition by placing the individual subject within a social totality that takes “precedence” over him’ (Forgacs 1986, 190). These ‘modernist’ novels are thus no less ‘realist’ than the nineteenth-century novels which Lukács celebrates. (Indeed Adorno argues that Lukács overlooks the ‘unrealistic’ aspects of these texts. See Adorno et al. 1980, 163.)

Despite their obvious differences, Lukács and Adorno shared the belief that modern society is thoroughly ideological, that our perceptions of reality are alienated, reified, so that dialectical thinking is necessary to discover the essences which lie hidden. In History and Class Consciousness (1922), Lukács describes bourgeois thought as characterised by unmediated antinomies: subject and object, freedom and necessity, the individual and society, form and content. Because of the intrinsic duality (as opposed to dialectics) of bourgeois thought, reality ‘disintegrates into a multitude of irrational facts and over these a network of purely formal “laws” emptied of content is then cast’ (Lukács 1971, 155). Bourgeois thought is unable to see the
ways in which these elements are mediated within a complex system, unable to see their interrelatedness. Thus a concept of totality is necessary if we are to consider the relation between parts and the whole, and the interrelatedness of parts. Here the influence upon Adorno is strong, for Adorno’s own theories of ‘totality’ are responses to and continuations of History and Class Consciousness. In Adorno’s writings, modern society appears as an administered world, completely controlled by bureaucracy, administration and technocracy. Capitalism is categorised by monopolies rather than the market forces of the nineteenth century. Within this totality, the freedom of the individual is wholly illusory, personal freedom having been destroyed in an age of concentrated capital, planning and mass culture. Society and consciousness then become totally reified, appearing to be immutable, unchanging forms, solidified as objects. The capacity for critical thinking appears an impossibility. But the apparent impasse could be broken by means of art, and more precisely, the specific forms of art. And this is true of both theorists. In Lukács’s writing there is the utopian gesture of the realist form, that which could integrate subject and object, an integration which is unrealised in contemporary society. The contradictions of society are reflected in the content of the work but reconciled in its form. In Adorno’s theory, the modernist form itself displays the contradiction. When subjectivity is reduced to a ‘mere object’ by exchange value, avant-garde movements resist reappropriation by the market system. The practices of surrealism, for example, have been interpreted by Jameson as ‘a convulsive effort to split open the commodity forms of the collective universe by striking them against each other with immense force’ (1974, 96). Thus both Lukács and Adorno view art as a means to a true(r) knowledge of society, differing ‘only’ as to the form which this art-as-knowledge should take.

For Adorno however, critical thought itself might also achieve a freedom outside of the system, and such thinking would itself take the form of the modernist art work. Through the use of ‘provocative formulation’, ‘startling exaggeration’ and ‘dramatic emphasis’ in his writings (Held in Bottomore 1991, 5), Adorno hoped to undermine ideologies and to create conditions through which the social world could once more become visible. The opposition to closed systems of thought (such as Hegelian idealism, or orthodox marxism) can be seen in his own style, particularly in the extensive use of essay, aphorism, deliberate discontinuity (as in Dialectic of Enlightenment) and fragments (Minima Moralia). These styles demand that the reader engage creatively with Adorno’s own unystematic thought since the reader needs to make a critical effort to construct the logic of the argument. Style must negotiate between the immediacy of the object (here the work of art) and the abstraction of thought, the concepts by which the object will be perceived (aesthetic theory or criticism). This negotiation is thus a dialectic, between non-identity (the difference of all works to themselves and each other) and identity (we can think in concepts only in terms of the possibility of similarity). Many commentators have remarked on how each sentence of Adorno’s itself strives to be dialectical. Jameson, for example, writes that: ‘As with aesthetic modernism itself ... what you are able to construct in language has a certain truth by virtue of that very wrestling of language, not merely from silence as such, but from the baleful properties of the proposition form, the perils of thematization and reification, and the inevitable (and metaphysical) illusions and distortions of the requirement to begin and end at certain points, and to appeal to this or that conventional standard of argument and of evidence’ (1996, 11).

Adorno’s hostility to systematization is also evident in his attacks on ‘political art’ as programmatic. This hostility underlies his opposition to socialist realism (rather unfairly identified with Lukács), Sartrean engagement and Brechtian theatre. Adorno criticised Sartre’s idea of a committed art because his theories of commitment rely on the notion of content as the embodiment of the ‘meaning’ of the text and on an excessive subjectivism, as if authors have only to make their ‘free’ choice, a mark of their — and their readers — ‘authentic’ existence. Implicit in the first of these is an objection to denotative language as, however politically ‘radical’ its content might appear, it is bound to remain utterly conformist because of its form. Thus this critique continues Adorno’s privileging of non-realist forms. The second objection — that of the ‘objectivity’ of the form of art — argues that theories, like that of Sartre, which fetishise the author’s intentionality, forget that the text is objective in its intrinsic sociality, while they also overestimate the possibilities of ‘freedom’, ‘choice’ and ‘authenticity’ in an administered society. This argument can be seen in the following excerpt from Adorno’s Negative Dialectics:

For the theory of committed art, as it is current today, presupposes a superiority and an inulnerability to the basic reigning fact of life of
exchange society – namely, alienation between human beings and also between objective spirit and the society that it expresses and judges all at once. The theory of commitment demands that art speak directly to people, as though the immediate could realize itself immediately in a world of universal mediation. (Adorno 1973, 120)

Political art compromises the autonomy which is the mark of ‘authentic’ art to Adorno so that writers such as Kafka and Beckett, it is argued, ‘compel’ the change of attitude which committed works ‘merely demand’ (Adorno 1980, 191). But the confidence in the ‘compelling’ nature of such modernist writers illustrates Adorno’s own fetishising of a particular type of literature and thus reveals the deeper complicity of his theory with that of Lukács. Both espoused a specific form of art and elaborated its intrinsic suitability for a marxist aesthetic. And as a consequence both overlooked the ways in which their ostensibly competing theories intermeshed and the ways in which their definitions of the opposing form were imbalanced (and undialectical). In their commentary on these debates, Livingstone, Anderson and Mulhern argue: ‘Lukács inveighed against the irrationalist element in modernism, but was wholly insensitive to its positive disruptive moment: Adorno was justly contemptuous of the “optimism” prescribed by Soviet orthodoxy, but was unable or unwilling to acknowledge the equally reactionary “pessimism” of Western liberal orthodoxy’ (in Adorno et al. 1980, 149). They contrast these theoretical closures with Brecht’s undogmatic definition of realism as a ‘political and ideological end whose formal means were variable’ (149). This was evident in the discussion of the Berliner Ensemble above in which the company performed both experimental ‘epic’ works and the ‘realistic’ plays of the classical tradition.

While many commentators have criticised Lukács and Adorno in similar terms to those of Livingstone et al., their exchanges may be marked by the polemical nature of the exchange itself.20 This is certainly true of Adorno, whose theories do not always privilege modernist form so much as the formal laws of all works of art:

...every aesthetic work is an individual product and so always an exception in terms of its in-dwelling principle and its general implications, whereas anything which fits in with general regulations disqualifies itself from a place in the world of art. (Adorno et al. 1980, 172)

Adorno’s distinction here is not between realism and modernism but an implicit distinction between the ‘aesthetic work’ and the popular art of mass culture, a significant focus of his writing elsewhere (see Adorno 1991). Adorno’s writings on the culture industry are not, as Jameson has argued (1990, 144), theories of ‘culture’, but of an industry, of the ways in which culture is produced from reproduction and mass consumption by a system which simultaneously organises ‘free’ or leisure time, that last domain of ‘freedom’ under capitalism, into a system of production too. The culture industry continues the encroachment of capitalism into our every moment, while it presents itself as the gratification of desire and freedom. The culture industry is thus thoroughly ideological, nowhere more so than when we refuse to recognise it as dominant. While we will happily pay for the pleasures of the new Star Wars trilogy, Lucasfilm back such a project and indulges our desires primarily so as to maximise company profits. Titanic (1997) included a critique of class division, in its portrayal of romance between the genteel Rose and the unemployed artist, Jack, and in its sympathetic identification with the poor on board who were prevented from escaping. Many commentators and reviewers interpreted the film as a satire on the hubris of capitalism, represented by the ship itself. But we need to remember that, whatever its ideological ‘message’, it is also a film which cost over $200 million to make and which, within six months of its initial distribution, had taken $1.7 billion worldwide, even before television and video rights had been sold.

Adorno’s argument was also that our happy leisure hours only inoculate us against effecting political change, so that the entertainment industry becomes a means of political quietism. His argument suggests that there is a thin line between the workings of fascism and the Hollywood industry of 1950s America. This is an interesting correlation, but, as the following chapter’s discussion of cultural studies will show, it is also an exceedingly problematic one. Adorno’s own stridency is evident in his attack on jazz music as degenerate (though, in publishing this essay under the pseudonym of ‘Hektor Rottweiler’, Adorno seems to have been aware of the ferocity long before his critics used this essay to dismiss his work). In contrast to mass entertainment, the aesthetic work which is formally difficult remains relatively ‘autonomous’ from capitalism. Characterised by contradiction, it refuses conventional codes of meaning, and thus prevents itself from the domineering effects of instrumental meaning. Such a work
achieves a distance from the otherwise all-pervasive ‘culture industry’. The issue of ‘high’ versus ‘low’ art is deeply implicated in the debates concerning realism and modernism since ‘realist’ forms often appear to be less formally innovative, and consequently, more accessible. The arguments of accessibility and popularity have continued to be influential, for if art is to be a potentially political, emancipatory force, it will have to reach more than intellectual elites. This is certainly the argument of Lukács, Brecht, and even Bloch when he defends the incipient ‘populism’ of expressionism by its inclusion of folk art.

It would be unfair to allow the impression that Adorno privileges modernist art to stand. In his writings, aesthetic works of ‘high’ art are not innocent of ideology, and are in their own way moulded by the workings of capitalism. Such works are ‘autonomous’ only because they have excluded the working classes throughout their tradition because the market of ‘high art’ is ‘free’ insofar as it is unconstrained by need. Kant’s definition of the work of art as ‘purpose without purposefulness’ is thus revealed as ‘uselessness’ which frustrates and thus (apparently) escapes the domination of the market, but which is itself a product of that market. In Prisms (1967), Adorno writes: ‘all culture shares the guilt of society. It ekes out its existence only by virtue of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production’ (19). Furthermore, Jameson argues that Adorno’s distinction between the mass work of art and the aesthetic work is to be found in their representations and (non)/fulfillment of happiness. Adorno’s is consistently a pessimistic, gloomy view of contemporary society. In Negative Dialectics he wrote: ‘No universal history leads from savagery to humanitarnism, but there is one leading from the sling-shot to the megaton bomb’ (1973b, 320). Adorno certainly opposes the classical marxist belief that capitalist forces of production would generate a free society; for him, twentieth-century capitalism is moving not toward greater freedom but toward further domination and integration, an ‘administered’ totalised society. Thus happiness is that which does not and cannot yet exist, it is only what is not yet possible or achievable, the promise of its occurrence. As Jameson argues: ‘[w]hat is inauthentic in the offerings of the Culture Industry then, is not the remnants of experience within them, but rather the ideology of happiness they simultaneously embody: the notion that pleasure or happiness ... already exists, and is available for consumption. ... [Both] “genuine art” and that offered by the Culture Industry raise the issue and possibility of happiness ... and neither provides it; but where the one keeps faith with it by negation and suffering, through the enactment of its impossibility, the other assures us it is taking place’ (1990, 147).

We must remember that all these writers lived through fascist oppression. After the Nazi seizure of power in Germany in 1933, Bloch was branded a political enemy and escaped to Switzerland, Benjamin went into exile in Paris, Lukács to Moscow and Brecht escaped to Denmark while his books were banned publicly by the Nazis. By 1938 Adorno had left Germany, joining his colleague Max Horkheimer in New York, where the Institute of Social Research was now based after its own removal from Frankfurt. When we read Adorno’s writings on the culture industry, we might remember his most notorious injunction: ‘No art after Auschwitz’ and his discussion of this in his essay on ‘Commitment’. In the latter essay, Adorno balances art’s impossibility after Auschwitz with its necessity. The knowledge of suffering simultaneously demands and prohibits the continued existence of art:

(1) It is now virtually in art alone that suffering can still find its own voice, consolation, without immediately being betrayed by it. The most important artists of the age have realized this. The uncompromising radicalism of their works, the very features defamed as formalism, give them a terrifying power, absent from helpless poems to the victims of our time. But even Schoenberg’s Survivor of Warsaw remains trapped in the aporia ... There is something embarrassing in Schoenberg’s composition – not what arouses anger in Germany, the fact that it prevents people from repressing from memory what they at all costs want to repress – but the way in which, by turning suffering into images, harsh and uncompromising though they are, it wounds the shame we feel in the presence of the victims. For these victims are used to create something, works of art, that are thrown to the consumption of the world which destroyed them. (Adorno et al. 1980, 189–90)

Adorno wrote passionately and mournfully on contemporary inhumanity and domination. The last of his theoretical sparring partners – Walter Benjamin – cannot, like Lukács, Bloch, Brecht and Adorno himself, be said to have ‘lived through’ fascism: he committed suicide in September 1940 while attempting to escape from Occupied France to Spain.
Although Benjamin and Adorno both wrote celebrations of modernist art, their disagreements reveal that the debates of this chapter cannot be straightforwardly reduced to a contest between realism and modernism. Benjamin’s own aversion to a ‘realist’ model of reflection is evident in his rewriting of the base-superstructure problematic:

Concerning the doctrine of the ideological superstructure. At first it seems as if Marx here wanted only to establish a causal relation between superstructure and base. But the observation that the ideologies of the superstructure reflect the relations in a false and distorted manner already goes beyond this. The question is, namely: if the base somehow determines the superstructure in the material of thought and experience, but this determination is not one of simple reflection, how is it then to be characterized, leaving aside the question of the cause for its emergence? As its expression. The superstructure is the expression of the base. (Quoted in Cohen 1995, 28; emphasis added)

Benjamin attempts to counter the mechanistic reading of base-superstructure relations by allying marxism with a variety of non-marxist discourses, the most important of which is psychoanalysis. For while Benjamin reads from Marx that the superstructure is the expression rather than reflection of the base, his rewriting of this relationship as one of ‘expression’ is inspired by Freudian researches as to how repressed forces are expressed in dreams. The passage above continues with the Freudian analogy of the dream: ‘The economic conditions of a society’s existence come to expression in the superstructure, just as the overfilled stomach of someone who is sleeping, although it may causally determine the dream content, finds there not its reflection but its expression’. Benjamin’s break here with the orthodox marxist preoccupation with Enlightenment concepts of representation and causality is one of the reasons why he is a marxist theorist of particular interest to ‘post-marxism’. We might compare, as Margaret Cohen suggestively does, the revisioning of the base-superstructure problematic by Benjamin and Althusser. Althusser too problematises orthodox marxist reflectionism when he writes: ‘[t]he economic is never clearly visible’ (1979, 179).\(^{22}\)

Benjamin’s use of psychoanalytic ideas is one of Adorno’s (many) objections. For Adorno, psychoanalysis is implicated in bourgeois ideology and thus cannot be used as a type of science by which we might understand ideology. Benjamin adapts Jungian theories of a collective unconscious to suggest that images of pre-capitalist relations remain residual, awaiting a theory by which the cultural critic might transform collective dreams into ‘dialectical images’ which will have the potential to ‘awaken the world from the dream of itself’ (Benjamin quotes here from Marx; see Cohen 1995, 21–2). But this apparently ‘social’ use of psychoanalysis merely compounds the problem of excessive subjectivism for Adorno. Here, he argues, Benjamin is merely transferring analyses of individuals to society, and thus the centrality of the bourgeois individual subject is retained and even strengthened. Adorno’s foundational dialectic between alienated subjects and alienating objective conditions is swept aside by the introduction of a collective, prematurely classless unconscious.\(^{23}\)

The disagreement over the role of collectivity in thinking is linked also to that of mass, or popular culture. Susan Buck-Morss argues that their differences over the Baudelaire drafts were influenced by their ‘evaluation of the collective’s utopian desire’ (Buck-Morss 1989, 121). This difference between the two friends is paralleled by their disagreement over the potential of new technologies. For Benjamin, new practices, such as contemporary film, encouraged a new mode of reception: in place of the ‘aura’ or the unapproachability of the traditional art work, comes the immediate ‘shock’ of the audience confronted with something new. And as a consequence of this shock, the mass audiences of mechanically reproduced art would not merely consume the work but would adopt a critical stance, not only to the art work but to the capitalist society which produced it. Adorno was opposed to what he saw as Benjamin’s prematurely optimistic separation of technology from the bourgeois social relations of its use (see, for example, Adorno 1991, 157–8). However, if we think of alienation not in terms of the reification of social relations, but as the effacement of production, then modern technology becomes the means through which we can perceive commodification. Thus Benjamin is able to identify even in the commodity a revolutionary potential. In his analysis of nineteenth-century Paris, Benjamin argues that the development of the shopping arcades created not just a new style of consumption, but also a new kind of looking and a new consumer
subject who looked. Rachel Bowlby uses this analysis in her readings of Zola, Gissing and Dreiser, writers who, she argues, were responding to the sudden expansion of consumer culture and whose naturalistic styles are appropriate modes for such a culture. Selling itself is transformed by and into display in the arcades, which "appear as places of culture, fantasy, divertissement, which the customer visits more for pleasure than necessity" (1985, 6). Bowlby's readings reflect the ways in which popular culture has been defended by cultural studies approaches, as we will see in the next chapter, and counter Lukács's critiques of naturalism as fetishising surface.

Benjamin's confidence in the possibility of modern communications and mass art was explicitly influenced by Brecht's maxim: 'Don't start from the good old things but the bad new ones' (Adorno et al. 1980, 99), an inflection of Marx's argument that history progresses by its bad side. Film is the paradigmatic cultural form of modernity, but Benjamin traces the origins of modernism to the emergence of the city's technologies in the Paris of the Second Empire. Baudelaire is celebrated as the first modernist, a modernism traced through the simultaneity of his writing with the appearance of the daguerreotype, the panorama, advertising, the arcades (commercial passageways), the great expositions, and the use of cast iron, all of which altered the experience of city life. Social experience in the capital is now characterised by the 'shock' which will later become the formal principle of cinematic perception. It is the experience of 'shock' which links the factory worker with the stroller, or flâneur, pushed along or jostled by the Parisien crowd on the crowded pavements ('The shock experience which the passer-by has in the crowd corresponds to what the worker "experiences" at his machine'; Benjamin, 1997, 134); with the film-gazer ('[t]hat which determines the rhythm of production on a conveyor belt is the basis of the rhythm of reception in film'; 132), and with the gambler ('[t]he jolt in the movement of a machine is like the so-called coup in a game of chance'; 134). The prevalence of shock effects means that urban experience is one of immediacy, or 'living through' (Erfahrung) rather than the aural or Proustian experience of richly recollected inwardness (Erfahrung): 'The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli; the more efficiently it is so, the less do these impressions enter experience (Erfahrung), tending to remain in the sphere of a certain hour in one's life (Erfahrung)' (Benjamin 1997, 117). Benjamin's theory here appropriates Freud's theory of trauma, of the way in which consciousness functions so as to prevent shock-effects, in Beyond the Pleasure Principle. Benjamin does not denounce the experience of shock as a depressing expression of modern capitalism, submitting the self to alienation, to fragmentation. Rather the effects of shock are registered as moments of revolutionary potential, moments which might disrupt imaginary unities. Les Fleurs du Mal, despite the apparent conventionality of its lyric forms, contains a modernist aesthetic, not in a representation of material conditions, but in its inscription of reactions to material conditions. Not the city but the experiences of the neurasthenic, of the big city-dweller, of the customer.24 Despite the apparent differences in style, Baudelaire's poetry thus shares with the juxtapositions of surrealism and cubism and the montage-effects of Eisenstein's expressionist cinema an inscription of the shock effects of modernity.25 A more contemporary example might be Abel Ferrara's film Bad Lieutenant (1992). Depicting the spiritual degradation of a cop in contemporary New York City, this low-budget film uses hand-held cameras, improvisatory acting styles and long-editing takes to create a documentary style of visual narrative. At the centre of the film, however, and the turning-point for the 'bad lieutenant' (Harvey Keitel) himself, is the rape of a nun. This scene is shot in a studiedly different style, with surreal montage effects of shots of religious iconography interspersed with intimations of the violence of the rape itself. Thus this scene jars against the 'mainstream' viewing of film, with its search for coherence.

Benjamin and Adorno also differed on the question of surrealism and this, as Margaret Cohen has illustrated, is related to their quarrels over the drafts of the Baudelaire project or Passagenarbeit: Benjamin himself claimed the connections between his project and surrealism consistently during the twelve years he spent on it.26 Adorno criticised the second draft of the Passagenarbeit because, he argued, Benjamin's dialectic lacked mediation, instead offering an excessive 'concreteness' in the tendency to relate elements of Baudelaire's poems directly to 'adjacent features' in the social context of Paris. Baudelaire's wine poems, for example, are juxtaposed with wine tax duty and the prohibition on taverns outside city limits of the time. The mediation Adorno demands is that cultural traits should be mediated through the total social process, rather than related to corresponding features in the economic base. Benjamin links Baudelaire's poems on wine with taxation but omits the social and economic
tendency within which both operate and thus attributes to phenomena 'precisely that kind of spontaneity, palpability and density which they have lost in capitalism' (Adorno et al. 1980, 129). Benjamin has lost the theoretical perspective which would prevent this falsification in succumbing to his own form of 'positivism'. In his reply, Benjamin argues that this draft is only a section of a much larger sequence, in which he would frame this discussion within a theoretical discussion of the poet and the city.28 More suggestive, however, is the way in which Benjamin's own writing paralleled that of the surrealists, whom Adorno also attacked for their fetishism of immediacy and subjectivity, the violent mockery of arbitrary elements (see Adorno's essay on surrealism in Notes on Literature). Benjamin differs from the surrealists however in the ultimate pessimism of their message in which potentiality is never achieved (see Cohen 1995, 199). Benjamin, as Eagleton has argued, 'is in search of a surrealist history and politics, one which clings tenaciously to the fragment, the miniature, the stray citation, but which impacts these fragments one upon the other to politically explosive effect' (1990, 338).

**Realism/modernism/postmodernism**

This chapter has thus far retraced the marxist literary and cultural debates of the 1930s to the 1960s (although it has had to exclude many voices, including those of Marcuse and Sartre). But this focus is of more than historical interest to contemporary marxist cultural theories. For one thing, there has been a contemporary rejuvenation of interest in these thinkers.29 And these debates have been revisited in attempts to map our contemporary situation, the postmodern. If the 'postmodern is defined in terms of its difference from or even its erasure of the 'modern', then modernism is itself evaluated differently. And in such a climate, the earlier realism/modernism debates have been re-viewed.30 The most significant marxist theorist of the post-modern is the American critic Fredric Jameson, whose own approach is thoroughly imbued in the 'Hegelian' tradition of marxist theory which many identify with Lukács. Jameson's work is often influenced by antithetical marxisms. The Political Unconscious, for example, draws upon both structural marxisms (associated with Althusser and Macherey) and Hegelian marxisms (associated with Sartre and Lukács). But his synthesis of competing marxisms and his emphasis upon social totality as a standard of judgement for the literary text are both 'Hegelian' manoeuvres.31 Thus Jameson's work has continued to keep older forms of marxism alive, and allowed the 'Hegelian' work of Lukács to survive the attack upon it by structuralist marxisms.

Jameson has certainly been one of the most persuasive defenders of Lukács's theories of realism.32 Jameson's argument is that postmodernism needs to be analysed in a dialectical relationship with modernism, but in order to prevent this analysis becoming a binary opposition, it requires a third term, the (in itself complex) mode of realism. He identifies realism, modernism and postmodernism as the dominant (but not exclusive or determinant) cultural modes of respectively market capitalism, monopoly capitalism and multinational capitalism. Indeed, Jameson uses these three terms not to designate purely aesthetic or stylistic descriptions, but to pose the problem from the outset of the mediation between formal or aesthetic concepts and periodising or historical ones.33 His argument relies on the sense that contemporary, or post-war society, is marked by a constitutively different kind of society, variously termed multinational or media capitalism, or in Guy Debord's terms, spectacle or image society. Multinational capitalism is distinguished from earlier twentieth-century forms ('monopoly' or 'imperial' capitalism) by the emergence of new forms of business organisation (multinational or transnational corporations such as McDonald's, ICI, Dupont, Microsoft, Coca-Cola) and concomitantly a new vision of a world capitalist system which includes the international division of labour and a crisis in traditional labour (the cheapest First World products are manufactured in Third World sweatshops), a vertiginous new dynamic in international banking (millions lost in seconds on the stock exchange, and Second and Third World debt), new forms of media interrelationship, computers and automation, money as status evident in the emergence of 'yuppies' and rural and urban gentrification (Jameson 1992a, xviii-xix). Whereas modernism might be defined as a consequence of incomplete modernisation, postmodernism represents the triumph of modernisation, since it emerges at a time when even the term 'modernisation' no longer has any application (everything now already being 'modern'), a time when the archaic traces of the pre-modern past have been eradicated (see 1992a, 366). Thus the base-superstructure problematic is no longer appropriate for a postmodern society in which culture has become thoroughly commodified. 'Culture' is itself now fully infrastructural, so absorbed
in the economic that it cannot be disentangled from it, so that today one cannot talk about culture without simultaneously discussing economics and vice versa. ‘[E]very position on postmodernism in culture – whether apologia or stigmatization – is also at one and the same time, and necessarily, an implicitly or explicitly political stance on the nature of multinational capitalism today’ (Jameson 1992a, 3).

Jameson’s understanding of dialectics as the possibility of grasping capitalism as both liberating and exploitative, progressive and regressive, means that he himself studiously refuses either to castigate or celebrate realism, modernist or postmodern culture. In his reading of Conrad’s *Lord Jim*, for example, he contrasts the impressionist style of Conrad’s (‘high’) modernist aesthetics and the romance conventions of mass culture. Such oppositions reveal, in a Machereyan reading, the novel’s symptomatic splits. Impressionism and romance are recourses against the rationalisation and reification of nineteenth-century capitalist society. In the transitional period in which capitalism first transforms society it overlays older, traditional and pre-capitalist forms of society with the characteristic logic of capitalism as a system: a means/ends instrumentality which values efficiency, calculation and profit. This is the moment of rationalisation (or in Lukács’s term ‘reification’) which Conrad’s novels address in situating their plots in the margins of imperialism, in Patusan (*Lord Jim*) and in Costaguana (*Nostromo*). But reification also produces side-effects which then develop semi-autonomously. In Jameson’s example, the privileging of rationality under capitalism leads to a split whereby sense perception is divorced from an increasingly abstract rationalism. Conrad’s aestheticising style can be understood as both a consequence of this transition and a strategy by which his novels resist it. In the style’s foregrounding of the senses, reality is turned into image. This is an embodiment of reification, but it also projects beyond it, so that the literary text in its potential to resolve real contradictions on the level of symbol is both a figure of ideology in Althusser’s sense and also an emancipatory ideal. Literature transcends the real, even if only symbolically. Conrad’s style and the experience of industrial capitalism during the heyday of imperialism belong to separate realms and as such are relatively autonomous of each other. But in thinking through the text at the level of mediating codes (through which both: text and context can be discussed), Jameson resynthesises the elements of life which capitalism had torn apart and thus, he argues, realises the utopian potential of the text.

Jameson’s readings also attempt to reopen discussion of the realism/modernism debate, in such a way that its conclusions would not be decided in advance. (Modernism is usually judged to have ‘won’ in terms of twentieth-century marxist theories.) Thus Jameson defines the terms realism and modernism more broadly than is usually the case. For example, Jameson resists the absolute linear, chronological or even evolutionary sequence which this transition implies. In ‘The Existence of Italy he discusses film in terms of realism, modernism, postmodernism, despite its being an exclusively twentieth-century form (1992b, 155–229) and ‘realism’ is identified less with the (Victorian) ‘period’ of market capitalism as with the ‘conquest of a kind of cultural, ideological, and narrative literacy by a new class or group’ (156). This allows realism to be situated in, for example, early eighteenth-century England (when the novel’s emergence can be traced against the rise of the middle classes) and in the mid-twentieth century (when cinematic realism – such as the Italian ‘neo-realism’ of Rossellini and De Sica, or the British social realism of Lindsay Anderson and Tony Richardson – is associated with the confidence of the industrial working classes, in which they become filmic subjects in their own right). This argument is implicitly linked with Lukács’s theory of realism, which was not defined by reflectionism or theories of representation. Critical realism was never a matter of photographic accuracy (which would be truer of naturalism), but a mode of narrative (rather than description) which permitted an articulation of historical and social forces which ideology attempted to efface. Such counter-cinematic forms as Italian neo-realism, or the social realism of the contemporary British film-maker Ken Loach, for example, are marked by a rejection of the ideological stereotypes of mainstream Hollywood cinema for a documentary style (common production modes of realist counter-cinema include non-professional actors or, at least, non-‘stars’; visual authenticity of real locations; hand-held cameras; naturalistic dialogue). In *Ladybird, Ladybird* (1994) Loach allowed the story of a mother’s fight to prevent her children being taken away from her to be told from her perspective. We see how the social workers judge her on her past: a series of abusive partners and, as a single mother, her mistake in locking her children in a hostel room while she went to work. Now that Maggie (Crispy Rock) is in a loving relationship, those in social welfare continue to judge her according to their preconceptions of her life. Scenes in which Maggie and Jorge find successive new-born babies
taken from them by welfare, just after delivery, emphasises their sense of powerlessness. Loach's realism allows him to portray the tragedy of poverty in which people have few real choices and find themselves in situations they can do little to alter. The film reminds us that definitions of 'realism' which rely upon plausibility or 'verisimilitude' may be too narrow for the harrowing events which are 'real' for many people. It is a reality which is rarely enough represented.

Jameson also argues that realism in the late twentieth century has assumed forms which Lukács would have been unlikely to recognise, such as 'magic realism', contemporary postcolonial writing, and even advertising. Such 'postmodern' realisms are permissible because modernism itself has altered the ways in which we decide what is 'realist'. As modernist art has become institutionalised, canonised and commodified (Picasso postcards are bestsellers and Beckett's plays are accepted as ways of representing the modern condition), what at first seemed anti-realistic can be re-viewed. But postmodern realisms are also necessarily different from their nineteenth-century forms: Lukács's celebration of realism was as a mode which narrated the relation between the individual and society, the particular and the totality. But Jameson's conception of a social 'totality' in the postmodern period is of one which cannot be represented (though this does not mean that it cannot be known).

Equally, however, modernism's implicit attack on realism has also permitted a recognition of the ideology of realism. Where realism was once celebrated as a mode of exposing ideology (Lukács), realism itself, like all modes, might itself be seen as ideological. This chapter began with a discussion of the ways in which realism is cognitive as well as aesthetic and as such was valorised by the official Communist Party. Poststructuralist attacks on realism as an aesthetic mode have, however, censured it as an essentially 'bourgeois' form. Realism promotes a pretence of transparency or illusionism (in disguising its mode of production, the fact that it is a production); naturalises its perspective (in presenting itself as commonsensical); fixes a narrative closure (in aspiring to determine the interpretation of its reader or viewer); and either empties the reality which it represents of its contradictions or organises these hierarchically, thus reconciling them, rather than permitting them to interrogate and contradict each other. Such critiques of realism are associated with Barthes (who wrote of the 'reality effect'), the writers associated with Screen (principally Stephen Heath and Colin MacCabe) and Catherine Belsey. For

Stephen Heath, in a reading which blends Lacanian, Brechtian and Barthesian influences, representation confirms the subject in an imaginary self-coherence, gliding over the subject's setting in position, the very process and structure in which she is constructed. Heath finds among the 'lessons from Brecht' that of distanciation through estrangement, so that this moment of illusory fullness is broken, as the subject is reminded of the mode of representation. For MacCabe, the classic realist text is grounded in a dominant narrative voice which presents itself as the voice of knowledge. George Eliot's narrator in Middlemarch, for example, is the guarantor of meaning, the voice which exposes the limitations of her characters whose speeches are separated from this more 'truthful' voice by the inverted commas which enclose them. In the following passage the reader is encouraged to view Mr Brooke from the same position of omniscience as that of the author/narrator. Mr Brooke is surprised by the response to him from the drunken, violent Dagley when he visits his farm, but the narrator makes us recognise this surprise as self-delusion: 'He [Mr Brooke] had never been insulted on his own land before, and had been inclined to regard himself as a general favourite (we are all apt to do so, when we think of our own amiability more than of what other people are likely to want of us). (See MacCabe 1979, 13–38.) It is this ultimate narrative voice which controls the narrative: 'The unquestioned nature of the narrative discourse entails that the only problem that reality poses is to go and look and see what Things there are... The real is not articulated – it is' (Rice and Waugh 1992, 138). Thus realism consists not in the work's content, its 'realistic' subject-matter, but in its mode of presentation.

In these readings, the language of realism is interrogated by deconstructive scepticism. In MacCabe's account of classic realism, for example, the voice which represents itself as 'truth-speaking' is vulnerable to the same slippages and deferrals of meaning which haunt all language. But there is a political dimension to these epistemological discussions which MacCabe does not pursue (though Belsey, in placing classic realism as a product of, and simultaneous with, industrial capitalism does so obliquely). For the 'truth-speaking voice' is also an adoption of authority in a discourse which is then strictly hierarchical. Simon Dentith has written of the parallels between MacCabe's critique of classic realism and Bakhtin's criticisms of monologism, but he notes also this divergence: where MacCabe's focus is epistemological, Bakhtin's is ethical and social, in which 'the
objection to the monologic “discursive hierarchy” is that it represents a politically unacceptable arrogation of authority and the celebration of polyphony is not simply ‘a celebration of the other’s word but a responsible engagement with it – though of course with no attempt to arrogate the final word’ (Dentith 1995, 94). Maria Edgeworth’s *Castle Rackrent* (1800) explores just these issues. This novel consists of (at least) two voices, that of the illiterate Irish peasant Thady and that of the English (or Anglo-Irish) editor, who transcribes Thady’s tale and ‘translates’ his vernacular so that the novel's English readers can understand his account of the Rackrent family. The editor is the ostensibly ‘neutral’ scholar, adding the textual apparatus of footnotes and glossary. But the novel permits us to see that the authority of his status might also be a form of domination. Before Thady’s account even begins, the editor is already telling his readers the significance of the ‘Monday’ on which Thady begins his account, for the work-ship Irish are forever postponing things until a Monday. Edgeworth’s experimental realism in *Castle Rackrent* permits her two voices to comment upon one another, but the editor, as the educated man, always has the last word. Thady cannot comment directly upon the editor’s notes, and thus these are ironised only if we read them, and the supporting voices they invoke (such as the English colonial writers Gerald of Wales and Edmund Spenser) from the perspective of Thady’s Irishness. Edgeworth’s novel is then hierarchically dialogic.

MacCabe’s analysis also risks an exaggerated formalism in celebrating anti-realism as an absolute good. His opposition to Lukács’s celebration of classic realism becomes a mirror image of it, in which the argument becomes a question of the intrinsically ‘progressive’ or ‘regressive’ effects of that realism. But if we situate the practices of ‘realism’ or ‘modernism’ within specific contexts, the effects of their practices cannot be so (pre-)determined. This is largely Jameson’s argument, but it is also Brecht’s. As Eagleton has argued (1980), Brecht was not opposed to representation in itself; he was opposed to non-contradictory representation. (And, Eagleton argues, the influential 1974 volume of *Screen* edited out Brecht’s contradictions ‘in the interests of presenting him as an avant-gardist’; 1980, 163.) For Brecht, representational modes do not always have realist effects: realist writing and film-making may be more radical, in reaching a wide audience, for example, than modernist experimentalisms, enjoyed only by educated elites. Thus collapsing formalist radicalism into socialist radicalism may be all too premature.

**Notes**

1. This letter is reprinted in Craig (1975, 269–71).
2. The Congress’s most infamous comment on modernism is Karl Radek’s denunciation of Joyce’s *Ulysses* as a ‘heap of dung, crawling with worms, photographed by a cinema apparatus through a microscope’ (Milner 1993, 27). Such an attack is an important, if implicit, context for Adorno’s defences of modernism.
3. ‘Symbolism’ is most associated with French poets of the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Baudelaire, Rimbaud, Verlaine, Mallarmé and Valéry) whose intense mixing and blurring of the senses and poetic images was an attempt to portray the ‘reality’ of consciousness through suggestion and evocation rather than through direct description. In ‘expressionist’ works of the early twentieth century, reality is shown to be distorted by emotional or irrational perspectives (Van Gogh, Strindberg and Wiene’s *The Cabinet of Dr Caligari* are examples in painting, theatre and film). ‘Imagism’ is associated primarily with the poetry of Ezra Pound (and flourished from 1910–17). In which short, impersonal lyric poems attempt to treat the object with precision rather than with overt symbolic intent. ‘Vorticism’, associated with Wyndham Lewis and Ezra Pound (flourishing between 1912–15), depicted abstract compositions of bold lines, sharp angles and planes. ‘Dada’ styles used collage to arrange objects and words into meaningless and illogical patterns whose import was frequently nihilistic. In ‘cubist’ art objects are represented as geometrical forms. ‘Futurism’ espoused speed, war and Fascism, rejected all grammatical and artistic conventions, and was given expression in Marinetti’s Manifesto of 1909. Russian ‘constructivists’ in the 1920s attempted to adopt a technological approach to writing. ‘Surrealism’, drawing upon Freudianism, patterned itself upon dreams, hallucination and other forms of the unconscious mind to free art from logic and convention. André Breton published a manifesto of surrealism in 1924.
5. John Frow argues that Lukács’s writings became communist orthodoxy and are of a piece with his ambiguous defences of Stalinisation, despite later professions that his attacks on modernism were directed against socialist realism (Frow 1988, 16). Jameson notes that Stalin belatedly authorised a version of the policy advocated by Lukács in the Blum Theses (in Adorno et al. 1980, 203). In a late interview, Lukács remarked that one of the things which attracted him to Stalin in the late
1920s/early 1930s was his criticism of Plekhanov’s aesthetic theory of realism (see Sim 1994, 125).

6. ‘Zola’s theatre director continually repeats: “Don’t say theatre, say bordello.” Balzac, however, [in Lost Illusions] depicts how the theatre becomes prostituted under capitalism. The drama of his protagonists is simultaneously the drama of the institution in which they work, of the things with which they live, of the setting in which they fight their battles, of the objects through which they express themselves and through which their interrelationships are determined.’ (Lukács 1970, 114). Other arguments in this essay include that ‘Narration establishes proportions, description merely levels’ (127) and that description contemplates everything while narration recounts the past (130).

7. ‘The “centre” figure need not represent an “average man” but is rather the product of a particular social and personal environment. The problem is to find a central figure in whose life all the important extremes in the world of the novel converge and around whom a complete world with all its vital contradictions can be organized’ (Lukács 1970, 142).

8. All of these are reprinted in Adorno et al. Aesthetics and Politics (1980).

9. ‘Experience’ itself seems to have taught Lukács something of the accuracy of Bloch’s arguments. See the anecdote related by Eagleton: ‘Arrested by the Communist Party in 1956, deported, locked up in a castle and held without trial in Rumania, Lukács is reputed to have said that Kafka was a realist after all’ (Eagleton 1986, 141).

10. See Adorno et al. (1983, 14) for a discussion of the Bloch-Lukács exchange and of how both writers do not discuss how social unity is contradictory (an implicit context for Bloch’s discussion of montage).

11. I have translated verfremdung as ‘estrangement’ rather than the more  common ‘alienation’ because Brecht’s ‘alienation’ is used contrarily from Marx’s definition of alienation under capitalism. It also reveals a link with the Russian Formalist argument that literature ‘estranges’, ‘de-familiarises’ or ‘makes strange’. Formalism was antithetical to marxist literary theories in that it studied literature in separation from its historical and social context. However this common definition of ‘formalism’ is itself misleading in its omission of second-wave revisionary formalists – Vološinov, Bakhtin, Medvedev – who incorporated primary formalist theories within marxist theories of context. The formalist theory that all art ‘estranges’ is later echoed in Althusser’s ‘Letter on art’ in which literature is endowed with the potential to expose ideology (see Chapter 2). Althusser, who rarely discusses literature, devotes one chapter to the theatre of Bertolazzi and Brecht in For Marx (1990, 129–52).

12. Amendments to the text are not prohibited, but the Ensemble begin with the premise that they will prove the usefulness of their analytical method even without adding new text (259). One suggestion is ruled out by Brecht as a ‘major intervention’, one which would raise expectations which it would be difficult to fulfill in later scenes (259). Willett’s notes to this section detail how the scene was eventually performed (see 265).


14. Given this theory of society, Jameson argues that Adorno’s writings envisage a place for the possible emergence of postmodernism (1996, 247). As an analyst of ‘total system’ and late capitalism, Adorno is an analyst of the 1980s onwards (8). See below on postmodernism.

15. For this argument, see, for example, Eagleton (1990, 324): ‘The work of art ... comes to the rescue of a commodified existence, equipped with everything in which the commodity is so lamentably lacking – a form no longer indifferent to its content but indissociable from it; an objectifying of the subjective which entails enrichment rather than estrangement; a deconstruction of the antithesis between freedom and necessity, as each element of the artefact appears at once miraculously autonomous yet cunningly subordinated to the law of the whole. In the absence of socialism, then, it will prove necessary to make do with art.’ Eagleton reads modernity in the light of Williams’s argument that modernism is marked by the divergences between metropolitan and colonial identities, and applying this obliquely to the Adorno-Lukács debate sees critical realism as impossible for colonised writers such as Joyce, Flann O’Brien and Beckett. (See 1990, 320ff. and also 1995, ‘Form and Ideology in the Anglo-Irish Novel.’) See also Jameson in Eagleton et al. (1992).

16. Peter Bürger distinguishes between modernism’s attack on traditional writing techniques and the avant-garde attack on and attempt to alter the institutionalised commercialisation of art. See 1984, passim.

17. See also Eagleton (1990, 342): ‘a style of philosophizing which frames the object conceptually but manages by some cerebral acrobatics to glance sideways at what gives such generalized identity the slip’. Adorno’s style however is criticised by some – here by Rodney Livingstone, Perry Anderson and Francis Mulhern: ‘Dialectical tropes and epigrams that do not so much explain modernist art as re-create its moods and temperaments served here for the kind of conceptual clarity that Lukács, for all his errors and evasions, rightly took to be the task of theoretical exposition’ (Adorno et al. 1980, 146). This parallels the question of accessibility in relation to realist and modernist art-forms. See below.
18. For example, Adorno writes: ‘Eulogists of “relevance” are more likely to find Sartre’s *Huis Clos* profound, than to listen patiently to a text whose language challenges signification and by its very distance from meaning revolts in advance against positivist subordination of meaning’ and ‘This hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance, even if it proclaims itself critical or socialist, than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid co-ordinates that governs authoritarian personalities’ (Adorno et al. 1980, 179).

19. In this regard Adorno’s argument can be seen to anticipate Pierre Macherey’s theory of art as ‘production’ in the determination by genre, language, narrative conventions and so on. See Chapter 2. Adorno accuses Sartre of fetishising ‘spontaneity’ and thus, ironically, causing it to reify: ‘... since the pure immediacy and spontaneity which he hopes to save encounter no resistance in his work by which they could define themselves, they undergo a second reification’ (Adorno et al. 1980, 181).

20. For other critiques of the Adorno-Lukács debates, see Bennett (1979, 136) and Peter Bürger on the inconsistency between Lukács’s normative aesthetic theory and his marxist philosophy of history; and his failure to distinguish between modernism and the avant-garde (in Corredor 1997, 49 and 51). Stuart Sim however discusses Lukács’s writings on Solzhenitsyn as an example of how Lukács was willing to depart from standard forms of realism (1994).

21. The debate has also to a large extent dictated whether Benjamin is interpreted as sufficiently ‘marxist’. See Cohen (1995, 28ff.): e.g. Habermas’s agreements with Adorno, Buck-Morss’s defence of Benjamin (see below).

22. There are significant similarities between Benjamin and Althusser in relation to the base-superstructure model. See the discussion of Althusser in the section on ‘base and superstructure’, Chapter 1 and Cohen’s excellent discussion of both the similarities and divergences between the two (1995, 3c–6).

23. Buck-Morss defends Benjamin’s analysis from the attack of ‘classlessness’, for example, in reading the analogy of the ‘overly full stomach’ as obviously symbolising the bourgeoisie, and thus the so-called ‘collective’ unconscious as the dream of the dominant class. See Cohen’s summary of these arguments (1995, 29) and Buck-Morss (1989, 281–2).

24. See Williams’s implicit disagreement: ‘... it is not the general themes of response to the city and its modernity which compose anything that can be properly called Modernism. It is rather the new and specific location of the artists and intellectuals of this movement within the changing cultural milieu of the metropolis’ (Williams 1996, 44). See also n.15, above.

25. Cohen argues that Benjamin’s theory of ‘shock’ is more applicable to the surrealist practices of Breton than Baudelaire’s latent romanticism. (See Cohen 1995, 208–15.)

26. See Cohen (1995, 8 and 187). Cohen defends Benjamin’s ‘psychoanalytical’ or ‘Gothic’ Marxism against the critiques of the Frankfurt School and other marxisms (see 18ff.).

27. ‘Positivism’ or ‘Positive philosophy’, as originated by Auguste Comte (1798–1857), is defined by the doctrine that man can have no knowledge of anything but phenomena, a knowledge which is relative, not absolute. Jameson discusses its specific usage in Adorno’s writings (1990, 89–90): ‘... in general to be taken to mean a commitment to empirical facts and worldly phenomena in which the abstract ... is increasingly constricted, when not systematically pursued and extinguished as a relic and a survival of older traditional “metaphysical”, or simply old-fashioned and antiquated thoughts and categories’ (89).

28. Benjamin submitted a third draft to Adorno: ‘On Some Motifs in Baudelaire’ to which Adorno responded with enthusiasm. Livingstone et al., however, note that this draft loses the strength of the second draft – its ‘intense absorption and mastery of cross-connected historical materials’ – without compensating gains in theoretical perception (Adorno et al. 1980, 105).

29. For example, Eagleton’s celebration of Benjamin (1981); Jameson’s celebration of Adorno (1990; reprinted 1996); recent reappraisals of Lukács (Corredor 1997); of Adorno (Hohendahl 1996; Nicholsen 1997; Jarvis 1998; Armstrong 1998) and of Bloch (Daniel and Moylan 1997). Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* was first translated into English in 1984. Since then, Beech and Roberts (1996) argue, there has been a return to aesthetics on the Left, after the considerations of aesthetics as ideological which were pervasive in marxist debates of the 70s and early 80s.

30. Eagleton has suggested that criticisms of Lukács’s anti-modernism as being ‘reductive’ need to be re-examined in the light of ‘analogous and even more reductive antipathies to modernism [which] have become hegemonic via debates associated with postmodernism’ (Eagleton 1996, 141) whereas Robert Young has argued that attacks on poststructuralism for denying history repeat Lukács’s attacks on modernism, and that both are myopic in looking only for the ‘History’ which they wish to see there (1990, 23).

31. In subsuming all other approaches within marxism, Jameson’s theory parallels Hegel’s view of history as the unfolding of progressive stages in which new ideas and cultural forms develop by ‘sublating’ older ones,
that is by simultaneously adopting and transcending them, reconciling and preserving them. So too in Jameson’s writings, no theory, however ‘partial’, cannot be usefully assimilated. In Bhaskar’s discussion of dialectics, we can see obvious parallels between Hegel and Jameson’s approach: ‘For Hegel truth is the whole and error lies in one-sidedness, incompleteness and abstraction; it can be recognized by the contradictions it generates and remedied through their incorporation in fuller, richer, more concrete conceptual forms’ (in Bottomore 1991, 144). Yet the suspicion remains, as Eagleton has argued, that Jameson is able to assimilate competing theories only because his analysis remains on the level of pure theory, suggesting, to put it in its crudest terms, that we need only see the ‘whole’ in order to put the world to rights. That the more structuralist marxisms associated with Eagleton and Hall in Britain have been less popular among American marxist theorists reveals the absence of a grass-roots marxism in America since the McCarthy era.


33. See Jameson (1992a, 95–6) for a brief discussion of these transitions in terms also of signification. Associated technologies might be steam (market capitalism), electricity and cars (monopoly), computers and nuclear power (multinational). Alex Callinicos argues that modernism and postmodernism as aesthetic movements and monopoly and multinational capitalism cannot be differentiated in the schematic way Jameson suggests (see 1989, passim).

34. Franco Moretti argued that contemporary marxist criticism tends to be ‘little more than a left-wing “Apology for Modernism”’ (in Grossberg and Nelson eds. 1988, 339). Such ‘modernist marxists’ include Kristeva’s celebration of the texts of Lautréamont, Joyce and Rimbaud in the ways in which they deconstruct ideological closures. That modernism ‘won’ over realism needs to be considered in the context of socialist realism and its influence in terms of inspiring strenuous resistance not only to such doctrinaire judgements, but also to realism itself.


37. MacCabe’s essay ‘Realism and the Cinema; Notes on some Brechtian Theses’, Screen 15: 2 (1974) is excerpted in Rice and Waugh (1992). See also MacCabe (1979, especially Chapter 2, ‘The end of a meta-language: from George Eliot to Dubliners’) and Coward and Ellis (1977a). Such positions are also close to structuralist forms of marxism in the resistance to claims of ‘experience’ as legitimising, as for example, in the following: ‘Belief in simple referentiality is not only unpoetic but also ultimately politically conservative, because it cannot recognize that the reality to which it appeals is a traditional ideological construction, whether one terms it phallocratic, or metaphysical, or bourgeoises, or something else. The politics of experience is inevitably a conservative politics for it cannot help but conserve traditional ideological constructs which are not recognised as such but are taken for “the real”’ (Jane Gallop, quoted in Docherty 1993, 440).

38. The most interesting writings on the realism-modernism debates are thus those which interrogate and frustrate these terms as labels, as badges of position. For example Docherty’s unexpected invocation of Lukács in his discussion of postmodernism: genuine avant-garde work for Lukács was prophetic, and thus ‘realist’, though it could only be so judged retrospectively (Docherty 1993, 17). Docherty quotes the following from Lukács – ‘Whether a writer really belongs to the ranks of the avant-garde is something that only history can reveal, for only after the passage of time will it become apparent whether he has perceived significant qualities, trends, and the social functions of individual types, and has given them effective and lasting form ... only the major realists are capable of forming a genuine avant-garde’ – and thus compares Lukács with Lyotard’s theory of the future anteriority of the postmodern. Lukács admits the schematic degree of his own theory in ‘Narrate or Describe?’: ‘There are no writers who renounce description absolutely. Nor, on the other hand, can one claim that the outstanding representatives of realism after 1848, Flaubert and Zola, renounced narration absolutely. What is important here are philosophies of composition, not any illusory “pure” phenomenon of narration or description.’ (Lukács 1970, 116.) A further example would be Williams’s emphasis on the diversity within both ‘modernism’ and ‘realism’. See, for example, ‘Metropolitan Perceptions and the Emergence of Modernism’ (Williams 1989) and ‘Forms of English fiction in 1848’ (Barker et al. 1986). For an excellent essay on Williams’s relationship to the debates of this chapter, see Tony Pinkney’s introduction to Williams (1989).