

BENJAMIN, ADORNO AND THE DECLINE OF THE *AURA*

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In 1931, three years after the publication of *The Origin of German Tragic Drama*, the obscure masterpiece which he had intended as his habilitation thesis, Walter Benjamin wrote about it to the Swiss editor, Max Rychner:

... what I did not know at the time of its composition became more and more clear to me soon after: that, from my very particular position on the philosophy of language, there exists a connection -- however strained and problematic -- to the viewpoint of dialectical materialism. (CB 372, BR 523)ⁱ

The location of that connection -- whether, indeed, it can be said to exist at all -- remains deeply problematic. Nor should this be in the least surprising. What could be further removed from what one would normally understand by "materialism" than Benjamin's early writings, with their predilection for mystical theories of language and unblushingly anti-scientific metaphysics? To put them together with the ideas of Marx and Engels can only, it would seem, undermine the latter: the connection appears at all plausible only if Marxism, its scientific pretensions notwithstanding, rests upon a mystical view of the world.

Not the least complexity -- but not the least interest -- in the dispute over the nature of Benjamin's relation to Marxism is that it involves just as much the question: what is Marxism? -- a scientific materialism in the spirit of nineteenth century natural science, a quasi-Hegelian eschatology, or what? It is not, though, just Marxism's inner tensions -- ambiguities, to be more blunt -- which have made Benjamin's relationship to it so controversial. The intellectual issues are themselves, in turn, almost inextricably entangled with Benjamin's own personal and political circumstances.

Successful, it seems, only in sabotaging whatever alternative prospects were offered to him, Benjamin was never in a position to pursue the life of independent scholarship for which alone he regarded himself as suited. Conflicts with his family, money troubles and political upheavals were to disrupt his plans repeatedly.

One effect of this has been to create an image of Benjamin (like Kafka, whom he so much admired) as a helpless victim, a kind of frail and exotic butterfly blown on the gales of Europe between the wars. One should treat this with a considerable degree of caution, however. It is true that Benjamin was, indeed, helpless in many ways -- incapable, apparently, of even preparing a cup of coffee for himself. But, at least where his work was concerned, he was self-assured, even calculating. Nor was he ever the withdrawn, other-worldly figure that his fascination with the forgotten by-ways of intellectual history might lead one to imagine. From his school-days he showed a strong commitment to radical political activity. Though it was, no doubt, his love affair with Asja Lacis, the Soviet communist whom he met on Capri, which brought him to think more seriously about Marxism than before, there is no reason at all to suppose that even that forceful personality could have manipulated Benjamin's work into a direction which he himself did not want it to take.

His financial difficulties were frequently to force Benjamin to leave aside cherished projects in order to try to support himself by his pen, and -- which is particularly confusing as one now comes to reconstruct his ideas -- also led him to try to present his more serious work in such a light as would, he felt, appeal most to potential sponsors of it. (In this he proved naive, however; very few such hopes bore fruit, and, throughout the nineteen-twenties and thirties, Benjamin's finances veered between the precarious and the desperate.)

Working on his own left Benjamin heavily dependent for intellectual companionship on three friends, all major figures in their own right: Gershom Scholem, Bertolt Brecht and Theodor Adorno, and the relationship to these three adds a further level of complication to the question of Benjamin's Marxism. Inevitably, it has been their perspectives -- above all, those of Scholem and Adorno, the devoted guardians of Benjamin's literary legacy and tireless promoters of his reputation -- which have dominated later interpretations. Yet, genuine and close as his relationship was with all three men, it did not prevent Benjamin from preserving a certain intellectual distance, and [even], at times, playing one off against the other. What is more, Benjamin knew well that all three had reservations about his Marxism -- reservations which, of course, will [only] have increased his innate caginess.

Brecht and Scholem -- opposed to each other in every other way imaginable -- were equally dismissive of the idea of Benjamin as a Marxist. Scholem spoke of Benjamin's "Janus face"; he was, Scholem said, caught in theoretical vacillation: "torn between his sympathy for a mystical theory of language and the necessity, felt equally strongly, to combat it from within the framework of a Marxist world-view". Brecht -- typically -- was even more trenchant. His comment on Benjamin's "Marxist" essay, "The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility": "All mysticism, from an attitude against mysticism. This is how the materialist view of history is adapted! It is quite dreadful."

Whereas Brecht and Scholem reject the idea of Benjamin as a Marxist out of hand, Adorno's attitude is much less simple. It is true that Adorno did not take Benjamin's early ideas to be inherently incompatible with Marxism. To the contrary, he made the idea of their reconciliation his own. Yet he was by no means convinced by Benjamin's own attempts to bring the two together. In a series of letters, written in the thirties -- responses, for the most part, to work which Benjamin had submitted to the Journal of the Institute for Social

Research -- Adorno expressed the fear that Benjamin, under the influence of Brecht, was sacrificing the dialectical subtlety of his early work in favour of a simplistic "vulgar-Marxism". In the face of this, Adorno took his own task to be "to hold your arm steady until Brecht's sun has sunk once more into exotic waters", his aim to reinforce the theological element in Benjamin's writing; only then, he believed, would the social dimension of Benjamin's theory develop its full scope and power: "A restoration of theology, or, better yet, a radicalization of the dialectic into the glowing heart of theology" would at the same time, Adorno argued "have to mean the utmost intensification of the social-dialectical, indeed economic, theme".

Adorno's passionate engagement with Benjamin's work was, notoriously, to become the source of much bitterness. As the German New Left rediscovered Benjamin in the nineteen-sixties, suspicions were raised that Adorno had used Benjamin's financial dependence on the Institute for Social Research and his subsequent control over access to Benjamin's unpublished writings to promote that side of Benjamin's work which was most congenial to his own ideas. Exaggerated though many of these accusations were, there can be no doubt that Adorno's intellectual relations with Benjamin were marked with something of the intensity (and difficulty) of those between master and disciple. To write, as Adorno once did to Benjamin, claiming to speak as "the advocate of your own intentions" cannot have made his criticisms any easier to bear.

Adorno placed his chief hopes on the *Arcades Project* (*Passagenwerk*) which Benjamin worked on for the last thirteen years of his life, but whose fragments were only published in the nineteen-eighties. Taking as its starting-point the "latent mythology" of Parisian urban architecture, *The Arcades Project* was to provide an *Urgeschichte*, a "fundamental history" of nineteenth-century culture. What Benjamin left behind him,

however, is little more than a sketch-pad: a set of observations, quotations and reader's notes, with nothing to show how these elements would have been woven into the form of the final work. Thus we cannot now tell whether Adorno was justified in maintaining what he called his "Passagenorthodoxie" except in relation to their other writings. In the remainder of this paper I shall argue, first, that there are important continuities between Benjamin's early and his later thought, and, second, that, whatever the verdict on the character of the personal relations between Benjamin and Adorno, there was, indeed, a substantial and significant intellectual disagreement between them, the nature of which Adorno was not fully aware of, either at the time or later.

Most important of the continuities between Benjamin's early and mature thought is his allegiance to a distinctive form of Kantian philosophy. He enunciates this first in an early essay (written as a twentieth birthday present for [Gershom] Scholem), "On the Programme of the Philosophy to Come". Here Benjamin argues that Kant's philosophy is to be accepted, but criticized. What is to be accepted, he thinks -- and this, I believe, is a matter on which he never changed his mind -- is the fundamental turn given to philosophy by Kant; what Kant himself calls his "Copernican revolution" -- a turn away from purporting to investigate the nature of reality, towards an investigation of our experience of that reality. Yet, fundamental though Benjamin considers Kant's turn to the question of experience to be, he is critical of what he takes to be the restricted conception of experience -- as if to experience were simply to catalogue sense-images under formal, general rules -- which Kant himself presupposes. This critical encounter with Kant leads to what Benjamin proclaims to be contemporary philosophy's prime task: "to undertake the foundation of a higher conception of experience, under the auspices of Kantian thought". Scholem, in his touching and revealing memoir of

Benjamin, recalls a conversation from that time in which Benjamin explained his point more vividly:

He spoke of the breadth of the concept of experience which this meant, and which, according to him, included the mental and psychological links between man and the world in areas not yet reached by knowledge. When I made the point that, in that case, the mantic disciplines would be legitimately included in this conception of experience, he replied with an extreme formulation: A philosophy which does not include the possibility of divination from coffee-grounds cannot be true. [SF 59, GF 77]ⁱⁱ

Thus, even at his most mystical and apparently anti-scientific, Benjamin's chief concern is Kantian; that is to say, he wants to articulate the distinctiveness of certain kinds of experience -- the allegorical world of the *Trauerspiel*, for example, or the struggle against myth in Greek tragedy -- which a scientifically-oriented culture dismisses or takes to be insignificant. But this does not mean that their claims must be treated as cognitively valid; the experiences are important in their own right, not as alternatives to scientific knowledge.

The emphasis on the concept of experience is the key to Benjamin's relation to Marxism, for it is the means by which he confronts a question basic, not only to Marxism, but to the whole tradition of cultural history. It is the question of what connects different areas of a culture, allowing us to see a common identity in their apparent diversity. In the German tradition it has led, as Sir Ernst Gombrich has put it, to "Hegelianism without Hegel" -- attempts to preserve the Hegelian idea of cultural unity emanating from a single centre without recourse to the metaphysics of speculative idealism. In the context of Marxism, however, the problem arises in the specific form of the relation between "base" and "superstructure": the nature of the connection between the economic life of men as producers of material goods and the ideological realm in which, according to Marx, economic life is both reflected and transfigured.

In a highly significant fragment from the *Arcades Project* Benjamin proposes his own answer to this problem of the nature of the determination of the ideological superstructure:

At first sight it seems as though Marx only wanted to establish a causal connection between superstructure and base. But his remark that the ideologies of the superstructure mirror relationships in a false and distorted manner goes beyond this. The question is, in fact: if, in a certain sense, the base determines the thought- and experience-content of the superstructure, yet this determination is not a simple mirroring, how – leaving aside the question of its causal origin – is it to be characterized? As its expression. The economic conditions under which society exists come to expression in the superstructure ... (A 392, BGS V.1 495)ⁱⁱⁱ

The question of Benjamin's relation to Marxism can thus be brought into focus in the form of a specific problem: how the existence of such an "expressive" relationship between base and superstructure can be accommodated within the framework of his conception of experience. The solution Benjamin proposes emerges most perspicuously in a short piece, "On the Mimetic Faculty", written in 1933. Here, once again, Benjamin pursues his challenge to the flattened, Enlightenment conception of experience. Even in the modern world, he claims (and Freud is just as important a witness to this as Marx) human beings show a disposition to structure their experience according to what he terms "non-sensible resemblances" -- resemblances, that is, in which similarity is not just a matter of "mapping" or visible correspondence, and which may appear bizarre or even occult when measured against the standards of a world-view for which that is the only kind of experience imaginable.

Scholem (for whose reaction to the piece Benjamin waited with particular eagerness) regarded it as another instance of the Janus-face -- a return (welcome to his mind) to the mystical stance of the early writings; it lacked, he said, "even the slightest hint of a materialist view of language". But that is not how Benjamin himself saw things. Admittedly, the essay is quite at odds with modern scientific reductionism. But there is another sense in

which the intentions behind "On the Mimetic Faculty" might reasonably be described as materialist: what the essay attempts to do is to undermine a perspective from which certain phenomena must either be dismissed, or, if they are acknowledged, treated as in some way occult or transcendent. Nowhere does Benjamin come closer to the ideas of Wittgenstein than here. Only because the "enlightened scientific" conception is taken as a norm are certain experiences made to seem supernatural; they are treated as such just because they go beyond the presupposed scientific perspective.

In a very interesting letter to Adorno's wife, Gretel, Benjamin drew a parallel between this essay and an essay of Freud's on telepathy (From internal evidence, it seems likely that this essay now forms the second of Freud's *New Introductory Lectures on Psychoanalysis*.) What impressed Benjamin was that, in this essay, Freud, like himself, takes seriously a phenomenon often dismissed; not treating telepathy as something occult, but seeing it, rather, as a type of perception, operating at a level not normally appreciated or acknowledged.

Mimetic experience is what allows us to identify "correspondences" between different areas of social life ("similarity is the *organon* of experience", Benjamin writes in *The Arcades Project*), and makes plausible the idea of an expressive relationship between economy and ideology. The expressive relationship obtains because similarities have been transmitted by society's members (without, of course, their being aware of it) at the deepest, collective, levels of their experience. The task of the social theorist is to reawaken that experience from its sedimentations and incrustations. Phenomena which seem the most dissonant and obscure -- the interior exteriors of the *passages* themselves, the passion for roulette, the vogue for panoramas -- may turn out to be the most revelatory. What Novalis once said of poetry is also true of Benjamin's *Urgeschichte*: the more personal, peculiar, temporal a phenomenon, the closer it may stand to the center.

Needless to say, this approach makes the concept of experience bear an enormous weight; there is, inevitably perhaps, a certain element of circularity. The "unseen affinities", referring, as they do, to a subterranean level of awareness, are not such as, immediately and unambiguously, to strike the uninstructed observer; and yet it is their existence that provides Benjamin's concept of experience with its only possible verification. Proof, thus, necessarily makes reference to the reader's own intuition -- a point which Benjamin acknowledges in language quite strikingly reminiscent of Wittgenstein: "Method of this work: literary montage. I have nothing to say -- only to show." Yet there is always the worry that what are shown as the latent significance of cultural phenomena are, in point of fact, no more than subjective associations, made plausible by the shared political commitment of author and reader.

Furthermore, the necessary reference to intuition places a severe limit on how far Benjamin's "cultural Marxism" can be given expression in terms of the sort of scientifically-oriented discursive theory characteristic of Marx's own "economic Marxism". If Benjamin's writing often seems "impressionistic" or unsystematic then this is because its central purpose -- the eliciting of correspondences -- cannot be carried out in methodical fashion. Hence, it is hard to see how he could, in principle, have responded to Adorno's criticism that his treatment of his material was insufficiently theoretical: "... the work is located at the cross-roads between magic and positivism. This place is bewitched. Only theory can break the spell: your own fearless, good speculative theory."

To appreciate fully the kind of theory Adorno is advocating -- and the distance which separates it from Benjamin's own enterprise -- one must compare the two men's understanding of one of Benjamin's key conceptions: the concept of the *aura*.

The concept was introduced by Benjamin originally as a way of identifying that quality of numinousness, traditionally acknowledged to be characteristic of the authentic work of art. As he writes in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility':

We define the aura of [a natural object] as the unique phenomenon of a distance, however close it might be. If, while resting on a summer afternoon, you follow with your eyes a mountain range on the horizon, or a branch which casts its shadow over you, you experience the aura of those mountains, of that branch. (WA 224-25 (216), BGS I.2 479)^{iv}

So, for Benjamin, the aura is, in the first place, a quality of our experience of objects, not necessarily restricted to the products of artistic creation. In the case of the work of art, however, this exalted quality (what Benjamin calls its "cult-value") is closely tied to the religious or quasi-religious element in art -- a remnant of that association between art and religion characteristic of pre-modern society.

However, the "desacralising" processes of modern civilization -- the development of industrial capitalism and the attendant rise of the masses -- have, hand in hand with the purely technical fact of the increasing mechanical reproducibility of the art-work itself, diminished human beings' power to see and respond to this quality. Thus, the *uniqueness* of the work of art becomes increasingly questionable, and leads to the decline of its cultic function:

[The contemporary decay of the aura] rests on two circumstances, both of which are related to the increasing significance of the masses in contemporary life. Namely, the desire of contemporary masses to bring things "closer" spatially and humanly, which is just as ardent as their bent towards overcoming the uniqueness of every reality by accepting its reproduction (WA 225 (217), BGS I.2 479-80)^v

At first sight this may appear as simply a Marxist version of the conventional conservative lament for the erosion of high culture. Thus it is important to emphasize that Benjamin does not *disapprove* of this desacralising process. Given that the auratic values of uniqueness and authenticity were themselves, in fact, a perceptual legacy from the work of art's cultic function, it follows, for Benjamin, that their elimination will open the way to a political form of art, a transition which he welcomes:

[F]or the first time in world history, mechanical reproduction emancipates the work of art from its parasitical dependence on ritual... (WA 226 (218), BGS I.2 482)^{vi}

Benjamin fails to make clear, however, what this political form of art might amount to, and it is on this point that Adorno's objection to his analysis is first raised. On one level, the objection is that Benjamin's dismissal of the aura is too extreme: open as the traditional work of art is to criticism, to sweep aside its auratic qualities entirely leaves no basis for any distinction between art and propaganda. As Adorno was, much later, to put it in his *Aesthetic Theory*:

The deficiency of Benjamin's grandly conceived *theory of reproduction* remains that its bipolar categories do not allow differentiation between the conception of art which has been fundamentally *disideologised* and the abuse of aesthetic rationality for mass-exploitation and domination; (. . .). (AT 56, AGS 7 90)^{vii}

There is considerably more at stake here, however, than Adorno's preference for Schoenberg over Brecht; it is the attitude which Adorno takes to Idealist aesthetics -- and the transformation which he believes to be necessary to make the transition to a materialist perspective -- which provides the key to his theoretical disagreement with Benjamin. To understand its basis, it is necessary to go back to the connection which Adorno takes to exist between Benjamin's concept of the aura and the German Idealists' characterization of art in terms of what they called *schöner Schein*. This apparent connection is asserted in the clearest

possible terms by Adorno's pupil and collaborator Rolf Tiedemann (the editor of the collected works of both Benjamin and Adorno). Tiedemann writes:

The later, materialistic writings of Benjamin give a sociological derivation of the aura, perceiving in it "the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship of the inanimate or natural object and man". Aura shows itself as the ideological investment [*Belehnung*] of the reified and alienated, with the capacity of "opening its gaze". At the same time, the "beautiful semblance" [*schöner Schein*], as ascribed to art by idealist aesthetics, rests on auratic *Schein*.^{viii}

Schein (which means both "semblance" and "sheen") is the identifying characteristic of fine art in the Idealists' view: "... the beautiful has its life in *Schein*", as Hegel puts it. *Schein* is an index of art's characteristic as an epiphany, a mode of manifestation of truth -- the *Logos* underlying reality which Hegel calls the Idea: "... art has the task of presenting the Idea for immediate intuition in sensible form".

Art *presents* the truth; it does not, that is to say, represent or, in some way, stand in place of it. It is, rather, like an *ikon*, a channel or a window through which to have access to what is universal and transcendent. This means that, ontologically (in their manner of being), works of art are not simply self-identical. The work of art also "points beyond itself", not by relating to a well-defined and specific further meaning, but by evoking what is transcendent in the shifting, unspecific form of *Schein*. In this sense, the work of art is a *symbol* of transcendence. Goethe, who was a pioneer of this theory, puts it as follows:

The objects presented [in authentic, symbolic art] appear to stand independently and are, again, most deeply significant, and this in virtue of the ideal which ever brings a universality with it. *If the symbolic utters anything apart from the presentation, then it does so in indirect fashion.*^{ix}

For Idealists, such authentic, symbolic art bears an intrinsic meaning, and stands in contrast to allegorical art, which they understand as an artificial way of importing meaning

into art by means of lifeless conventions. (Benjamin, of course, had polemicised against this dismissal of allegorical art in his 'Origin of German Tragic Drama'; allegory, he wrote, was not conventional in expression, but the expression of convention.) This set of doctrines was developed in Germany, principally by Goethe and Schelling; it was, however, to become widely influential in nineteenth-century aesthetics. Coleridge, for example, presents a very orthodox -- not to mention derivative -- version of the theory in the following terms:

Now an Allegory is but a translation of abstract notions into a picture-language which is itself nothing but an abstraction from objects of the senses; the principal being more worthless even than the proxy, both alike unsubstantial, and the former shapeless to boot. On the other hand a Symbol (*o estin aei tauteegorikon*) is characterized by a translucence of the Special in the Individual or of the General in the Especial or of the Universal in the General. Above all by the translucence of the eternal through and in the temporal. It always partakes of the Reality which it renders intelligible; and while it enunciates the Whole abides itself as a living point in that Unity, of which it is the representative.^x

For Hegel, however, it is just that duality between finite and infinite which is art's limitation. Being limited to the sensible, art is inadequate, to the extent that the truth expressed in it lacks full clarity or self-awareness: "Only a certain sphere and level of truth is capable of being presented in the element of the work of art...", he writes. As a consequence, as he puts it in a famous expression: "Thought and reflection have lifted themselves up above fine art."

Returning now to Adorno, it is important to note that his aesthetics has several crucial features in common with the Idealist theory just described. He believes that authentic art does indeed have this quality of "pointing beyond itself", and he agrees, too, that this is a form of manifestation of *Geist* (or Spirit):

That by which works of art, as they become appearance, are more than what they are: that is their Spirit. (AT 86, AGS 7 134)^{xi}

What is more (although readers of Adorno have sometimes failed to appreciate the fact) Adorno shares Hegel's criticism of the limitation, which its sensible form imposes on art; it requires a higher, theoretical form to elucidate its truth-content:

[The truth-content of works of art] can only be attained by philosophical reflection. (AT 128, AGS 7 193)

Hence, the work of art's character as *Schein*, according to Adorno, is, at once, both true and false; it creates the illusion that the aesthetic quality of the work of art is a property without relation to non-aesthetic reality, but, at the same time (paradoxical though it may seem) it is what connects the work of art to a broader sphere of social meaning:

But *Geist* is not simply *Schein*. It is also truth. It is not only the fraudulent image of an independent entity but also the negation of all false independence. (AT 108, AGS 7 165-66)

Thus, one could summarize Adorno's criticism of Idealism as that, for him, it is not so much the structure of Idealist aesthetics which is mistaken as its reference; the Idealists misunderstand the nature of *Geist* in imagining it to be original and independent. What, for Adorno, is necessary in order to submit Idealist aesthetics to a "passage to materialism" is to re-identify *Geist*, to decipher it as a form of social labor:

Geist is no isolated principle but one moment in social labour -- that which is separated from the corporeal. (AGS 5 270)^{xii}

The Idealist theory of *Geist*, thus, does not represent a simple illusion but is, rather, an accurate reflection of a certain form of social reality -- one ruled by the division between mental and manual labor. The structure it describes really exists; the mistake is to ascribe its effects to the operation of a Neo-Platonic World-Spirit: "The World-Spirit exists; but it is no such thing", he writes in the *Negative Dialectic*.

The purpose of a philosophical aesthetics is, by its reflective activity, to "save" the *Schein* of works of art through the theoretical reconstruction of the sedimented layers of *Geist's* activity:

...no work of art has its content other than by the *Schein* in its own form. The [central part center] of aesthetics would, thus be the salvation of the *Schein*, and the emphatic justification of art, the legitimation of its truth, depends on this salvation. (AT 107, AGS 7 164)

Schein is not, as Benjamin would have it, to be eliminated: "[Art] has no power over *Schein* by its abolition". Whatever its associations with the cultic functions of the work of art is, *Schein* retains a progressive element, Adorno claims:

Magic itself, when emancipated from its claim to be real, is an element of enlightenment; its *Schein* desacralises the desacralised world. That is the dialectical ether in which art today takes place. (AT 58, AGS 5 93)

In short, Adorno's aesthetics -- indeed, I would argue, his entire philosophy -- is based on a transformation, by means of the Marxist concept of social labour, of the Idealist doctrine of *Geist*, and it is this which provides the intellectual substance behind his criticism of Benjamin. A letter written to Benjamin in 1940 was to make this crystal-clear:

You write in *Baudelaire* (...) "To perceive the aura of an appearance means to invest it with the ability to raise its gaze." This differs from earlier formulations by the use of the concept of *investment*. Is it not an indication of that aspect which, in Wagner, I made fundamental to the construction of phantasmagoria, namely, the moment of human labour. Is not the aura, perhaps, the trace of the forgotten human element in the thing, and does not therefore this form of forgetting relate to what you see as experience? One is almost tempted to go so far as to see the foundation in experience, underlying the speculations of Idealism, in the endeavour to retain this trace -- in those things, indeed, which have become alien.^{xiii}

This letter -- characteristic in the manner of its attempt to lead Benjamin back towards Adorno's own ideas -- gives expression to the two central elements in Adorno's theory I have stressed: the association of the aura with the Idealist doctrines of *Schein* and of *Geist*; and the

transformation (but not the wholesale rejection) of those doctrines via the concept of social labor.

Adorno himself certainly considered the letter to be of major theoretical significance, since he reproduced it in a collection he published called *Über Walter Benjamin*. But even more illuminating, in my view, is Benjamin's reply, written only months before his death (though that letter Adorno did not reproduce) for in it, Benjamin quite clearly and explicitly rejects this proposal of Adorno's:

But if, indeed, it should be the case that the aura is a matter of a "forgotten human element", then not necessarily that which is present in labour. The tree or the bush which are invested are not made by men. It must be a human element in things which is *not* endowed by labour. On this I would like to take my stand. (BR 849)

What this letter makes plain is that Benjamin, at least, was aware that he and Adorno have adopted quite different answers to the problem of the identity of cultures in their apparent diversity: for Adorno it is social labour which -- articulating itself like Hegel's *Geist* -- produces a not-always-apparent unity between economic and non-economic spheres of social reality; for Benjamin, it is the system of *correspondences*, the "non-sensible similarities" to which individuals, without being aware of it, respond, which gives expression to economic life in non-economic reality. The conclusion must be that Adorno (and his followers) are wrong to read Benjamin in terms of the categories of Hegelian Marxism: these are incompatible with his theory and, as we can see, he clearly rejects them.

What then of the decline of the aura? If, from Adorno's Hegelian-Marxist perspective, the doctrine of the aura is to be read as corresponding to the Idealist concept of *Schein*, it follows that the disintegration of the aura implies the loss of art's potential for intrinsic meaning. So the *political* art, with which Benjamin hopes auratic art will be replaced, can, it

would appear, be no more than instrumental. It will be purely a means to generate the appropriate, "proletarian" emotional responses.

But from Benjamin's own point of view -- Marxist-Kantian, one might call it -- the alternative is not so simple. There is a parallel here to his rehabilitation of allegory: Benjamin rejected the opposition between the "intrinsic" meaningfulness of symbolic art and the "conventional" meaning of allegory, for allegory, he claimed: "...is not a technique of image-play, but *expression*, as language is expression, indeed, as script is." Similarly, in 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility' he ascribes a distinctive experiential quality (what he calls, in contrast to "cult value", "exhibition value") to post-auratic art. Thus, for Benjamin, it seems that the work of art in the age of mechanical reproduction can escape what appears to Adorno as an exhaustive alternative: it need be neither *Schein* nor pure propaganda.

The dispute between Adorno and Benjamin is, of course, important for the light it sheds on two original, influential -- and notoriously difficult -- thinkers. But it has, I believe, a broader significance. One of the most fundamental problems of Marxist theory has been how to conceive the nature of the relationship between base and superstructure -- the more so because Marx himself gives the issue so little sustained treatment. To claim only that the superstructure "corresponds" to the base in the sense that the superstructure is such as to maintain (or, at least, to reinforce the preservation of) the base -- which is where many Marxists leave the matter -- is simply not enough. Marxism must also give an acceptable account of how the base is able to exert this apparently miraculous power of generating (the conscious awareness of the individual members of society notwithstanding) the superstructure it "needs". (To take up the parallel between Marx and Darwin which has recently become fashionable again: What made Darwin's theory a scientific breakthrough

was *not* his claim that species had characteristics which were adapted to their needs -- that was, after all, the merest commonplace of eighteenth-century biology -- but his proposal of natural selection as a convincing causal account of how those properties might come to be acquired. Does Marxism have an equivalent account of the genesis of functional relationships?)^{xiv}

Since Lukacs's early writings, it has been accepted by many Marxists that the most promising way of responding to this gap in Marxist theory is by a return to the Hegelian inheritance of Marxism. No one, however, (and this includes Lukacs himself) has followed through this strategy with greater rigor and consistency than Adorno.

To the question of how social systems come to achieve purposes that go beyond (or, indeed, against) the purposes of individuals, the Hegelian Marxist replies that we must look beyond the individual subject to a broader, social subject whose ends (like Hegel's "cunning of reason") are realised by and through individuals. For Adorno, this social subject -- here, again, the parallel with Hegel is in order -- is a source, not just of collective action but of meaning. Thus, what the interpreter of cultural phenomena aims at is an objective property of the object in question -- not, to be sure, in the way that Locke thought that size and shape were objective properties, but as emanating from a social process which is, ultimately, nothing less than the circular process of the self-reproduction of the social whole.

Adorno's theory has the attraction -- and the questionableness -- typical of Hegelian theories. On the one side, it offers a comprehensive solution to a number of very real problems. It does so, however, at a price -- that of accepting a central, overarching concept of social labor which may, one fears, prove no less metaphysically over-ambitious than Hegel's concept of *Geist* itself.

Benjamin, on the other hand, is more usually seen as a brilliant (if somewhat mystical) aphorist, rather than the proponent of an original and consistent social theory. Yet, his "Marxist Kantianism" does, it seems to me, have claims to be treated as equal in originality and significance to the more familiar Marxist Hegelianism represented by Adorno. Not that one should underestimate its difficulties. One cannot deny that Adorno was right to argue that the objectivity of Benjamin's theory rests on the claim of a shared, pre-discursive level of collective experience, and it may be that this historicised version of the Kantian "transcendental subject" will prove just as problematic as Adorno's attempt to invoke the concept of social labour as a surrogate of Hegel's *Geist*. But, if neither Marxist-Hegelianism nor Marxist-Kantianism, what then? Once again, the chasm between "base" and "superstructure" yawns.

Citation Abbreviations

Adorno

AE= *Against Epistemology: A Metacritique* (trans) W. Domingo. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1983.

AGS = *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed) R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1970-97.

AT=*Aesthetic Theory* (ed & trans) R. Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998.

H= *Hegel: Three Studies* (trans) S.W. Nicholson. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994.

JA= *The Jargon of Authenticity* (trans) K. Tarnowski & F. Will. Chicago: Northwestern University Press, 1973.

K= *Kierkegaard: Construction of the Aesthetic* (trans) R. Hullot-Kentor. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1989.

MM= *Minima Moralia* (trans) E.F.N. Jephcott. New York: London: Verso, 1978.

ND=*Negative Dialectics* (trans) E.B. Ashton. London: Routledge, 1973. (**n.b.** this translation is very unreliable. All cites should be checked against the original and corrected where necessary. I will say something about this in the editor's comments).

NL1= *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1 (trans) S.W. Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1991.

NL2= *Notes to Literature*, vol. 2 (trans) S.W. Nicholson. New York: Columbia University Press, 1992.

NS= *Nachgelassene Schriften*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1993-.

P= *Prisms* (trans) S. Weber & S. Weber. Cambridge: MIT, 1983.

PMM= *The Philosophy of Modern Music*

Q= *Quasi una Fantasia* (trans) R. Livingstone. New York: Continuum, 1992.

Benjamin

A= *The Arcades Project* (trans) H. Eiland & K. McLaughlin. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 1999.

CB= *The Correspondence of Walter Benjamin* (ed) G. Scholem and T.W. Adorno, (trans) M.R. Jacobson & E.M. Jacobson. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press 1994.

BR= *Briefe*, vol. 2 (ed) G. Scholem and T.W. Adorno. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1966.
BGS = *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed) R. Tiedemann & H. Schweppenhäuser. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1972-89.
OT= *The Origin of German Tragic Drama* (trans) J. Osborne. New York: Verso, 1998.
SW1=*Selected Writings 1913-1926* (trans & ed) M.W. Jennings, M. Jennings & M.P. Bullock. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 1996.
SW2= *Selected Writings 1927-1934* (trans & ed) M.W. Jennings, H. Eiland, M.P. Bullock. et al. Cambridge: Harvard Belknap Press, 1999.
WA= 'The Work of Art in the Age of its Mechanical Reproducibility', in *Illuminations* (ed) H. Arendt, (trans) H. Zohn. London: Collins-Fontana Books 1973-. The more recent editions, London: Fontana 1992 and Pimlico 1999, have the same page numbering, which differs from that of the 1973- edition.

Fromm

EF= *Escape from Freedom*. New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941.
MCM= *Marx's Concept of Man*. New York: Continuum, 1961.

Habermas

CE= *Communication and the Evolution of Society* (trans) T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1979.
FN= *Between Facts and Norms* (trans) W. Rehg. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998.
KHI= *Knowledge and Human Interests* (trans) J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
LC= *Legitimization Crisis* (trans) T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1975.
LSS= *On the Logic of the Social Sciences* (trans) S.W. Nichol森. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988.
MC= *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action* (trans) C. Lenhardt & S.W. Nichol森. Cambridge: MIT, 1991.
PD= *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity* (trans) F. Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990.
PT= *Postmetaphysical Thinking* (trans) W.M. Hohengarten. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1992.
RS= *Towards a Rational Society* (trans) J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1971.
STP= *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (trans) T. Burger & F. Lawrence. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991.
TCA1=*Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 1 (trans) T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1984.
TCA2=*Theory of Communicative Action*, vol. 2 (trans) T. McCarthy. Boston: Beacon Press, 1987.
TP= *Theory and Praxis* (trans) J. Viertel. Boston: Beacon Press, 1973.

Horkheimer

CIR= *The Critique of Instrumental Reason: Lectures and Essays since the End of World War II* (trans) M. O'Connell. New York: Continuum, 1974.
CT= *Critical Theory* (trans) M. O'Connell. New York: Continuum, 1975.
DE= *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (+ Adorno). (trans) J. Cumming. New York: Continuum, 1976.
ER= *Eclipse of Reason*. New York: Continuum, 1974.
HGS= *Gesammelte Schriften* (ed) G. Schmid-Noerr & A. Schmidt. Frankfurt/M: Fischer, 1987-.
PSS= *Between Philosophy and Social Science* (trans) G.F. Hunter, M. Kramer & J. Torpey. Cambridge: MIT Press, 1995.

Marcuse

AD= *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics*. Boston: Beacon, 1978.
CR= *Counterrevolution and Revolt*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1972.
EC= *Eros and Civilization: A Philosophical Inquiry into Freud*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1955.
L= *An Essay on Liberation*. Boston: Beacon Press, 1969.
MS= *Schriften*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1978-89.
N= *Negations* (trans) J. Shapiro. Boston: Beacon Press, 1968

O= *One Dimensional Man*. Boston: beacon Press, 1964.

RR= *Reason and Revolution: Hegel and the Rise of Social Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1941.

Scholem

GF= *Walter Benjamin – die Geschichte einer Freundschaft*. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1975.

SF= *The Story of a Friendship* (trans) Jewish Publication Society of America. London: Faber and Faber 1982.

ⁱ Translation modified.

ⁱⁱ Translation modified

ⁱⁱⁱ Translation modified

^{iv} Translation modified. IL= *Illumination*. IL page number of edition 1973- (in brackets of edition 1992-).

^v Translation modified.

^{vi} Translation modified

^{vii} Translation modified. AGS 7 = Adorno, T.W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 7 (ed) R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp, 1970-. Up to the present, the volume coincides with later editions and their page numbers. This includes the common used paperback edition *Ästhetische Theorie* (ed) G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1970-.

^{viii} Article “Aura” in J.W. Ritter, ed. *Historisches Wörterbuch der Philosophie*.

^{ix} Goethe, W., ‘Über die Gegenstände der bildenden Kunst’ in *Gedenkausgabe der Werke, Briefe und Gespräche* vol. 13, pp. 122-25 (ed) Ernst Beutler. Zürich: Artemis 1954, p. 124. Trans. M. Rosen.

^x Colderidge, S.T., *The Statesman’s Manual*. London: Gale & Fenner, Richardson, and Hatchard 1816, p. 37 (also in his *Collected Works*, vol. VI (ed) R.J. White. London: Routledge and Kegan Paus 1972).

^{xi} Translation modified.

^{xii} Adorno, T. W., ‘Drei Studien zu Hegel’, in Adorno, T. W., *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 5, (ed) G. Adorno and R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1970. Trans. M. Rosen.

^{xiii} Adorno, T. W., *Über Walter Benjamin* (ed) R. Tiedemann. Frankfurt/M: Suhrkamp 1970. Trans. M. Rosen.

^{xiv} I have dealt with this issue in detail in *On Voluntary Servitude: False Consciousness and the Theory of Ideology* (Polity Press: Cambridge and Harvard U.P.: Cambridge, Ma., 1996). See especially Ch. 6.