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LATE MUSICOLOGY:
RECENT INTERSECTIONS BETWEEN
THEORY, MODERNITY, AND MARXISM

Andrew Timms

A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol
in accordance with the requirements of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy
in the Faculty of Arts, Department of Music

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ABSTRACT

This dissertation stages an encounter between two bodies of thought—Western Marxism and contemporary Anglo-American musicology—whose relationship up until now, with the exception of the recent musicological revival of interest in Adorno, has largely been one of mutual neglect. The purpose of this encounter is to demonstrate that musicology has failed to understand modernism and postmodernism adequately—that it has, in other words, confined itself to models of stylistic (and critical) evolution and change that reveal little about the historical conjunctures that underpin the cultural history of the twentieth century. A series of case-studies examining key musicological treatments of modernism and postmodernism—such as those by Richard Taruskin, Georgina Born, and Lawrence Kramer—will chart the reception of the different cultural periods. A figure whose writings are central to contemporary Marxist aesthetics—Fredric Jameson—will stand in opposition to these musicologists, demonstrating how modernism and postmodernism can be understood in a more profound sense, one that is far from a vulgar, deterministic Marxism. What emerges at this point is that this Marxian understanding of modernism and postmodernism cannot be grasped unless accompanied by a concept of modernity which can also be shown to lie behind the models of music history still widely proposed by a musicology at its supposedly most self-critical moment. Whether as crisis of representation or geopolitical configuration, modernity potentially presents itself as a useful concept for musicologists; however, even these models are not without problems. The most significant of these is that such an immensely formalistic mega-theory is captured by a logic of reification which is itself distinctively modern, and the theory thus becomes caught up in the problem that—in its Marxist form, at least—it is trying to solve.

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I am also grateful to Dr Rachel Beckles Willson who—very generously—read and criticised early drafts. I must also thank Professor Jim Samson, who started me off on my doctoral research—although it was admittedly a rather different project back then. Finally, Dr Giles Hooper read a very early draft of parts of Chapter 3 and made several very useful observations.

On a more personal note, thanks to my family and friends for supporting and tolerating me whilst I wrote this thesis. Most important of all was Alexandra—who means more to me than I can possibly express here, and without whom I simply could never have done it.

AUTHOR'S DECLARATION

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the Regulations of the University of Bristol. The work is original except where indicated by special reference in the text, and no part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree.

Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author and in no way represent those of the University of Bristol.

The dissertation has not been presented to any other university for examination either in the United Kingdom or overseas.

Signed

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to be the initials 'AG' followed by a stylized flourish.

5 May 2005

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NOTE ON TERMINOLOGY

Several of the most important words in this dissertation exist in various permutations in much academic writing. To avoid unnecessary confusion, a brief clarification of my intentions is called for.

noun modernity



adj modern

modernist postmodernist

I shall use postmodernism and postmodernist to denote a cultural period that emerges (unsurprisingly) after modernism in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Modernism itself I take to be a cultural period—beginning in the second half of the nineteenth century—that responds to a crisis of many degrees. Fundamentally, this crisis is one of modernity itself; modernity stretches back much further than modernism, however, and its precise demarcation and conceptual content will be addressed in the dissertation. Even on its most simplistic and problematic understanding (‘The Enlightenment’) we are pushed back to the eighteenth century; but it can be delineated in more productive ways which take it back much further.

I therefore use modernity to designate this epoch; modern is the accompanying adjective. Since one of the principal assumptions of this thesis is that modernity continues, I do not use the words postmodernity or postmodern, although many of the writers I deal with do use these terms, and they usually mean (respectively) postmodernism and postmodernist. I have not altered quotations from their writings, but I have always conformed to my own usage when discussing them. This (uncharacteristic) fastidiousness might seem more than faintly ridiculous, but, as will become clear, there is rather a lot at stake in falsely claiming that modernity is over.

PREFACE

*The question astir here, precisely, is that of presentation.** This thesis can be read as an extended essay on the opposition between form and content. To make matters more complicated than this, however, it so happened that the content of the thesis started to affect the form in which it was being presented. In other words, the form and content of a doctoral thesis—hardly the freest of genres—became, themselves, factors in the critical mix.

I therefore conceived the form of this dissertation as a dialectical investigation; that is, I have taken on board the theory discussed in Chapter 2 whereby dialectical thought undercuts superficial problems, showing them to be the product of broader situations. Thus, it is argued that the puzzling intersections between Marxist cultural theory and musicology can be reconfigured as problems involved in the notion of modernity. This is not an obvious conclusion and it takes some time to work towards it: the ideas involved are complex, and only assume their fullest significance when harnessed by a genuine theory of history, rather than a piecemeal academic survey. The form of the thesis thus stages a confrontation between two elements (thesis and antithesis, if you insist); it then moves to a different level for the important synthesis, which leads in turn to more questions.

These questions will not be answered. Since my theoretical focus is the work of Fredric Jameson, it will be unsurprising that to some extent this thesis is broad in its scope. As anyone who is familiar with Jameson's work will know, it is stylistically very distinctive—always an extremely challenging read, and obviously designed to resist consumption. I have found Jameson's example to be an exceptionally attractive one: here is someone who really can demonstrate the poverty of customary academic discourse, with its speed-reading, its predictable phrases and platitudes, its articles which can be generated almost sentence-by-sentence from a brief look at their abstracts alone, and (not least) its relentless, baffling formalism, by which I mean the constant policing of discourse so that very little of the passion of life itself is allowed to permeate the surface of texts which are sometimes little more than elegant critical pirouettes, nowadays churned out—in some cases—for few discernable purposes other than to satisfy the bean-counters. This essay will not acquiesce in the devaluation of writing that such an atmosphere is accomplishing: what is the point of trying to write in a style that is 'intended to speed the reader across a sentence in such a way that he can salute a readymade idea effortlessly in passing, without suspecting

* Italicised sentences are quotations from Jacques Derrida, *Dissemination*, trans. Barbara Johnson (London: Continuum, 2004), 3–7.

that real thought demands a descent into the materiality of language and a consent to time itself in the form of the sentence?’[†]

This is an essential and ludicrous operation.

Oxford, May 2005

[†] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), xiii.

INTRODUCTION

This dissertation is a theoretical experiment in which two troubled disciplines are mixed together in a doctoral test-tube. The experiment was provoked by the discussions of postmodernism that have only recently taken place in mainstream Anglo-American musicology. Although one hesitates to begin with a sweeping criticism of a wide and admittedly varied terrain, anyone who is serious about cultural theory will know that postmodernism is simply not understood adequately by many musicologists. With some notable exceptions,¹ discussions of postmodernism have tended to confine themselves to stylistic matters (how can we identify postmodernist music?) and questions of epistemology (what can a postmodernist musicology know?), neither of which adequately illuminate the underlying theoretical conjuncture. One is also tempted to claim that in focussing on simplistic analyses of style and half-understood critiques of representation, all combined with a healthy amount of superficial pluralism, musicology risks repeating precisely the errors which have elsewhere given postmodernism such a bad (or, indeed, ridiculous) name. The result has been a bewildering and increasingly unreal academic atmosphere in which all that is solid really has melted into air, and the unity and purpose of musicology—particularly certain forms of historical and theoretical enquiry—have been dissolved as if by fiat.

The ironic aspect of this situation is that what has been lost on the swings has not been gained on the roundabout: it is not as if the decline of older modes of enquiry has transformed musicology into a streetwise user of postmodernist theory. Indeed, as we shall later see, some of the most prominent musicological engagements with postmodernism (when they have been noticed at all) have provoked chastening reactions from theorists in other academic disciplines. Moreover, musicology has arrived belatedly on the postmodernist scene, and has thus had to push itself through a

¹ See, for example, John Butt, *Playing with History: The Historical Approach to Musical Performance* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002).

veritable mountain of theory at top speed simply to be able to relate to recent developments in the other arts and humanities. We are left today in a situation in which, like the other front-line disciplines,² musicology can now go post-theoretical—but almost without ever going properly theoretical in the first place! This thesis will dissent from this comforting trajectory: I remain unconvinced that most musicologists have appreciated the philosophical depth or geopolitical resonance of postmodernist theory; moreover, the climate of hubris that is now beginning to prevail, in which musicology is complacently felt to have survived its moment of greatest crisis, and in which only an ostrich could continue to want to talk about such things as formalism or Foucault, bestows a done-and-dusted sheen on a series of questions that have hardly been understood, never mind answered.

What this dissertation thus does is to juxtapose Anglo-American musicology with another unhappy discipline—Marxist cultural theory—whose fortunes are closely tied to postmodernism. One figure in particular has inspired this part of the analysis: Fredric Jameson. In his work there resides not only a fascinating and powerful understanding of modernism and postmodernism, but also a full-blown philosophy of modernity, which can somewhat surprisingly be aligned with the problems of musicology. This understanding of modernity will no doubt strike many as quirky, if not downright implausible,³ but comprehension of its substantial theoretical claims requires no particular allegiance to its political programme. In other words, the end result of this investigation will be indebted to Marxism, but not subordinate to it. What emerges is that the uncomfortable trajectory of the twentieth century—from modernism to postmodernism—tends to replay several aesthetic debates that can be seen as central to modernity itself: notably the question of knowledge and how we are to secure it, but also the relationship between language and meaning. It has been recognised for some time now that from a musical point of view these debates are expressed very productively in the writings of several German philosophers of the nineteenth century—well before the zenith of their recent post-structuralist fashionability⁴—but it has less often been remarked that several of the

² See Thomas Docherty, *After Theory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1996); Valentine Cunningham, *Reading after Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002); Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003); Michael Payne and John Schad, ed., *life.after.theory* (London: Continuum, 2003).

³ Roger Scruton, for instance, no doubt speaks for many when he suggests laconically that 'It may no longer be necessary to argue against the Marxian theory of history.' See *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 468.

⁴ See Andrew Bowie's pioneering study, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, second

most signal musicological motifs in the conflict between modernism and postmodernism—the tussle between what musicologists call formalism, for instance, and what might be termed contextualism—essentially continue these conversations, albeit in new and interesting ways.

The underlying continuity of this situation is what will most concern me—the sense in which, when talking about music, we still find ourselves falling prey to the problems that have haunted (or is it defined?) the modern era. A principal theoretical contention is that it is possible to model these problems of form and content economically, in explicitly Marxist terms drawn from the distinctive analysis of commodities and money which forms one of the foundation-stones of *Das Kapital*. Whether or not the efficacy of this model is anything other than coincidental or tautological will be unimportant here, because I shall be more interested in unfolding the model of modernity that can be read into Marx's analysis. The result of this investigation is a realisation that the history of Western classical music can indeed be mapped onto a Marxist concept of modernity; likewise, the recent postmodernist developments in musicology can be folded into a broader critical moment to which musicology arrived belatedly and rather half-heartedly. But a chastening set of consequential questions follows: in what senses is this history now over? What can the future hold for classical music? How will we escape the problems of modern meaninglessness? And what are the moral questions that follow from the correlation of classical music with modernity, which, as we scarcely need reminding, is a spatial, geopolitical concept, outlining a sense of the difference and superiority of the West over the rest?

A vulgar Marxism might answer these questions with crude denunciations of art itself; a mandarin Marxism might degenerate into a stale ritual of pessimistic *Kulturkritik*. The position that I shall outline here will involve an uneasy and unsatisfied combination of these two responses: we cannot not invest redemptive hopes in cultural production, but those hopes must be tempered by an exacting realism as to the full degradation of the present. Put bluntly, if art will no longer change the world, we might as well try to understand why that is now the case. In this theoretical stance I hope to come close to Fredric Jameson's readings of Marxism and

edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).

postmodernism. It is a question, as Jameson has argued,⁵ of sensing that most productive power of dialectical thinking, the way in which we can grasp modernity as both the best and worst thing that has happened. The completion of this modernising impulse, which Jameson detects (controversially) in postmodernism,⁶ is thus both shocking and a relief—shocking because it represents the triumph of the market, a fate that is generating some significant resistance nowadays; and a relief because the elimination of the older modes of production somehow allows a moment of considerable cultural interest, in which the remoter levels of the superstructure are finally shot through with the narcotic of the commodity-form itself. The result can seem—even to Marxists—wholly positive, a way, after all those years of caricatured grey modernism, of having one’s alienation and enjoying it.

But a blunt question surely arises at this point: why is a musicological (re)discovery of Fredric Jameson’s work on postmodernism necessary? Is it nothing other than a failure of the critical imagination to go behind and beyond Jameson, who is now just as canonical and difficult as the bad old modernists, as well as being an unrepentant Red? There would thus seem to be a sort of conservatism in engaging Jameson on postmodernism; after all, few people openly doubt that he is one of the most important theorists of postmodernism, and his work on the subject is anthologised, respected, contested, endlessly quoted, and widely disseminated. But these questions have a quiet subtext, one which is potentially more damaging than their superficial charge. Put simply, is postmodernism itself also too predictable now as a topic of scholarly interest? Should not the student be pushed onto fresher pastures to take note of the burgeoning amount of criticism (even to be found in Jameson’s recent writing)⁷ that detects the end of postmodernism?⁸ And, to focus such questions still further, even if it could be argued that postmodernism remains interesting, and even if one might plausibly make the case that Jameson is in need of yet more critical attention, why would a musicologist (of all people) want to do this?

This last question is perhaps the easiest to answer. Marxism—even the ubiquitous, mild, theoretical Marxism that barely raises an eyebrow in cultural-theory

⁵ See Fredric Jameson, ‘Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism’, in *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 122–3.

⁶ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 302–13.

⁷ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002).

⁸ Such claims even reached musicology some time ago: see Nikolas Kompridis, ‘Learning from Architecture: Music in the Aftermath to Postmodernism’, *Perspectives of New Music* 31 (1993), 7.

circles—has had very little impact on Anglo-American musicology. Several academics have tried to produce recognisably Marxist work,⁹ but in most cases, and with perhaps only one exception,¹⁰ one senses that these have been lonely expeditions into a dangerous environment. And whilst interest has recently increased considerably in the work of Theodor Adorno, the results of this have been depressing: he has been too easily harnessed to conservative causes, with the result that his distinctive Marxism has all but disappeared, as has mention of the M-word itself in relation to this thinker.¹¹

The situation is only a little better with respect to postmodernism. Mainstream musicology has only recently immersed itself in the debates surrounding postmodernism,¹² and as two later chapters will demonstrate, it has done so in a haphazard and unsatisfying manner. The work of theorists such as Jameson has certainly been felt (and acknowledged), but there have been few extended close readings of postmodernist theory. It is not particularly surprising that this has been the case, for music poses distinctive, difficult questions for the mind, questions which Jameson and other big-name theorists have often not openly addressed, preferring to concentrate on the written and visual arts—but the problem remains nonetheless. It is intensely difficult to know how to relate the work of any of these writers *directly* to music; but this problem can at least be foregrounded and explained, if not solved. The interesting result of this is that broader problems and more pervasive situations are delineated; the risk of this approach is that the resulting essay does not ‘talk about music’ in ways typically recognised by musicologists.

However, this is the important sense in which such theoretical forays are valuable. One of the most distinctive features of Jameson’s own writing has been its fulfilment of an imperative that Jameson laid down in the final chapter of his *Marxism and Form*:¹³ the point of dialectical criticism (in Jameson’s iconic formulation of it) is

⁹ See, for instance, the essays collected in Regula Burckhardt Qureshi, ed., *Music and Marx: Ideas, Practices, Politics* (London: Routledge, 2002).

¹⁰ The Department of Music at the University of Alberta has on its Faculty several scholars who have engaged seriously with Marxism.

¹¹ On the reception of Adorno see the following trenchant and much-needed article: Henry Klumpenhouwer, ‘Late Capitalism, Late Marxism and the Study of Music’, *Music Analysis* 20/3 (2001), 367–405.

¹² It was possible in 1993, for instance, for the editor of a collection of essays on music after modernism to argue that ‘It is [...] important for musicology to enter the fight, to stake its claim and not rest content to lament the passing of traditional approaches.’ See Simon Miller, ‘Introduction’, in Miller, ed., *The Last Post: Music after Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 3.

¹³ Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971).

not merely to dismiss different schools of thought whilst sitting atop of some transcendent Marxist peak. Instead, the dialectical critic works through competing theoretical positions, mapping out their terrain, utilising their strengths, cataloguing their weaknesses. As Hayden White puts it:

Jameson is a genuinely dialectical, and not merely antithetical, critic. He seriously entertains the theories of other critics, and not only those who in general share his own Marxist perspective. On the contrary, he is especially interested in the work of those critics who are non- or anti-Marxist, because he knows that any theory must be measured by its capacity, not to demolish its opponents, but to expropriate what is valid and insightful in its strongest critics.¹⁴

This is an imperative of considerable urgency for musicology: it has long been a discipline apart in the broader academic situation. As a trained Anglo-American musicologist, one is almost predisposed to cringe at the ways in which music is talked about by non-musicologists;¹⁵ it is not that unintelligent things are said, but rather that there seems to be an uneasy gap between the words of the critic and the specifics of the score—a gap that will not be traversed by the equally fashionable ‘discrediting’ of score-based analysis in favour of whichever postmodernist theorist is flavour of the month. This musicological unease is now widely recognised as limiting: it merely reflects, or so we are told, the Anglo-American empiricism and formalism that have been privileged at the expense of more speculative modes of thought.¹⁶ And yet a problem remains, which can perhaps be captured most economically by saying that the technical language required to talk about music is difficult and lengthy to acquire, and actually to be able to use its insights aurally is something that very few people in a generation achieve. Communicating such specialisation is next to impossible, but one can think of a handful of occasions where it has succeeded to wide acclaim—notably works like Charles Rosen’s *The Romantic Generation*.¹⁷ Unless a postmodernist musicology can find some way of bridging this gap, it will risk losing something that may very well never be recovered. This dissertation will not solve this problem or even address the process of its solution; but it will demonstrate why the problem arises at all, as well as pointing towards just what is at stake in its resolution.

¹⁴ Hayden White, ‘Getting Out of History: Jameson’s Redemption of Narrative’, in *The Content of the Form* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1987), 144.

¹⁵ For an example of this cringing, see Alexandra Wilson’s review of Slavoj Žižek and Mladen Dolar, *Opera’s Second Death* (New York: Routledge, 2002), *Nineteenth-Century Music Review* 1/2 (2004), 120–3.

¹⁶ For a recent example, see Michael P. Steinberg, *Listening to Reason: Culture, Subjectivity, and Nineteenth-Century Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2004), 1–3.

¹⁷ Charles Rosen, *The Romantic Generation* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1995).

Thus Jamesonian dialectical criticism will be useful here, in that it will enable me to go beyond musicology to outline alternative ways of approaching a common object. The conclusion of such working-through may well be that the competing school of thought is problematic in some way; but this is a mode of enquiry that is fundamentally sympathetic to its object. The problems that it finds will not be trivial failures, but markers of deeper contradictions that the school of thought in question fails (sometimes inevitably) to address. So dialectical criticism might be described, in Jameson's words, as 'thought to the second power': 'it aims, in other words, not so much at solving the particular dilemmas in question, as at converting those problems into their own solutions on a higher level, and making the fact and the existence of the problem itself the starting point for new research.'¹⁸ It is therefore not so much the enemy of conventional Anglo-American analytical thought, which Jameson describes as 'that mixture of political liberalism, empiricism, and logical positivism',¹⁹ but rather the end and transcendence of such projects, the moment in which they will be plugged back into the current of history and be seen as the peculiar ideological forms of our moment.²⁰

This dialectical criticism has not won Jameson unqualified respect, however. Whilst many see him as certainly one of the greatest contemporary Marxist culture-critics, his broader influence is more difficult to assess. His work on postmodernism is of course widely acknowledged to be seminal; and yet, as Neil Lazarus has recently argued, despite this he surely does not command the field.²¹ Jameson seems almost to be tolerated rather than respected—the Marxist theorist of postmodernism, granted, but still a creature of the dark side; the current, superficial pluralism of academic discourse encourages us to believe that Jameson's is thus just one particular reading of something that can quite easily be detached from such tendentious political appropriation. You pay your money and you take your choice: on this view a preference for Jameson might be understood as a particularly daring lifestyle choice

¹⁸ Jameson, *Marxism and Form*, 307.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, x.

²⁰ Anyone who doubts the efficacy and power of such a method would be well advised to consult Jameson's *The Prison-House of Language*, which offers an exposition and critique of structuralism that has never been equalled by anyone else on the Left—and from which, one senses, musicologists with interests in semiotics could learn a great deal. See Fredric Jameson, *The Prison-House of Literature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

²¹ Neil Lazarus, 'Fredric Jameson on "Third-World Literature": A Qualified Defence', in Douglas Kellner and Sean Homer, ed., *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 43–4.

or perhaps even the consequence of a misguided sense that Marxism still offers a rich seam for cultural theory to mine—but such a preference would remain judged as a matter of taste.²²

There thus arises a significant disparity between those who estimate Jameson to be the most recent addition to the great pantheon of Western Marxists and those, on the other hand, who read, say, 'Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism' and find it brusque and, frankly, baffling.²³ In fact, one of the most significant aspects of Jameson reception is surely the centring of attention on that one particular essay, for whilst it is indeed a striking piece of writing—and whilst its historical influence was no doubt considerable—it is, in the final analysis, rather untypical. Cogent arguments have been made to explain precisely why this is the case;²⁴ of greater moment is the resulting realisation that most people are introduced to Jameson through what is a (comparatively) quite readable, untypical essay that took shape over many years. Only when Jameson's theoretical concerns are traced back to the early 1970s does the astonishing continuity of his critical project become clear; and it is only when read alongside the theory of interpretation offered in *The Political Unconscious* that the essays in the *Postmodernism* book reveal their fullest richness.

So whilst a musicological concentration on Jameson is, at least in principle, viable, there is still the problem of postmodernism itself. The term was once sharply contested and theoretically glamorous, but there can be little doubt now that times have changed. Postmodernism was always disdained and ridiculed by some, of course, particularly those for whom the word evoked some kind of two-decade-long academic party, in which an unruly bunch of literary critics branched out of their subject and, depending on one's point of view, conquered or comprehensively misunderstood distant philosophical terrains. Almost despite itself, postmodernism became associated with a certain kind of relativistic hedonism: pluralism, superficiality, carnival, all taking place under the benevolent sun of what many have seen to be a significant mutation in capitalism. Like it or not (and several of its best theorisations came from those who were hostile to, or at the very least ambivalent about, its implications), on one matter many were united: postmodernism was at least

²² This runs quite contrary to the tone of Jameson's prose, which has always been much less accommodating: certainly there is a take-it-or-leave-it terseness to Jameson's work, but his writing makes it clear that one can only leave the problems of capitalism at the cost of rediscovering them later.

²³ The essay is reprinted as the first chapter of Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1–54.

²⁴ See Steven Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 103–25.

timely and intensely fashionable; it spoke of something—plausibly fashion itself—very pertinent to the 1980s and 1990s.²⁵

In recent years, however, this colourful commodified backdrop has lost some of its urgency, and a striking fate has befallen postmodernism itself. A typical contemporary reaction to postmodernism would simply be to say that the term is now disappointingly predictable, the garb of a new conformism. Supercilious amusement can greet those who even mention the word: if work on your thesis on postmodernism seems to be going badly, then there will always be some dreary old turtle who will quip that you could just hand in fragments (or blank paper) and thus submit, rather than a thesis on postmodernism, a postmodernist thesis. The extent to which postmodernism is still regarded as nonsensical froth is seen nowhere as clearly as in such pompositives, but such quips come from a plentiful fund, it would seem, and they are part of a regrettably broad ground-level association of postmodernism with anything that is quirky, subversive, pretentiously obtuse, mistaken, ersatz, and so on. One reason for these associations, however, has been precisely the recent proliferation of the quirky, the subversive, the pretentiously obtuse, the mistaken, and the ersatz—and not least in certain corners of Anglo-American academia, which has in more than a few eyes shed a great deal of its intellectual credibility in the process.²⁶ As a result of this situation, it is becoming more widely accepted that in some senses postmodernism does need to be criticised. Terry Eagleton, for instance, in a discussion of the ease with which cultural studies has come to scoot over the (former?) boundaries between the ‘high’ and ‘low’, remarks that

To work on the literature of latex or the political implications of navel-piercing is to take literally the wise old adage that study should be fun. It is rather like writing your Master’s thesis on the comparative flavour of malt whiskies, or on the phenomenology of lying in bed all day. It creates a seamless continuity between the intellect and everyday life. There are advantages in being able to write your Ph.D. thesis without stirring from in front of the TV set. Intellectual matters [...] re-join everyday life—but only at the risk of losing their ability to subject it to critique.²⁷

But a far more sensational example is provided by the so-called Sokal Affair. Alan Sokal, an American physicist, submitted a hoax academic paper to *Social Text*, an

²⁵ See (especially) the first chapter of John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997).

²⁶ For a brief introduction to some of these issues, see Christopher Butler, *Postmodernism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 32–43.

²⁷ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 3.

American humanities journal of some prestige which duly published the paper, to a great deal of (probably unfair) subsequent derision. The paper was a clever mix of name-dropping, fanciful relativistic anti-realism, and nonsensical mathematics, all dressed up in precisely the right kind of soft-centred Leftist rhetoric that it was Sokal's purpose to estrange. The editors of the journal thus appeared to be floating so high in their own balloons of speculative hot air that they had completely lost touch with reality—and this to the point at which, or so Sokal later claimed, they would not even bother to ask someone with appropriate scientific knowledge to evaluate a text that lay well outside their own expertise.²⁸ Needless to say, the affair came as a boon to those who argue that research into the arts and humanities is so much idle speculation propped up by public money that would be better spent doing something useful.²⁹ More interesting, however, is the association of the affair with the milieu of postmodernism as a whole; this is no doubt partly due to the fact that Sokal later co-wrote a book on the intellectual impostures of postmodernists. But there can be little doubt that here is one of the more widely circulated notions to have attached itself to postmodernism: the idea that, put crudely, the cultural shit has hit the academic fan, and now crap can be cool. Appropriately enough, Perry Anderson has claimed that this 'street-level relativism that often passes—in the eyes of friends and foes alike—for the hallmark of postmodernism' is the intellectual heir of the work of Jean-François Lyotard—the original impostor, one might say, for, according to Anderson, Lyotard admitted that his *The Postmodern Condition*, one of the most widely cited works on the subject, was the worst of his books, full of references to disciplines of which he had next-to-no knowledge.³⁰

It is clear, then, that changes have been occurring that have rendered postmodernism an increasingly passé or unfashionable notion; what has been most striking of all, however, is that it is one of the most memorable aspects of postmodernism—its endless theorisation—that now seems to hail from another age. If postmodernism was marked by its predisposition either to provoke, or be delineated by, ever more grandiose theoretical constructions, giving birth to an extraordinary, unignorable academic meta-discipline known simply as 'theory', then it is precisely that

²⁸ Alan Sokal, 'A Physicist experiments with Cultural Studies', *Lingua Franca* (May–June 1996), 62–4.

²⁹ This point has also been made by Christopher Norris. See his interview in Payne and Schad, *life.after.theory*, 107–8.

³⁰ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 26.

age of theory that now seems to be history. 'The golden age of cultural theory is long past', writes Eagleton:

Theory overshot reality, in a kind of intellectual backwash to a tumultuous political era. As often happens, ideas had a last, brilliant efflorescence when the conditions which produced them were already disappearing.³¹

So at a time, ironically enough, when few would doubt any longer that modernism has been eclipsed or somehow displaced, the term that is the most logical successor to modernism has come to be associated with a certain grandiose intellectual frivolity—which is, of course, a thoroughly convenient state of affairs for those who have never found the energy to learn the theories of postmodernism in the first place.

It is hard to know what to make of this situation: on one hand, one is tempted to say, with more than a hint of *Schadenfreude*, that postmodernism has only itself to blame for its demise; after all, for a doctrine that has often been felt to glamorise fashion and the ephemeral, it was only ever going to be a matter of time before it too fell victim to the ticking of the clock. On the other hand, it may very well be the case that the conceptual disrepute into which postmodernism has fallen is part of a more general disdain shown towards the totalising work that the concept does: in an age of purported pluralism and heterogeneity, a bland universal lying behind the fun and games is the last thing that people want to think about, acknowledge, or theorise. In any case, precisely the point about postmodernism, or so one might think, is that it was never merely the sum of its stylistic parts. It was never just theory, or just a certain type of architecture, or just a certain attitude towards metanarratives. Understood this way, the term (understandably) never crystallised into an agreed point of reference; as T. J. Clark has hinted, in this sense the word '*necessarily* pointed to too many, too disparate phenomena at once—too many instances and levels—with no stable sense of separations and determinations among them.'³² And so the more piecemeal understandings of the term—where one laments the nonexistence of an agreed referent and then proceeds to act nonetheless as if it meant just what one takes it mean—could never work their way up from superstructure to the base. Thus whilst there are (or have been) clear traditions within the discursive field of postmodernism, such as the growth of meta-theoretical discourse (one of whose offshoots, in turn, was

³¹ Eagleton, *After Theory*, 1, 29.

³² T. J. Clark, 'Origins of the Present Crisis', *New Left Review* 2 (2000), 85.

a certain relativism) or a body of cultural criticism which has paid a great deal of attention to architecture and films, there is comparatively little agreement on an overall dynamic to characterise the years in question.

It is to these problems that Jameson provides an answer of unparalleled elegance and uncommon theoretical reach. If the point is that totalising views of postmodernism have appeared, but that they have tended to get forgotten amidst a more simplistic focus upon solely the superstructural effects of the age, then a rediscovery of Jameson's postmodernism becomes a high priority indeed. In a fickle and fast-moving world, his theory of postmodernism has become the gold standard. One of my principal contentions here will be that we continue to need such a totalising theory of the present moment, and that Jameson's sketch of postmodernism remains the best that we yet have. However, there is always a problem with totalising theories, in that they can be presented as adroit done-deals, which, in a well-known passage, Jameson characterises as a 'winner loses' logic:

What happens is that the more powerful the vision of some increasingly total system or logic—the Foucault of the prisons book is the obvious example—the more powerless the reader comes to feel. Insofar as the theorist wins, therefore, by constructing an increasingly closed and terrifying machine, to that very degree he loses, since the critical capacity of his work is thereby paralyzed, and the impulses of negation and revolt, not to speak of those of social transformation, are increasingly perceived as vain and trivial in the face of the model itself.³³

In order to try to avoid this logic, the account (and appropriation) of postmodernism I present here will not begin but end with Jameson. In doing this I hope to show how, despite minor skirmishes here and there, there has in fact been a broad agreement on the political Left as to the shape of the past thirty-odd years, an agreement that allows for a sympathetic reading of other important critics such as Francis Fukuyama, whose ideological affiliations are far from Marx. The starting-point for this investigation will have to be the economic realm, but the investigation quickly involves other levels. This ideational diffusion, as it were, should not be surprising, for, no matter how unfashionable it may be to say it, all theories of postmodernism are philosophies of twentieth-century history, even if some of these theories are rather less aware of the fact than others; the merest conceptual content allotted to postmodernism tends to imply an entire reckoning of the cultural history of the past hundred years. The reason for this is obvious enough: an understanding of postmodernism almost by necessity

³³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 5–6.

implies some kind of grasp of modernism itself. And since the debates over modernism have ranged far and wide, traversing virtually all of the arts and humanities, it becomes clear that by mentioning the word at all, one reckons on an obscured but not invisible framework of critical assumptions about the twentieth century. I shall begin, then, by attempting to fill in a little of the detail of this backdrop; later on, so to speak, it will be wired for sound.

1 TRIUMPH AND DEFEAT

In its baldest sense, postmodernism has been theorised by the Left as comprising a pincer-movement of two historical dynamics: on one hand, the post-1960s ‘triumph’ of capitalism; on the other, a realisation that this triumph is nevertheless bound to deliver an unacceptable world. This can be stated in another way by saying that what is meant by postmodernism is the comprehensive defeat (however temporary) of the various communisms and socialisms whose ideological opposition to capitalism virtually defines the cultural period of modernism,¹ which stretches back well into the nineteenth century; but this comprehensive defeat is also an incomprehensible one, for it happens in an age when the intellectual power and dissemination of materialist critique, in particular, has never been so great.² The resulting picture of the postmodernist age is a jaded, confused, and laconic one—partly because much of its theory emanates precisely from the battered intellectual Left, which moves away from its earlier radical moment and struggles to find a proper release for its prodigious energies, but partly also because even the most buoyant theorists from the Right cannot quite reconcile the welcomed theoretical freedoms of the market with the creeping standardisation of cultural atmosphere that has been much noted in recent pop critiques of globalisation.³

On this reading postmodernism is much more than just a set of artistic practices or aesthetic styles; it is also not just restricted to that peculiar cross-pollination of philosophy, critical theory, and literary theory which is now generally subsumed by the hubristic term ‘Theory’.⁴ Instead, postmodernism is taken as an

¹ See, for example, T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 1–13.

² Perry Anderson, ‘Editorial: Renewals’, *New Left Review* 1 (January–February 2000), 18.

³ For a well-marketed example, see Naomi Klein, *No Logo: No Space, No Choice, No Jobs* (London: Flamingo, 2000).

⁴ The literature devoted to theory is unforgiving in its vastness: for a celebrated, consumable Marxist introduction, see Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, second edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). For two examples of recent attempts to move beyond theory, see Valentine Cunningham,

historical period in which all these phenomena are to be explained ultimately in terms of some broader organising dynamic. No matter what we choose to call this dynamic—the consumer society, multinational capitalism, late capitalism, globalisation—the fundamental point is straightforward enough: the period is delineated chronologically by the waning of the radical alternative, and conceptually by the ever more systemic penetration of the more distinctive cultural characteristics of capitalism (notably reification). Postmodernism emerges, then, as both part of an historical narrative as well as a relatively autonomous cultural correlative of that development. The narrative in question is the development (one hesitates to say evolution) of capitalism; put simply, at some point after the Second World War the way in which capitalism began to be culturally theorised changed quite significantly—which is not at all to say that the mode of production itself suddenly solved its problems or ceased to be based fundamentally on inequalities and exploitation. These problems, however, were reconfigured,⁵ and one of the more interesting developments of the time was precisely a huge investment in the culture of the image as such,⁶ in which gory realities are progressively denied or effaced in favour of a smooth, shiny surface. In this essential contradiction—itsself an obvious variation of the reification problematic long familiar to Marxism—is located the heart of the age, which will be theorised in this chapter on the level of its infrastructure. The cultural (and therefore superstructural) levels will be considered in Chapter 2. This ‘redundant’ Marxist scheme will thus be allowed one last supersonic outing before being decommissioned, with the added excitement that the thing being theorised is supposedly the fading power of the theory itself.

Reading after Theory (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002) and Terry Eagleton, *After Theory* (London: Allen Lane, 2003).

⁵ The early work of Jean Baudrillard, for example, productively confronts Marxist theory with structuralism. See Jean Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production*, trans. Mark Poster (St Louis: Telos Press, 1983), and Jean Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*, trans. Charles Levin (St Louis: Telos Press, 1981).

⁶ The key oppositional text here is surely Guy Debord, *The Society of the Spectacle*, trans. Donald Nicholson-Smith (New York: Zone Books, 1995).

The initial infrastructural determinant of postmodernism is an essential trajectory of comparative economic decline: since the early 1970s the West has found itself in a secular crisis that has been tenacious in its hold and unforgiving in its consequences.⁷ This observation is immediately unsettling, partly because it contrasts so sharply with the general sense of continuing economic progress that dominates much of the mass media in Anglo-America; but it is also the case that during the period in question there have, of course, been tangible increases in living standards—increases which, in the West, have virtually flooded certain sectors of society with a never-ending stream of ever more seductive commodities. The increasing tempo of technological change—whether illusory or not—makes people of some social classes (undoubtedly the sorts of people who will be the ones to write the history of the period) feel that no matter what any economic statistics show, life has continued to improve at an increasing rate. The underlying reality pointed to by theorists on the Left, however, is that within such societies the disparity between rich and poor has in fact grown considerably; and whilst there have undeniably been absolute improvements in living standards, it is also arguable that these have been bought at not only a considerable social cost, much noted in post-Thatcherite Britain, but also with scant regard to the exploitation and suffering they have caused elsewhere. It is also claimed that the overall performance of the most advanced nations has fallen well below what they attained earlier in the twentieth century.⁸

This situation—a feel-good economic decline—is arguably a sign of the extent to which capitalism as a systemic mode of production has come to be seen as the only plausible such system: to admit that it is failing is to be faced with the bleak prospect that our degraded present is nevertheless the best that we can imagine. The distortions of the actual economic situation as presented by the contemporary media—that we are living in a time of unparalleled prosperity: surefire annual economic growth, historically low interest rates, low inflation, and low unemployment—are only mistakenly termed ideological; they are, in fact, the necessary projections of the system itself, which must disguise its contradictions and failure, not only so that it

⁷ Even the *Very Short Introduction* to capitalism admits this. See James Fulcher, *Capitalism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004), 116.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 116. For a full and balanced survey, see Scott Newton, *The Global Economy 1944–2000: The Limits of Ideology* (London: Arnold, 2004).

will not be overthrown on compassionate social grounds, but also so that it will not be rejected on economic ones either.

What we are dealing with, then, is a widely acknowledged historical marker of the very late twentieth century: the triumph of capitalism over the state-organised (putative) socialisms whose ideological opposition to the West defined the Cold War era. It was surely inevitable that an age thus temporarily bereft of ideological choices would come to understand and theorise itself as the endpoint of a certain narrative of political evolution; but this hardly does justice to the tone of some of the cultural theory that took its cue from the demise of communism. The sense of liberation that this conjuncture provoked was captured most iconically by Francis Fukuyama's much-contested *The End of History and the Last Man*.⁹ Written in the aftermath of the collapse of Soviet and East European communism, Fukuyama argued in a famous phrase that 'a remarkable consensus concerning the legitimacy of liberal democracy as a system of government had emerged throughout the world'.¹⁰ At a time of burgeoning American optimism about a new world order, Fukuyama claimed strikingly that 'we' have trouble today 'imagining a world that is radically better than our own'.¹¹ Or rather, '[t]hat is to say, for a very large part of the world, there is now no ideology with pretensions to universality that is in a position to challenge liberal democracy, and no universal principle of legitimacy other than the sovereignty of the people.'¹² And in a remark that very neatly catches the loss of vision that accompanies this situation, Fukuyama claimed that 'we cannot picture to ourselves a world that is *essentially* different from the present one, and at the same time better. Other, less reflective ages also thought of themselves as the best, but we arrive at this conclusion exhausted, as it were, from the pursuit of alternatives we felt *had* to be better than liberal democracy.'¹³

The quasi-Hegelian accents of Fukuyama's theory are striking indeed—and as will become obvious later, many of Fukuyama's claims can be accommodated all too easily by certain Marxist theorisations of postmodernism. His analysis of the progress of history revealed two motors driving the whole process: the first is the advance of science and technology in a post-Enlightenment world, ensuring a certain level of

⁹ Francis Fukuyama, *The End of History and the Last Man* (London: Penguin Books, 1992).

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, xi.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 46.

¹² *Ibid.*, 45.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 46.

conformity on both military frontline and the shopper's high street. The first of these domains of homogenisation—arms and defence—is predictable enough, but the second might not have been quite so obvious in the early 1990s as it seems to be now. Fukuyama calls the comparatively new universal consumer culture 'the victory of the VCR', remarking that the 'enormously productive and dynamic economic world created by advancing technology and the rational organization of labor has a tremendous homogenizing power'.¹⁴

If this side of the historical process threatens sameness, then, it is with Fukuyama's other motor that this imbalance is countered. Returning to Hegel, Fukuyama takes up the basic master–slave dialectic and sees this struggle for recognition as pushing the slaves to achieve a political parity with their masters, which somewhat predictably turns out to be liberal democracy: the 'problem of human history can be seen, in a certain sense, as the search for a way to satisfy the desire of *both* masters and slaves for recognition on a mutual and equal basis; history ends with the victory of a social order that accomplishes this goal.'¹⁵ The subtext of this, of course, is an economic mode of production that is effectively happy to tolerate the existence of slaves; since their continuing presence is now simply the logic of human evolution itself, their exploitation can no longer be felt to be unacceptable. Formal political parity is bought at the cost of continued participation in the capitalist system, a striking alliance between liberalism and capitalism that is in many ways the most revealing aspect of Fukuyama's work and the conjuncture which produced it.¹⁶ Thus two very simple notions are combined to propel the First World, at least, into an age which supposedly no longer contains internal contradictions of a magnitude that would cause the political system to be overturned from within. It is not the case that capitalist, liberal democracies have ironed out their inconsistencies or in any sense solved their problems, but rather that the problems are those of the implementation of the system, rather than those of the system itself.

One predictable, contemptuous reaction to this theory would be: so far, so American! But this would be an unfair and inaccurate response to this most suggestive of books: in a section which some of his more trenchant critics seemed not

¹⁴ Ibid., 108. Precisely this homogenisation has latterly been much criticised, sometimes in the spirit, if not the style of Max Weber. See, for example, George Ritzer, *The McDonaldization of Society*, New Century edn (Thousand Oaks, CA: Pine Forge Press, 2000).

¹⁵ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 152.

¹⁶ See Perry Anderson, *A Zone of Engagement* (London: Verso, 1992), 341–5.

to reach, Fukuyama, having had and eaten his cake, suddenly chokes on the last crumbs and wonders what the end of history might look like. It is here that he begins to find a foothold from which to critique his thesis. The principal question concerns the Hegelian struggle for recognition once the end of history is reached: does it subside (and, if so, with what effects), or is the era of posthistory still marked by this process (and again, if so, with what effects)? There are several possible replies to these questions. The response of the political Left is that capitalism breeds inequality by default, thus guaranteeing unequal recognition and a continuance of history in this sense.¹⁷ Tellingly, however, Fukuyama sees as more powerful the view of the political Right: in this view democracy is more a levelling force than a welcome granting of equality, and in a sudden nod towards the sort of relativism that is often associated with postmodernism, Fukuyama returns us to another end—the end of romanticism and entry into modernism—and Nietzsche:

Modern education, that universal education that is absolutely crucial in preparing societies for the modern economic world, liberates men from their attachments to tradition and authority. They realize that their horizon is merely a horizon, not solid land but a mirage that disappears as one draws closer, giving way to yet another horizon beyond. That is why modern man is the *last* man: he has been jaded by the experience of history, and disabused of the possibility of direct experience of values.

Modern education, in other words, stimulates a certain tendency toward relativism, that is, the doctrine that all horizons and values systems are relative to their time and place, and that none are true but reflect the prejudices or interests of those who advance them. [...] Relativism in this context does not lead to the liberation of the great or the strong, but of the mediocre, who were now told they had nothing of which to be ashamed. [...] Men with modern educations are content to sit at home, congratulating themselves on their broadmindedness and lack of fanaticism. As Nietzsche's Zarathustra says of them, "For thus you speak: 'Real are we entirely, and without belief or superstition.' Thus you stick out your chests—but alas, they are hollow!"¹⁸

There can be little doubt that this 'liberation' from tradition and authority, and the concomitant levelling of values, is a corollary of the gradual encroachment of the market onto all levels of social life. In Fukuyama's vision of *posthistoire*, it is unclear whether anything can be done about this process. For the Left there can be little to celebrate; but the Right, too, are equally uneasy, and one is thus tempted to believe that the debates over postmodernism are not as far from politics as one might assume.

Even if one grants Fukuyama a measure of recognition for the striking synthesis he effects in *The End of History and the Last Man*, it still remains a deeply problematic essay. The arrogance with which he deposits liberal democracy at the top

¹⁷ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 289.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 306–7.

of the political pile is surprising, given its comparatively very recent provenance. Moreover, in distinguishing between liberal practice and the liberal idea, Fukuyama can be read as being willing to tolerate the patent real-world failings of capitalism simply because the idea itself is apparently now historically and theoretically unbeatable. Analogous lines of argument have rarely worked for Marxists. One is also tempted to confront Fukuyama's thesis with the depressingly monochrome big-money reality of American political life and its falling electoral participation rates. However, the surprising resourcefulness of Fukuyama's theory is evidenced by the very willingness of the world's most powerful nation to tolerate the miscarriages of its supposedly universally legitimate system: one might well argue that if these, the most basic of problems, cannot breed a political will that might sweep away liberal democracy's pretensions to universality, then what event might do so? The worrying thought for a Marxist is that Fukuyama's theory might be correct for the time being, and that gradually this post-historical present might so seduce those who trumpet its achievements that they might grow blind to its manifest failings, and become doubtful of the possibility of any change in the conditions of material life that might keep alive the hope of what Fukuyama rather disparagingly calls 'a radiant socialist future'.¹⁹ This very neatly suggests that an effective critique of Fukuyama might concern itself not with the possibility that he is wrong, but that he is in fact right—or, more likely, that the milieu which he theorises might in some sense generate a complacency that will in turn fulfil the theory's prediction of endless political and economic sameness.

But what is the nature of the alliance between liberalism and capitalism upon which Fukuyama's vision rests? Although Fukuyama likes to characterise the situation as one in which alternatives to capitalism have been finally vanquished—a seductive thesis that, in 1989, had an obvious emotional resonance—it is much more plausible that the conjuncture that he analyses is simply that of what is more often labelled (on the Left, at least) as neoliberalism. Far from being a political and economic theory which has finally won a long battle with evolutionary alternatives, neoliberalism is more usually theorised as a very specific, aggressive agglomeration of interests that first gained influence in the 1980s under the Reagan administration and Thatcher government. Specifically, it represents the overthrow of Keynesian economic orthodoxy in a direct response to the latter's inability to pull the world out

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 46.

of recession in the 1970s. So before neoliberalism can be adequately surveyed, it is necessary to detail the elements of the crisis to which it was a response. That crisis, in turn, is only recognisable as such when viewed alongside the long postwar period of economic growth—and it is to this golden age, as so many call it,²⁰ that attention should first be paid.

The golden age, stretching from 1945 to 1973, was a time of buoyant economic performance in the advanced capitalist nations.²¹ The average annual rate of economic growth in the OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries was 5.1% during 1960–8 and an only slightly less impressive 4.7% during 1968–73.²² Compared with the figures for 1973–9 (2.6%) and 1979–85 (2.2%), this was a strong performance indeed—and compared with average rates of growth over various time periods since 1820, none of which topped 1.8%, the period from 1950–73 as a whole achieved a striking 3.8%.²³ As Hobsbawm notes, ‘World output of manufactures quadrupled between the early 1950s and the early 1970s and, what is even more impressive, world trade in manufactured products grew tenfold.’²⁴ In the US alone, real wages for private-sector nonsupervisory workers peaked in 1973 at \$15.72 (at 2001 prices), having climbed steadily since 1960; by the mid-1990s they had fallen to under \$14—a decline of over 10%.²⁵ At 2.8%, productivity growth was higher in the 1960s than in any of the subsequent decades; unemployment hit a level that, again, is yet to be bettered (averaged over a decade); and the same is true of inflation.²⁶

The key determinant of this age, in Hobsbawm’s own analysis, was the restructuring of capitalism that led states to promote a mixed economy—that is, an accommodation of the free market balanced by governmental commitments to welfare and social security, notably including the explicit goal of full employment—at a time when the world economy was becoming increasingly internationalised, ‘making

²⁰ The idea of the golden age surely received its widest dissemination through Eric Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes: The Short Twentieth Century 1914–1991* (London: Abacus, 1995).

²¹ See Rondo Cameron and Larry Neal, *A Concise Economic History of the World: From Paleolithic Times to the Present* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003), 362–71.

²² David Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 130.

²³ *Ibid.*, 132.

²⁴ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 261.

²⁵ Robert Pollin, *Contours of Descent* (London: Verso, 2003), 43.

²⁶ *Ibid.*, 195.

possible a far more elaborate and sophisticated international division of labour'.²⁷ Economic liberalism and social democracy were married;²⁸ the turbulence of the years between the First and Second World Wars was to be avoided at all costs, and one of the principal ways in which this was to be achieved was through full (or near-full) employment. There thus arose a solid consensus that in order to avoid the sort of catastrophic market failure that had hit the USA and Germany in particular—but also, in the milder form of a general slump, much of the rest of the industrialised world—what was needed was not an ever more unrestricted form of capitalism, but rather a complementary embrace of state planning and intervention.

On some levels, at least, the results were astounding. Even the Marxist Hobsbawm writes, memorably, that 'All the problems which had haunted capitalism in its era of catastrophe appeared to dissolve and disappear.'²⁹ As has already been noted, what followed was an age of unprecedented economic growth, powered in Hobsbawm's view by the technological revolution: advanced electronic goods, once the height of luxury, were now demanded as the base-line of respectable living; the age of radar, the jet engine, and commercially manufactured plastics beckoned.³⁰ Mechanisation veritably flooded the advanced industrial countries and changed life even in the rest of the world, causing colossal social ripples as it went: where once there had been servants and domestic labour, now there was increasingly just an ever-expanding array of machines. This technology-fuelled explosive growth was complemented by the growth of welfare provision in some of the more progressive nations. The state could now aim to provide healthcare, benefits, and pensions for all—a considerable shift in the fortunes of the poor.

These social changes were, of course, highly significant features of the golden age. But of more obvious prominence were developments which threatened (or promised) fundamentally to restructure the socio-economic (not to mention political) world. Whereas a very short time ago large proportions of nations' populations had worked in agriculture and fisheries, the golden age witnessed a 'spectacular' decline of peasantry—Hobsbawm's most striking example being Japanese farmers, constituting 52.4% of the population in 1947 but only 9% by 1985. The concomitant urbanisation, as formerly rural workers flocked to the big cities in search of gainful

²⁷ Hobsbawm, *Age of Extremes*, 269.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 270.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, 267.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 264.

employment, provides much of the social backdrop for postmodernism. But of similar significance is the fact that urbanisation did not weaken the agricultural competitiveness of the most developed nations; indeed, thanks to their comparative wealth and technological advantage, they were able to increase production vastly, so much so that despite the decline of agriculture,

the developed industrial countries, with one or two exceptions, also transformed themselves into the major producers of agricultural goods for the world market, and they did so while reducing their actual farming population to a steadily diminishing, and sometimes an absurdly tiny percentage of their people.³¹

Increased prosperity also helped to fuel one of the more long-lasting legacies of the golden age: the expansion of secondary and higher education.³² Whereas in the recent past the numbers of university graduates had been (as a proportion of a nation's population) very small, the improved economic position of some of the lower-middle and upper-working classes allowed their children the benefits of a degree—namely, intellectual self-improvement and the virtual assurance of improved salary prospects, not to mention the opportunity to enter the professions closest to the centre of political and social power. An unintended spin-off of this demographic change was the surprising growth of a Left-wing student movement at a time when one might least have expected it; as we shall later see, it was this initially inconspicuous change that has perhaps exerted the greatest influence over theorisations of postmodernism.

Such changes, when coupled to the considerable alterations in the socio-economic and political position of women, combined to produce what is perhaps most significant of all about the golden age. Specifically, in Hobsbawm's phrase, the most developed nations were confronted by the 'illusion of a collapsing working class'.³³ Older industries, such as mining and ship-building, were of course suffering a secular economic decline; but it was the social side of the situation—the increasing importance for workers of property and privatisation over poverty and collectivism—that exerted just as much leverage on traditional class politics. As Hobsbawm sardonically notes,

Of course most of humanity remained poor, but in the old heartlands of industrial labour what meaning could the *Internationale's* 'Arise, ye starvelings from your slumbers' have for workers

³¹ Ibid., 292.

³² Ibid., 295–301.

³³ Ibid., 302.

who now expected to have their car and spend their annual paid vacation on the beaches of Spain?³⁴

The inexorable march towards what would later be termed the consumer society, a process which proved adept at fracturing the more prosperous working class from the persistently very poor, again sets the scene for the social dynamics of a later postmodernism.

In a textbook example of dialectical theory, the golden age balance had, in turn, unleashed forces of change that in the early 1970s brought the era to a close. In Hobsbawm's brisk delineation,³⁵ the hegemony of the USA, which had guaranteed the newly transnational capitalist system, began to waver. The persistent growth in productivity and earnings combined with healthy profit levels, which had underpinned the balance, started to fail: ironically, as full employment was most nearly achieved, the resulting (comparative) shortages of labour, coupled with booming demand in the economy in general, began to exert inflationary pressure on the world economy. Labour militancy began slowly to increase, as workers, well aware of the tight labour market, felt able to increase wage demands. The stable international system of currency exchange, backed by the ultimate convertibility of the US dollar into a given amount of gold held at Fort Knox, collapsed; and when the price of oil was (twice) hiked dramatically by the cartel, OPEC, that then controlled much of the world's oil production, the fragile scaffold that had underpinned the mechanised age of social democracy finally gave way: 'this was a major change. The world economy did not recover its old stride after the crash. An era was at an end. The decades since 1973 were to be once again an age of crisis.'³⁶

2

How was the economic balance of the golden age struck? Conventional theories on the Left have looked towards the so-called regulation school of economics, whose analyses focus on the institutional structures that govern capitalist relations in any

³⁴ Ibid., 267.

³⁵ Ibid., 284.

³⁶ Ibid., 286.

reasonably stable pattern of economic evolution.³⁷ The key concept that has been thought to lie behind the golden age is (Gramsci's) Fordism: not just the systems of mass production that one associates with the term, but more accurately a

recognition that mass production meant mass consumption, a new system of the reproduction of labour power, a new politics of labour control and management, a new aesthetics and psychology, in short, a new kind of rationalized, modernist, and populist democratic society.³⁸

In the post-war years, a combination of state-sponsored regeneration and rationalisation of industries that had been decimated by the Second World War set the scene for the mollifying of the working class: increases in real wages were bought at the cost of cooperation in Fordist mass production systems. An era of stability beckoned, in which the state—through judicious fiscal and monetary policy—would iron out the worst of the business cycle, undertaking public investment and guaranteeing a social security safety-net (including housing, education, and healthcare) for those who remained or found themselves poor. This enlightened age was to be blessed with the sort of responsible corporate behaviour that Ford himself tried to practise: technological progress, as we have already seen, promised to make conditions better for all; and the macroeconomic stability underwritten by the state finally allowed firms to invest heavily in fixed capital, thus promising an eventual reaping of economies of scale when the mass production lines—churning out standardised products for the masses—came alive. 'Postwar Fordism', in the words of David Harvey, must be seen, then, 'less as a mere system of mass production and more as a total way of life.'³⁹ A global system of capitalism, backed by the ultimate convertibility of the US dollar into gold, solidified, with America playing banker. The benefits for those in the loop were considerable, but the Second and Third Worlds—as they were then known—were not invited to join.

As always, in other words, the benefits were confined to the few rather than the many: Fordism was certainly a way of life, but one that flourished only in particular states and only then in certain industries. In order to justify the large capital outlays that Fordist manufacturing processes required, a stable economic climate was needed—and more particularly, stable growth in demand was needed to develop in the

³⁷ Robert Brenner and Mark Glick, 'The Regulation Approach: Theory and History', *New Left Review* 1/188 (July–August 1991), 47–8.

³⁸ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 125–6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 135.

markets for the products that would eventually fall off the ends of the new assembly lines.⁴⁰ The monopoly sector that produced such goods promised reasonable wages and provided (comparative) job security; its labour-force was predominantly male, highly unionised, and mainly white. These are the workers whose depoliticisation Hobsbawm noticed, gradually separated from their (economic) brothers working in much harsher competitive industries, where employment was less well remunerated and job security was much worse.⁴¹

This, at least, is the picture painted by geographer David Harvey's influential study of postmodernism, *The Condition of Postmodernity*. Harvey sees the shift from modernism to postmodernism as being determined, on an economic level, by what regulation-school economists would term a shift in the regime of accumulation.⁴² Fordism came to be seen as one such regime in Harvey's view, and it is the dissolution, or at least difficulties, of this regime that has marked a transition to a different regime of accumulation. As in Hobsbawm's delimitation of the golden age, the shift from stability to difficulties is centred on 1973, but Harvey's analysis of the onset of the crisis is more detailed. Fordism, Harvey argues, was always dependent on stable rising demand for the sorts of products that were manufactured by Fordist processes. By the late 1960s, internal markets—particularly in the US—for some of these were already reaching their saturation points. Moreover, corporate productivity and profitability were declining. Robert Brenner, in an influential analysis of this moment, argues that US firms responded to these difficulties by repressing their wage costs, updating their plant and equipment, and by pricing below full cost.⁴³ They had not been helped by the weakening of the dollar, the story of whose decline is as gripping as any thriller.⁴⁴ Eventually the downward pressure on the dollar became intense—accompanied inevitably by a deterioration in the US trade balance, particularly with Japan and Germany⁴⁵—and in late 1971 the US government was forced to devalue the dollar by 7.9% against the price of gold. Even this measure could not correct the underlying problem of US uncompetitiveness, however, and

⁴⁰ Ibid., 133–5.

⁴¹ Ibid., 137–8.

⁴² A regime of accumulation is a distinct pattern of economic evolution which is relatively stable. See Brenner and Glick, 'The Regulation Approach: Theory and History', 47.

⁴³ Robert Brenner, 'The Economics of Global Turbulence: A Special Report on the World Economy, 1950–98', *New Left Review* 1/229 (May–June 1998), 1–265. See also Giovanni Arrighi, 'Tracking Global Turbulence', *New Left Review* 20 (March–April 2003), 8.

⁴⁴ See Newton, *The Global Economy 1944–2000*, 79–102.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 81–3.

another further dollar devaluation in 1973 led to the abandonment of the system of fixed exchange rates on which the international monetary system of the golden age had depended.

One of the golden age's key coordinates collapsed, then, under the increasing pressure exerted on major currencies by an ever-more global economy. Harvey, however, devotes more space to inflation, casting it as the inevitable end-product of a rigid Fordist regime. What he means by this is that the Fordist regime was reliant on inflexible design processes and presumed stable growth in unvarying consumer markets, all enforced by rigid labour markets and firm state commitments to welfare programmes. When the competitiveness of a major economy such as that of the US began to decline, there were few means of sustaining the boom other than by adjusting monetary policy to try to engineer or restrain the growth that might eventually restore productivity and profits to their previous levels:

The momentum of the postwar boom was maintained through the period 1969–73 by an extraordinarily loose monetary policy on the part of both the United States and Britain. The capitalist world was awash with excess funds, and with few diminished productive outlets for investment, that meant strong inflation.⁴⁶

When the inflation was halted, it was as if a curtain had been raised on a dreadful conjuncture: a property crash, rises in the oil price, and recurring financial problems. The ensuing recession (1973) opened the 'social space' for a new regime of accumulation.⁴⁷ Flexible accumulation is marked by the prevalence of greater changeability: innovation, new sectors of production, new consumer markets; the growth of the service sector encourages this flexibility, in which a large, mobile army of workers can transfer their skills quickly and simply from one job to the next. The older specialised, capital-intensive industry starts to seem like a technological dinosaur when mentally juxtaposed with the pulsing circuits of Silicon Valley.

Such is the image that might be provoked by the idea of a more flexible regime of accumulation: a kind of fun-fun capitalism fit for the mutability of the post-Fordist consumer. Harvey is undoubtedly correct to dash this nonsense on the rocks of reality: moving rapidly to the labour market, he points out that production flexibility does not augur well for workers' pension cover.⁴⁸ Temporary contracts and increased

⁴⁶ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 145.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 145.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 151.

outsourcing sounds sexy and flexible enough on a managerial level; for those who are laid off as a result and can find no permanent position, the experience is a little more muted. The burden of risk is thus shifted somewhat onto the employee: the political situation of this, as history moved towards the Reagan–Thatcher era, needs no particular underlining; the increased flexibility of the firm is matched by the greater responsibility (read: uncertainty) of the worker as to his or her own future, a situation mirrored by the growth of defined-contribution pension schemes, which similarly shifted risk away from the older occupational schemes—in which the employer had to meet its obligations—to schemes where shortfalls are simply the employee’s problem.⁴⁹ And as Harvey notes, the actual resulting structure of labour organisation can, in turn, foster yet greater exploitation and actively hinder the formation of class resistance: ‘Struggling against capitalist exploitation in the factory is very different from struggling against a father or uncle who organizes family labour into a highly disciplined and competitive sweatshop that works to order for multinational capital’.⁵⁰ More obviously, the growth of flexible accumulation at home can simply displace the older mass production to corners of the globe that tend not to get identified as centres of postmodernism: here, rhapsodic accounts of flexible accumulation simply disguise the exploitation of very vulnerable workers in the developing world who are paid a pittance and work often without elementary social protections (health and safety, job security, retirement benefits). Another contemporary point of resistance to globalisation thus resurfaces.

The benefits to firms of these changes are similarly clear. In the right circumstances, small-batch production and subcontracting could replace older economies of scale with economies of scope: the greater role played by innovation and customisation can produce more personalised goods for profitable niche-markets. Rapid turnover time in production allows just-in-time delivery, which permits firms to produce continuously ‘to order’, rather than building up large stock inventories and waiting for them to be sold.⁵¹ Crucially, however, rapid production turnover time needs rapid consumption turnover: so flexible accumulation entails built-in obsolescence, as well as the need to generate a rapidly fluctuating sense of fashion ‘and the mobilization of all the artifices of need inducement and cultural

⁴⁹ Robin Blackburn, *Banking on Death, or, Investing in Life: The History and Future of Pensions* (London: Verso, 2002), 79–81.

⁵⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 153.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 155–8.

transformation that this implies. The relatively stable aesthetic of Fordist modernism has given way to all the ferment, instability, and fleeting qualities of a postmodernist aesthetic that celebrates difference, ephemerality, spectacle, fashion, and the commodification of cultural forms.’⁵² The era of the mobile-phone fascia and downloadable polyphonic ring-tone beckons.

Flexible accumulation, then, does not represent a decisive break with the dynamics of capitalism:

what is most interesting about the current situation is the way in which capitalism is becoming ever more tightly organized *through* dispersal, geographical mobility, and flexible responses in labour markets, labour processes, and consumer markets, all accompanied by hefty doses of institutional, product, and technological innovation.⁵³

Two developments, in Harvey’s view, have caused this: first is the increased significance of information, which, when up-to-date, is a very valuable commodity indeed.⁵⁴ It is this proliferation and speed of communication of information that, in part, allows the flexibility of the producer and saturates the mind of the consumer. Allied to this, and much more significant, is the widespread reorganisation and deregulation of the global financial system, the formation, for the first time, ‘of a single world market for money and credit supply’.⁵⁵ In a remark that, as we shall see, eerily echoes Fredric Jameson’s theorisation of the sublime unrepresentability of multinational capitalism, Harvey claims that ‘The structure of this global financial system is now so complicated that it surpasses most people’s understanding.’⁵⁶ But one thing is clear: the autonomy of the nation-state takes a beating. It can still legislate within its borders, of course, but capital flows are now mere digits in the void; the flow of this immense amount of global capital can powerfully influence the macroeconomic situation of any country, as the developing world has had cause to regret. A new world order takes shape, in which the neoliberal Washington Consensus run by the World Bank and International Monetary Fund—marked by its whatever-the-consequences commitment on one hand to ultra-free-market economics, but on the other to the frequent hypocritical interventions to ‘bail out wealthy asset holders

⁵² Ibid., 156.

⁵³ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 159.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 161.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 161.

during the frequent global financial crises in the 1990s⁵⁷—will assume the economically significant role, with the leaders of the free world merely playing catch-up. Times have changed: this is the message of flexible accumulation; the solidity and solidarity of the 1950s and 60s gives way to the decentred and fleeting experiences of postmodernism,⁵⁸ and it is already obvious from this analysis that, on this view, postmodernism is decidedly the situation as seen from just one side of the fence.

Put this way the theory sounds deliberately garish, a seeming ancestor of so many post-Marxisms. Harvey is much more level-headed, however. He devotes a chapter to aligning flexible accumulation with the more traditional Marxist theories of overaccumulation.⁵⁹ He is strikingly balanced in his assessment of the phenomenon: noting that the theory overwhelmingly points to a major change in the way capitalism is working, he assesses the counter-proposition—that all of this is sheer self-fulfilling ideology. The truth lies inevitably between the extremes: Fordism never became hegemonic everywhere, and neither has post-Fordism in its turn. There is rather a co-existence of these varieties of capitalism. What has happened, Harvey claims, is ‘a simple change in the balance between Fordist and non-Fordist systems of labour control’;⁶⁰ a highly remunerated managerial class has emerged, the service sector has grown significantly, and inequality has deepened. The growth in the financial markets, whether cause or effect of flexible accumulation, marks a response to a crisis—problems of inflation, productivity, profitability, the problem of sustaining adequate demand (a threat, in other words, of underconsumption)—that demonstrates the degree to which we are confronted by ‘a particular and perhaps new combination of mainly old elements within the overall logic of capital accumulation.’⁶¹

The way in which this new regime of accumulation is socially mediated is through the experience of time and space. Harvey subjects differing conceptions of time and space to a long analysis, and, in one of his most influential passages, identifies a new round of time–space compression that has shrunk the dimensions of the globe yet again, rendering spatial barriers less significant than ever before. But therein lies a crucial contradiction: ‘the less important the spatial barriers, the greater the sensitivity of capital to the variations of place within space, and the greater the

⁵⁷ Pollin, *Contours of Descent*, 8. See also Harvey, *The Conditions of Postmodernity*, 168–9.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 171.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, 173–88.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, 192.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, 196.

incentive for places to be differentiated in ways attractive to capital.’⁶² Differences in strengths of labour control, or differences in productivity or quality of labour, matter greatly, for instance, and flexible accumulation can tailor its production to the specific requirements or limitations of a particular place.⁶³ Likewise, the cultural homogenisation of the world may continue apace, with massive multinationals opening more or less identical shops in country after country; but, importantly, the particular tastes of local markets must be catered for if maximum rewards are to be reaped. Here the needle of the post-Fordist paradigm has to be both incredibly sensitive to local winds, but also completely insensitive to the broader standardisation within which the local variety finds its place.

3

Harvey’s account of postmodernism is a subtle and eclectic survey of the terrain. Genuine Marxist theory always runs the risk of appearing to yoke too many particulars under one domineering universal, but Harvey’s problem is in many ways the opposite. *The Condition of Postmodernity* provides seminal diagnoses of certain key cultural changes, but it constructs its reading of postmodernism by a process of collage and juxtaposition. Sensing perhaps that a very laboured linking up of the various dimensions of postmodernism would fall prey to the charge of vulgar economic determinism, Harvey instead lets his particulars roam free. Rarely do such scintillating portrayals of the base and its spatio-temporal mediation appear; but what is gained on the infrastructural swings is lost on the superstructural roundabout. As has been claimed elsewhere, Harvey’s summaries and analyses of culture do not reach the required level:⁶⁴ his early chapters, whilst presenting an interesting model of modernism in three stages—revolutionary (pre-First World War), heroic (inter-war), and high (post-Second World War)—are simply too synoptic to be convincing. When he finally does get down to some in-depth analysis—in the treatment, for instance, of the film *Blade Runner*—the result falls far below what one would expect were the pen in the hands of a Žižek or a Jameson. This seems to arise not from any lack of care or

⁶² Ibid., 296.

⁶³ Ibid., 294.

⁶⁴ John Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture: Essays on Cultural Theory and Postmodernity* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 53.

thought, but simply because not enough attention has been paid to the very complex, but very significant world of postmodernist theory. It is impossible to read Harvey's summaries of deconstruction, for instance, without cringing;⁶⁵ and this reaction comes to seem rather mild when it becomes clear that the overall impression given is that somehow this supposed semiotic freedom mirrors the more signal change in both the experience of time and space, as well as the new regime of accumulation in which flexibility is the key word.

A more challenging theory is put forward by Alex Callinicos.⁶⁶ In his trenchant *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* he does not reject the idea that there might have been some kind of shift in the way capitalism works, but he does qualify it very strongly, restricting it to a very small proportion of businesses in one particular part of the globe. This book undoubtedly exhibits one of the rather more baleful sides of Marxist theorising, in which brisk dismissals of all sorts of intellectuals are followed by faithful restatements of the basic tenets of historical materialism. The evolution and adaptation of Marxism to what many have seen to be distinctively new social conditions is halted and essentially rejected, and instead the search is begun for someone to blame for advancing such nonsense in the first place. A little surprisingly, the solution to this problem is found in the most striking (and lasting) part of Callinicos's analysis—namely, his dissection of the sort of political subject that a postmodernist epoch might constitute. In this, the final section of *Against Postmodernism*, Callinicos turns his attention primarily to the middle classes. Somewhat refreshingly—for throughout the book Callinicos is generally scornful of other attempts to account for the constitutive newness of postmodernism—he claims that the twentieth century did witness the growth of a so-called new middle class, composed essentially of professional, administrative, and managerial workers. The importance of this stratum is considerable: 'because of the cultural influence it exerts on other white-collar workers who aspire to promotion into its ranks, the new middle class is a force to be reckoned with in every major Western society.'⁶⁷ Key markers of this class are, apparently, the (rather slow) breakdown of the separation of men and women, a waning sense of class itself, and a penchant for instant rather than delayed

⁶⁵ 'Cultural life is then viewed as a series of texts intersecting with other texts, producing more texts (including that of the literary critic, who aims to produce another piece of literature in which texts under consideration are intersecting freely with other texts that happen to have affected his or her thinking).' Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 49.

⁶⁶ Alex Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism: A Marxist Critique* (Cambridge: Polity, 1989).

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

gratification.⁶⁸ Outlined in this way it is hard to claim that this theory possesses any serious intellectual interest, for it reads like a shortlist of amateur-sociological clichés. It is especially irritating that Callinicos is persistently uninspired by—and dismissive of—the work of theorists such as Jean Baudrillard, who has addressed many of these trends in work that dates back at least as far as the late 1960s.⁶⁹ For Callinicos, it seems, any analysis of this baleful commodity-scape that does not end in a return to staple Marxist battle-cries is to be ridiculed; yet because the demise of the Marxist alternative is precisely what so many take to be one of the seminal political reorientations of the years in question, it seems spectacularly misguided to criticise thinkers such as Baudrillard and Lyotard for having trekked away from Marxism. For the trek away from Marxism, as it were, is what we are analysing in the first place; moral condemnations of the object of study might rally the dispossessed, but they also run the risk of abandoning any serious enquiry into the object. As will become clear, in this respect Callinicos's analysis comes to look very weak when set aside the work of Jameson, for it is precisely the ability to work through the superficiality of competing theoretical positions that Jameson puts at the very centre of his critical practice—which is thus surely dialectical in some authentic sense.

Callinicos, however, takes a different approach. He explicitly avoids a vulgar reductionism by locating postmodernism not in a kind of cultural corollary of this new middle class—for it predates the 1960s—but in the wider historical conjuncture 'in which all the talk about a postmodern era began'.⁷⁰ This analysis delineates two significant developments. First is what Mike Davis has termed overconsumptionism, a regime of accumulation in which, put baldly, the rich get richer whilst the poor get poorer. In this climate of polarisation what emerges is a split-level economy, with a salaried stratum of the middle class enjoying considerable luxury whilst less well-off workers end up being able to fund comparatively poor-quality lifestyles. Here the terrain is, one suspects, simply that of neoliberalism; as we have already seen, this climate is persistently linked to postmodernism, with the yuppie standing as an emblematic symbol of the sang-froid and greed of the era.

Where Callinicos is much more interesting is in his second feature of the historical conjuncture of postmodernism. This is none other than what Callinicos calls

⁶⁸ Ibid., 162–3.

⁶⁹ See, for example, Baudrillard, *The Mirror of Production* and Baudrillard, *For a Critique of the Political Economy of the Sign*.

⁷⁰ Callinicos, *Against Postmodernism*, 163.

the ‘fallout from 1968’,⁷¹ meaning the life trajectories of the various socialist revolutionaries who attempted to effect some kind of social change in the celebrated uprisings of that year. Not surprisingly, Callinicos rejects the analysis of those who see the failure of 1968 as being in some sense determined by capitalism—so that the bid for freedom is thus assimilated by the illusory freedoms of the more perfectly free markets of the neoliberal 80s. Instead, he locates the failure in the compromises that were made that effectively swapped revolution for reform. This drift away from a more orthodox Marxism is arguably the thumbprint of the age, and in a key analysis of the fortunes of academic Marxism, Callinicos writes, with palpable regret, that:

The political odyssey of the 1968 generation is, in my view, crucial to the widespread acceptance of the idea of a postmodern epoch in the 1980s. This was the decade when those radicalised in the 1960s and early 1970s began to enter middle age. Usually they did so with all hope of socialist revolution gone—indeed, often having ceased to [...] believe in the desirability of any such revolution. Most of them had by then come to occupy some sort of professional, managerial or administrative position, to have become members of the new middle class, at a time when the overconsumptionist dynamic of Western capitalism offered this class rising living standards (a benefit often denied the rest of the workforce: hourly real wages in the US fell by 8.7 per cent between 1973 and 1986).⁷²

Here we encounter what has often been taken to be one of the most significant social determinants of postmodernism. Whereas some point out the waning of Marxism’s relevance in an era when all of the key questions have already been answered (Fukuyama), Callinicos in effect points out that the intellectual genealogy of postmodernism is a dissatisfaction with Marxism; thus those who posit some kind of seminal political change are merely taking their own jaded experience as a true model for genuine socio-political evolution, and a kind of interpretative circle thus opens up whereby Marxism can never speak to the age of postmodernism, because what is constitutive of that age in the first place is its deafness to revolutionary social theory. Postmodernism thus can be seen as a kind of solipsistic error, and although Callinicos does not put it quite so strongly, this is the core of his argument, and it remains a very potent piece of analysis for those who wish to dismiss postmodernism as a mistaken (as well as ideological) reaction to a misreading of a political situation.

This type of analysis of postmodernism reaches its most dazzling highpoint in Terry Eagleton’s *The Illusions of Postmodernism*. Deploying his characteristic humour at full strength, Eagleton provides a more culturally sophisticated version of

⁷¹ Ibid., 164.

⁷² Ibid., 168.

Callinicos's analysis, but one which still takes as its starting point the fallout of 1968. This is striking for several reasons, not the least of which is that Eagleton is not so concerned to consider socio-economic theories of postmodernism; instead, his principal concern is with the types of relativism and anti-historicism that have become widespread in some theoretical circles. Many of these attitudes have, in fact, histories that date back considerably further than 1968: indeed, many connect postmodernist relativism with Nietzschean antifoundationalism,⁷³ and the denial of history can certainly be backdated to logical positivism, if not much further indeed. But as Eagleton points out, precise analysis of the often caricatured positions of the loftiest philosophers is not his purpose, which is to address an atmosphere that one tends to encounter more (but, sadly, not exclusively) in the corridors and seminar rooms than in serious journals. Only rarely is fashionable orthodoxy dismissed so enjoyably:

For a [...] variety of postmodernism, to exist historically is to break through the falsifying schema of History and live dangerously, decentredly, without ends or grounds or origins, letting rip the odd snarl of sardonic laughter and dancing ecstatically on the brink of the abyss. It is hard to know what this would mean in practice—how exactly would one live 'decentredly' in Chipping Norton, and whether dancing on the brink of the abyss is compatible with, say, wearing horn-rimmed spectacles or returning one's library books on time. [...] It is also hard to see how this view is not just another form of idealism, for which freedom resides in reading the world differently.⁷⁴

Amusing though these arguments are, they are something of a distraction from Eagleton's most distinctive claim, which comes in his opening chapter. 'Imagine a radical movement', he writes, 'which had suffered an emphatic defeat. [...] What would be the likely reaction of the political left to such a defeat?'⁷⁵ He then details the possible responses in a brisk caricature of some of the more baleful features of the postmodernist academic world. Eagleton's mock-tentative prediction of a cult of interpretation gives a good example of the sucker punches of his prose:

Theorists would mock the madness of the Law in suburban enclaves protected by private security guards, celebrating transgression as inherently good while worrying about child abuse. Protest would still be possible; but because the system would instantly recongeal around this irritant like a jellyfish, the radical sensibility would be accordingly divided—between a brittle pessimism on the one hand, and an exhilarated vision of ceaseless difference, mobility, disruption on the other. The distance between all that, and the drearily determinate world of social and economic life, would no doubt bulk embarrassingly large; but the gap might be

⁷³ Steven Best and Douglas Kellner, *Postmodern Theory: Critical Interrogations* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1991), 16.

⁷⁴ Terry Eagleton, *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 64–5.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 1.

narrowed if one were to attend to those few surviving enclaves where these things could still find a home, where a pleasure and playfulness not wholly under the heel of power might still be relished. Primary candidates for this role might be language and sexuality, and one would accordingly anticipate an enormous inflation of interest in these matters in the period in question.⁷⁶

Later comes the cunning denouement, designed to correct a generation of students from such waywardness:

Imagine, finally, the most bizarre possibility of all. I have spoken of symptoms of political defeat; *but what if this defeat never really happened in the first place?* What if it were less a matter of the left rising up and being forced back, than of a steady disintegration, a gradual failure of nerve, a creeping paralysis? What if the confrontation never quite took place, but people *behaved* as though it did?⁷⁷

The resemblance to Callinicos's middle-aged (post-)revolutionaries is striking; once again, the very foundation of the socio-economic history of the later twentieth century—the triumph of capitalism—is, or so it would seem, a mirage, a product not of success but of failure—the failure of the opposition.

Needless to say, this position will strike many as mere wishful-thinking. It is notable that in Eagleton's earlier work he was more realistic about the transition from modernism to postmodernism. In *The Ideology of the Aesthetic*, for instance, he took a more traditional view of the phenomenon. The point was not so much that a generation of the left had failed; rather, the modernist avant-garde had been institutionalised. Here Eagleton reads the revolutionary avant-garde as a radical anti-institutional force:

aesthetics is part of the problem, not of the solution. The problem of art is art itself, so let's have an art which isn't art. Down with libraries and museums, paint your pictures on people's pyjamas, read your poetry through megaphones in factory yards, lead the audience on the town hall when the play is over, leave your studios and go out into the factories (as some of the Bolshevik avant garde actually did) to make useful objects for the workers.⁷⁸

This avant-garde has both a negative and a positive moment: the negative destroys meaning, shocking and outraging its audiences, whereas the positive, associated by Eagleton with Brecht, ties itself to the fortunes of revolutionary political movements: 'The one thing the bourgeoisie cannot incorporate is its own political defeat. Let them

⁷⁶ Ibid., 3–4.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 19.

⁷⁸ Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 370–1.

try hanging *that* on the walls of their banks.’⁷⁹ But ultimately both sides of the avant-garde run into the problem of institutionalisation, and it is worth quoting at some length Eagleton’s moving outlining of this crucial point:

The avant garde’s response to the cognitive, ethical and aesthetic is quite unequivocal. Truth is a lie; morality stinks; beauty is shit. And of course they are absolutely right. Truth is a White House communiqué; morality is the Moral Majority; beauty is a naked woman advertising perfume. Equally, of course, they are wrong. Truth, morality and beauty are too important to be handed contemptuously over to the political enemy.

The avant garde failed, rolled back by Stalinism and fascism. Some time later, *Ulysses* entered the university syllabuses and Schoenberg sidled regularly into the concert halls. The institutionalization of modernism had set in.⁸⁰

Essentially, then, a certain type of radical (anti-)aesthetic experiment is given institutional patronage at precisely the point in history when a certain economic system begins a move into a new stage of production that will challenge the rigidly demarcated realm of the aesthetic and instead saturate in aestheticization ‘the entire culture of late capital, with its fetishism of style and surface, its cult of hedonism and technique, its reifying of the signifier’.⁸¹ This move into postmodernism is viewed by Eagleton as the point when the system—capitalism—becomes, as it were, maximally resourceful in delivering (or is it just promising?) just the right amount of the good life to enough Westerners so as to render implausible the thought that it could ever be overthrown. On this view postmodernism is a kind of failure of nerve of the political left, which ‘discovered to its dismay that the system was currently too powerful, too total, to be broken.’⁸² The claim that postmodernism represents a pluralizing or easing up of the system’s operations is thus to Eagleton a misapprehension of great significance, especially given its happy congruence with postmodernist attacks on notions such as ‘totality’: in a kind of reflexive manoeuvre worthy of the greatest illusionists, postmodernism represents the mirage of a benevolent capitalism at the very point when it has never had, as it were, so many fingers in so many globalised pies. Hence one of Eagleton’s memorable formulations, that in ‘such a situation, it is sometimes comforting and convenient to imagine that there is not, after all, as Foucault might have said, anything “total” to be broken. It is as though, having

⁷⁹ Ibid., 372.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 372.

⁸¹ Ibid., 373.

⁸² Ibid., 381.

temporarily mislaid the breadknife, one declares the loaf to be already sliced. The term “post”, if it has any meaning at all, means business as usual, only *more so*.⁸³

4

One of the problems, however, with the overall drift of such analyses is that they can, almost unintentionally, erase the radical nature of the break between modernism and postmodernism. This is an immediate problem posed by the focus, unavoidable in Marxism, on the evolution of capitalism as a system that tends to function as a narrative underlay to cultural history. What in effect results from such a scheme is a logic of capital that simply progresses inexorably to whatever telos—revolutionary or otherwise—the theorist chooses; and one only need remember Fukuyama to realise that such narratives can all too easily be appropriated by either side of the ideological field. Theories which stress the (undeniable) continuity of capitalism either side of the modernist/postmodernist divide run the risk of configuring postmodernism as an intensification rather than a mutation. Whilst this is surely accurate on the more basic socio-economic levels of analysis, it does not seem to do justice to some of the more superstructural spheres. Those theorists of postmodernism who like to think of there being a definitive stylistic break with high modernist abstraction, for instance, might reasonably point out that an underlying historical narrative traduces the astonishing difference in cultural production that obtains either side of the modernist/postmodernist divide.

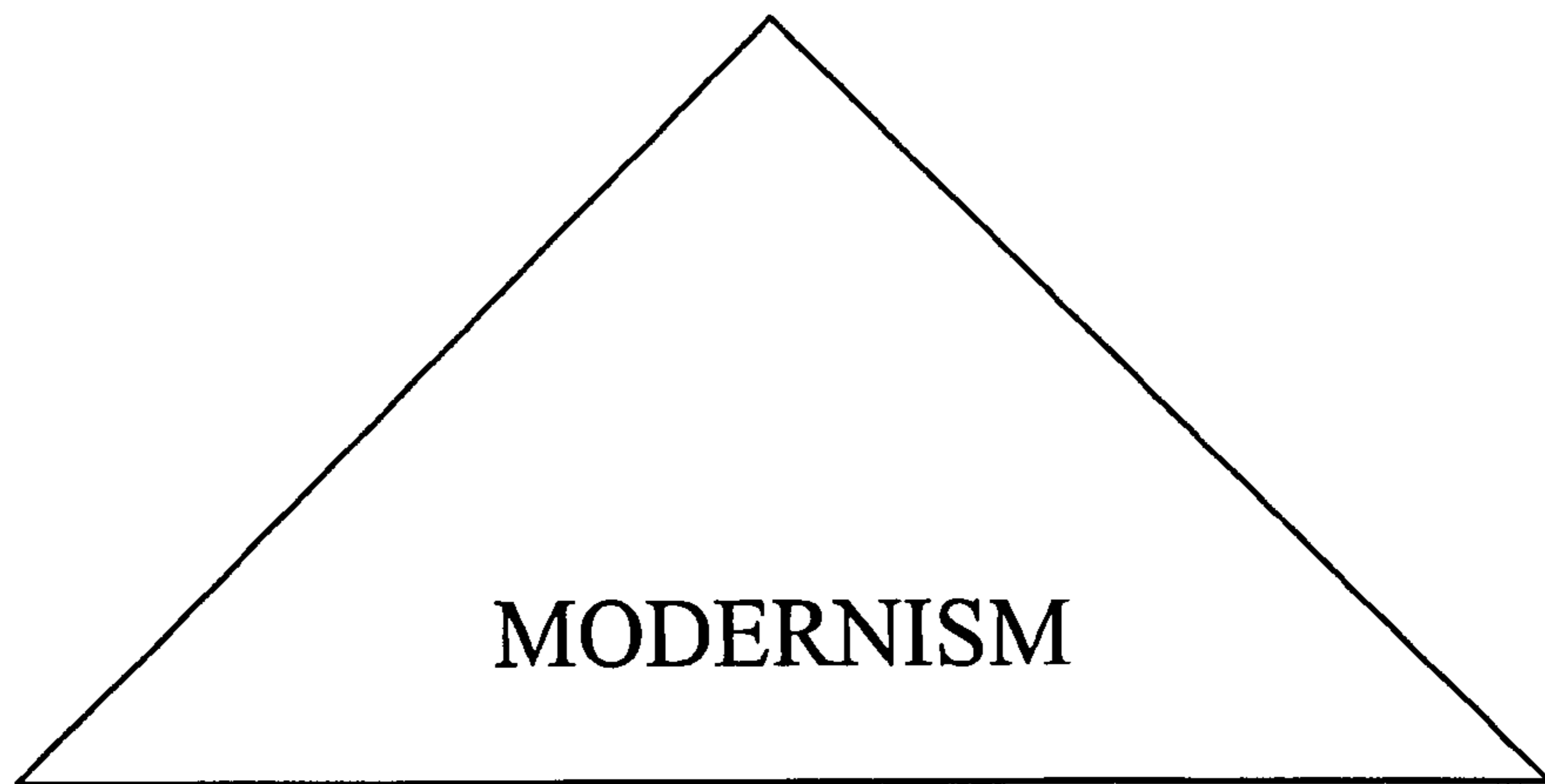
Such a problem cries out for a structural analysis. A conjunctural model of modernism and postmodernism will not solve the difficult question of how and why the one changes into the other, but it will outline the principal features of each in a way that treats each period as a kind of totality (though not in the traditional Marxist sense). It is here, then, that some attention should be paid to one of the most influential *Marxisant* surveys of the past twenty years. Modernism, Perry Anderson once claimed, is best understood as ‘a cultural field of force *triangulated* by three decisive coordinates’ (Figure 1.1).⁸⁴

⁸³ Ibid., 381.

⁸⁴ Perry Anderson, ‘Modernity and Revolution’, *New Left Review* 1/144 (March–April 1984), 104.

Figure 1.1 Anderson's modernism

art still dominated by aristocratic elite and its institutions



technology:
seized by images of machinery

proximity of
social revolution

Firstly there was the ‘codification of a highly formalized *academicism* in the visual and other arts’,⁸⁵ which was institutionalised in state cultural systems in which the older aristocratic, landowning classes still had a considerable, if not dominant stake. This, then, is the survival of the old within the new, the residue of an older economic order persisting with the new, modern times, and it provided an easy target for what Anderson calls ‘insurgent forms of art [...] Without the common adversary of official academicism, the wide span of new aesthetic practices have little or no unity: their tension with the established or consecrated canons in front of them is constitutive of their definition as such.’⁸⁶ But, crucially, if the old order is viewed as such against the backdrop of the increasing penetration of industrial capitalism—one of the key markers of the onset of the modern—then the *ancien régime* at the same time remains a refuge from where the prevalent social degradation of the modern world can be critiqued. Hence the seemingly contradictory aim of so much modernism, to have an art which is simultaneously more than art whilst setting itself against what has passed for art in the past.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 104.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 105.

The second coordinate of modernism is closely related to the same underlying changes: the excitement of the new machine age. The inventions that underpinned the twentieth century—the telephone, radio, combustion engine—rapidly accelerated what is now known as the shrinking of the globe, a process whereby ever more rapid communicational links and means of travel render the world, effectively, a smaller place. Anderson points out the obvious machine-inspired sensibilities of Parisian cubism, Italian futurism, and Russian constructivism—references familiar enough from any standard map of modernism—and makes the more striking claim that the interest in machinery (and a concomitant enthusiasm for technique on the part of the artist) accompanied an ‘abstraction of techniques and artefacts from the social relations of production that were generating them’;⁸⁷ also, it was initially impossible to see where such devices would ultimately lead, so an enthusiasm for technology was possible which, a mere half-century later, would pass into history.

An open attitude towards the future is one of the conditions of Anderson’s third coordinate, too. At the ‘intersection between a semi-aristocratic ruling order, a semi-industrialized capitalist economy, and a semi-emergent, or -insurgent, labour movement’⁸⁸ there arose an extremely productive tension between ‘a still usable classical past, a still indeterminate technical present, and a still unpredictable political future.’⁸⁹ If anything, the First World War intensified these criss-crossings, bringing the prospect of social revolution ever closer (after its materialisation in Russia), as well as producing a renewed conservatism in which ‘a distinctive upper-class mode of life persisted right down to the end of the 30’s, whose hallmark—setting it off completely from the existence of the rich after the Second World War—was the normalcy of servants. This was the last true leisure-class in metropolitan history.’⁹⁰

In this 1984 article, Anderson claimed that it was ‘the Second World War—not the First—which destroyed all three of the historical coordinates’: the persistence of the aristocratic order was decimated as bourgeois democracy ‘was finally universalised’.⁹¹ Industrial capitalism, in its Fordist, mass-production version, triumphed, implemented in part by the reconstruction of a Europe whose industries lay in ruins, but, crucially, were now backed by the new economic, political, and

⁸⁷ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 105.

⁸⁹ Ibid., 105.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 106.

⁹¹ Ibid., 106.

cultural strength of the dollar. As the Cold War froze over, the prospect of imminent social change also waned: 'there now reigned a routinized, bureaucratised economy of universal commodity production, in which mass consumption and mass culture had become virtually interchangeable terms.'⁹² Later, in his survey of a Jamesonian postmodernism, Anderson was to capture this change in much more evocative terms:

With all the forces that had historically spurred it gone, the *élan* of modernism gave out. It had lived from the non-synchronous—what was past or future in the present—and died with the arrival of the purely contemporaneous: the monotone steady-state of the post-war Atlantic order. Henceforward, art that still would be radical was routinely destined for commercial integration or institutional cooption.⁹³

But this characteristically brisk delineation brings with it several problems. As Anderson has admitted, a far greater sensitivity to national variation is required.⁹⁴ There is also, however, a more drastic shortcoming in Anderson's eyes, which is the use of the Second World War as the endpoint of modernism. Indeed, in Anderson's revised analysis, what this elides is a phase of modernism that remains freshest in intellectual memory: high modernism, the post-war state-backed institutional culture that, in the West, became the cultural vanguard of the broader war of attrition—an abstract expressionism to counter socialist realism.

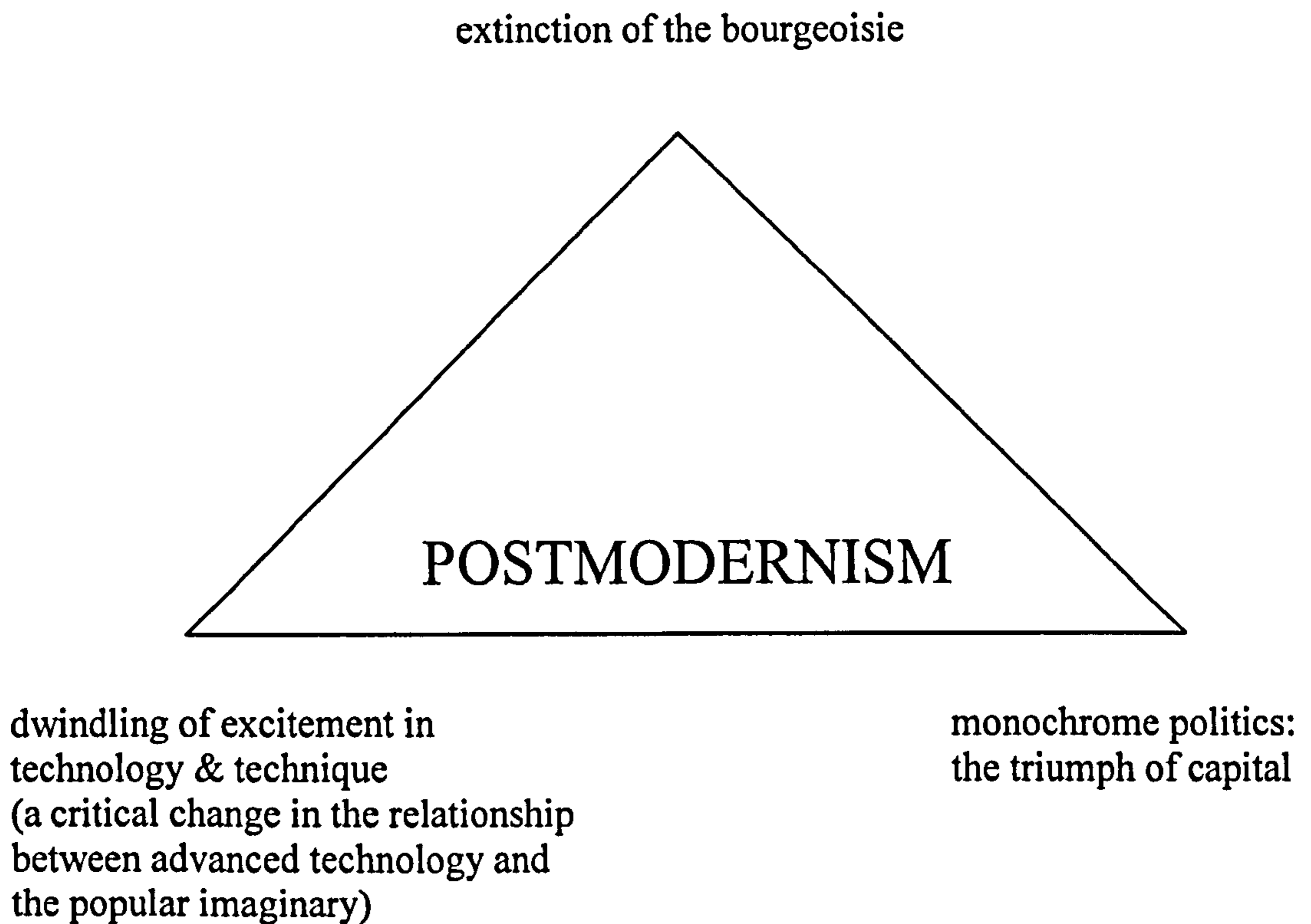
What this means for Anderson's periodisation is that modernism's end must be backdated until around 1968—which by now will be recognised as a standard symbolic turning-point in accounts of twentieth-century culture. At this point, modernism's flame, flickering rather weakly for some 25 years, was finally capped, and postmodernism took recognisable shape for the first time. In a neat updating of his earlier analysis, Anderson captured the postmodernist force-field with a similar expository elegance (Figure 1.2):

⁹² Ibid., 107.

⁹³ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity* (London: Verso, 1998), 82.

⁹⁴ Ibid., 82.

Figure 1.2 Anderson's postmodernism



In the brief episode between the Second World War and the early 1970s, then, the bourgeoisie lingered uncertainly. What Anderson means is that the class persisted as a 'social force with its own sense of collective identity, characteristic moral codes and cultural *habitus*. If we wanted a single visual clip of this world, it was a scene where men still wore hats.'⁹⁵ This confidence in its own identity and standards of morality was an essential underpinning of the age that might now seem to be that of social democracy and the welfare state; but within scarcely two decades, this world was already passing, and it is now clear that this brief episode is but the merest glimpse into the secular decline of the classic bourgeoisie: 'the bourgeoisie as Baudelaire or Marx, Ibsen or Rimbaud, Grosz or Brecht—or even Sartre or O'Hara—knew it, is a thing of the past. In place of that solid amphitheatre is an aquarium of floating, evanescent forms—the projectors and managers, auditors and janitors, administrators

⁹⁵ Ibid., 85.

and speculators of contemporary capital: functions of a monetary universe that knows no social fixities or stable identities.’⁹⁶

For cultural production this process—the ‘*encanaillement* of the possessing classes’, as Anderson dryly puts it—was of signal importance, for it represented a virtual melting-away of the ‘academicist establishment’ against which any vanguard movement could turn its face.⁹⁷ As so many have remarked, when common standards of morality, no matter how flagrantly class-bound, disappear into the relativistic flux of contemporary capitalism, then there can increasingly seem to be no officialdom to oppose. What evidence is there for such assertions? Anderson mentions ‘starlet princesses and sleazeball presidents, beds for rent in the official residence and bribes for killer ads, disneyfication of protocols and tarantinization of practices, the avid corteges of the nocturnal underpass or the gubernatorial troop.’⁹⁸ In short, the ‘jettisoning of any real pretence of upholding [bourgeois] standards, widely visible from the eighties onwards, could not but affect the situation of oppositional art’.⁹⁹

Each of Anderson’s other two coordinates has undergone a similarly depressing change. Technology’s fate is not difficult to predict: the exhilaration of the industrial age gives way to the terror that such machinery will unleash, not just in the weapons of war themselves, but in the manner in which everyday objects will come to facilitate their most deadly employment. This era which, as presumably will all later ones, lived under the threat of nuclear apocalypse ushered in the technological form which changed forever the nature of mass communication. Television combined the ‘continuous availability of radio with an equivalent of the perceptual monopoly of print, which excludes other forms of attention by the reader’;¹⁰⁰ whereas an earlier modernism had watched the perceptual menagerie of the early machines with open mouths, postmodernism sits tight-lipped staring intensely at the tiny pixels: ‘modernism was seized by images of machinery; now, postmodernism was sway to a machinery of images’.¹⁰¹

Finally, we come to the most recognisable of all mutations. The revolutionary sparks of the late 1960s were snuffed out by an astonishing enforced political conformity. The long, muted rumbling of socio-economic alternatives in the West

⁹⁶ Ibid., 85.

⁹⁷ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 86.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 88.

began to come to an end, a process accelerated by the sudden turn to a predatory neoliberalism as the Reagan and Thatcher administrations delivered powerful blows to the Left. As the communist threat passed away, apparently into history, decades of real social-democratic achievement were rolled back, at first under Republican and Conservative governments, later followed helplessly by Democratic and Labour administrations. A new world order took shape, in which the Third World was burdened with astronomical debt and reinvestment programmes which, administered by the new rulers of the world, demanded the implementation of a more-or-less unfettered free-market capitalism—a development that may well prove to cause the beginnings of a new era of opposition. This, then, is the conclusive economic backdrop of postmodernism in Anderson's view—the 'universal triumph of capital',¹⁰² an analysis echoing, with no little flair, Fukuyama's declaration that in the alliance of liberal democracy and capitalism the human race had reached the endpoint of its ideological evolution, and that history in its strong form was over. Many have derided this thesis; few have understood it or defended against it with any real efficacy. Capitalism won, and regardless of one's instinctive responses to the claim—whether celebratory, despairing, or critical—this victory cemented the foundation-stone of postmodernism into place.

¹⁰² Ibid., 91.

2 GUILT-EDGED RETURNS OF THE BEAUTIFUL

Confronted with these various sketches of twentieth-century history, it is only natural to feel that they are rather tangential to the analysis of cultural objects. The models and paradigms are thrilling enough on their own terms, but one begins to wonder how they can be related to culture in any way other than by crude analogy or brute determinism. Moreover, it is possible to read the preceding chapter and surface with no clear idea of how to recognise postmodernism nor any real sense of when, precisely, it became dominant. The triumph of capital is directly entangled with the defeat of the various communisms and socialisms whose ideological opposition to capitalism virtually defines the modernist era, but this defeat is not secure until around 1990—well after the onset of postmodernism as a focus of theoretical debate. On the other hand, as recently as the immediate post-war years one can trace a sense of real alternative in the political world, in which Marxism is seen as a viable model of emancipatory social change. It seems unacceptable, therefore, to date postmodernism from the 1950s (too early) or the 90s (too late). But the late 1960s and early 1970s are no less problematic: there is the general uprising of 1968, which supposedly shakes capitalism and is widely taken to signal something to do with postmodernism; on the other hand, the onset of prolonged capitalist uncertainty and difficulty from the 1972 slump tends to undercut the triumph of capital. This must all be juxtaposed against a widespread popular sense that the 1980s and 90s have, quite contrary to the theory presented here, been populated by more than one economic boom, thus rendering unlikely the idea that capitalism has been encountering long-term problems. The latter's victory, then, is no simple linear affair, and one suspects that none of the theories presented here accounts for the dynamics of the age adequately.

This failure is a result of a more general theoretical impasse, one which is highly relevant to the philosophical debates of the years in question, and which directly impacts upon the doubts as to whether all of this actually means anything for

the quotidian musicologist. The point is a simple one, but one which does not receive enough space or reflection in the accounts of the theorists mentioned here. Put bluntly, the question concerns the ways in which the more basic economic trajectory of the years in question interacts with the political, legal, and cultural spheres. We are thus returned to one of the biggest problems of all for Marxist cultural theory. The terms of the debate come from a handful of pregnant lines from Marx's vivid 'Preface' to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy*:

In the social production of their lives men enter into relations that are specific, necessary and independent of their will, relations of production which correspond to a specific stage of development of their material productive forces. The totality of these relations of production forms the economic structure of society, the real basis from which rises a legal and political superstructure, and to which correspond specific forms of social consciousness. The mode of production of material life conditions the social, political and intellectual life-process generally.¹

Expressed in this way, the question seems almost to provide its own answer, but as any follower of Marxist thought will know, the intellectual afterlife of this brisk delineation has been astonishing. At the very least, a satisfactory Marxist cultural theory will need first of all to develop a convincing model of this 'totality'.

1

It is here that Fredric Jameson comes into view, for many years of theoretical reflection on this problem preceded the emergence of his theory of postmodernism. In his early study *Marxism and Form*, dialectical thinking was configured as a shocking and thrilling type of thought that effects a continual displacement from localised concerns towards the wider horizons of the political and (ultimately) economic. But a too simple configuration of a brute opposition between culture and economy can lead to the charge of vulgar economic determinism, in which, crudely put, rather than a dialectical description of two fields, we are instead presented with a one-way street, leading only from the economic to the cultural. In *Marxism and Form* Jameson configured the two spheres in much more satisfyingly dialectical terms. The superstructure therefore carries the socio-economic base *within* itself, and dialectical

¹ Karl Marx, *Later Political Writings*, ed. and trans. Terrell Carver (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 159–60.

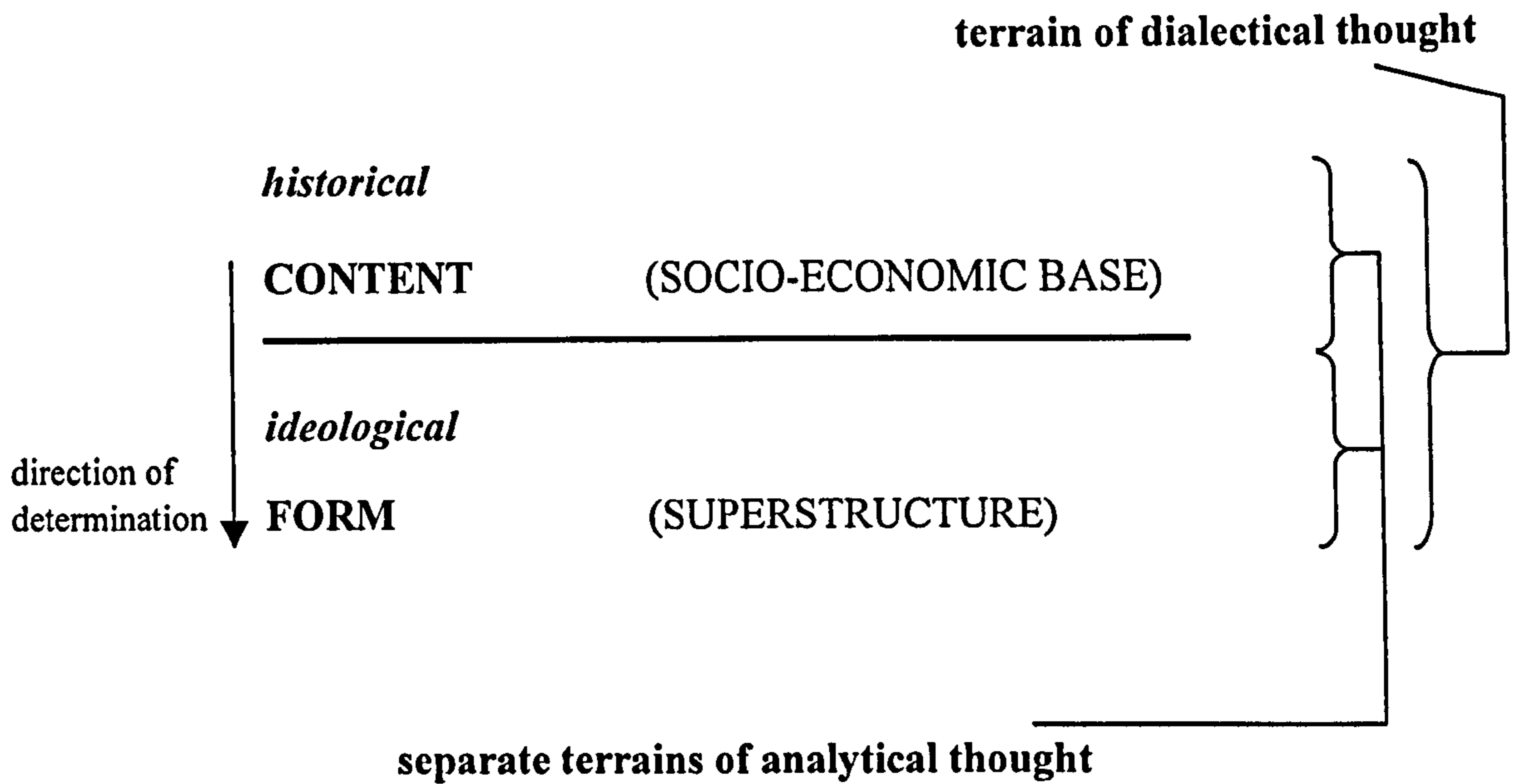
thought will respect its object's independent superstructural integrity whilst transcending the limits of any specialised analysis, thus resituating the autonomy of cultural objects, for instance, in the society in which they come to be valued most highly. The problem of choosing between the equally unconvincing alternatives of idealism and materialism can thus be shown to be an illusory difficulty, because the dialectical process can quite happily allow for elements of both.²

Dialectical thought, then, strives to be self-conscious: the thinker comes to realise that his or her own thought-processes actually come to limit the results of that very thinking, as well as determining (and prescribing to some extent) the problems that thought initially set out to probe. In a more Lukácsian sense, however, this awareness of the situation of thought is linked ultimately to the thinker's position in history. Here the potential for thought is limited not so much by the abstract limits of one's thought itself, but by the ideological positioning—presumably in terms of social class—of the thinker, which necessarily determines the problems that will concern thought. This is the important sense in which Jameson claims that 'thought tends somehow to unravel itself', that dialectical thought is tautological,³ for if thought depends on its own content or object, then the very positing of that object as part of some external world presupposes a separation that might limit thought from the outset. That this separation is historical is a fundamental truth for any Marxist commentator—it is presumably the corollary of alienation and reification—and it tends to throw into confusion any analytical thought too concerned with the permanence of reality, for such thought may well be unable to reckon the possibility of change (that is, contingency) into its structures. A simple model of base and superstructure thus presents itself (Figure 2.1):

² See, particularly, Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 359–74.

³ *Ibid.*, 340.

Figure 2.1 Base and superstructure



So dialectical thought will dissolve the ideological form of thought into its historical content, into the historical situation which structures the thought in the first place. That is to say, form will to some extent be dissolved into context, and dialectical criticism will be the practice of regaining this 'ultimate reality' to which a given cultural product corresponds.⁴

The Hegelian contours of *Marxism and Form* are obvious enough, most notably in this dialectical tension between form and content. Here cultural change is typically seen as a function of content's attempts to find its most adequate expression in form; so form is viewed as not merely some archetype or mould, but rather as the articulation of some deeper logic of the content itself.⁵ In this way our judgements about individual cultural products become socio-historical themselves, since what we would seem to be judging is the adequacy of the historical content's realisation in form. This generates an important conclusion: the insufficiency of a cultural product will be seen to be not necessarily the result of individual clumsiness on the part of the creator.⁶ At certain historical moments it might be the case that only very few people can realise the historical untruth of content, as the degraded superstructural product of capitalism's base, and thereby adequately realise this content in an inadequate form,

⁴ Ibid., 354.

⁵ Ibid., 329.

⁶ Ibid., 329.

as it were. This staple Hegelian motif is highly susceptible to Marxist appropriation: in Jameson the very possibility of a true adequacy of the relationship between form and content can only exist because we have glimpsed its concrete realisation in social life itself.⁷ That is, we can sense the possibility of a perfect representation of an idea (content's realisation in form) because we can imagine that the concrete content of life could itself find its realisation in an adequate social form (or mode of production).

Marxism and Form, then, decisively asserts the importance of the future and the dimension of time itself as a crucial criterion in the criticism of cultural products. In many ways this is hardly surprising, since, as Jameson argues, the isolation of this or that literary category can only be accomplished dialectically if we retain its interrelationship with all other categories.⁸ Thus the very choice and analysis of a particular device, say, implies a consequent realignment in all of the other, interdependent devices in a particular text; and these consequences will manifest themselves as processes which will unfold in time itself, rather than being immediately available to the analytical eye.⁹ So the diachronic process itself is always implicit in the isolation of categories for analysis, and it is this potential for the synchronic to dissolve in the stream of diachrony that pushes Jameson's analyses continually outwards, always towards the most complex interrelated system that we can (or cannot) imagine: the economy. The dissolution of this, the infrastructure of society, in the moment of revolution, is seen as the necessary consequence of being brought face-to-face with the contradictions of the system itself as they manifest themselves in concrete social life; and it is this possibility of the dissolution of capitalism, generated by its own contradictions (grasped dialectically), that opens up the diachronic conceptual space into which might sail a fairer, more humane society.

Such a cheerful philosophical resolution of what is but the mere tip of an epistemological iceberg is, of course, a little glib. By the early 1980s Jameson had reconfigured this scheme somewhat, and, in the seminal first chapter of *The Political Unconscious*, presented what is arguably his most powerful theory of Marxist interpretation, one which is (elusively) central to his later analyses of postmodernism. At the heart of this theory remains the simple insistence that we need a genuine philosophy of history if the political is to be the absolute horizon of all reading and

⁷ Ibid., 331.

⁸ Ibid., 311.

⁹ Ibid., 311–13, 319.

interpretation.¹⁰ But this philosophy must be more than just a mere antiquarianism (which forgets the present) or modernising conquest (which forgets the past), and it is ‘Only Marxism’, claims Jameson, that ‘can give us an adequate account of the essential *mystery* of the cultural past, which, like Tiresias drinking the blood, is momentarily returned to life and warmth and allowed once more to speak, and to deliver its long-forgotten message in surroundings utterly alien to it.’¹¹ Only a genuine philosophy of history ‘is capable of respecting the specificity and radical different of the social and cultural past while disclosing the solidarity of its polemics and passions, its forms, structures, experiences, and struggles, with those of the present day.’¹² The doctrine of a political unconscious will take as its explicit mission that task of restoring a buried and repressed history to the surfaces of texts: in this way it will not reject more specialised interpretative methods and techniques, but demonstrate merely that the overarching Marxist scheme of history is the horizon against which we need to view such specialisms.

One of the most important contentions that underlies such an ambitious theory is the idea—familiar from the preceding discussion of *Marxism and Form* where it was conducted in terms of the analytical choosing of literary categories—that synchrony always projects diachrony: the very act of grasping an historical period, whether our own or from the past, tends to imply, explicitly or implicitly, a whole succession of periods.¹³ In other words, the very act of identifying an historical sameness (identity) always carries within it, however deeply, the realisation that this sameness must be cast historically against some period which was not the same (difference):¹⁴

¹⁰ Fredric Jameson, *The Political Unconscious* (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 1–3.

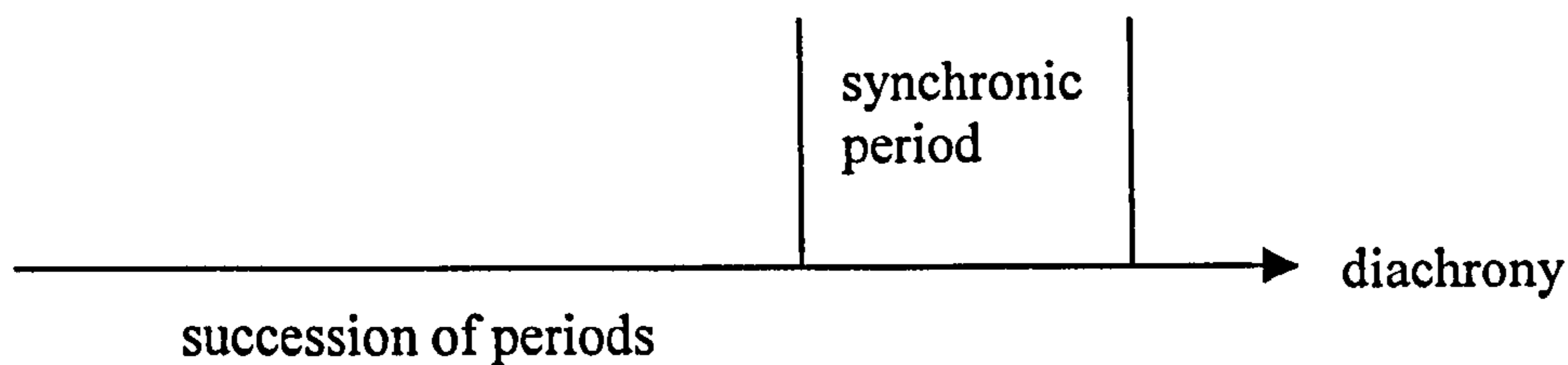
¹¹ *Ibid.*, 3.

¹² *Ibid.*, 2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁴ See also ‘Marxism and Historicism’, in Fredric Jameson, *The Ideologies of Theory*, vol. 2 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988), 173–4.

Figure 2.2 Synchrony and diachrony



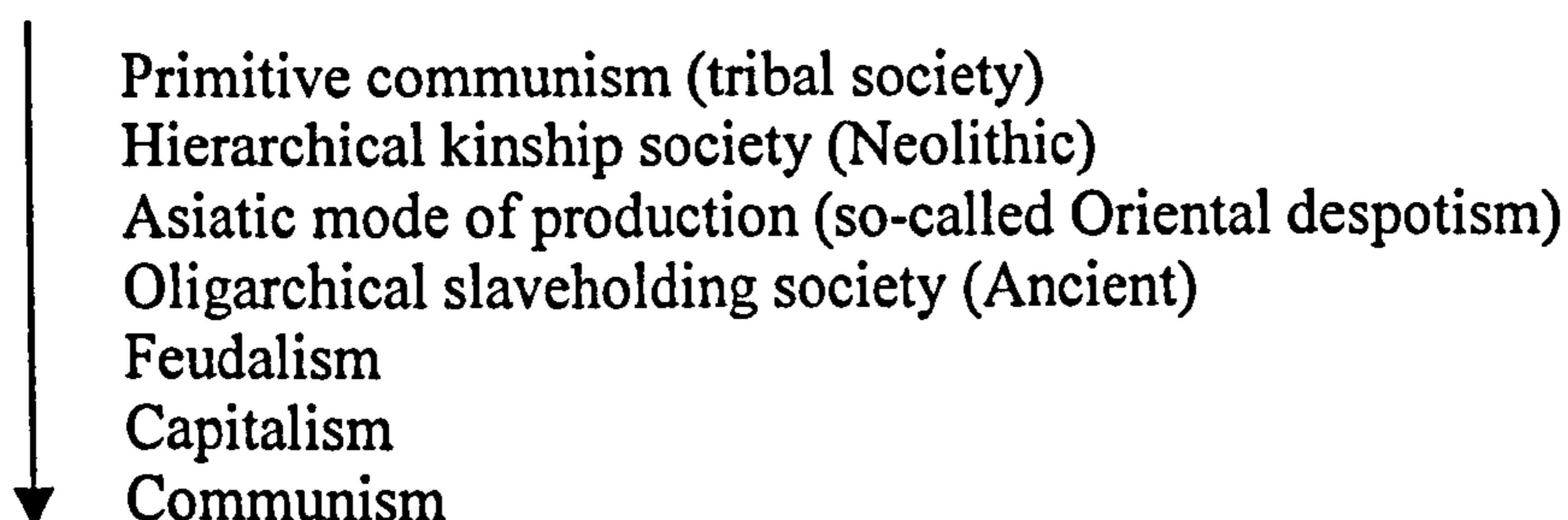
So if we formulate an understanding of the past or the present, we cannot help but imply the temporal movement and succession of such periods in history itself; or, in rather different terms, our conceptual formulation projects its own narrative manifestation. One of the limitations of what Jameson elsewhere calls a ‘structural typology’ of history (that is, the conjunctural models of structuralist history), whereby the logic of a period can superficially mask the underlying diachrony, is thus avoided.¹⁵

There, in a nutshell, is perhaps the most important chunk of dialectical logic that can be said to underpin Jameson’s entire intellectual oeuvre. Grasping the present requires us to have some category of identity, which always implies its contradiction, difference. This difference must therefore be realised historically as periods which were not the same as our own; in this relational, comparative, interlocked, *dialectical* way, the conceptual always projects the narrative: our synchronic investigations are always undercut by the diachronic history from which they arise. Any investigation which aims for some kind of ahistorical practice—for Jameson this is always the implication of Anglo-American analytical thought with its reliance on undefeatable logic—will be deficient to the extent that it cannot figure the unthinkable, change itself, into its reckonings. Where this method becomes Marxist, or more specifically, Hegelian-Marxist, is in the way in which the periods that Jameson uses as synchronic units are those which correspond to the dominance of different historical modes of production; history is seen as some great succession of these modes of production, and on this view it will ultimately end up in some final realm—communism—which will bring the sequence to an end.

¹⁵ Ibid., 165–9.

The traditional manner in which mode of production has been defined is that of the unity of the forces of production (the population, state of technology, ecology) and the relations of production (social class) within a society at a given time. Together, these forces and relations constitute the economic base (or infrastructure) of society. In the scheme outlined by Jameson there are seven such modes of production, including a communism that has not yet come to prominence. The sequence therefore runs as follows:¹⁶

Figure 2.3 Sequence of modes of production



It is very important to note that these modes are not mere classificatory devices, nor do they designate historical periods as seamless unities: ‘no historical society has ever “embodied” a mode of production in any pure state (nor is *Capital* the description of a historical society, but rather the construction of the abstract concept of capitalism). [...] every social formation or historically existing society has in fact consisted in the overlay and structural coexistence of *several* modes of production, now relegated to structurally dependent positions within the new, as well as anticipatory tendencies which are potentially inconsistent with the existing system but have not yet generated an autonomous space of their own.’¹⁷ The cultural significance of modes of production, then, can be seen in the way in which each is associated with a particular type of cultural text or cultural object which dominates in each mode, although this dominance is of course haunted and challenged by remnants of the old as well as portents of the future:

¹⁶ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 75.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 80.

Figure 2.4 Cultural dominants

Mode of Production	Cultural Dominant
Primitive communism	Magic/mythic narrative
Hierarchical kinship society	Kinship
Asiatic mode of production	Religion
Oligarchical slaveholding society	Politics/citizenship
Feudalism	Relations of personal domination
Capitalism	Commodity reification
Communism	Communal association

Of course, there can be little doubt that such schemes have fallen into disrepute in the past thirty or so years. Such misgivings have been fuelled by an increasing suspicion of the plausibility of such master-narratives (which is a major fingerprint of some postmodernisms), as well as by the visible failure of the supposedly socialist regimes of much of the communist world of the late twentieth century. Jameson might not answer these objections, but he does at least address another: by his insistence on the coexistence and jostling of modes of production, he responds to a pressing charge, namely, that such concepts are unacceptably totalising.

In the immediate term, Jameson argues that the critique of such master-narratives is in reality a coded critique of something else: the type of vulgar Marxism whereby the form of cultural objects is merely scanned like a barcode from the underlying economic base.¹⁸ Such interpretations of cultural objects use the base-superstructure model as an interpretative allegory to map underlying conceptions of class-interest; but since this allegory in Jameson's view will ultimately encode the economic, we eventually return to the same problem, namely, the concept of the mode of production. The two things, then—sequence of modes of production, and its use as an interpretative allegory via the base-superstructure model—are essentially different sides of the same problematic coin. Importantly, however, Jameson openly defends this sort of interpretative work, claiming that if

interpretation in terms of [...] allegorical master narratives remains a constant temptation, this is because such master narratives have inscribed themselves in the texts as well as in our thinking about them; such allegorical narrative signifieds are a persistent dimension of literary and

¹⁸ Ibid., 17.

cultural texts precisely because they reflect a fundamental dimension of our collective thinking and our collective fantasies about history and reality.¹⁹

The concept of the political unconscious deals with this issue simply by reading it into the cultural objects themselves,²⁰ and

if the modern reader is bored or scandalized by the roots such texts send down into the contingent circumstances of their own historical time, this is surely testimony as to his resistance to his own political unconscious and to his denial (in the United States, the denial of a whole generation) of the reading and the writing of the text of history within himself. [...] to switch [the study of such roots] off at the source entails the virtual repression of the text of history and the political unconscious in our own cultural and practical experience, just at the moment when increasing privatisation has made that dimension so faint as to be virtually inaudible.²¹

A theme highly reminiscent of much of the motivation of *Marxism and Form* returns, in other words: Jameson has at last begun to theorise in extensive detail the precise mechanisms by which contemporary American life has become so frictionless, politically speaking—and it is impossible not to see here in embryonic form the theorising that will very rapidly point him towards his understanding of the cultural corollary of this mass historical repression: namely, postmodernism.

Jameson formulates his defence of the base-superstructure model in such a way as to highlight the problem not of the model itself, but of the way in which it can be too simplistically used—specifically, the operation of structural parallelism or homology, whereby the tension or difference between the two levels is progressively eroded and features of both are identified as being somehow ‘the same’.²² Jameson himself is much more interested in the construction, rather than the finished form, of such closed interpretative schemes: the manner in which such models are constructed so as resolutely to repress their base in real class antagonism, and all of the problems this poses to their authors. Dialectical thought, on the other hand, will move beyond such localised levels of interpretation towards the economy itself.

The Political Unconscious stages such a system of levels as a series of concentric circles, each one designating an interpretative horizon which constructs and reconstructs its object of study in different ways. The centre of this system is the

¹⁹ Ibid., 19.

²⁰ Ibid., 19.

²¹ Ibid., 19.

²² Ibid., 28.

level on which interpretation constructs the individual work, the Jamesonian category that most nearly corresponds to the cultural text itself. On this level, which Jameson designates as that of the political-historical (meaning the level of sheer events, history in its weak form), the work is grasped as an imaginary resolution of real contradictions, by which Jameson means the aesthetic act is itself political (ideological), in that it will rewrite its historical subtext at the same moment that it brings this last into being.²³ What Jameson is addressing here is the problem that history as such is only available to us through its textualisation; so it necessarily appears to us as an absent cause (in Althusser's phrase)—or, in Jameson's analogy, it essentially remains in the realm of the Lacanian Real, a noumenal realm beyond language and symbolisation. So an aesthetic text will give us access to that history at the same time as it creates it; but such a text will inevitably bear the imprint of its own ideological surround, and therefore such ideological limitations will impinge upon what questions the text asks (or allows to be asked) about history itself. Jameson raises such a spectre to stress that all texts will respond to historical contradictions by offering their own ideological solutions—that is, they will all allegorise history in terms of a governing ideology. So the task of criticism becomes the articulation of the contradictions to which the text responds:²⁴ the discovery of the mess that the ideological cleaner tries to sweep under the carpet, as it were. One can then view logical antinomies projected by the text as mere frozen contradictions; in this way, logical deadlock can become so much grist to the dialectical mill, as the conceptual hypostasis is narrativised, thus tracing the important movement from synchrony to diachrony that is present at all points of Jameson's thought. In other words, we plug the autonomous work back into the current of history, grasping the former as an act symbolic of the contradictions of the latter.²⁵

This initial level of interpretation is straightforward enough, and one certainly not monopolised by Marxists. It is within Jameson's second horizon that we move onto the terrain of Marxism proper, in which the cultural object must be resituated as part of a much broader ongoing class struggle. This is not, needless to say, a typographical classification of the various sociological groups of society, but instead a relational structure: rulers versus ruled, for want of a more elaborate description.

²³ Ibid., 66–8.

²⁴ Ibid., 66.

²⁵ Ibid., 60–8.

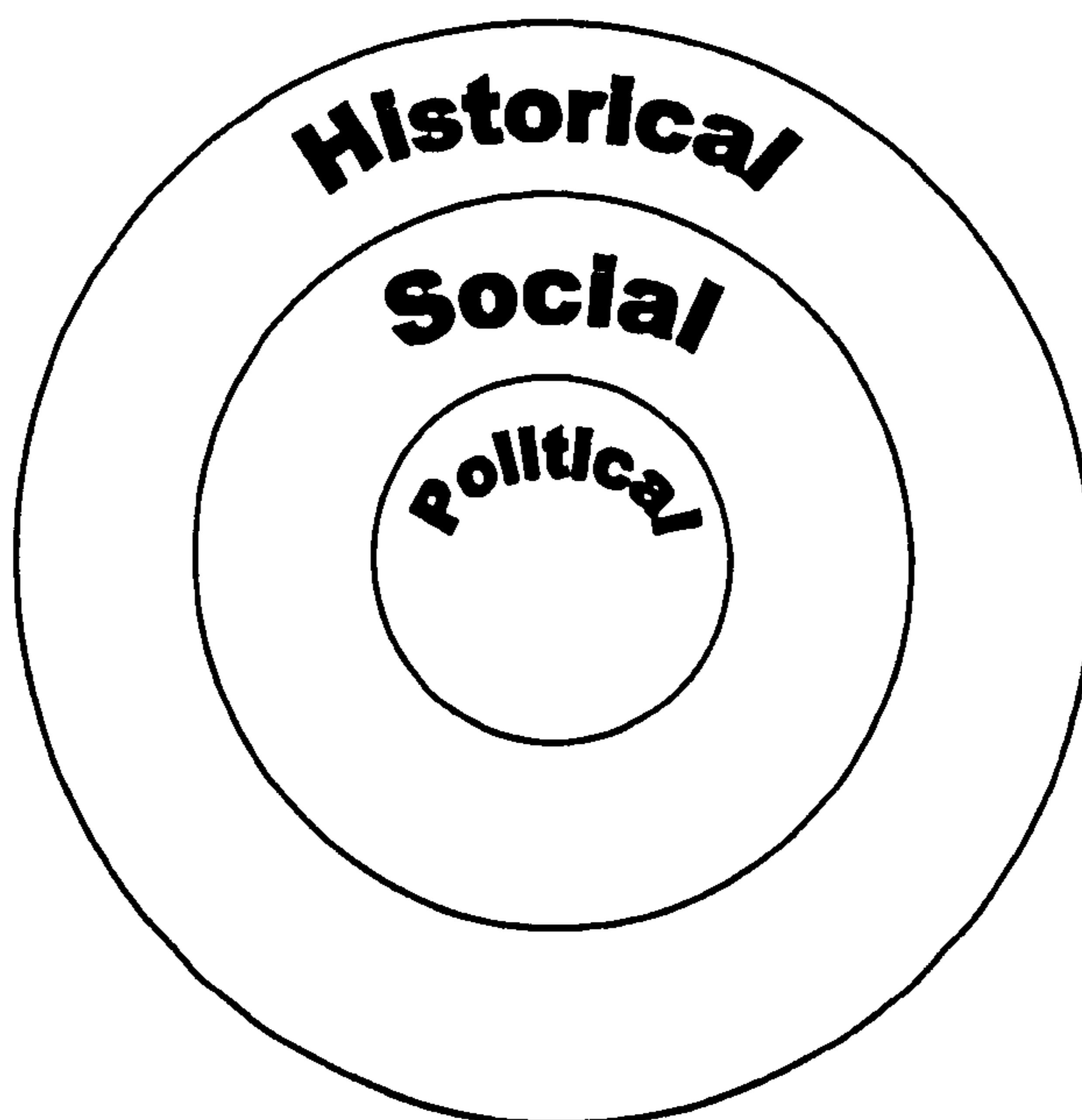
Class struggle is dialogical, then, for it simply maps a dialectical process of compensatory gains and losses in the antagonism of the legitimating, ruling class and the oppressed remainder of society.²⁶ Here autonomy can be revealed partly as the sham that everyone must privately know it to be (it is so much easier to feel that culture is autonomous when contemplating it in an opera house, rather than bearing it on one's shoulders in a sweatshop). But, importantly, this evocation of the woes of the oppressed must not lead into some more properly postmodern vision of sheer plurality for its own sake:

the affirmation of such nonhegemonic cultural voices remains ineffective if it is limited to the merely "sociological" perspective of the pluralistic rediscovery of other isolated social groups: only an ultimate rewriting of these utterances in terms of their essentially polemic and subversive strategies restores them to their proper place in the dialogical system of the social classes.²⁷

Instead, on this level the analyst will look for ideologemes, units of culture in which this class antagonism is sedimented (Jameson's example is his theory of *ressentiment* that is analysed in the chapter on George Gissing).

At length, then, we come to the third, outer ring of what we might term Fredric Jameson's dartboard, and the system of concentric horizons of interpretation can be given a visual form (Figure 2.5):

Figure 2.5 Fredric Jameson's dartboard



²⁶ Ibid., 69–70.

²⁷ Ibid., 71.

On this, the broadest of levels, the organising sequence is that of the modes of production, which was outlined earlier. As will be recalled, the flexibility of this concept was such that it could tolerate the coexistence and jostling of several modes in any given synchronic moment. Jameson proposes that the concept of cultural revolution best dramatises this raw process of succession:²⁸ cultural revolution is therefore not just a transitional category, because it is an ongoing process, but it becomes visible in moments of actual revolution. So what a mode of production does, when grasped synchronically, is cloud the continuing energies that are animating it from within; a transitional category, in other words, can become expanded into a whole era, to our eyes, if we fail to see the ongoing processes of revolution. The task of cultural analysis, therefore, is simply to rewrite its materials so as to make this process of revolution clear, to document the structures ‘in which the empirical objects know intelligibility’.²⁹ Meanwhile, the object of this final horizon is the ideology of form:³⁰ completing an analysis long left hanging from *Marxism and Form*, Jameson points us to sheer content itself, and the way in which this becomes sedimented as form—the way in which form solidifies as a ‘determinate contradiction of the specific messages emitted by the varied sign systems which coexist in a given artistic process as well as in its general social formation.’³¹ Such is the outer reach of the dartboard, the historical horizon which encompasses both of the others.

2

When Jameson applies this model to the period of postmodernism, astonishing cultural vistas are delineated. One of the most striking essays in this respect is his survey of the 1960s, ‘Periodizing the 60s’, in which postmodernism is allotted a particularly important place.³² In this essay Jameson methodically discusses four different levels of interpretation, grounding the logic of the period as a whole on the notion of late capitalism (see Figure 2.6). This is a particularly important motif in Jameson’s considerations of postmodernism, one that has migrated well beyond its

²⁸ Jameson, ‘Marxism and Historicism’, 173–6.

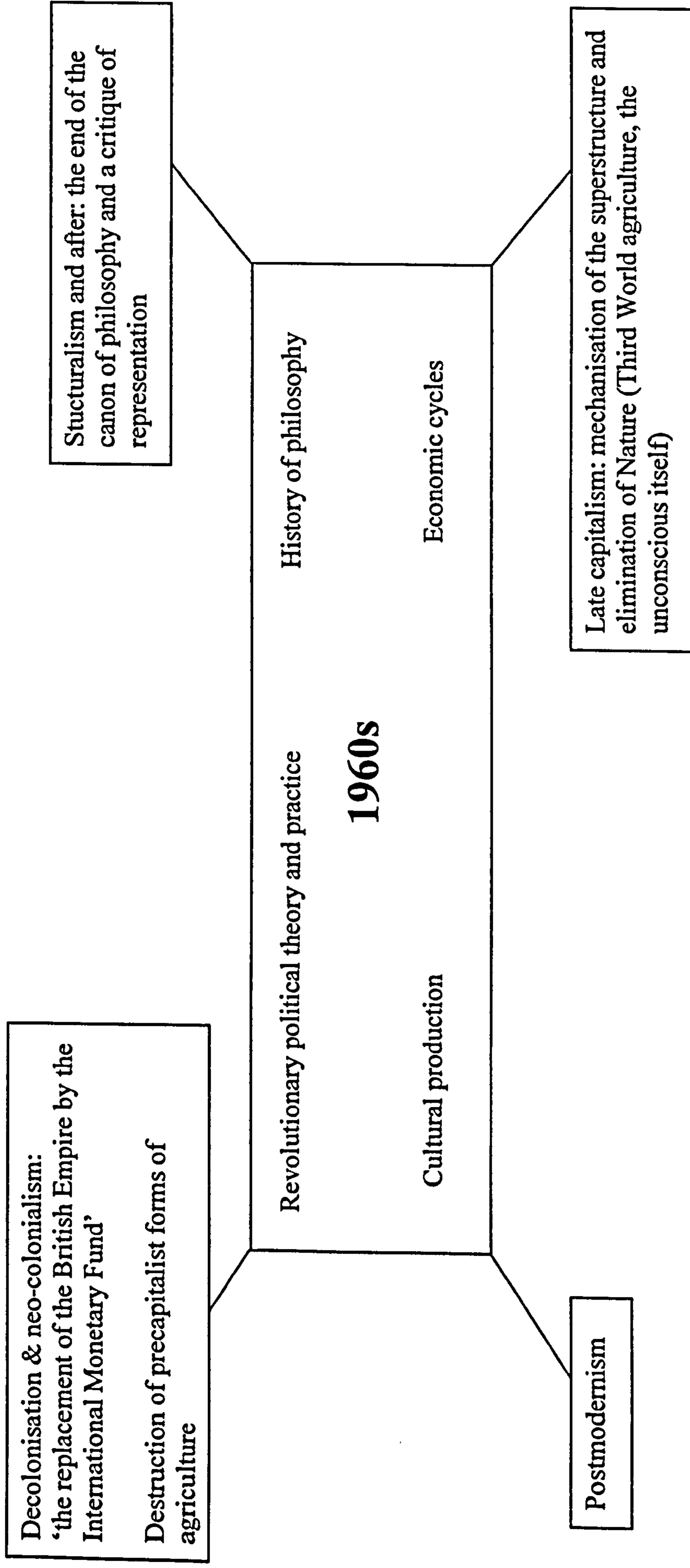
²⁹ Jameson, *The Political Unconscious*, 83.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 84–5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 84.

³² Fredric Jameson, ‘Periodizing the 60s’, in *The Ideologies of Theory*, 178–208.

Figure 2.6 Jameson's 60s



original field of reference (for example, ‘Denise’s shampoo had the pleasing, subtle scents of late-model Western capitalism’),³³ but his use of it has been controversial to say the least.³⁴ The term is most commonly associated with Ernest Mandel’s large study, *Late Capitalism*,³⁵ which offered a pioneering Marxist analysis of the economics of the postwar years, ending in the early 1970s with the slump that is now seen as decisive in the onset of postmodernism. Jameson, however, formulated a rather different scheme, which featured prominently in his 1984 *New Left Review* essay.³⁶ Here he noted the growing cultural resonance of technology itself, but explicitly linked it to a scheme of the evolution of machines. Fundamentally there have, or so Jameson claims (citing Mandel), been three machine revolutions. Firstly the steam-driven motors of 1848; electric and combustion motors since the 1890s; and now the electronic and nuclear-powered ‘apparatuses’ since the 1940s.³⁷ These revolutions corresponded to three ‘fundamental moments’ of capitalism (Figure 2.7):

Figure 2.7 Three moments of capitalism

1848	market capitalism	steam
1890	monopoly capitalism imperialism	electricity and combustion
1940	multinational capitalism	computers and nuclear power

But in a key addition to this model, Jameson added to it his own cultural periodisation. Thus, market capitalism found its cultural realisation in the dominance of realism; monopoly capitalism in modernism; and finally, multinational capitalism in postmodernism. Interestingly, this took the form of a linear trajectory in which realism provoked not just modernism, but also naturalism, which predates the

³³ Jonathan Franzen, *The Corrections* (London: Fourth Estate, 2001), 622.

³⁴ For a consideration, see Christian A. Gregory, ‘Stranded Economies’, in Douglas Kellner and Sean Homer, ed., *Fredric Jameson: A Critical Reader* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), 79–85.

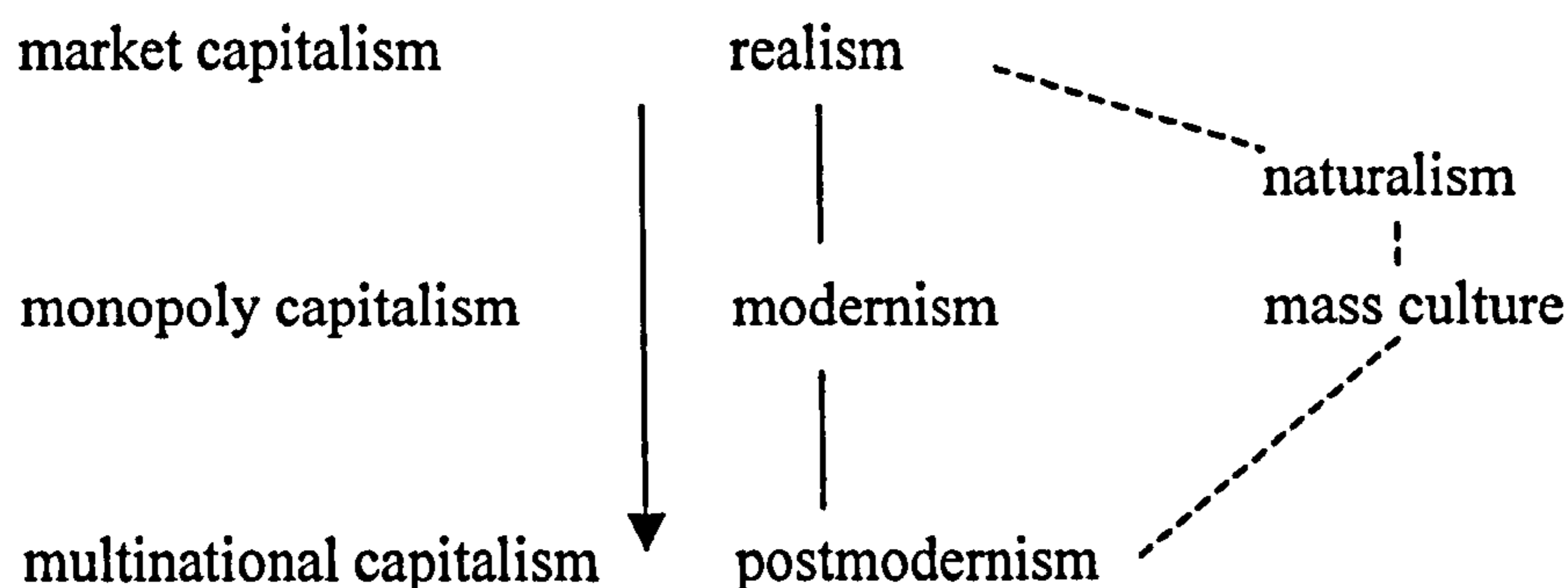
³⁵ Ernest Mandel, *Late Capitalism*, trans. Joris de Bres (London: Verso, 1978).

³⁶ Reprinted as the first chapter of Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 1–54.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 35–6.

emergence of the realist forms of more general mass culture.³⁸ The era of modernism was thus marked by an opposition between modernism and mass culture which waned only in postmodernism itself (Figure 2.8).³⁹

Figure 2.8 Three cultural modes of capitalism



On this Jameson was quite unambiguous, and it is hard to come away from these texts with anything other than the impression that by postmodernism he had in mind the dominant cultural forms of, to use today's terminology, an increasingly globalised age. So whilst it may or may not be true that Mandel shunned the term 'multinational',⁴⁰ it does not seem substantially to alter Jameson's thesis, which is that the forms of modernism (particularly postwar high modernism) that were resolutely hostile to the philistinism of a 'gilded age culture', which persisted from Victorian times through to the Cold War, were displaced by material—sometimes equally offensive—that was now assimilated to the logic of the consumer society.⁴¹ Mandel's era of late capitalism can therefore be seen as the mere birth pangs of the economic determinants of what would later develop into postmodernism.

Seen in this way the original disparity between Jameson and Mandel—namely, the fact that Mandel's late capitalism began in the 1940s, whereas

³⁸ See Fredric Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave: Demystifying the Ideology of Modernism', in *The Ideologies of Theory*, 129–32.

³⁹ Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', 195.

⁴⁰ See Gregory, 'Stranded Economies', 80.

⁴¹ Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', 196.

postmodernism (on Jameson's view) would seem to date from the late 1960s or early 1970s—seems remarkably trivial, not least because it can now be seen that Mandel was incorrect if he thought that the 1970s slump was the beginning of the end for capitalism. For as we now know all too well, this slump might well have signalled the onset of a long capitalist crisis, but it also marked the effective suspension of any socialist alternative. If anything, Mandel's third-revolution technology has increased in its cultural symbolism, for computerised technology and the social landscape in which it is used is surely one of the most striking aspects of postmodernism itself. Jameson, in fact, formulated as a cornerstone of his analysis of postmodernism a very striking analysis of precisely this phenomenon, in which our representations of technology 'afford us some glimpse into a postmodern or technological sublime',⁴² which is actually an encoding of something else:

our faulty representations of some immense communicational and computer network are themselves but a distorted figuration of something even deeper, namely, the whole world system of a present-day multinational capitalism. The technology of contemporary society is therefore mesmerizing and fascinating not so much in its own right but because it seems to offer some privileged representational shorthand for grasping a network of power and control even more difficult for our minds and imaginations to grasp: the whole new decentred global network of the third stage of capital itself.⁴³

Here, then, we can detect a mutation in the reach of postmodernism. What starts out as a cultural theory begins to turn around and eat its way back into the base itself, and the very autonomy of the cultural can thus be revealed to perform an essentially ideological purpose of blocking our representations of the 'impossible totality' that animates them from within. Postmodernism, then, is not some stylistic fad or fashion, but an entire logic of representation, one that proclaims that capitalism won, even whilst denying us access to the reality of that victory.

This logic arises in the 1960s, a period seemingly marked politically by decolonisation; what emerges by the end of it, however, is an insidious neo-colonialism in which we see 'the replacement of the British Empire by the International Monetary Fund'.⁴⁴ National liberation is thus bought at the cost not only of crippling systems of debt, but also a regime of international finance that will

⁴² For an alternative postmodernist use of the sublime, see Jean-François Lyotard, 'Answering the Question: What is Postmodernism?', in *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1984), 71–82.

⁴³ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 37–8. This motif is given a full cultural analysis in Jameson's later *The Geopolitical Aesthetic: Cinema and Space in the World System* (London: BFI Publishing, 1992).

⁴⁴ Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', 184.

henceforth impose ultra-liberal capitalism on developing nations with scant regard for the consequences. In this claim, Jameson's 'Periodizing the 60s' was well ahead of its time, since it is only in recent years that a global anti-capitalist movement has arisen that has seen the importance of challenging the institutions that maintain the economic world order.⁴⁵ What can be seen here is thus an important historical mutation: the comparative waning of the nation-state's powers when set alongside the increasing power of the multinational corporation.⁴⁶ Once again, then, another key theme of contemporary debates over globalisation emerges, some twenty years ahead of its time. Culturally, the transgressive qualities of the era can be captured by a wry economic metaphor:

The 60s were [...] an immense and inflationary issuing of superstructural credit; a universal abandonment of the referential gold standard; an extraordinary printing up of ever more devalued signifiers. With the end of the 60s, with the world economic crisis, all the old infrastructural bills then slowly come due once more; and the 80s will be characterized by an effort, on a world scale, to proletarianize all those unbound social forces that gave the 60s their energy [...] The unifying force here is the new vocation of a henceforth global capitalism[.]⁴⁷

The 1960s therefore appear as a transitional phase into postmodernism proper, which is marked by capitalism's systemic triumph and the cultural corollaries of such a jaded age.

3

It is important at this juncture to note that postmodernism is thus not the marker of a new mode of production. Postmodernism does not mark the supersession of capitalism; in fact, it arises as a corollary of its ever more systemic penetration of the world. This is the flip-side of the 'defeat' of socialism: not a shift to a new mode of production, but the completion, as it were, of a previous revolution. This is already implicit in Jameson's discussion of the increasing industrialisation of Third World agriculture, but he is also concerned to map out the consequences for the (philosophical) subject of the commodityscape that late capitalism opens up. His most

⁴⁵ Pop critiques have emanated even from the Right on this matter: the most ubiquitous of these is surely Joseph Stiglitz, *Globalization and its Discontents* (London: Penguin, 2002).

⁴⁶ See Scott Newton, *The Global Economy 1944-2000: The Limits of Ideology* (London: Arnold, 2004), 85-88.

⁴⁷ Jameson, 'Periodizing the 60s', 208.

famous renderings of these matters come in the celebrated analyses of postmodernist pastiche, schizophrenia, and the death of historicity.⁴⁸ But there is another side to this dynamic, one which harks back to the earlier dialectical logic of *The Political Unconscious*. Specifically, the point is that with the ‘triumph’ of capital and the extension of its remit to cover every last atom, the age comes to find that it can no longer detect signs of significant difference.

Now this claim, which everyone must know to be empirically false, is obviously hyperbolic: presented as it is, the theory seems to generalise, rather insidiously, the experience in the most advanced capitalist nations, with very little regard for the complexities and subtleties of experiences elsewhere. Whilst the societies in the West—most particularly America and the United Kingdom—may not sense the urgency of the radical alternative, it is a little brusque to claim this of the rest of the globe. Alex Callinicos’s criticisms of middle-aged middle-class revolutionaries echoes eerily in the air. After all, capitalism is nowhere near as geopolitically complete as this view of postmodernism likes to think: pre-capitalist modes of production obviously persist all over the globe (state-funded academic writing is hardly productive labour in the Marxist sense), and resistance to globalisation is a very hot topic indeed, politically speaking. There would seem to be a distinctive Western hubris in assuming otherwise, a hubris not helped by its emanation mainly from America, a country which is sometimes not well regarded for its knowledge of (and empathy with) the rest of the world. There is a danger here, therefore, of presenting the ‘advanced’ state of postmodernism as some kind of inevitable evolutionary period that the rest of the world will go through when it reaches that particular point on the trajectory of development. There are obvious reasons why this is an uncomfortable theory: one would normally want more resistance from a Marxist writer, to dispel the fatalism provoked by capitalism’s triumph. In the absence of such qualifications, the disappearance of alternatives to capitalism—which originally means something synchronic and purely economic in Jameson—can seem rather uneasily proximate to Francis Fukuyama’s diachronic, political projection of history’s liberal-democratic endgame, a situation from which Marxists would be expected to dissent.

⁴⁸ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 16–31. See also Fredric Jameson, ‘Postmodernism and Consumer Society’, in *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998), 4–10.

Jameson is presumably not unaware of these problems, but he does not soften the edges of these mid-period texts to accommodate them. For the Jameson of the late 1980s, the critical marker of the shift from modernism to postmodernism is the disappearance of what we might call, in modernism, ‘an uneven moment of social development, or to what Ernst Bloch called the “simultaneity of the nonsimultaneous,” the “synchronicity of the non-synchronous”’.⁴⁹ In other words, modernism returns us to the earlier notion of cultural revolution. But in a departure from the outer level of interpretation as it was presented in *The Political Unconscious*, this paradigm is dissolved in postmodernism; in a key passage, Jameson claims that

the postmodern must be characterized as a situation in which the survival, the residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept away without a trace. In the postmodern, then, the past itself has disappeared (along with the well-known ‘sense of the past’ or historicity and collective memory). [...] Everything is now organized and planned; nature has been triumphantly blotted out, along with peasants, petit-bourgeois commerce, handicraft, feudal aristocracies and imperial bureaucracies. Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with embarrassment of non-simultaneities and the non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the ‘West’). This is the sense in which we can affirm, either that modernism is characterized by a situation of incomplete *modernization*, or that postmodernism is more modern than modernism itself.⁵⁰

The jostling of modes of production that defines cultural revolution seems to be suspended or representationally blocked. So if to be modern is to sense the imperative to be new (or, alternatively, to think that one is new), then the sense of the new must surely be measured against something old; the modernising impulse subsides when this oldness disappears:

nature is abolished along with the traditional countryside and traditional agriculture; even the surviving historical monuments, now all cleaned up, become glittering simulacra of the past, and not its survival. Now everything is new; but by the same token, the very category of the new then loses its meaning and becomes itself something of a modernist survival.⁵¹

These are sweeping claims indeed, and they litter Jameson’s writing on postmodernism. They can be placed in a more comprehensible context by a brief return to an earlier Jameson essay on modernism. Stressing, in a now familiar motif, that modernism was a break with realism, Jameson explicitly aligns realism with an understanding of modernity. Realism desacralises, is postmagical, commonsensical,

⁴⁹ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 307.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, 309–10.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 311.

everyday, secular;⁵² and it is therefore 'inseparable from the development of capitalism, the quantification by the market system of the older hierarchical or feudal or magical environment, and thus [...] both are intimately linked to the bourgeoisie as its product and its commodity'.⁵³ In a striking claim, however, realism also shares a close identity with historical thinking. This is because the older forms of magical or transcendent causality no longer strike the modern mind as being very plausible; instead, they must be decoded and processed anew to become simply causality itself, history in its weak form. But:

At length, as the nineteenth century itself wears on, we begin to detect signs of a kind of fatigue with the whole process of decoding; indeed, as the very memory of feudalism and the ancien regime grows dim, there appear perhaps to be fewer and fewer codes in the older sacred sense to serve as the object of such semiotic purification. This is, of course, the moment of the emergence of modernism, or rather, of the various modernisms, for the subsequent attempts to *recode* the henceforth decoded flux of the realistic, middle-class, secular era are many and varied[.]⁵⁴

These attempts to recode secular reality lead Jameson to an observation about modernism that will prove fertile indeed when applied to music:

all modernist works are essentially simply cancelled realistic ones [...], not apprehended directly, in terms of their own symbolic meanings [...] but rather indirectly only, by way of the relay of an imaginary realistic narrative of which the symbolic and modernistic one is then seen as a kind of stylisation[.]⁵⁵

Crucially, then, the 'older overstuffed Victorian bourgeois reality' which modernism reacts against does not rid itself of that reality; on the contrary, 'it simply reinforces all [its] basic presuppositions, only in a world so thoroughly subjectivized that they have been driven underground, beneath the surface of the work, forcing us to reconfirm that concept of a secular reality at the very moment when we imagine ourselves to be demolishing it.'⁵⁶ It is the persistence of this older regime that gives modernism its 'agonising dilemma', which is that 'the truth of our social life as a whole [...] is increasingly irreconcilable with the aesthetic quality of language or of

⁵² Jameson, 'Beyond the Cave', 122.

⁵³ Ibid., 122.

⁵⁴ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁵ Ibid., 129.

⁵⁶ Ibid., 130–1.

individual expression [...] we can no longer make it accessible in narrative or literary form.⁵⁷

By the time that postmodernism comes onto the scene, this dilemma has receded somewhat, because the effacement of the historical alternative to modernism is complete; so there is now no particular need felt to be oppositional, except for opposing modernism itself, and accordingly a new period opens up which poses new contradictions that the literary form may or may not be able to solve. In another crucial mutation, however, postmodernism, flaunting its pluralism, seems able to subsume and accommodate modernism, erasing further the historicity of this period. In other words,

our conceptual exhibit comes more sharply into view when we begin to ask ourselves how it is possible for the most standardized and uniform social reality in history, by the merest ideological flick of the thumbnail, the most imperceptible of displacements, to reemerge as the rich oil-smear sheen of absolute diversity and of the most unimaginable and unclassifiable forms of human freedom. Here homogeneity has become heterogeneity[.]⁵⁸

The conceptual exhibit under investigation here is the second of what Jameson calls his four antinomies of postmodernity. An antinomy, of course, is a type of opposition whose terms are simply irreconcilable (all X is Y; no X is Y). In his essay 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity' Jameson reads antinomies not as resolute logical non sequiturs, but more as symptoms of the contradictions of postmodernism,⁵⁹ and proceeds to deploy them in ways that are quite unexpected and amongst his most convincing enactments of dialectical shock. In the passage quoted above, for instance, the antinomy being probed is essentially that of space: how has such a standardised social reality (indeed the *most* standardised social reality) come to seem so absolutely diverse? How has such homogeneity cloaked itself in such outward heterogeneity?

The basic determinant of this situation is once again the obliteration of difference on a world scale: earlier modern moments of capital had carried within them some remnants of earlier, precapitalist modes of production.⁶⁰ In spatial terms this effectively refers to a premodern peasant agriculture, working in a system of land tenure that is increasingly displaced by capitalist systems of private property. By the

⁵⁷ Ibid., 131.

⁵⁸ Fredric Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', in *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 32.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 4.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 24–6.

time of the onset of postmodernism, the remnants of the precapitalist past have been purged from contemporary experience, so that agriculture itself (nurture) is no longer the simple other of nature, but merely a business like any other.⁶¹ Importantly, then, it carries no memories of a time when things were done differently, so we can no longer reconnect with the sheer concreteness of the very earth itself, for capitalism's reorganising has parcelled it into quantities and surrendered it to the market, which in the time of postmodernism will value it speculatively with potentially no concern for its content at all.⁶² The obvious cultural reference here is Jameson's famous discussion of Van Gogh's late painting of peasant boots, adroitly counterpointed against (amongst others) Warhol's *Diamond Dust Shoes*, a version of which iconically graces the cover of *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.⁶³ In this way does the bustling heterogeneity of the surface relate to the grim determinations of the underlying system.

The ideological ramifications of this are a lot less abstract than might seem to be the case. If capitalism has truly obliterated difference, and agriculture is veritably just a business like any other, then the traditional opposition of town and country, urban and pastoral, can no longer continue to model the tension between the libidinal freedoms of the city and the provincial boredom of the countryside—and a major modernist motif is thus reconfigured.⁶⁴ The vision of the city is of a bustling marketplace of small traders, colourful and eventful in ways that contrast greatly with the drudgery of the pitiful corporate reality (the same coffee shops and fast-food outlets no matter where you travel, with obvious exclusions). But it is of greater importance to note the transfer, onto Second World cities, of characteristics traditionally assigned to the countryside.⁶⁵ The heterogeneity of the contemporary capitalist city is thus counterpoised against the cultural and libidinal poverty of the Second World: this then becomes a less than covert attack on centralisation and planning, which is caricatured as grey and featureless precisely because the fabric of the city does not prostitute itself to the whims of fashion.⁶⁶

⁶¹ Ibid., 26–7.

⁶² Ibid., 25.

⁶³ On the irony of the 'colorization' of Warhol's print, see Steven Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 169 n. 15.

⁶⁴ Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', 29.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 29–30.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 30–2.

One of the more interesting spin-offs of this argument is the disappearance of nature, in the sense of some essentially pastoral vision of non-urbanity; nature no longer opposes man, presumably because there is nothing natural left that is not infected with some form of capital. But nature has suffered in postmodern times in other ways too, most notably in the trivial culturalism that has swept over large parts of the academy, in which everything, more or less, comes down to culture; to talk of the natural is merely to assert the odious universality of one particular view amongst many equally convincing others. Such a climate, of course, has been fed by two currents of thought—antifoundationalism and antiessentialism—which Jameson views as essentially dealing with the same problematic.⁶⁷ Antifoundationalism questions (or tries to overturn) the assumption that we can derive scientific laws about the external world, and thus takes (or eliminates) nature as one of its inaugural moves. Antiessentialism, on the other hand, can certainly be deployed to question notions of a universal human nature, and so it too becomes implicated in nature's postmodern eclipse.⁶⁸

Jameson treats antifoundationalism as a desire rather than a concrete epistemological position; this is partly so as to grasp the historical conditions of its possibility, but also as a response to one of antifoundationalism's more trivial problems: the way in which this body of thought so hostile to norms can, in its turn, solidify into a norm, and thus itself become a type of foundationalism. Historically, of course, the notion of the natural has been identified with the self, whereas the unnatural—whether (as in the course of history) female, deviant, marginal, criminal, and so on—becomes something essentially other. An antifoundationalism will privilege this otherness—privilege it so strongly, in fact, that the terms will, under a certain amount of duress, simply click round into the same original ideological positioning, only with their polarities reversed, so that what was formally other is now the realm of identity itself. There have been attempts to avoid this circularity: Jameson makes the point that whereas Sartrean existentialism was equally hostile to nature, it used such analysis to challenge bourgeois normativity, and thus could always find a new situation that would 'solve' the opposition, whereas the more recent antifoundationalism simply yearns for some radical free-floating otherness that is grounded by the very attempt to think it, and thus meanwhile poses no threat to the

⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 33.

⁶⁸ *Ibid.*, 33.

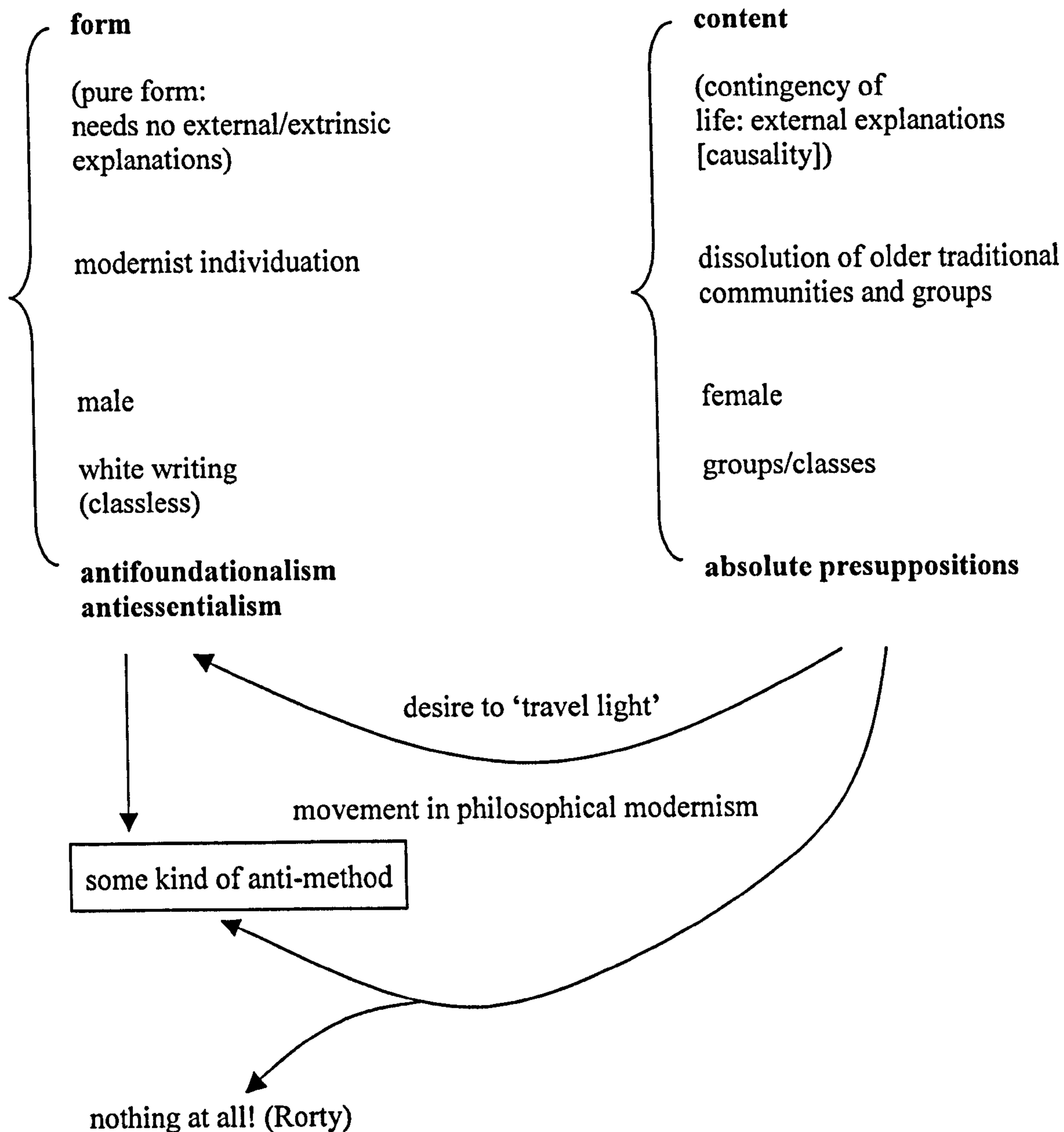
ruling class whatsoever. Indeed, one of Jameson's most illuminating analogies is here, when he characterises antifoundationalism as a 'philosophical ambition to live dangerously, as Nietzsche might have put it; to try to think without backup or presuppositions, to deal with problems ad hoc and without a system.'⁶⁹ But, in a great traversal of fields, Jameson moves unexpectedly to aesthetics, and points out that antifoundationalism can also be seen as complementary to the privileging of formal autonomy in modernism, a stringent refusal of content that might tarnish the pristine, unsullied form itself of the cultural object.⁷⁰

This analogy generates a series of oppositions whose elaboration ranks amongst the most virtuosic and ambitious of all Jameson's analyses:

⁶⁹ Ibid., 35.

⁷⁰ Ibid., 35.

Figure 2.9 Form and content



First of all, form (essentially autonomous, needing no external or extrinsic explanation) is thrown into opposition with content (the sheer contingency of life: external explanations). From here is drawn a social analogy, whereby the modernist gesture is seen as symbolic of the essential unity of the individual, as opposed to the older communities of groups. If this essentially juxtaposes the worker under modern capitalism with an older, context-bound scenario, then what Jameson (simplistically) claims we are dealing with in terms of gender is, unsurprisingly enough, the male

versus the female. But of still greater importance is the way in which if content signals groups, classes, and all that is concrete in the world, form can also come to seem to be those attempts to escape class: here Barthes's white writing, the attempt to absolve literature, through a sheer absence of style, of its guilty participation in the bloodbath of history.⁷¹ So in the final analysis we sense a familiar Jameson motif, which is the movement away from the concrete (absolute presuppositions of thought), towards the purely formal (antifoundationalism and antiessentialism). Seen this way, we begin to understand one of Jameson's formerly most sweeping claims about modernist philosophy, its migration into a variety of formalisms.⁷² But if, in Jameson's phrase, the modernists tried to travel light, philosophically speaking, then their anti-methods always seemed to risk the return of a method at a higher level, whether in Wittgenstein, phenomenology, Nietzsche, or pragmatism. So the moment of postmodernist antifoundationalism comes as a logical point when in order to avoid slipping mistakenly into some hidden foundationalism, one simply moves closer and closer to saying nothing at all, in conventional philosophical terms. We thus reach the pragmatism of Richard Rorty, in which, in a famous claim, philosophy indeed does cease to exist in its conventional, strong form, becoming instead merely a type of writing.⁷³

In some respects this dazzling series of analogies merely explains a tendency—the move away from content—that many will recognise. Its distinctive relation to the postmodernist moment itself, the elimination of the residual bits of the modern in contemporary experience, needs to be clarified. Jameson makes the point once again that much of this refusal of content was an elimination of prebourgeois life modes, in a situation in which the modern was far from hegemonic; the existentialist moment, on the other hand, was a flicker of discomfort with the bourgeois mode itself. In postmodernism, however, we reach the end of such ideological tussles, if not the end of ideology in its conventional sense, for this is no longer the way society reproduces itself:⁷⁴ there is simply no remaining residual element of the essentially *different* mode of production against which ideology might be needed to turn its fire. Instead, in an Adornian move, the system eliminates the last vestiges of critical

⁷¹ Roland Barthes, *Writing Degree Zero*, trans. Annette Lavers and Colin Smith (New York: Hill and Wang, 1968).

⁷² For an example of this widespread Jamesonian motif, see Fredric Jameson, 'Metacommentary', *Publications of the Modern Language Association of America* 86/1 (1971), 9.

⁷³ Jameson, 'The Antinomies of Postmodernity', 35–9.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, 40.

distance which are written into the very notion of ideas or concepts;⁷⁵ amidst a more general surrender to positivism, it has become an imperative to abolish philosophy altogether (a claim that puts Rorty's pragmatism in a new and rather unfavourable light), because it too is one of the last remaining residues of the critical past. But this merely sets the stage for Jameson's most unexpected analogy of all: antifoundationalism as a kind of replication of post-Fordism,⁷⁶ in which products are tailored to meet the individual needs of customers—in a vision of plurality and distribution that is undoubtedly a governing ethos of multinational capitalism. Any collective experience is progressively annulled in the face of this rampant concern for the consuming individual, and this, then, is the logical conclusion of a genuine neopragmatism: when confronted with the need for a qualitative test of group ethics (so as to ensure undesired forms such as fascism do not reappear), antifoundationalism can only dismiss such tasks as false problems.⁷⁷

Antiessentialism, on the other hand, proves to be a rather more simple matter: if we take the example of feminism, for instance, the notion of essential, radical difference proves to be worth holding on to, in the face of an egalitarianism that would proclaim all to be essentially the same. Here once again we simply meet a movement from content (difference itself) to form (identity), and the problematic as such folds back into contours of the antifoundationalist position. In fact, it becomes more important to note that if both these movements—antifoundationalism and antiessentialism—stage a movement away from, if not obliteration of, nature and the natural, then another of Jameson's postmodernist antinomies becomes clear: the obliteration of nature coincides with its return, in the ecology movement.⁷⁸ What Jameson means by the latter term is the process by which we have become increasingly aware of the destruction wreaked upon the earth by Promethean conceptions of production, and we now realise that there are limits to such models of production, at least if we are to avert a global environmental catastrophe. This postmodernist ecology, then, coincides with the end of the modern mode of production and ushers in a time of restraint (the era of recycling, amongst other things) that has its most interesting corollaries in terms of human nature. In a world haunted by AIDS and the spectre of environmental disaster, a new ethos of frugality

⁷⁵ Ibid., 40.

⁷⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁷⁷ Ibid., 44.

⁷⁸ Ibid., 46.

and smallness has come to dominate;⁷⁹ which is to say, a certain conception of human nature has indeed returned, but one in which humans are by their nature sinful and aggressive, hence the need for restraint.⁸⁰ In other words, human nature needs to be held in check for its own good, to avoid all the problems of the end of the era of high capitalism, supposedly the product of the libertarian ethos of the late 1950s and 60s: drugs, social breakdown, urban violence, and so on.⁸¹

Against this Jameson makes the plausible claim that it is rather the *failure* of the 1960s movements that ushered in these problems:

the enthusiasm raised by such movements individually and suffusing the period generally was in itself a powerful and objective force whose absolute disappointment could not but have objective consequences in its own right: the ossification of the new states that emerged from the great wars of national liberation, the capitulation of most Western social democratic governments to business as usual, the sinking of the communist regimes of the Brezhnev period into the 'era of stagnation'—all this, followed by the reemergence of a new high-tech multinational capital, could not but document the feeling that human beings are incapable of collective achievement or individual change and underwrite a conviction that some essential human nature, of a limited and ungrateful sort, is necessarily to blame for these irreversible setbacks.⁸²

So against such supposedly aggressive freedom movements the market itself was gradually unveiled as the new form of restraint—and it is this, the market, that emerges as the final form of postmodernist naturalism. That is, the market *is* the new metaphysic of postmodernism, a foundation or essentialisation like any other, and the postmodernist moment, as has repeatedly been claimed, is merely the triumph of this mode of production and obliteration of any traces of difference that might whisper to us that we could organise ourselves differently.⁸³

To say this is also to come very close to another of Jameson's antinomies: today we are faced with an unparalleled rate of change on all levels of social life, but this at a time of unparalleled standardisation of *everything*! The form of this antinomy is closely related to the spatial antinomy with which this discussion began, but the temporal is more severely challenged by postmodernism: when the clock stops and the antinomies freeze over, there is no role for time to play in the fabric of our experience. The modern period dreamt of itself as being in opposition to some earlier world in which life did not seem to change: once again a pastoral vision of a slower

⁷⁹ Ibid., 47.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 49.

⁸¹ Ibid., 49–50.

⁸² Ibid., 50.

⁸³ Ibid., 51.

permanence floats into view, in which an arrogant city played itself off against some imagination of rural idiocy, the hangover from a precapitalist past.⁸⁴ But the very act of this comparative gesture becomes impossible in postmodernism, because no residual traces of the earlier world remain, and this calls into question the possibility of change itself. As with the progression to antifoundationalism, philosophy or critique as demolition—whereby we move supposedly close to the truth—becomes visible as a process of demystification that merely sweeps the world clean for the global corporations, banishing the traces of pure difference from what collective memory remains and substituting instead a dull positivism with all its meagre Anglo-American ‘philosophical’ spin-offs. The situation is characterised, then, by the surface rhythms of a frantic capitalism masking the fundamental stasis which marks its triumph as such:

Here, it is as if the logic of fashion had, accompanying the multifarious penetration of its omnipresent images, begun to bind and identify itself with the social and psychic fabric in some ultimately inextricable way, which tends to make it over into the very logic of our system as a whole. The experience and the value of perpetual change thereby comes to govern language and feelings, fully as much as the buildings and the garments of this particular society, to the point at which even the relative meaning allowed by uneven development (or ‘nonsynchronous synchronicity’) is no longer comprehensible, and the supreme value of the New and of innovation, as both modernism and modernization grasped it, fades away against a steady stream of momentum and variation that at some outer limit seems stable and motionless.⁸⁵

Nothing can change any longer: the end of history as academic motif is revived (Fukuyama) and the system persists in the face of absolute difference on the most visible surface. The only change would now be to end change itself,⁸⁶ and with this logical half-nelson the possibility of some future Utopia melts away even when we are, in the traditional Marxist scheme, surely closest to it.

These antinomies of postmodernism are all therefore predicated on the radical sameness of contemporary experience, the setting in place and completion of modern capitalism and its reaching of the final frontiers of global space and ecological possibility. If the dilemma here is essentially therefore one of space, it is no surprise that the antinomy comes to be the privileged form of opposition of the age, for it is a kind of freezing of alternatives which look at each other as if from different worlds and languages. In the postmodernist world such tendencies have their correlatives in

⁸⁴ Ibid., 29.

⁸⁵ Ibid., 17.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 18.

contemporary thought, where objective enquiries are reduced to a stale positivism in which universalisms are avoided, and subjective enquiries which are increasingly nominalist in such a way as to assign fragmentation an extraordinarily high positive value. In the face of such fragmentation, the bald categories of identity and difference (on which postmodernism is doubly predicated) return seemingly free of values, and as we have repeatedly seen, each carries the other within it; or, rather, difference is folded back into identity, and the antitheses turn out to be 'the same', creating a frictionless world on which critique can no longer simply find any foothold—the terrain, in other words, of frozen antinomy itself.⁸⁷ Against this view, Jameson increasingly juxtaposes the mere possibility of fundamental systemic change itself, thinking of totality in such a way as to force us outside of the fused circuits of postmodernist capitalism; he thinks the possibility of the future from the perspective of an eternal present—thus does difference return to haunt the everlasting identity, to give a breathless quickening of the pulse 'as we listen for the missing next tick of the clock'.⁸⁸ Only in this way can antinomies be registered as the contradictions that they most surely are: by drawing a timeline under a cleanly autonomous present Jameson can reintroduce the temporal itself, and a blurring of our clear-cut edges to accommodate the possibility of a transition into the future. And from such a vantage point we shall be able to look back, one supposes, and reveal postmodernism itself as the sort of transitional moment that gets expanded into an entire period, as Jameson had earlier theorised in *The Political Unconscious*.

4

One final dimension of postmodernism requires comment: the status of the theory itself. The rise of 'Theory' has long been read as a marker of postmodernism—by Jameson himself, for instance, amongst others—but the relationship of this theory to philosophy and art is a matter of some complexity. Evidently there is a loss of bearings due simply to one of theory's more striking achievements on the level of

⁸⁷ Ibid., 5–6.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 71.

institutional practice, which Jameson has called ‘a dedifferentiation of fields, such that economics has come to overlap with culture: that everything, including commodity production and high and speculative finance, has become cultural; and culture has equally become profoundly economic or commodity oriented.’⁸⁹ Academic fields which were once supposedly separated by both subject-matters and interpretative approaches have increasingly been sucked into the whirlpool of theory, and Jameson has extended this observation to include even that most zealously guarded of academic terrains, namely, philosophy itself. Interestingly, however, Jameson’s placement of the point at which philosophy ended, as it were, has altered from the position taken in his early writings on postmodernism. In the early 1980s he associates the onset of theory with emergence of the French poststructuralism of Michel Foucault, traversing as it does the fields of philosophy, history, and politics with scant respect for their academic border-guards;⁹⁰ but in a more recent essay of 1994, Jameson moves the end of philosophy back to the end of romanticism and Hegel’s last works. Drawing upon Hegel’s much-touted idea of an end of art that is followed by a truly philosophical age, Jameson claims that ‘Hegel was rather the last philosopher in the tradition’, meaning that not only that he has been subsumed in and transfigured by Marxism, but also that he ‘occupied this philosophical terrain so completely as to leave all later purely philosophical efforts [...] to constitute so many local guerrilla raids and anti-philosophical therapies, from Nietzsche to pragmatism, from Wittgenstein to deconstruction.’⁹¹

Whatever the viability of this *tout court* pronouncement on post-idealist philosophy, it is virtually undeniable that there has been a disciplinary widening over the past forty years. So pervasive has theory become, indeed, that there is now a concerted effort afoot somehow to move beyond this fashionable era—and this almost certainly indicates the institutional importance of the phenomenon. Valentine Cunningham remarks that ‘Theory’

is simply ubiquitous. [...] Notwithstanding the looseness of the term, vague, ultra-compendious, a huge flag of convenience, it has stuck, and in practice we know more or less what it covers. [...] The scope is, of course, Structuralism and Feminism and Marxism and Reader-Response and Psychoanalysis and Deconstruction and Poststructuralism and Postmodernism and Deconstruction and New Historicism and Postcolonialism [...] The modern gurus of Theory on these lines are, of course, the likes of Mikhail Mikhailovich Bakhtin, Walter Benjamin, Roland

⁸⁹ Fredric Jameson, *The Cultural Turn* (London: Verso, 1998), 73.

⁹⁰ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 81.

Barthes, Louis Althusser, Jacques Derrida, Paul de Man, Jacques Lacan, Julia Kristeva, Luce Irigaray, Michel Foucault, non-anglophone thinkers all, but most notably French-speakers, the French men and women who poured the Word from Paris [...] into eager Anglophone ears from the 1960s onwards.⁹²

Thus, as in Jameson's formulation in 'Periodizing the 60s', the era of theory dawned at some point in the 1960s and seemed 'to supplant traditional literature from the 1960s onwards, and to extend across a broad range of disciplines, from philosophy to anthropology, from linguistics to sociology, effacing their boundaries in an immense dedifferentiation'.⁹³

A tale thus emerges in which there are two key cultural watersheds. The first marks the point of the end of art as conventionally conceived by Hegelian aesthetics—that is, the end of romantic art. Jameson points out that in one sense Hegel was entirely incorrect ('disastrously wrong')⁹⁴ in this pronouncement, since the end of romanticism (and also, one might add, its continuation and intensification) actually gave birth to one of the most celebrated of all artistic times—that of modernism. Far from being the end of art, this was the end of the philosophical tradition, the last of the totalising systems of philosophy. More significantly, Hegel's end of art—the point at which something else (philosophy) would overtake and transcend art's ability to apprehend and represent the absolute⁹⁵—is almost overtly defied by the gestures of modernism: for, as Jameson puts it, 'surely what has defined *modernism* in the arts above all is that it laid peremptory claim to a unique mode "of apprehending and representing the Absolute" and that it was indeed for us or at least wished to be for us par excellence "the highest mode in which truth claws its way into existence"'.⁹⁶ In other words, modernism 'aspires to the Sublime as to its very essence, which we may call trans-aesthetic, insofar as it lays a claim to the Absolute, that is, it believes that in order to be art at all, art must be something beyond art.'⁹⁷ Thus at the moment when philosophy is supposed to supersede art, art suddenly changes its skin and jostles with the claims of philosophy. In a sense, then, Hegel was right: a certain type of art—fine

⁹² Valentine Cunningham, *Reading after Theory* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002), 15–17.

⁹³ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 84–5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 80.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 82.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 83.

art, that of the realm of the beautiful—did indeed end, but the onset of philosophy was put back by several decades.⁹⁸

This leaves the other key chronological point in Jameson's argument, the 1960s emergence of theory, in what might appear to be a strange position. For it is quite obvious that, as a candidate for the time of the end of art, this historical conjuncture seems also to witness a profound cultural shift. In a very real sense, like the age of the onset of modernism, the 1960s were the end of a certain type of art, but this time it was the end of institutionalised high modernism itself:

the very deployment of the theory of the "end of art" was also political, insofar as it was meant to suggest or to register the profound complicity of the cultural institutions and canons, of the museums and the university system, the stage prestige of all the high arts, in the Vietnam War as a defence of Western values: something that also presupposes a high level of investment in official culture as an extension of state power.⁹⁹

This is a theory that, as we have seen, has been advanced by several other notable theorists of postmodernism. David Harvey carved modernism into three slices, the last of these being that of high modernism, which in the aftermath of the Second World War came to enjoy a 'much more comfortable relation to the dominant power centres in society.'¹⁰⁰ In the field of culture, the 'great modernist literature of Joyce, Proust, Eliot, Pound, Lawrence, Faulkner—once judged as subversive, incomprehensible, or shocking—was taken over and canonized by the establishment (in universities and the major literary reviews).'¹⁰¹ This defusing, as it were, of the radical anti-institutional edge of the avant-garde, and its metamorphosis into official ideology, 'meant that, for the first time in the history of modernism, artistic and cultural, as well as "progressive" political revolt had to be directed at a powerful version of modernism itself.'¹⁰² Harvey, of course, saw the beginnings of a new type of counter-cultural critique as taking shape in the 1960s—again the era symbolising some kind of major cultural event—culminating in the riots, resistance, barricades, and bloodshed of 1968, which marks the beginning of a symbolic period of change that eventually, in the early 1970s, ushers in postmodernism itself.

⁹⁸ Ibid., 84.

⁹⁹ Ibid., 75.

¹⁰⁰ Harvey, *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 35.

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 36.

¹⁰² Ibid., 37.

From the starting point of modernism, then, we arrive at the institutionalised high modernism of the postwar years that Jameson also reads as the point of departure for the critical movement that heralds the 1960s end of art. For Jameson this end of art 'can only be the end of the modern itself, or in other words the end of the Sublime, the dissolution of art's vocation to reach the Absolute.'¹⁰³ Thus Jameson posits two different ends of art, one that ushers in modernism, and another that marks the beginning of its ending and the setting in place of postmodernism. But the 1960s end of art is also, as has already been remarked, the birth of theory, and thus the Hegelian notion of a movement from art to philosophy returns to haunt the academy at a time, ironically enough, when the fortunes of progressive historicity have come under vociferous attack. In other words, this end of art is marked for Jameson by the 'slow disappearance of all the great *auteurs* who signed modernism in its grandest period from 1910 to 1955'; and the waning of modernism was accompanied by the gradual process in which theory

emerged from the aesthetic itself, from the culture of the modern, and it is only in the dreary light of the old anti-intellectual distinction between the critical and the creative that the movement from Mayakovsky to Jakobson will seem a downward curve, or that from Brecht to Barthes, or from Joyce to Eco, from Proust to Deleuze.¹⁰⁴

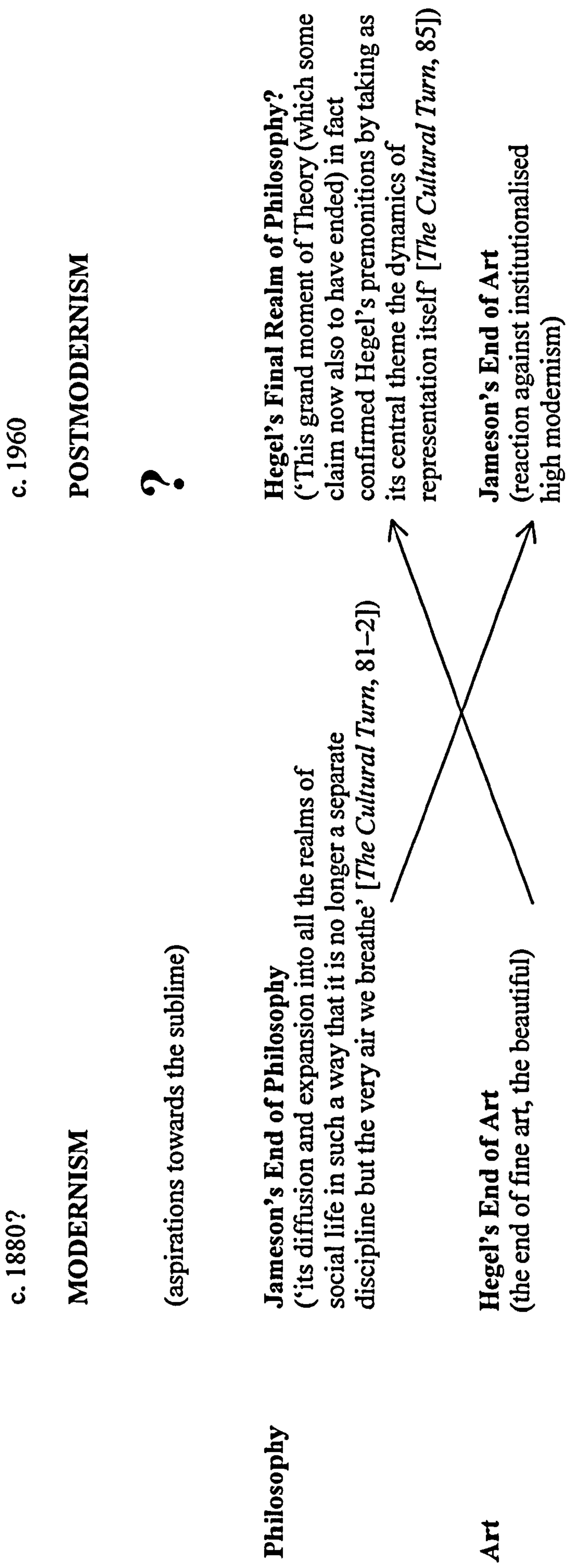
This passage points towards an understanding of the rise of theory that will not be forced either to dismiss it as a form of academic navel-gazing or to celebrate it naively whilst being held within its suffocating grasp.

The fluctuating fortunes of philosophy and art as mapped in Jameson's essay can be presented as in Figure 2.10.

¹⁰³ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 84.

¹⁰⁴ *Ibid.*, 85.

Figure 2.10 End of art, end of philosophy



However, there remains one crucial gap in this account of cultural change, and that is the question of what takes the place of modernism's aspirations towards the sublime. If theory takes over the dominant function of modernism, then what fills this hole? The answer is, of course, rather obvious, and in a wonderful climax Jameson stands aside and ushers the beautiful back towards the centre of the stage:

[This] leaves room for the survival of art's other half, namely the Beautiful, which now invests the cultural realm at the moment in which the production of the modern has gradually dried up. This is the other face of postmodernity, the return of Beauty and the decorative, in the place of the older modern Sublime, the abandonment by art of the quest for the Absolute or of truth claims and its redefinition as a source of sheer pleasure and gratification (rather than, as in the modern, of *jouissance*).¹⁰⁵

In some respects, then, art has come full circle via its journey through modernism, a return to what Jameson calls 'the older culinary status it enjoyed before the dominance of the Sublime'. Yet the return of the beautiful is quite obviously not a return to the socio-economic context in which—in the earlier era, at least—it arose, and this is the crucial difference of our own time: the beautiful returns now amidst such a considerable expansion of cultural commodification that it has occasionally come to seem as though everything is cultural—as if any talk of the natural is to be treated as somehow appealing to base instincts which can all too easily be put to undesirable political uses. This is the time of beauty's biggest coup yet: as Jameson puts it, it becomes a systemic dominant at the time when this colonisation itself becomes commodified on a world-wide scale.¹⁰⁶

The attractiveness of this broad analysis of the movement from modernism to postmodernism lies in its neat double-helix of philosophy and art, intertwined and carrying the genetic blueprint of the two cultural eras. Gone at last are those grand tables in which a clear line is drawn between two columns which are then packed with 'opposing' concepts supposedly characterising either modernism or postmodernism. The obvious and indeed famous example is Ihab Hassan's table of the schematic differences between modernism and postmodernism.¹⁰⁷ No matter how much one cautions that the division is arbitrary or that some concepts lie equally well in either column, such oppositions feed into and fuel the angry assertiveness of new cultural times, in which academic debate becomes the drab affair of selecting one's cultural

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 86.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 87.

¹⁰⁷ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 91–2.

colours, as if this were little more important than choosing a tie to go with a particularly garish shirt. Jameson's formulation is more sophisticated in the sense that it sees the onset of postmodernism as a shift in the conceptual priority of certain themes, but framed very much within their fundamental reoccurrence at key historical moments. Moreover, in so doing he restates a familiar motif that seems all too frequently to be missed by those unaware of the powers and limits of his conceptual models: namely, that when working on the level of generality that characterises cultural history as painted in the broadest of strokes, a concept such as modernism or postmodernism does not need to be matched, blow by blow, work for work, by the particulars which it is supposed to universalise. After all, there can be resistance towards as well as acquiescence in authority. The positing of modernism as an era characterised by aspirations towards the absolute is a retrospective construction, a beguiling imagining, if you like, trying to package into a rather more manageable format the extraordinary flourishing of art that occurred roughly between 1880 and 1960. It is not a case of naming two particular years (and why stop at years—why not days, hours, minutes?) between which some totalising, inescapable modernism reared its head, before suddenly imploding under the pressure of its internal contradictions. Rather, cultural periodisation seeks merely to grasp the dominance of certain currents, as in Jameson's analysis of cultural revolution in *The Political Unconscious*. Thus beauty did not disappear under the tyranny of the modernist: in a remark that is important for anyone who might wish to broaden modernism, the rise of the sublime 'is accompanied by a low-level persistence and reproduction of any number of secondary forms of the Beautiful in all the traditional senses; the Beautiful now as decoration, without any claim to truth or to a special relationship with the Absolute.'¹⁰⁸

It is revealing indeed that in some ways this verdict—indeed much of Jameson's postmodernism in general—can be reconciled with Fukuyama's end of history. Indeed, Jameson has remarked directly that Fukuyama's 'identification of democratic institutions and the market [...] may stand as a challenge to contemporary or postmodern, late-capitalist Marxism to work up a properly materialist analysis of commodity consumption',¹⁰⁹ which acknowledges Fukuyama's placement within postmodernism as amply as might be required. But Jameson's remarks about the

¹⁰⁸ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 84.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 89.

significance of Fukuyama, with which he closes this essay, make a sudden swerve to some of Jameson's more established interests in postmodernism—that is, its relationship with the temporal and the spatial. Somewhat surprisingly (since one would, after all, expect a book about the end of history to be about time itself), Jameson draws a spatial analogy between the end of history and postmodernism:

Fukuyama's 'end of history' is not really about Time at all, but rather about Space; and that the anxieties it so powerfully invests and expresses, to which it gives such usable figuration, are not unconscious worries about the future or Time: they express the feeling of the constriction of Space in the new world system; they bespeak the closing of another and more fundamental frontier in the new world market of globalization and of the transnational corporations.¹¹⁰

And in an extra twist—as if the ends of philosophy, art, and history were not enough!—Jameson raises again the spectre of ecological disaster which was propelled to public attention during the time of postmodernism: at the very time when capitalism had never before managed to penetrate to so many of the corners of the globe, it became impossible to imagine the continuation of the conception of production (intensive industrial expansion coupled with imperialism) that had flung the economically most advanced countries into this position of strength in the first place. Meanwhile, one of the most important characteristics of the new situation—modern technology's radical shrinking of the globe and what Jameson rather unclearly calls the 'sheer systematicity' of late capitalism¹¹¹—renders impossible the notion of opting out of this scenario. Hence we find ourselves in a kind of spatial half-nelson: 'these spatial dilemmas are what immobilize our imaginative picture of global space today and conjure up as their sequel the vision that Fukuyama calls the "end of history", and the final triumph of the market as such.'¹¹²

Notwithstanding this imaginative spatial reading of the end of history, Fukuyama's study is also notable for its reassertion of the temporal, and in particular a conception of progressive history. There would seem to be a glaring contradiction between this linear model and one of the most famous claims of all about postmodernism, namely, Lyotard's definition of it as 'incredulity towards metanarratives'.¹¹³ After all, the Jameson (not to mention Fukuyama) reading of history would rank with the grandest of all metanarratives. Perhaps, however,

¹¹⁰ Ibid., 90.

¹¹¹ Ibid., 91.

¹¹² Ibid., 92.

¹¹³ Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition*, xxiv.

something can be salvaged from this seeming contradiction by pointing out that incredulity towards metanarratives does not necessarily imply that there are no longer any metanarratives at work: those who have the time for Lyotard's language games might not take metanarratives seriously any more, but since the Lyotard of *The Postmodern Condition* was interested in the state of knowledge only in the most highly developed countries, it would seem that postmodernism is once again irresistibly entangled with the dominance of capitalism. In fact, Lyotard makes this perfectly clear when he writes (of the contradictions born of the system's logic of maximum performance) that 'our incredulity is now such that we no longer expect salvation to rise from these inconsistencies, as did Marx'.¹¹⁴ This begins to sound very much like Fukuyama's assertion that our age arrives exhausted by the pursuit of alternatives to liberal democracy and unable to imagine a different political system.¹¹⁵ With this, the end of history chimes with so many theories of postmodernism—the horizon that disappears, the system that cannot be seen because it is so total, the feeling of somehow arriving late to an epoch, or as Jameson puts it, a

relationship to our own present which I will call 'epochality' and by way of which we defend the historical age against all claims of the past and the future. And this is all the more significant a lesson given the splendours of the preceding period of modernity against which we find it so difficult to defend ourselves, preferring to ward off the unpleasant feeling of being epigones by means of sheer historical amnesia and the stifling of the sense of history itself.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁴ Ibid., xxiv.

¹¹⁵ Fukuyama, *The End of History*, 46.

¹¹⁶ Jameson, *The Cultural Turn*, 90.

3 VIRGINS IN THE MEGASTORE

No one could accuse such cultural theory of narrowness. The global reach of Jameson's postmodernism is all-encompassing and brooks little dissent; presented brusquely, and from behind a stylistic barricade of notorious difficulty, his work on modernism and postmodernism remains closely linked to our understanding of contemporary cultural experience in all its particulars. When one moves from such heady theory to the less speculative discipline of musicology, however, a very different situation presents itself. The most apparent change is simply that postmodernism is rapidly stripped of its socio-historical and economic content.¹ It would be churlish to wring one's hands excessively over this: after all, musicologists (and, indeed, literary critics) cannot reasonably be expected to pursue front-line research into economic history or sociology. But when engaging with a concept such as postmodernism, which is clearly more than just an aesthetic style, it is similarly unreasonable for the culture-critic not to probe the wider disciplinary situation beyond the arts and humanities. In the case of postmodernism, which has obvious economic and social preconditions, a willed blindness towards its richest theorisations removes the term from its conceptual specificity. To put this in another way, one might say that once the history is taken away from postmodernism, something like a vacant shell remains. It is thus unsurprising that from this point onwards the term's meaning becomes a matter of considerable worry and debate.² Indeed, this is perhaps the most striking of all the observations that one might make about musicological postmodernism: as if the term were outrageously new (rather than depressingly

¹ In a perceptive review of one of the most widely disseminated collections of essays on music and postmodernism, Adam Krims tellingly speaks of 'the end-run musicology has tried to accomplish around Marxism'. See Krims, 'Postmodern Musicology in Combined Development', *twentieth-century music* 1/1 (2004), 127.

² Many of the contributions to the collection mentioned in note 1 above—Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, ed., *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2002)—reflect explicitly on this worry, for instance.

middle-aged), it is asserted by musicologists, defensively, that it means many things.³ In making this claim they fall in with a long-standing tradition of some postmodernist theory; but, crucially, what would once have been an ingenuous response to a dizzying situation (in which pluralism and relativism seemed themselves to be factors in the critical mix) now seems more the result of a reluctance or inability to evaluate. If anything, the passage of time from postmodernism's earliest theorisations should have put some welcome critical distance between musicology and postmodernist theory, enabling musicologists to evaluate the differing theories of postmodernism and select the ones that they think most pertinent, rather than simply throwing up their arms in dismay at the admittedly labyrinthine complexity (not to mention size) of the existing literature.

But this is not just a failure of nerve on the part of musicology; one of the most problematic aspects of postmodernism is that nowadays one tends to approach it with more than a few preconceptions. The point is that an atmosphere has arisen in which it sometimes seems that various standards of rationality, by which one might normally evaluate a theory, are no longer applicable. The result of this is that not knowing what postmodernism means is thought not to be so much of a problem after all, because the very concepts of meaning and truth are precisely what postmodernism has problematised. (How one would know even this is not explained.) Gradually, then, the term is irresistibly reconfigured as a glittering, slippery idea that may or may not correspond to some distant reality (and again: for some brands of this postmodernism, enough is known about the term, apparently, to render all of these concepts now questionable), and getting postmodernism right can seem unimportant when one believes that the very possibility of right- or wrongness is no longer applicable. Jonathan Culler makes a related point forcefully, and with some concern for the institutional effects of such attitudes:

people who attained their positions of professional eminence by engaging in spirited debate with other members of an academic field, such as philosophy or literary studies, by identifying the difficulties and inconsistencies of their elders' conceptions of the field and by proposing alternative procedures and goals, have, once they attain professional eminence, suddenly turned and rejected the idea of a system of procedures and body of knowledge where argument is

³ See Jonathan D. Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', in *ibid.*, 13–4; Ross Feller, 'Resistant Strains of Postmodernism: The Music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough', in *ibid.*, 250; and Björn Heile, 'Collage vs. Compositional Control: The Interdependency of Modernist and Postmodernist Approaches in the Work of Mauricio Kagel', in *ibid.*, 287.

possible and presented the field as simply a group of people reading books and trying to say interesting things about them. They thus seek systematically to destroy the structure through which they attained their positions and which would enable others to challenge them in their turn.⁴

Similar problems can easily be imagined in musicological contexts: to criticise musicologists for incoherent or inconsistent appreciations of postmodernism can come to seem a weak argument, because an atmosphere is created and maintained whereby others celebrate incoherence and inconsistency as being precisely what the term postmodernism itself is theorising and defending. Such motifs are no doubt familiar in seminar-room discussions of the term, in which one cannot complain that postmodernism is too popular, because the breakdown of the division between high and popular culture is what the term is problematising; one cannot moan about the imprecision of the term, because that would imply a substantialist conception of language which few poststructuralists would buy; one cannot use the term as a periodising concept, because history is no longer credible in narrative form (or, better still, has ended); and, not least, the aesthetic has been dissolved into commodity production in general, so the elegantly marketed tracts that refute the concept come to seem more like the problem than its solution. It is unclear whether this is a caricature or not: for sometimes one is inclined to say that there really do seem to be people around who believe that postmodernism means simply that anyone can talk about anything in any way they care to choose. Convincing them that they are wrong can be difficult, especially when they have already convinced themselves that the possibility of correctness is merely some hegemonic false consciousness—as if by misunderstanding something, so you think that it theorises the impossibility of correct understanding, you thereby excuse yourself of your misunderstanding. In this instance, the exasperation that postmodernism can cause is—regrettably enough—justified.

Even if this is to some extent an hallucination brought on by anxiety and rumour, one can still make some concrete observations regarding the reception of postmodernism. Most significantly, it is surely not an exaggeration to say that at precisely the time when postmodernism reached musicology, rumours were starting to abound elsewhere to the effect that postmodernism must be criticised for its

⁴Jonathan Culler, 'In defence of overinterpretation', in Umberto Eco, *Interpretation and overinterpretation*, ed. Stefan Collini (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), 118.

ephemerality, or its lax theorisations;⁵ it is possible that an atmosphere of danger thus crystallised, whereby the uncertainty of the term was palpably a problem as well as a liberation, because there were suddenly good and bad versions of postmodernism, and few were sure any longer how to evaluate them, nor with what ultimate authority, nor for what final purpose. This uncertainty had two seminal consequences in terms of the way in which postmodernism was received by musicologists. The first is that one branch of musicology broke away from the rest of the discipline and attempted to engage with postmodernist theory. In so doing it created a change on which it soon looked back, somewhat bewilderingly, as being the change that it originally set out to theorise. The logic is inescapable: by investigating postmodernism, a branch of musicology becomes postmodernist. A kind of meta-musicology was thus created which believed itself to be the front-line of the discipline, but which, lacking any positive socio-historical theorisation of its own specificity, defined itself negatively against its predecessor. Predictably, this ended up as the fall or demise of modernism, which garnered repeated attacks and was eventually superseded altogether, subsumed by the plurality of its successor. The vanguard of this musicological line of thought has undoubtedly been the new musicology, whose claims have been widely debated and will be discussed shortly. More broadly, however, in this scenario we have what I shall call musicological postmodernism, whose novelty rests on its own sense of difference, and which fills the shell of postmodernism with little other than its own assertions of change, and an essentially negative, differential relationship to modernism, to whose debunking it devotes considerable critical energies.

This must be juxtaposed with the second consequence of musicology's inadequate appreciation of postmodernism, which might be termed musical postmodernism, or postmodernist music. I shall investigate this branch more thoroughly in Chapter 4, but one can briefly describe it by saying that this is a more sceptical school of thought which does not engage postmodernist theory to any great depth, and instead cultivates a rough and ready stylistic version of postmodernism that rests on hackneyed analyses of fragmentation, collage, and the waning of historicity, all of which can be plucked like pretty flowers from the increasingly common garden-

⁵ One is reminded again of the milieu caricatured by Terry Eagleton in *The Illusions of Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). The principal figure on the Left to attack some of the philosophical foundations of a rather gaudy truth-denying postmodernism has been Christopher Norris. See, for example, Christopher Norris, *The Truth about Postmodernism* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1993), and Christopher Norris, *What's Wrong with Postmodernism: Critical Theory and the Ends of Philosophy* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1990).

variety anthologies of postmodernist theory.⁶ The emphasis of this musicology is really historical, but historical in the superficial sense of the first level of Jameson's dartboard, the succession of mere events. What this musicology effectively decides is that the claims of postmodernist theory are too difficult or irrelevant or time-consuming to bother to learn, and it concentrates instead on a version of postmodernism which is primarily stylistic and heavily aestheticised in itself. Postmodernism on this reading is just that: it is what came stylistically after modernism, and true to the traditions of Anglo-American stylistic histories of music, very little of the underlying social conjuncture needs to be or is revealed. The conjunctural vagueness means that postmodernist music, on this reading, can be taken to be one of several types: notably the 'return' of tonality in the concert traditions of the West, or popular music in general (or any one of its genres), or recent film scores (and soundtracks), or world music, and so on. Surprisingly, this is essentially a conservative postmodernism—and no more conservative than in its complacent free-market pluralism,⁷ where the onus is on us not to evaluate (in any objective historical sense) the available products, but simply to choose what is closest to our own tastes and desires, and then hand over the money. 'Now we can hear *Aida* on the patio and the St Matthew Passion in the shower', wrote Richard Taruskin;⁸ but one would now want to add: 'or the Sex Pistols at Buckingham Palace'.

These two versions of postmodernism are closely intertwined; indeed, they tend to rest on typically hostile analyses of modernism, which is in turn similarly bifurcated. There is a reaction, in other words, not just to modernist music—which would be understandable enough, given the aural severity of some of it—but also to what is seen to be modernist theory.⁹ As we shall see, in some accounts modernism seems to be to blame for a staggering list of theoretical sins—and, once again, here

⁶ For example, Thomas Docherty, ed., *Postmodernism: A Reader* (New York: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993) and Lawrence E. Cahoone, ed., *From Modernism to Postmodernism: An Anthology* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996). Needless to say, it is ironic (for the purposes of this dissertation) that all of these symptoms of postmodernism can also be found in a more sophisticated form in Jameson's key writings. See, notably, the opening essay of Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 1–54.

⁷ This excellent point is made by Krims, 'Postmodern Musicology in Combined Development', 129.

⁸ Richard Taruskin, *Text and Act: Essays on Music and Performance* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 93.

⁹ This doubling of modernist music and theory is effected particularly smoothly in Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

musicology repeats errors that have long been pointed out in other disciplines.¹⁰ What is important to these theories is not what postmodernism is—because that is now felt to be a problem, undecidable, and perhaps necessarily so—but rather what it is not, and a relational structure thus emerges in which the most that one can say is that no matter what postmodernism means, it is different from whatever modernism meant.¹¹ At the heart of this assertion lies a desperate desire to change culture through words alone: things have changed, because we say that things have changed. The assertions of change become the change, and what is thus created is an overwhelming sense of evolution. If one falls victim to this idealist circularity, then there might seem to be some truth in the remarks of John Frow, who claims that to avoid or question the concept of postmodernism ‘is still a move *within* the genre of the postmodernism; it may indeed be the most characteristic move [...] And [...] the very persistence of the word, however irritating this may be, seems to indicate that something is at stake’.¹² On this view postmodernism, once mentioned, is inescapable. Like the ontological proof of the existence of God to which it bears more than a passing resemblance,¹³ this is a transparently problematic argument, which seems to rest on the assumption that to deny something is to provide some evidence that one’s own position has been altered by that very denial to the extent that the denial must, in fact, be incorrect. Why should this necessarily be the case? If one cannot question the assertions of change without falling victim to them, then the assertions of change are unchallengeable. Logically, change would cease when no one was proclaiming it to occur. Since one might assume that a rational argument for or against change would be able to be cogently evaluated and assessed on its merits, rather than simply its sheer existence, it is already clear just how questionable are some of the contentions of the more naïve postmodernisms.¹⁴

¹⁰ See, for example, Gregor McLennan, ‘Post-Marxism and the ‘Four Sins’ of Modernist Theorizing’, *New Left Review* 1/218 (July–August 1996), 53–74.

¹¹ E. Ann Kaplan notes a similar tendency in 1980s academic discourse. See ‘The Politics of Feminism, Postmodernism, and Rock’, in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 332–3.

¹² John Frow, ‘What Was Postmodernism?’, in *Time and Commodity Culture* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1997), 22–3.

¹³ This resemblance is pointed out by John Butt, *Playing with History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 148.

¹⁴ Not that it would seem this way to the postmodernists: as we shall see, they would no doubt rail against such ‘modernist’ and ‘totalitarian’ uses of rationality. Terry Eagleton’s critiques of postmodernism, in which the latter is (seemingly) caricatured as a movement in which truth is merely the raciest story, seem to have some appeal after all. See, for example, Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 396.

Nevertheless, one is tempted to say that in a shallow institutional sense there obviously has been a profound shift in musicological sensibility. One of the consequences of the ensuing tussle—between those who have welcomed the change and those who have problematised it—has been an overwhelming demonstration that the musicological situation has indeed altered, if only because those people for whom life in certain respects continues exactly as it did before are now forced to justify their work in new ways. This atmospheric change is no longer in doubt; but the underlying contention that musicology has identified and responded adequately to a broader, fundamental alteration in culture is more problematic, for most musicology skirts the socio-historical and economic dimensions of postmodernism by which one would most clearly identify such an alteration. The problem with postmodernist musicology, trapped in its superstructural short-circuits, is that it does not theorise the causes of the change adequately, and thus struggles to account for the signs of mutation by which it feels increasingly besieged. In the absence of this positive content, there has been not only a rejection of modernism, but also a kind of conceptual ‘hardening’ of it, which, in the face of sustained attacks, has had to be codified into something substantial enough to warrant either critique or defence.

This process can be viewed most clearly through the recent trajectory of postmodernist musicology. In this chapter I shall examine some notable recent developments in musicology that have contributed towards the criticisms of modernism. There are four principal focal points: the rejection of certain theoretical paradigms and the subsequent institutional upheavals that this rejection entailed; the embrace of supposedly postmodernist theories of rationality and subjectivity; a ‘new’ scepticism towards the possibility of historical knowledge; and a critique of the modernist institution. All of these critiques are closely interrelated, even though they issue from different branches of musicology (or, in one case, from sociology), and all of them are notable for the confidence they place in rejections and criticisms of modernism. Indeed, the impression is often given nowadays that musicology recently leapt from its own dark age into an era of resplendent modernity. The story of the discipline’s evolution or progress—terms which themselves betray a certain evaluation of the present—is familiar and sometimes uncritical;¹⁵ education in its

¹⁵ For an indubitably critical survey, see Alastair Williams, *Constructing Musicology* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001); see also Nicholas Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), esp. ch. 6; and Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, ed., *Rethinking Music* (Oxford: Oxford

details is now almost a prerequisite for graduate students who wish to pursue a career as professional musicologists. The following summary is deliberately brash, partly because some of the rather more superficial claims of the protagonists seem not to warrant prolonged attention. But the briskness and brusqueness is also designed to serve a particular purpose, one of estrangement. One of the most brilliant effects of the transition towards a postmodernist musicology was that it provided a colossal jolt to the complacency of the previously dominant theoretical ideologies. But the cost of this jolt was a certain intellectual rigour: in order to relegate the old to the past, the old was dismissed out of hand, often presented as being self-evidently problematic. The new musicology, no less than the old, deserves a similar estrangement, but, as will quickly become apparent, some of the more interesting claims deserve elaboration and amplification, and it is impossible not to let the caricature relent slightly, in order to run one's finger carefully across the smooth surfaces for traces of the jagged rocks below.

1

Put crudely, then, the story might run as follows: from some point perhaps as far back as the 1970s, a young generation of academics—only some of whom were musicologists—began to subject the ways in which music was typically treated by musicologists to a substantial critique. Ways of investigating music that had supposedly been held formerly to be commonsensical and non-ideological were increasingly construed as being inherently laden with (and in some cases tainted by) values which were certainly not as universal as many of their proponents seemed to assume. Anglo-American musicology was seen to project a narrow, gendered history of music that was as much a spatial as temporal construct, being restricted principally to the work of male composers of Western Europe and North America. An overly restrictive tale of immanent technical development canonised a (largely) Teutonic mainstream, culminating in a severe modernism for which decreasingly few people cared. Scholarship was seen to be largely a pliant handmaiden to this body of

masterworks, investigating the history of its component pieces, improving the reliability of its scores, and analysing the structures of its movements.

One musicologist to raise these issues some time before they became intensely fashionable (and at a cost to her professional career) was Rose Rosengard Subotnik, whose early essays—later collected in *Developing Variations*¹⁶—now seem nothing short of astonishingly prescient.¹⁷ In ‘The Role of Ideology in the Study of Western Music’ (first published in 1983), for instance, she advanced a blunt critique of what she termed the empiricism of Anglo-American musicology. What was damaging about such musicology was not so much its aesthetic position, but rather its denial that it in fact occupied an aesthetic position at all.¹⁸ For Subotnik in this early piece such a denial can only mark the Anglo-American approach with a more indelible ideology. Contrasting this empiricism with a rather broadly brushed notion of metaphysical ‘continentalism’, she writes with palpable affront that

Continentalists may consciously suppress what differs from their ideology, whereas Anglo-Americans may never even recognize the possibility of valid differences from their way of looking at things because they are unconscious of having an ideology. And empiricists would vigorously deny the Continentalist assertion that their own anti-ideology is itself simply another ideology, a principle of conceptual selection with no privileged access to the truth. To the empiricist, as to the Newtonian scientist, on whose now-outdated worldview so much empiricist work is still based, anti-ideology is nothing less than the direct road to objective truth.¹⁹

Such critiques have their limitations, of course. The very broad definition of ideology adopted here can be criticised for too readily ruling out the possibility of objectivity or intra-subjective agreement in judgements.²⁰ And as a consequence of this, such a position might now seem to dissolve all too readily into the sorts of relativism that seem typical of certain variants of postmodernism. That, however, is a contemporary objection, and it is telling that nowadays the focus of such arguments is relativism, whereas not so long ago it might have seemed much more important to discuss the ways in which Subotnik’s opposition of continentalism and empiricism might be

¹⁶ Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991).

¹⁷ For a more sober assessment see Alan Street, ‘Carnival’, *Music Analysis* 13/2–3 (1994), 286.

¹⁸ The form of this argument is strikingly reminiscent of a point that Carl Dahlhaus makes at the beginning of both his *Aesthetics of Music*, trans. William W. Austin (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), vii–viii, and *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 1–2.

¹⁹ Subotnik, ‘The Role of Ideology in the Study of Western Music’, in *Developing Variations*, 6.

²⁰ It is only fair to point out that elsewhere in *Developing Variations* Subotnik outlines much more epistemologically satisfying positions, particularly in chapters 7 and 9.

transcended dialectically. Such claims can be understood better by viewing them as reactions to the wider climate of ideas of the time—an era of frenzied theoretical speculation in which the connections between academic work and the possibility of emancipatory social change seemed much more tangible than they do today.²¹ As Terry Eagleton later wryly put it, in ‘the early 1970s, there was much talk of the relations between signifiers, socialism and sexuality; in the early 1980s of the relations between signifiers and sexuality; and, as the 1980s moved into the 1990s, much talk of sexuality.’²² It remains a marker of the formalism of academic musicological discourse that, even now, very little is said about this social context in which the seeds of later developments were sown. In one of very few breaches of this (as it were) secrecy pact, Nicholas Cook remarks strikingly on the legacy of Vietnam and the last remnants of student protest whose highpoint is generally considered to be the global disturbances of 1968:

while it was the ethnomusicologists who were in the front line, so to speak, there was a way in which their experiences resonated with those of the generation of musicologists who went through graduate school around 1970, particularly in America. Those were the years of the Vietnam war, when folk and rock music were central to the protest movement in which many students were involved. [...] Your academic work told you that music was abstract, transcendent, above the world of napalm and body-bags; the rest of your life told you that music was intimately involved in everyday experience, in the construction and expression of personal and political values.²³

Such sentiments now seem to speak of a different age. The considerable upheavals that the discipline of literary criticism was undergoing as it digested the (then) newly resuscitated ideas of structuralism gave birth to well over two decades of theoretical adventure, much of it intimately involved (sometimes unknowingly) in tussles with various kinds of Hegelian-Marxism; in musicology, however, the conjuncture produced less immediate effects. Many of the musically inclined academics who were aware of the seminal developments in literary theory and continental philosophy that coincided with the political unrest still had a long wait before the musicological situation began to change substantially: not until the late 1980s, in the aftermath of the publication of Joseph Kerman’s much-discussed *Contemplating Music*,²⁴ did the tide

²¹ For a more strident reading of no-politics politics, see the Conclusion to Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, second edn (Oxford: Blackwell, 1996), 169–89.

²² *Ibid.*, 194.

²³ Cook, *Music: A Very Short Introduction*, 96.

²⁴ Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1985). The British version of this book was entitled *Musicology* (London: Fontana, 1985).

begin to turn decisively in their favour—and by then the political climate had also altered. Although musicology was felt to have lagged behind the front line of mainstream humanities theory by only a decade or two, the years in question would turn out to have witnessed a crucial moment in the cultural history of the twentieth century, one which would later come to be identified most widely as the onset of postmodernism. As a result, the upheaval that musicology was to undergo was very different from that of the earlier developments in the arts and humanities: whereas the literary- and cultural-theoretical developments engaged explicitly with the hopes of radical socialism, and politics more generally, musicology arrived on the scene once these projects were felt to be defeated. The revolutionary afterglow continues to burn (or at least flicker) in some corners of literary and cultural theory, whereas in musicology what eventually emerged was, ironically, something much more amenable to the neoliberalism that became the dominant ideological tenor of the 1980s and 90s.

There have been many analyses of this shift, which has also, in turn, been characterised in a number of ways. In the most widely accepted accounts, Kerman's *Contemplating Music* has been taken as a seminal moment. It is striking and already depressing that this should be so: the intellectual depth of Subotnik is considerably greater, assembling, as she does, what will, in Chapter 5, be seen to be an interesting philosophy of musical modernity. However, musicology clearly was only prepared to react to a senior voice from within its institutional walls, rather than a junior one on the border with philosophy. The result was, in Anthony Pople's mischievous words, a 'shabby, shocking little book',²⁵ which criticised what it saw as a prevailing positivist mindset in Anglo-American musicology. Positivism for Kerman signalled less the eponymous philosophical school, more a blind submission before the altar of sheer fact.²⁶ This mindset, in Kerman's view, was what was hindering a richer engagement with the sort of cultural criticism in which other disciplines were investing heavily. Musicology, on this view, could only travel in one direction if it was to regain any intellectual distinction:

Such intellectual interest as musicology can show today emerges out of several strains of reaction to positivism, and out of attempts, either associated with them or not, to develop a new musicology. To a large extent these attempts have themselves emerged from the confrontation

²⁵ Anthony Pople, 'Analysis: Past, Present and Future', *Music Analysis* 21/Special Issue (2002), 17. The description is borrowed from Kerman's own assessment of *Tosca*. See David Fallows, untitled review of Joseph Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, *Early Music* 13/4 (1985), 574.

²⁶ See, for instance, Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, 42–4.

of musicology with [music] theory and ethnomusicology. The coming together of these disciplines has had, so far as I can see, a more invigorating effect on musicology than on the other two.²⁷

Kerman's polemic was therefore less a clarion call for change, more a pointer to deficiencies that were already being addressed. Nevertheless, the purpose of his critique was unambiguous:

nearly all musical thinkers travel at a respectful distance behind the latest chariots (or bandwagons) of intellectual life in general, as we shall see many times in the following pages. Semiotics, hermeneutics, and phenomenology are being drawn upon only by some of the boldest of musical studies today. Post-structuralism, deconstruction, and serious feminism have yet to make their debuts in musicology or music theory.²⁸

As with Subotnik's criticisms, such remarks must surely be contextualised by the burgeoning significance that was then being accorded to theoretical developments in literary criticism. But whereas Subotnik's criticisms of Anglo-American empiricism have a long and distinguished heritage,²⁹ Kerman's arbitrary snapshot of a discipline—replete with brisk evaluations of the work of some, but by no means all, musicologists—gives the impression of being little more than both highly personal and very parochial. One wonders in particular what is gained by circumscribing the field of such judgements to Anglo-America, since even in 1985 the work of continental European musicologists—such as Carl Dahlhaus, who dealt emphatically with several of the intellectual schools of thought mentioned by Kerman—was readily available. Since an unreceptiveness to speculative thought is in some ways precisely what Kerman set out to criticise, his own reluctance to engage in detail with any of it now seems astonishing. Moreover, one sometimes feels that Kerman is less concerned with the specifics of what he calls criticism than with simply exhorting musicology to keep up; it was simply not a question of educating oneself in the aesthetic thought about music that has emanated from Europe for centuries, even if one was (as Kerman assuredly was) well aware of the rewards that such investigations promised.

Whatever one makes of Kerman's objections to positivism, the most striking aspect of the reception of his study was the way in which his criticism of unreflective historical and analytical work came to be read as not so much an attack on just positivism, but also a denunciation of formalism. Whereas Kerman criticised the way

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 17.

²⁹ See, for instance, Fredric Jameson's comments in the Preface to his *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), ix–xiv.

in which analytical work—particularly the highly determined theoretical studies which were closely linked in the American academy to the composition of high modernist music—fell easily into an uncritical climate ruled by an overriding positivism, many of his later readers chose to focus their attention also on the supposed deficiencies of formalism itself. So in another strange mutation of history, what started out as a broad, quasi-humanistic plea for criticism turned into a movement that can now be seen to have exerted considerable damage to the practice of music analysis.

What is being referred to here is, of course, the prolonged controversy over what came to be known in the early 1990s as the new musicology.³⁰ In this reading of musicological history, a post-Kerman Americanised contextualism displaced an Americanised formalism; a birth (or, for some, rebirth) of interest in cultural history pushed away what it saw as the overdetermined music-theoretical climate of the 1960s and 70s. As if a dam had burst, a number of exciting books appeared, all of which exhibited a highly critical attitude towards what was characterised as a monolithic musicological mainstream. There is, of course, a considerable dose of the hyperbolic in such assessments: to speak of the new musicology as if it were a unified theoretical movement—a kind of musicological avant-garde—is misleading, as it implies a community of methods and purpose that was very probably never present.³¹ One suspects, indeed, that the reason the term proliferated was so that the new critical work could pass itself off as being a part of a broader, seismic change, thus gaining disciplinary importance; and on the other hand, having a neat term for new developments equally served those developments' critics, who thereby relieved themselves the tedious work of differentiating what were, in fact, very varied theoretical positions. In such a manner the new musicology gained a prestige and notoriety far in excess of its ground-level influence.

In fact, the new musicology is more accurately viewed as a very particular reaction of a few American-based academics to the perceived institutional prestige of music theory. Very much in the spirit of Kerman himself, new musicologists such as Lawrence Kramer and Susan McClary tended not to engage the detail of the analytical

³⁰ The term is often supposed to be that of Lawrence Kramer, but it is explicitly present in the first quotation above from Kerman's *Contemplating Music*.

³¹ Lawrence Kramer, who is closely associated with the term, tellingly dismisses it as a 'phantom', 'an annoyance', and a 'cobweb'. See Kramer, 'Musicology and meaning', *Musical Times* 144/1883 (2003), 6.

work they opposed, instead critiquing the various objectionable assumptions and faulty philosophies on which such work was based. The result was texts which simply asserted and assumed that the dominant modes of enquiry had pushed discussion of musical expression and meaning off limits.³² Seminal texts in this respect were, of course, Kramer's *Music as Cultural Practice* and McClary's *Feminine Endings*,³³ the latter of which was one of the first collections of essays that could reasonably be termed musicological feminism. But what was also notable about such early new musicology was an hostility in tone—coupled to a tendency to make polemical exaggerations—that partially explains the heated nature of the subsequent musicological debates. For instance, in an Afterword to Jacques Attali's *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, McClary wrote, with typical vigour:

If the piece of music is but a series of chords on a notated grid, then there exists no way of linking it to the outside world. Research involves the conditions surrounding the material production of the work and the preparation of increasingly rigorous scholarly editions. Musicology remains innocent of its own ideology, of the tenets with which it marks the boundaries between its value-free laboratory and the chaotic social world. Reduced to an artifact to be dated and normatively described, the piece of music is sealed and stockpiled, prevented from speaking its narrative of violence and order.³⁴

It is striking how such writing now seems to have aged, to have taken on the foreignness that seems to be the historical fate of much of-the-moment polemic, whereas more sympathetic and generous criticism, such as Ruth Solie's consideration of the ideology of organicism or Janet M. Levy's analysis of the values encoded in musicological writing, has retained something of its critical power.³⁵ Once again, in this the new musicology arguably took its cue from Kerman himself, whose widely circulated essay 'How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out' contained sharp, unreasonable criticisms of Schenkerian analytical orthodoxy. In this article—and at the end of a famous consideration of analyses of the second song of *Dichterliebe*—Kerman, after recounting the minutiae of the differing Schenkerian readings, in effect threw down his pen and scoffed:

³² See, for instance, Susan McClary, *Feminine Endings: Music, Gender, and Sexuality* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1991), 4.

³³ Lawrence Kramer, *Music as Cultural Practice, 1800–1900* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990); McClary, *Feminine Endings*.

³⁴ Susan McClary, 'Afterword', in Jacques Attali, *Noise: The Political Economy of Music*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1985), 152–3.

³⁵ See Ruth Solie, 'The Living Work: Organicism and Music Analysis', *19th-Century Music* 4/2 (1980), 147–56; Janet Levy, 'Covert and Casual Values in Recent Writings about Music', *Journal of Musicology* 5/1 (1987), 3–27.

More serious interest might attach to this debate if someone would undertake to show how its outcome affects the way people actually hear, experience, or respond to the music. In the absence of such a demonstration, the whole exercise can seem pretty ridiculous.

As is not infrequently the case with Schenkerian analyses, the fragile artistic content of this song depends quite obviously on features that are skimmed in the analytical treatment. [...] Ambiguities such as those set up by Schumann's cadences are likely to strike a critic as a good place to focus his investigation, to begin seeing what is special and fine about the song. The analyst's instinct is to reduce these ambiguities out of existence.³⁶

In a slightly similar vein, and in a key text which is often overshadowed by the attention paid to Kerman and his self-appointed successors, Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker write from the perspective of operatic criticism that

It should be no news that 'analysis' aiming to reveal only absolutes of coherence or unity is sterile; the idea needs no further belabouring here. In the *Versuch über Wagner* Adorno dismissed Wagnerian (specifically, Lorenzian) analysis with the unflattering phrase 'a graphic game, without power over the actual music.' And who among us, faced with long, droning passages of analytic prose or unstylish diagrams, has not thought something of the sort?³⁷

A perfectly respectable and defensible aesthetic position is thus presented as being transparently unacceptable. But tonal music and opera were not the only loci of these problems; they stretched well into the twentieth century. In a controversy provoked by his review of Allen Forte's *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring*,³⁸ Richard Taruskin claimed that pitch-class set theory, when applied to Stravinsky (at least),

yields only an inert statistical description of the surface. Its aim is simply to make as many true statements about the music as possible (an endless task, and an aimless one). It does not and cannot distinguish between truths that are relevant and interesting and truths that are not, because it does not begin by trying to define relevance for a given functional/operational context. Instead, it holds certain truths to be self-evident. But criteria of relevance are not self-evident; they are historically delimited, and must be determined by historical methods. Forte's analytical method amounts to one huge non sequitur.³⁹

We have thus arrived at one of the foundational cruxes of postmodernist musicology: a wholesale and wholehearted rejection of what were seen to be stifling

³⁶ Joseph Kerman, 'How We Got into Analysis, and How to Get Out', in *Write all these Down: Essays on Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 24–5.

³⁷ Carolyn Abbate and Roger Parker, 'Introduction: On Analyzing Opera', in *Analyzing Opera: Verdi and Wagner* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 23.

³⁸ Allen Forte, *The Harmonic Organization of The Rite of Spring* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978). Taruskin's review is found in *Current Musicology* 28 (1979), 114–29.

³⁹ Richard Taruskin, 'Letter to the Editor from Richard Taruskin', *Music Analysis* 5/2–3 (1986), 318. Forte's angry reply can be found in 'Letter to the Editor in Reply to Richard Taruskin from Allen Forte', *Music Analysis* 5/2–3 (1986), 321–37.

music-theoretical paradigms. What is striking about this rejection in retrospect is just how difficult it now is to locate: many writers simply take it as read that we have now seen the light and moved from blinkered idiosyncrasy to enlightened pluralism. For example, Ruth Solie dismissively criticises a recent monograph devoted to responding to these issues with the claim that the study in question—Kevin Korsyn's *Decentring Music*⁴⁰—is an 'elegy for troubles that have by now largely resolved themselves'.⁴¹ But for analysts like Jonathan Dunsby, however, a very different situation presents itself:

[W]itness the bizarre disciplinary meandering [...] evident to those of us who were able to attend the *Toronto 2000: Musical Intersections* meeting, the largest ever such conference, and a real service to academe in showcasing the fact that, frankly, and however superficially enjoyable it may have been, not much was actually going on, if by 'going on' one means not only wonderful scholarship and individual enquiry—which there was in a plenty never before seen on one occasion—but community, common purposes, a research environment, ideas developing their history.⁴²

It is hardly surprising that there are such varying responses to the developments of recent years, for the issues in question were simply never worked through with any intellectual consistency. Instead of reams of critiques of analysis, for instance, one comes across a large pile of defences of it, all of them pointing to a distinct, hostile change in atmosphere that is referenced to the emerging new musicology and the critiques of formalism.⁴³ But when one looks at the early texts of the new musicology, searching for proper critiques of theoretical analysis, one normally finds, instead of reasoned discussions, fundamental dismissals. That is, instead of engaging with theory, showing why and how it is problematic on its own terms (for instance, by faulting a particular Schenkerian reading, or by questioning the efficacy of a certain graphical technique), it simply dismisses the very nature of the enquiry out of hand. Thus, in the Preface to *Unsung Voices*, Carolyn Abbate writes:

⁴⁰ Kevin Korsyn, *Decentring Music: A Critique of Contemporary Musical Research* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

⁴¹ Ruth A. Solie, untitled review of Korsyn, *Decentring Music*, *Music & Letters* 85/3 (2004), 419.

⁴² Jonathan Dunsby, 'Scenarios, mostly from the Early Days of *MusA*', *Music Analysis* 21/Special Issue (2002), 5.

⁴³ See, inter alia, Kofi Agawu, 'Analyzing Music under the New Musicological Regime', *Journal of Musicology* 15/3 (1997), 297-307; Scott Burnham, 'Theorists and "The Music Itself"', *Journal of Musicology* 15/3 (1997), 316-329; Derrick Puffet, 'Editorial: In Defence of Formalism', *Music Analysis* 13/1 (1994), 3-5; Pieter van den Toorn, *Music, Politics, and the Academy* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

The metaphorical status of all words about music is not always self-consciously recognized by its interpreters. Music critics, analysts, and theorists often either imply or state outright that their 'words about music' represent 'what the composer' or 'what musicians at the time' considered significant in a given work, thus at once invoking an authority that is not completely ours to possess and adopting a 'poietic' or 'emic' strategy [...] to buttress interpretation. Many choose, on the other hand, to practice a form of musical New Criticism, to push aside genetic or historical considerations, and rest content in the faith that a particular analysis addresses some quality or configuration immanent in the work, a configuration subject only to a process of discovery that—though mediated by and couched in verbal terms—is assumed to be uncorrupted by culture or language.⁴⁴

This tone of this criticism is wholly typical.⁴⁵ No analysis or analyst is engaged specifically; no evidence is presented to justify the hyperbolic and unfair claim that analysts and theorists think as Abbate claims they do. No doubt some did (and some do); but is the generalisation a reasonable characterisation of the entire field of musical analysis and theory? One wonders, too, why, if all words about music are metaphorical, should one particular way of writing about music seem 'problematic', rather than simply interesting? The historical situatedness of analysis and theory—that is, an appreciation of why analysis and theory arise at a particular moment and the cultural roles they play—is ignored, and this by someone criticising analysis and theory for doing precisely this to their own objects. Abbate's second point, that analysis assumes itself to reveal immanent properties of works, is weakened by its own implicit assumption that this is transparently impossible. That may very well be a plausible assertion; but it is no more and no less than that, despite its fashionability, and it would require a considerable amount of elaboration even to turn it into anything like a respectable epistemological position. In *Unsung Voices* it simply hangs in the air as a vague rebuke to some unspecified academics, and not one chapter of this influential study engages theoretical analysis on its own terms. Instead, musically speaking, a mixture of commonsense music criticism is mixed with patches of harmonic analysis. As Derrick Puffett was later to suggest, 'The sheer exuberance of argument [...] displayed by some proponents of the "New Musicology" could hide a return to a descriptive style of musical commentary redolent of Tovey—though without his insights.'⁴⁶

⁴⁴ Carolyn Abbate, *Unsung Voices: Opera and Musical Narrative in the Nineteenth Century* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), xiv–xv.

⁴⁵ For a review of *Unsung Voices* which tries to analyse both Abbate's style and her analytical claims, see Arnold Whittall, 'Analytic Voices: The Musical Narratives of Carolyn Abbate', *Music Analysis* 11/1 (1992), 95–107.

⁴⁶ Puffett, 'Editorial: In Defence of Formalism', 4.

Subotnik's *Developing Variations* is similar to this in some respects. Subotnik presents a much more epistemologically reflective position, and one that will be shown in a later chapter to be of considerable interest on its own terms; and whilst her prose is stylistically far from Abbate's, she too has a tendency to rebuke positivist approaches rather than to reconfigure them. One often cannot fault the accuracy of her more analytical moments, but they tend to be the stuff of the learned program note or listener's guide, rather than being based on any serious music-theoretical reflection or analytical rigour. Surprisingly, for a writer so sensitive to the claims of immanent critique, what is avoided is a substantial engagement with the enemy on its own terms. This is a problem that has also been observed elsewhere in the new musicology. Lawrence Kramer, who is typically more openly engaging of theory and analysis—for example, he shows an awareness of Schenkerian techniques and even presents his own readings—is particularly instructive in this regard. For even though he has often been hostile towards a certain type of theoretical enquiry, he does not refrain from crossing into this territory, albeit often with the purpose of moving through its findings fairly rapidly in order to get to the cultural-historical meat.⁴⁷ Again, then, what is circumvented is a sustained critique of particular analytical models. To give a focussed example, several of the writers mentioned here use Roman numerals for harmonic analysis, a tradition of labelling that is very much historically and geographically situated and which only an ostrich could think to be the only way of describing harmony. Recent American theoretical work, in particular, has considerably altered the ways in which one might approach the harmonic analysis of certain repertoires;⁴⁸ and, to give a further example, very little serious Schenkerian work nowadays would necessarily subscribe to the metaphysical contentions of the theory's original presentation, nor the strictness of some of its early Americanised reformulations.⁴⁹ What can result is a much more flexible engagement with voice-

⁴⁷ See particularly chapters 3 and 8 (on [respectively] Haydn's *The Creation* and Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé*) of Lawrence Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995).

⁴⁸ The so-called neo-Riemannian work, for instance, is based on historical theoretical foundations, yet generates strikingly new conceptions of tonal progressions. For a brief introduction, see Richard Cohn, 'Introduction to Neo-Riemannian Theory: A Survey and a Historical Perspective', *Journal of Music Theory* 42/2 (1998), 167–80.

⁴⁹ Indeed, these points have long been conceded. See William Rothstein, 'The Americanisation of Heinrich Schenker', in Hedi Siegel, ed., *Schenker Studies* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), 193–203; and Robert Snarrenberg, 'Competing Myths: The American Abandonment of Schenker's Organicism', in Anthony Pople, ed., *Theory, Analysis and Meaning in Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1994), 29–56.

leading theory, applied to a repertoire as wide as one cares to imagine. In sticking to commonsensical and time-honoured traditions and conceptions, the critics of analysis thus tend to paint a picture of a discipline that one would struggle to match to the reality. Much is lost in this process, and as Suzannah Clark remarks of some of Kramer's recent work on Schubert, not the least of this is a serious critical response to Kramer's 'normative sense of classical syntax and form': 'his identification of musical deviance is based on a system of analysis that gives priority to certain harmonies, diatonicism and closed forms. By maintaining, and even insisting upon, the status quo with regard to analytic method, Kramer fails to respond critically to its foundational assumptions.'⁵⁰ Criticisms of a similar spirit and content could be applied to several of those who have followed in Kramer's wake.

The complaints against analysis were thus from the start unfocussed, and this at least signified the complexity of the institutional situation at the end of the 1980s. The subsequent diffusion of this moment was striking: Carolyn Abbate, for instance, went on to produce an even more virtuosic series of readings of opera.⁵¹ Other musicologists, who seem to be much more worthy of the new-musicological label, produced similarly varied material, albeit from very different institutional backgrounds: McClary, a Medievalist by training, published the aforementioned *Feminine Endings*, containing essays on (amongst others) Beethoven and Madonna, and later published *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form*,⁵² in which the very idea of a 'dependable linear main stream'⁵³ (putatively, Western music history) is argued to be an ideological fiction.⁵⁴ Lawrence Kramer, a Professor of English (and thus not a professional musicologist), had meanwhile written monographs on postmodernism and musical meaning,⁵⁵ but also a study of Schubert and sexuality.⁵⁶ Even by this stage the new musicology was still viewed, at least in some circles, as a contentious Californian joke⁵⁷ and in this as in so many other

⁵⁰ Suzannah Clark, 'Schubert, Theory and Analysis', *Music Analysis* 21/2 (2002), 219.

⁵¹ Carolyn Abbate, *In Search of Opera* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001).

⁵² Susan McClary, *Conventional Wisdom: The Content of Musical Form* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000).

⁵³ *Ibid.*, 169.

⁵⁴ See, particularly, *ibid.*, 139–69.

⁵⁵ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*; and Lawrence Kramer, *Musical Meaning: Towards a Critical History* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002).

⁵⁶ Lawrence Kramer, *Franz Schubert: Sexuality, Subjectivity, Song* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998).

⁵⁷ Or such is the effect, at least, given by Tim Carter's review of *Conventional Wisdom*. Tim Carter, 'An American in...?', *Music & Letters* 83/2 (2002), 274–8.

respects musicology might well be seen as playing catch-up to the debates in literary criticism, which had endured such responses to its newest postmodernist currents for many years.⁵⁸

This brisk history of the theoretical mainstream of the new musicology is inevitably inadequate: partly this is a result of its very dubious conceptual unity—as has already been remarked—but it also pays scant attention to the detail of the arguments of its main protagonists, a deficiency which will be rectified in section 2 below. Also, whatever else can be claimed of this musicological writing, it certainly presents a variety of reading experiences. Abbate's prose is sophisticated and erudite ('as Winston Churchill was given the freedom of the city of London, so Carolyn Abbate has given us the freedom of the adjective');⁵⁹ Kramer's, prone to exaggeration and a peculiar density; McClary's, particularly in *Conventional Wisdom*, is chatty and colloquial to a degree that would doubtless be rejected were it to emanate from a doctoral student rather than a distinguished academic. A more telling objection, however, is that not just the content, but also the form of this history is inadequate. For whilst the new musicology was undoubtedly important as a critical force, it is much more plausible that it can be reconfigured as one particular outpost of a process of change whose principal causes and effects lay elsewhere. Once again, this is partly an inevitable consequence of the diffusion of ideas even within the work of those writers who one might readily associate with the new musicology; but in the 1990s much other musicological work was produced that certainly differed from that of the supposed empiricist golden age and yet, at the same time, could hardly be characterised as new musicology. Richard Taruskin, for instance, some of whose work will be analysed below, gave the impression of being appraised of both postmodernism and the new musicology; yet, seemingly less averse to positivism than a true disciple of Kerman, he wrote a mammoth historical study of Stravinsky's 'Russian' period and then decided, in a curious spirit for someone who once described himself as one of 'us happy-go-lucky postmoderns',⁶⁰ to complete a six-volume history of Western music.⁶¹ In some rare cases—notably Lydia Goehr's *The*

⁵⁸ Terry Eagleton, for instance, targets the (supposedly) American cultural imprint of such discourses in *The Idea of Culture* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2000), 51–96.

⁵⁹ Puffett, 'Editorial: In Defence of Formalism', 4.

⁶⁰ Taruskin, *Text and Act*, 183.

⁶¹ Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions: A Biography of the Works through Mavra*, two vol. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996); *The Oxford History of Western Music*, six vol. (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Imaginary Museum of Musical Works and Edward Said's *Musical Elaborations*—work from entirely independent disciplines (in these cases, philosophy and literary theory) came to be influential, much of it proclaiming the poverty of customary analytical modes of thought.⁶² In such a context—an impatience with empiricism—it cannot be surprising that a substantial reawakening of interest in the work of Theodor Adorno occurred, signalling a wider revival of (Frankfurt School) critical theory, and again pointing to the earlier pertinence of Subotnik's Adorno-conscious *Developing Variations*.⁶³ Elsewhere, Anglophone academics produced work which it is very difficult to assign to any particular musicological tradition, but which can hardly be viewed as independent of the sorts of debates that were dominating Anglo-American thought.⁶⁴

Few seemed able to deny that some kind of significant change had occurred: to caricature the situation a little, whereas once musicological journals had been dominated by considerations of watermarks, editions, structure, and so on, by 2001 the British journal *Music Analysis* was publishing on Marxism and urban geography;⁶⁵ sober, scholarly essays on particular composers were being introduced as (merely) 'constructing' their objects of study;⁶⁶ and, to give an example of the rhetorical world of the new musicology at its most egregious, an essay on Ravel's *Daphnis et Chloé* climaxed with an assertion that the ballet's ending 'is altogether the most explicit representation of orgasm in all "classical" music'.⁶⁷ Subotnik's original message might not have been read or understood, but it had argued a simple epistemological point that musicology took very badly: by 2003, so traumatised by the collapse of traditional research paradigms, one historical musicologist was asking (admittedly with a healthy dose of irony) whether his discipline was still possible.⁶⁸

⁶² Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1992); Edward W. Said, *Musical Elaborations* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1991).

⁶³ For examples of this reawakening, see Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Max Paddison, *Adorno, Modernism and Mass Culture: Essays on Critical Theory and Music* (London: Kahn & Averill, 1996); and Alastair Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997).

⁶⁴ For instance, Naomi Cumming's work on subjectivity. See Naomi Cumming, *The Sonic Self: Musical Subjectivity and Signification* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2000).

⁶⁵ Adam Krims, 'Marxism, Urban Geography and Classical Recording: An Alternative to Cultural Studies', *Music Analysis* 20/3 (2001), 347–363; Henry Klumpenhouwer, 'Late Capitalism, Late Marxism and the Study of Music', *Music Analysis* 20/3 (2001), 367–405.

⁶⁶ Jane F. Fulcher, ed., *Debussy and His World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001), 1.

⁶⁷ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, 220.

⁶⁸ Rob C. Wegman, 'Historical Musicology: Is It Still Possible?', in Martin Clayton, Trevor Herbert, and Richard Middleton, ed., *The Cultural Study of Music: A Critical Introduction* (London: Routledge, 2003), 137.

Surveying the wreckage in 1999, Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist summed up the situation in a brilliant, emblematic sound-bite: 'The history of musicology and music theory in our generation is one of loss of confidence; we no longer know what we know.'⁶⁹

2

By the turn of the twenty-first century, then, it was evident that what was occurring was not simply the polemical rise and fall of a fringe avant-garde. Indeed, by 2000 it seemed increasingly that the term new musicology had expired as a useful term: Kramer, now the principal spokesman, was coming to realise that many of his theoretical concerns could be much more profitably recast as central to the position of music in modernity itself.⁷⁰ McClary and Abbate's recent works distanced themselves implicitly from the term.⁷¹ It became almost obligatory to put the new of new musicology in quotation marks, thus demonstrating an awareness that it was no longer contemporary. What was emerging was a sense that musicology, far from simply enduring an internal tussle between (for want of better terminology) formalists and contextualists, was actually going through a secular mutation that was of far greater moment than some had originally realised. Alastair Williams, for instance, presents a much broader view of the change when he claims that there 'is widespread agreement that musicology has recently undergone a paradigm shift', a shift caused both by the impact of the wider musical repertoires now studied in Anglo-American universities, and the burgeoning field of interdisciplinary theory which now informs a great deal of musicological research.⁷² Ironically enough, one of the places where this oblique change is most obviously demonstrated is in the work of one of the key new musicologists: Lawrence Kramer.

In his first significantly influential study, *Music as Cultural Practice*, Kramer had been content to ground music in socio-historical contexts, pointing out the ways in which traditional musicology had tended not to achieve the sort of critical penetration that a more theoretically aware musicology might attempt. By 1995, when

⁶⁹ Cook and Everist, *Rethinking Music*, v.

⁷⁰ Kramer, *Musical Meaning*, 1–9.

⁷¹ See the studies referred to in notes 51–2 above.

⁷² Williams, *Constructing Musicology*, vii.

his *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge* was published, his position had shifted significantly. Whereas formerly Kramer was happy to challenge formalism on the grounds of its own poverty, presenting rich cultural work as an alternative to its dry abstraction, now Kramer made much grander claims. Aligning himself explicitly with a rather vulgar understanding of postmodernism, he cast classical music, considered as an institution, in a potentially autumnal light, and bestowed a heavy responsibility on the shoulders of musicology to do something about this situation. His prose is startlingly emotional when set against the usual sobriety of academic writing:

For those who care about 'classical' music, the possibility of tapping new sources of cultural and intellectual energy may come not a moment too soon. It is no secret that, in the United States anyway, this music is in trouble. It barely registers in our schools, it has neither the prestige nor the popularity of literature and visual art, and it squanders its capacities for self-renewal by clinging to an exceptionally static core repertoire. Its audience is shrinking, graying, and overly palefaced, and the suspicion has been voiced abroad that its claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous artistic greatness is largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of social interests.⁷³

In a kind of muted echo of the sorts of social concerns that Cook read as being central to the genesis of the new(er) musicology, Kramer here linked the fortunes of classical music directly with the theoretical raciness of a new musicology, as if a pinch of Derrida will fill up the stalls. This momentary glimpse of the wider social change confronting classical music reveals little about the specifics of Kramer's own work, but it does hint at the impetus behind the search for new critical pastures, even if Kramer's ultimate focus (in the majority of *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, at least) is the tradition of Western music that is increasingly being displaced in other musicological work. By contrast, Cook and Everist were more openly concerned with musicology and musicologists themselves:

In the aftermath of the near collapse of classical music as a form of public entertainment in North America and its recent rebirth in Britain in the form of play-list-oriented commercial radio stations and news-stand magazines, it is not just the disciplinary integrity of musicology that has become problematic; it is, to put it bluntly, the relationship between musicology and the rest of the universe. (Where does musicology come on anybody's list of global priorities? When we look back on our lives, will we be able to justify our career choice to ourselves?)⁷⁴

⁷³ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, 3–4.

⁷⁴ Cook and Everist, *Rethinking Music*, vii.

By the time that these remarks were penned, what had commenced as a post-Kerman reaction to positivism had metamorphosed into a fully blown anti-formalism. The particular reading of Kerman that this metamorphosis entailed has already been noted; but, in a crucial development, Kramer went further and crystallised a key third term that was also being used by other writers—notably Gary Tomlinson and Richard Taruskin—as a kind of portmanteau in which one could carry all of the ills of a soon-to-be-superseded era. As Kramer himself put it, with characteristic turn of phrase,

Much of what has been dubbed ‘the new musicology’ has evolved through postmodernist critiques of the formerly [...] dominant models of musicological knowledge, which for want of better names can be called formalism and positivism. [...] These] musical ‘-isms’—need it be said?—do not represent demonic forces but reasonable ways of specifying a disciplinary commitment to the scrutiny of style and structure on the one hand and the amassing of verifiable knowledge about musical texts and contexts on the other. It makes no sense to wish away the substantial achievements of these approaches, or of the modernism that houses them.⁷⁵

This characterisation may not have been the first statement of this critical position, but it is the most blunt. It is also a notable and fundamental deviation from Kerman’s analysis, which claimed explicitly that the ‘ideology of twentieth-century musicology is antimodernist and “elite”’.⁷⁶ What Kramer had realised, in effect, was that here was a characterisation of the musicological upheaval that could do all the necessary abstraction on a musicological level, as well as relating neatly and powerfully to the wider debates in the humanities which were now being seen to be intensely proximate to the difficulties of musicology. There, in a nutshell, was recent musicological history, with all of its endless (and often tedious) vicissitudes: from modernism to postmodernism, from formalism and positivism to the new musicology. One could not hope for a clearer exposition, nor, or so it seems, a more generous one. Kramer is careful to praise the achievements of formalism and positivism, to critique—implicitly—those who demonise them. But the dagger is drawn nonetheless, and it is razor-sharp: his careful separation of the verifiable facts of positivism and the (mere) scrutinising of style and structure surely already downgrades formalism’s epistemological claims. But that, however, is not the important part of the quotation; the bit that matters is those last five words: ‘the modernism that houses them’. What this little phrase does is to effect a periodisation that not only implies that current formalists and positivists are out-of-date—‘old’ musicologists—but it also lumps

⁷⁵ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, xiv–xv.

⁷⁶ Kerman, *Contemplating Music*, 39.

formalism and positivism together in—to use Kramer’s terminology—modernism’s house. Figure 3.1 presents itself as the most succinct summary of this position:

Figure 3.1 Kramer’s synopsis

modernism	postmodernism
formalism	new musicology
positivism	



In this scheme the shape of recent musicology found its most seductive and compelling sense of change: its influence became immense, and as has been noted of so many tabular analyses of this cultural shift—notably Ihab Hassan’s widely reprinted table from *The Postmodern Turn*⁷⁷—an unmistakable atmosphere of negativity and disapproval eclipses the term ‘modernism’ in such formulations, giving one no choice but to nod lamely at the superiority of postmodernism.

Unfortunately, however, Kramer’s understanding of postmodernism is almost a parody of idealistic criticism at full throttle. He takes a far from uncommon approach whereby one expresses some doubt about the meaning or conceptual content of postmodernism, but then proceeds to let it mean exactly what one most favours. In this way one’s own (possibly erroneous) intuitive understanding of postmodernism—the idea that there cannot be a definitive or official version of the concept—is used to validate one’s own reading of postmodernism, and a neat logical circle is therefore traced out whereby to assert from the outside that Kramer’s postmodernism is incorrect or implausible is futile, because he can simply reply that these judgements rely on rational or even ethical criteria which no longer necessarily have any purchase on postmodernist academic discourse. So, rather predictably, the idea of an official, normative, or definitive postmodernism is held to be a ‘contradiction in terms’ on page 3; but by page 6 it is made obvious that postmodernism can easily be outlined through ‘new turns’ (often supersessions) ‘in the conceptualization of four important

⁷⁷ Ihab Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn* (Columbus: Ohio State University Press, 1987), 91–2.

topics of modernist thought: rationality, generality, subjectivity, and communication.⁷⁸ And Kramer does himself no favours: when he says modernist, he actually means what most would call modern: 'the conceptual order inaugurated by the European Enlightenment.'⁷⁹ We are therefore doing considerably more than just waving goodbye to Boulez. This 'prismatic, partial' image of postmodernism, defined essentially negatively in relation to a superseded modernism, supposedly provides us with a 'credible image of postmodernism'.⁸⁰

But does it? Already the exciting socio-historical sweep of Jameson is a distant memory. What evidence is there for a new conceptual order that is literally postmodern, rather than just postmodernist? In this respect the uneasy tone of Kramer's explanation of the mutations in rationality deserves quotation:

Postmodernist thought [...] repeals the mandate of detachment, resituating reason in the midst of the dense, multiform world that reason seeks to know. It treats claims to knowledge as always also political claims, inescapably affected by and affecting the knower's position in a cultural, social, or psychical matrix. Postmodernist reason always serves interests other than truth and *by that means enables itself to serve truth*, however imperfectly.⁸¹

The spectres of solipsism and anti-foundationalism are anything but vanquished by these contentions, which are perhaps a little closer than Kramer would care to admit to the playground assumption that the essence of postmodernism, so far as rationality is concerned, is that old logical teaser to the tune of 'the truth is, there is no truth'. But we are then confronted by the evident work Kramer accomplishes in trying to distance himself from this position; he is explicitly careful to remove himself from the more extreme consequences of this logical half-nelson: he notes, fairly, that critics on the Left have found 'an extreme sceptical relativism' to be a problem. He mentions the names of Baudrillard and Rorty as being offenders in this respect,⁸² even though the lineages of each their positions are entirely different from one another. So it turns out that the 'majority of postmodernist discourses [...] take the effort to surmount such scepticism as part of their calling.' And, quoting Donna Haraway, Kramer argues that

⁷⁸ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*.

⁷⁹ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, 6.

⁸¹ *Ibid.*, 7.

⁸² *Ibid.*, 7.

the point is to acknowledge the simultaneous historical contingency of knowledge with 'a no-nonsense commitment to faithful accounts of the "real" world'.⁸³

Such are the contortions critics will go through to try to legitimate their interpretations of cultural objects! There is a pincer-movement at work here which will be obvious to anyone who reads Kramer's later interpretations of musical works: in order to open up the interpretative space for his own, certainly idiosyncratic readings, Kramer feels himself forced to weaken the structures of rationality; but in order to underwrite those very interpretations with any logical or ethical pertinence, in order to make them seem to be something more than, to put it crudely, 'just his opinion', Kramer is forced at least to allow for the mysterious return of all the criteria of rationality which had formerly (and thus presumably temporarily) melted away. Hence his clearing of space in which an 'imperfect' truth can perhaps return (although it is unclear what an imperfect truth is, and how we could be perfectly true [and know we were perfectly true] in our identification of one): he knows only too well, it would seem, that there is no need to challenge rationality in order to be able to claim that, say, the end of *Daphnis et Chloé* is 'altogether the most explicit representation of orgasm in all "classical" music';⁸⁴ but such is the putative burden of the sterile positivism of the old musicology that he feels it necessary to go to absurd ends to underwrite what is simply a contention about a piece of music, a contention which many (including Kramer) would probably claim does not need to be, and cannot be said to be, 'true' at all. Since Kramer does not seem to want to challenge the truth of statements which we might well feel *can* be ascertained as either true or false—such as, for instance, 'the final chord of *Daphnis et Chloé* is the tonic chord of A major'—it is hard to understand what all the fuss is about, and why this apparently requires the overturning of the Enlightenment's conceptual order. The entrapment of this sort of postmodernism in the strong arms of modernity could hardly be more complete, for these problems are little more than essential questions about what (and how) we can know, and more serious philosophical interest would follow these debates if they showed any awareness of just how astonishingly complex these questions are, and just what long, powerful, and rich a history they have. In the absence of this, Kramer's

⁸³ Ibid., 7–8.

⁸⁴ Ibid., 220.

more glib pronouncements—such as ‘in Kantian terms: in the postmodernist ethos, all reason is practical reason’⁸⁵—dissolve into vacuous fragments.

There is little to be gained from similarly ploughing through the other dimensions of Kramer’s postmodernist knowledge, but one must note the recurrence of predictable lacunae. Modern generality, for instance, is supposedly superseded by decentralisation. Master narratives and totality are mentioned as being ‘modernist’ in this regard—and again one is struck by the impressionism of these free associations (from Lyotard to Lukács, in the blink of an eye). Nevertheless, these modernisms are followed by discourses which ‘seek a *localized generality*’, and we might be able to ‘regard the heteroglossic discourses of conceptual postmodernism as models for a viable polyphony of social and communicative actions.’⁸⁶ Subjectivity is rewarded with a similar treatment:

The true human subject is fragmentary, incoherent, overdetermined, forever under construction in the process of signification.⁸⁷

Is this one of those imperfect truths, or a full-blown contingent one? Again Kramer tries to distance himself from trivial claims: ‘talk of the decentred subject can be cheap’ (touché!), so we must trek towards another unsatisfying sub-Foucauldian argument, that ‘Human agency arises, not as a radiation from a central core of being, but as a circulation among positions to be taken in discourse and society.’⁸⁸ As was observed above, it is not that these positions are ultimately implausible, but rather that they need considerably more philosophical depth if they are to be taken seriously; the question of identity has been a crux of modern metaphysics, particularly in the line that runs from Hegel ultimately to Derrida.⁸⁹ If one thinks that all this is now reconfigured, then the onus is heavily on one’s shoulders to show a substantive difference from (not to mention familiarity with) the problems of yesteryear.

Kramer’s essay has tended to be criticised in a rather different way, however, and notably so in the most prominent reaction to it—namely, the remarkable (but also faintly ridiculous) exchange between him and Gary Tomlinson that has become emblematic of the polemics that have surrounded the rejection of analysis. Tomlinson

⁸⁵ Ibid., 7.

⁸⁶ Ibid., 9.

⁸⁷ Ibid., 9–10.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 10.

⁸⁹ See, for example, the first chapter of Peter Dews, *Logics of Disintegration* (London: Verso, 1987).

explicitly buys into Kramer's understanding of modernism: that is, it arises thanks to the 'signifying distance between music and words',⁹⁰ which generates either a positivistic historical enquiry or an 'analytic description of the workings of the notes themselves'.⁹¹ This sounds very Krameresque, but then when Kramer analyses Mozart and actually refers to the notes—albeit in a way that would hardly satisfy a hardened analyst—he is judged ultimately to have reinforced the analytic paradigm. One might even feel a pang of sympathy for Kramer when Tomlinson further claims:

his insistence on close reading of the notes and his locating of context in them undoes his good intentions. [...] we need to move away from the whole constraining notion that close reading of works of music, of whatever sort, is the sine qua non of musicological practice. This notion has repeatedly pulled us back toward the aestheticism and transcendentalism of earlier ideologies. [...] it is the act of close reading itself that carries with it the ideological charge of modernism.⁹²

And then, as if to remove any doubt as to whether this modernism is as evil as one might suspect:

[...] we might try to see more clearly that categories such as "work" "art," "the aesthetic," even "music" itself are not truths given us by the world through which we and others must always conceive musical utterances but rather are themselves cultural constructions *darkly tinted* for us with modernist ideology.⁹³

Tomlinson pleads instead for a musicology that might shift towards the people who actually make music, rather than the music. In response to this, rather predictably, Kramer rightly ponders the 'relentless negativity' of a musicology forced to relinquish music and, fairly, wonders whether such 'decentring' points ultimately to the only obvious alternative to a musicology which could make so few knowledge-claims about music: silence.⁹⁴ But then, in response to Tomlinson's own vision, which, naturally, has to underwrite itself with some logical and ethical urgency in order to be normative in the first place, Kramer simply plays a similar game. The quarrelsome tone of these claims points to their author's evident unease, which he then admits:

Despite his sophisticated talk about meta-subjectivity and the plural construction of knowledge, Tomlinson's version of musical ethnography is at bottom positivistic. His program appeals to

⁹⁰ Gary Tomlinson, 'Musical Pasts and Postmodern Musicologies: A Response to Lawrence Kramer', *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 18.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 19.

⁹² *Ibid.*, 21–2.

⁹³ *Ibid.*, 23 (my italics).

⁹⁴ Lawrence Kramer, 'Music Criticism and the Postmodernist Turn: In Contrary Motion with Gary Tomlinson', *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 26–7.

discovery procedures and modes of knowledge uncontaminated by “individual, subjective agency”; it presupposes an oppositional relationship between subjectivity, that is, precisely the partial or localized modes of knowledge that an ethnographic postmodernism is supposed to cultivate, and truth; and it assumes possession of a transparent-enough metalanguage to make good on its epistemic promises. [...]

With this turn of argument, I might seem to have thrown Tomlinson’s critique back on him in a predictable and somewhat dreary way: You think I’m a crypto-modernist? You’re another! But the *tu quoque* game is not the point. Rather, the point is discovering the best means to carry out the overarching musicological project to which we both want to contribute, the understanding of music in its worldliness.⁹⁵

What neither author seems quite to sense is the way in which understanding music in its worldliness is precisely the *problem*, not the solution; they quarrel over their own ways of accessing this worldliness, without querying the status of the distinction between a worldly new musicology and an unworldly positivism and formalism. The contextualism that underpins this distinction is itself unacceptable and it *in itself* registers its own dominance. The point is a simple one, and it neatly flags up the infinite regresses that underpin appeals to context: for unless an argument can be made from some transcendent, contextually untouchable context, then what argument will escape the charge of being inflected (or tainted) with values or ideologies of its proponent? And if the impossibility of transcendent argumentation is an underlying assumption of such contextualism, does there not arise by default an endless deferral of the possibility of meaning? To put this in a rather different way, is there any wonder that contextualists continue to quarrel over who is less tainted by bad ideologies, given that, firstly, a non-ideological, objective enquiry is ruled out *a priori*, and, secondly, the very possibility of a good ideology seems to have dissolved amidst a more general celebration of worldliness and difference so sensitive to the trampled that it can no longer even tell them that their condition is a poor one? Tomlinson unintentionally makes the point quite adequately when, in a later response to Kramer, he claims:

The dearest price musicology can pay is not a decentring of our current notions of music—this ought to be its steadfast aim—but the continued sacrifices of musical invitations to a broad engagement in human difference.⁹⁶

The most obvious retort to this well-fed pluralism is: there are some differences which many might wish to see erased.

⁹⁵ Ibid., 32-33.

⁹⁶ Gary Tomlinson, untitled response, *Current Musicology* 53 (1993), 37.

The postmodernism into which both Kramer and Tomlinson buy, even though they might well claim significant critical differences, is, at root, a deeply problematic, almost incoherent concept. To borrow a wickedly crushing phrase of Perry Anderson's, the 'intellectual fragility of th[e] [...] construction hardly needs emphasis.'⁹⁷ That this is genuinely a shame is obvious, for later in the essay that raised these questions Kramer does give hints of significant musical issues that a better understanding of postmodernism might illuminate. He is particularly interested in the ways in which music constructs subjectivity, and he is refreshingly unorthodox in his statements in relation to music and language. For instance, his musical sensibilities are always in a fruitful, dissonant combination with his more relativistic postmodernist moments, notably so when he writes that 'a musicology would satisfy the demand for human interest, not by making good on music's lack of meaning, but by ceasing to entertain the illusion that such a lack ever existed.'⁹⁸ His principal gripe here, as will be remembered, is that modernist forms of knowledge effectively seal music off into an autonomous, self-referential world which is then capitalised on by a dull positivism that then marginalizes historical and critical interpretation.⁹⁹ But Kramer is still prone to make ridiculous exaggerations—such as his wild claim that 'From a postmodernist perspective, music as musicology has conceived it simply does not exist'¹⁰⁰—which stoke the coals of those who want old paradigms to dissolve in the white heat of sheer rhetoric. But, strikingly, what starts out as a modest reassertion of the importance of cultural meaning of music seems to lose confidence; Kramer is confronted with a mass of theory which he knows he must take on board, but which ultimately might be thought to problematise all sorts of questions about meaning, not to mention the social and historical position of art itself in the late twentieth century. Somehow the tension between these positions is not reconciled; postmodernism is used as an enthusiastic call-to-arms against the problems of an older musicology, but Kramer turns out to be merely doing the sorts of tasks that musicologists have long undertaken: weighing evidence, answering questions, probing masterpieces. And to judge by the broadly hostile reception of the new musicology, it seems that the new musicology's search for meaning turns into a flight from it, and all that remains is a kind of dishevelled claim that the word 'new' must signal something—namely, that in

⁹⁷ Perry Anderson, *The Origins of Postmodernity*, 34.

⁹⁸ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, 25.

⁹⁹ *Ibid.*, 13.

¹⁰⁰ *Ibid.*, 17.

postmodernism things have somehow changed. Of course, this is correct; but there is little to suggest what, in a more profound, socio-historical sense, this might be. And so it is that a lack of (theoretical) materialism fuels an interpretative idealism: the new musicologist simply adds one more repetitive chapter to that weighty book which tells of just how difficult it is to reconcile music, language, and meaning.

From this brief analysis it might be deduced that musicological discussions of postmodernism exhibit three striking characteristics. The first of these is a surprising distance from the substance of much postmodernist theory; in some cases the musicologist brushes this theory aside, choosing instead to approach music whose style or reception might be considered or argued to be postmodernist. Even Kramer—who as a Professor of English is, one assumes, familiar with the complexity of postmodernist theory—tends to shy away from extended theoretical discussion; his ultimate focus is usually some piece of music, which he typically subjects to what turns out to be a close reading. Moreover, in most of his work he has tended to concentrate on music from the Western mainstream. References to the displaced social position of this mainstream—which is a principal feature of postmodernism—are less familiar. In *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, it will be recalled, this matter was even presented as a cause for considerable lament. When Kramer does engage at length with theoretical matters, as in the ‘Prospects’ essay discussed above, his text becomes almost a parody of gung-ho postmodernism, in which all that is solid has melted into air. It is easy to be excessively critical of this position, and it is worth remarking that many lesser figures have been seduced by it; but it remains troubling that a musicology that is presented as being so new and exciting rests essentially on close readings of artistic masterworks, taking its assumptions from dubious theoretical foundations. That this musicology also presents itself as postmodernist only adds to the discomfort.

A second aspect of postmodernist musicology contributes to this discomfort. For what might shock a neutral observer is not that musicological postmodernism is theoretically trivial, but that it should be theoretically trivial *now*. Triviality has dogged the theorisation of postmodernism right from its beginning, partly because the concept has always been associated by its critics with crude forms of relativism and poorly understood formulations of supposedly post-structuralist models of signification. It is this triviality—the air of academic hedonism that was discussed in

the Introduction to this dissertation—that must be discarded if postmodernism is to crystallise as a useful term; but whereas some musicologists act as if this has not yet happened, or as if it could not happen, the reality is that for some time now the term has stabilised, and usefully so. What is at issue here, then, is musicology's lateness—its astonishingly belated arrival onto the field of postmodernist theory. At precisely the time when much of the (inevitable) fashionability and superficiality has been purged from this jaded terrain, musicology has swept into town and continued to operate as if no rigorous appraisal has in fact occurred. The effect of this is an absurd and well-nigh painful series of throwbacks to an age of theoretical excess at precisely the time when this age has at last been superseded.

The third striking aspect of musicological postmodernism is just as baleful. Put simply, the excitement provoked by postmodernism tends to entail a concomitant trashing of modernism. This is not, it must be said, so much a feature of Kramer's writing; but it certainly haunts that of other musicologists. It is not just the case that the styles and reception of modernism are critiqued; on the contrary, entire modes of thought and enquiry are characterised (or perhaps caricatured) as being modernist and therefore (!) out of date and insidious.

3

Such an approach to modernism is exemplified particularly clearly by the work of two figures whose work will be examined in the final two sections of this chapter. The first of these has been very influential indeed: Richard Taruskin's 1980s interventions in the debates surrounding performance practice were one of the first musicological enquiries in which a notion of modernism as a critical, not to mention historical and philosophical, mindset crystallised. These essays are now standard fodder for undergraduate degree courses, and they are sometimes informally presented as a kind of definitive theoretical rebuff to historical performance practice—a glib interpretation that does not do justice to the interesting interplay between Taruskin-the-theorist and Taruskin-the-performer (not to mention Taruskin-the-formidable historical musicologist).¹⁰¹ Needless to say, the outlining of modernism as a full-

¹⁰¹ John Butt also makes this point: see *Playing with History*, 7.

blown ideology was not new, even in musicological circles: such an analysis had already been hinted at by Subotnik, and was clearly formative for that generation of American musicologists (mentioned above) whose later publications represent a clear attempt at a critical break with modernism; but Taruskin was perhaps the first academic to cause a major storm in this particular teacup. This is undoubtedly partly due to his characteristically forceful and polemical prose, but it would be unfair to deny Taruskin an important role, however misconceived, in the shaping of a musicological appreciation (or sometimes deprecation) of modernism. Some of his writing on Stravinsky and Schoenberg is, as I shall demonstrate later, important in this regard. But it is his earlier work on performance practice that is more widely disseminated; the basic dimensions of this now rather beleaguered position are well known and can be gleaned from the essays later collected and published as *Text and Act*.¹⁰² Put simply, and in the terms that follow from Taruskin's later reminiscences,¹⁰³ the situation was thus:¹⁰⁴ the then burgeoning historical performance movement contained some rather foolish members who were claiming, either explicitly or implicitly, that their performances of what was then called 'early' music were historically authentic in some fundamental sense. These performers, who were, for example, using instruments dating from the time of the piece being played, or using original notational forms or performance scenarios, were essentially making the superficially understandable claim that their renditions of the music were historically closer than so-called 'modern' performances.¹⁰⁵ The question was, however, closer to what? All of the terms of this assessment—from 'early music' to 'authenticity', not to mention 'historical'—were unacceptably complacent, and Taruskin lost little time in pointing this out. 'No one was calling the bluff', he later wrote, 'so all at once, I found, I was a man with a mission.'¹⁰⁶ His retorts were memorable, and they contained several sharp charges.

The first of these was the comprehensive demolition of the idea that seeking the composer's intentions was necessarily the way to approach performance.¹⁰⁷ This

¹⁰² See note 8 for bibliographical details. I say 'now beleaguered' because it seems to me that John Butt's *Playing with History* comprehensively problematises (in the most generous of ways) the identification of this sort of performance practice with modernism.

¹⁰³ Taruskin, 'Last Thoughts First', in *Text and Act*, 5-6.

¹⁰⁴ A more detailed and extended survey is given by Butt. See *Playing with History*, ch. 1.

¹⁰⁵ It is obvious, too, that sometimes these superficially factual statements were generating what felt like a normative atmosphere, in which one ought not to perform this sort of music in any other way.

¹⁰⁶ Taruskin, 'Last Thoughts First', 6.

¹⁰⁷ Taruskin, 'On Letting the Music Speak for Itself', in *Text and Act*, 53-7.

resuscitation of an age-old aesthetic question signalled nothing if not the fact that there were very fundamental issues at stake in this debate. In his early writings Taruskin was deliciously ambivalent about this matter: on one hand, there was the appeal to the effect that there is no need to consult the composer's intentions, because that is simply a normative claim that no one necessarily can be forced to follow; on the other hand, there is the argument that intentions, when they exist, are multiple and contradictory, if not susceptible to dishonesty or inadequacy; a third argument is that the intentions are unknowable, given the epistemological limits of historical enquiry, and so following them is merely to kid oneself. Taruskin sometimes handled these alternatives with a very unsure touch: early essays such as 'On Letting the Music Speak for Itself' skate over them to great rhetorical effect, but the effect is that of a scattergun shooting a pinhead: one can only see the missiles, not the target. This is evidenced particularly well when Taruskin discusses historical reconstruction in broader terms:

The paradox and the problem—or is it just my problem?—is it that this way of thinking about art and performance has no demonstrable relevance to the ways people thought about art and performance before the twentieth century. Applied to the music of the Renaissance and the Baroque, to say nothing of the nineteenth century, it all seems exquisitely anachronistic.¹⁰⁸

Thus, in the midst of plenty of criticism of the power of historical thinking—such as the indubitably critical 'We tend to assume that if we can re-create all the external conditions that obtained in the original performance of a piece we will thus recreate the composer's inner experience of the piece and thus allow him to speak for himself'—a hardened concept of historical knowledge nevertheless returns: in the latter quotation, historical knowledge is inadequate; in the former, our historical knowledge is plain wrong and must be susceptible to correction, for otherwise Taruskin could not plausibly identify anachronisms.

A second aspect of Taruskin's critique concerned the privileging of the score in historical reconstructions. To equate copies of scores or manuscripts with the composer's intentions is obviously problematic; more significant is the relative poverty of these documents in specifying all sorts of other variables which pertain to the sound produced in response to them. Conventional, un-notated aspects of past styles can be lost by a blind fidelity to some notational *Urtext*; it is the sheerest hubris

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 61.

to assume that playing music 'just as the score says' approaches the (potentially irrelevant, unascertainable, unknowable!) intentions of the composer, or some idealised past historical moment.

What both these issues point towards is a renewed sense of the fallibility and contingency of historical knowledge. This is perhaps the third important charge of Taruskin's critiques, and it is a simple enough point, which, put delicately, could be extremely liberating to many a performer: one cannot treat historical knowledge as epistemologically absolute, because it comes to us through a prior textualisation. This mediation of language does not challenge the notion that there was a set of events and people in the past, and that certain things happened at certain points for certain reasons; the point is that we can only know these things through the mediation of language, which is to say, the mediation of ourselves. Now this does emphatically not necessarily point towards the extreme relativism associated with a vulgar postmodernism; the problem is not new, nor particularly interesting when stated in such broad terms. But what it does introduce is a slight trace of contingency which ought to kindle a scepticism in the mind of an Enlightened individual: this suspicion need not lead to panicked renunciations of the possibilities of knowledge, but it must acknowledge that ultimate contingency is the flip-side of knowledge, which must therefore be approached intra-subjectively, through an essential collectivity of procedures and rules that can only be stated and revised rationally. Such, at least, is a rather simplistic description of the way in which modernity responds to the philosophical crisis of knowledge and meaning by which it is partly defined.

Taruskin nowhere states the matter in these terms, seemingly assuming in a rather drastic, *a priori* fashion that much of history is ultimately unknowable, and therefore we can be more creative in our performances of it rather than yoking them to some ideal of purity or fidelity which is ultimately a mirage. But, as we have noted, this is invariably tempered by the return of some (no doubt repressed) historical sensitivity on the part of this distinguished historical musicologist. Taruskin is caught agonisingly between epistemological doubt and intuitive certainty: to coin a phrase, there are things he does not know, but he knows things about these things-that-he-does-not-know. The logical implausibility of this position could hardly be more plain, but it underpins an extraordinary diagnosis, one which is most important for the purposes of this thesis: what Taruskin claims is that the mentality that would seek this (to him, implausible) certainty is *modernist*. So in a further unlikely twist, the

authenticity movement is itself historicised by Taruskin, but historicised not as modern (which would be a much more usual grasping of the historicising impulse), but as modernist. Here Taruskin had arrived at one of his most lasting claims, and it is worth reliving his statement of it:

I hold that discussions of authentic performance typically proceed from false premises. The split that is usually drawn between 'modern performance' on the one hand and 'historical performance' on the other is quite topsy-turvy. It is the latter that is the truly modern performance [...] while the former represents the progressively weakening survival of an earlier style, inherited from the nineteenth century, one that is fast becoming historical. The difference between the two, as far as I can see, is best couched in terms borrowed from T. E. Hulme: nineteenth-century 'vital' versus twentieth-century 'geometrical.' In light of this definition, modern performance, in the sense I use the term, can be seen as modernist performance, and its conceptual and aesthetic congruence with other manifestation of musical modernism stand revealed.¹⁰⁹

In this particular essay Taruskin fleshes out his vital–geometrical dichotomy: vitalist performance concerns intensity, the 'dynamic qualities' of music, as expressed in fluctuations of tempo and intensity'.¹¹⁰ This 'Romantic' notion is explicitly contrasted with a tendency towards abstraction that generates the geometrical performance style, in which, to quote Hulme, '[t]he changing is translated into something fixed and necessary. This leads to rigid lines and dead crystalline forms, for pure geometrical regularity gives a certain pleasure to men troubled by the obscurity of outside appearance.'¹¹¹ Thus we are delivered, for instance, the 'sewing-machine style' which will be familiar to anyone who has sampled certain 'historically informed' performances: in a survey of some recordings of Bach's Fifth Brandenburg Concerto, Taruskin traced the 'resilient rhythms, flying tempi, energy, activity, actuality, clarity, concision, the absence of subjective reflection.'¹¹² When Taruskin mentions *die neue Sachlichkeit* in connection with this aesthetic, remarking on its hostility towards nineteenth-century 'Romantic' views, it is very obvious that a fairly crude division lies at the crux between these styles, even though Taruskin nowhere puts it quite as bluntly as this: one is 'Romantic', intense, and subjective; the other is modernist, calculating, and objective.

Familiar problems return, though. Even though we cannot know we know about historical performances, Taruskin knows enough to differentiate the sewing-

¹⁰⁹ Taruskin, 'The Pastness of the Presence and the Presence of the Past', in *Text and Act*, 140.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 108–9.

¹¹¹ Quoted in *ibid.*, 110.

¹¹² *Ibid.*, 134.

machine Bach from Bach the historical figure.¹¹³ It is precisely this warped logic that enables the historical locating of this performance aesthetic ('a specifically twentieth-century style of Baroque performance')¹¹⁴ as modernist, because it is only following the diagnosis of an inauthentic practice that Taruskin can clear the space for his own putatively postmodernist values, which simultaneously dash any hopes of authenticity in the historical sense. Where authenticity returns, then, is in a predictable relocation into the realms of subjectivity: in the iconic final sentences of 'The Pastness of the Present and the Presence of the Past', we are told that 'as long as we know what we do want and what we do not want, and act upon that knowledge, we have values and are not dirt. We have authenticity.'¹¹⁵ The ethical complacency of a brand of postmodernism is evoked rather strongly by this statement, because it collapses values into desires at the same time as viewing that process positively; this considerably underdetermines the roles of rationality and morality, by which we might hope to distinguish between the good and the bad. Since some desires are demonstrably authentically held and yet wholly incompatible with liberal democracy and capitalism (not to mention elementary conceptions of human rights), even this feel-good appeal to the sovereignty of the consumer projects a political philosophy with just as many problems as an ostensibly modernist one.

Indeed, what is most striking about this aspect of Taruskin's theorising is just what an inadequate picture of modernism it paints. In this particular essay, Taruskin focuses on mechanical textures in Stravinsky; these are conceptually linked to the geometrical performance style that Taruskin bundles together with a kind of anti-Romanticism, as well as a certain lineage of modernists including Ezra Pound, T. S. Eliot, Yeats, and Ortega y Gasset. Central to this line, as well as geometrical performance, is, in Taruskin's view, a flight from the flux and impermanence of modern life:

Refuge in order and precision, hostility to subjectivity, to the vagaries of personality, to whatever passes and decays—these were the inevitable reactions of all who were committed to the preservation of the high culture. The threat has only intensified since the days of Eliot and Pound, and high modernism has become even more intransigent, objectivist, elitist, and fearful of individual freedom of expression, which leads inexorably to the abyss.¹¹⁶

¹¹³ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁴ Ibid., 116.

¹¹⁵ Ibid., 151.

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 104.

And later Taruskin, for a final flourish, connects this mentality with the sort of uncritical historical positivism which had already been criticised by Kerman in *Contemplating Music*. Here Taruskin really lets fly: stripping away the false accretions of history in some narrow-minded positivistic pursuit of the factually ascertainable is little more than a way of implying that 'people are dirt'.¹¹⁷ And then comes the inevitable: 'this is another, less attractive way of stating the premise that underlies the whole modern movement. It is the dark side of dehumanisation, the side that does evoke robots and concentration camps.'¹¹⁸ In case it were in any doubt, then, Taruskin's real assessment of one side of modernism is revealed, and it casts a lengthy, negative shadow over the concept.

4

Having read this, if we were given paper and pencil and asked to represent modernism graphically, what would we draw? It would seem that if one had to paint modernism it would be in many different shades of grey; it would be something huge, monolithic, immovable; it would be oppressive, powerful, self-important, possibly Germanic, and difficult; it would believe in passé notions such as truth and the imperatives of history; and yet it would somehow be pure, crystalline, seeking perfection, order. These are the things conjured by such criticisms of modernism—a grey, lifeless landscape, almost beautiful, overwhelmingly foreign. This view of modernism—the monochrome view—has been critiqued, however, by critics alert to the more complex historical reality: the literary critic Astradur Eysteinnsson, for instance, in *The Concept of Modernism*, claims that the modernist paradigms that we now know and love, or at least perpetuate, are greatly indebted to the New Criticism, which drew them directly from the modernists themselves. In Eysteinnsson's words, drawing heavily on T. S. Eliot,

Modernism is viewed as a kind of aesthetic heroism, which in the face of the chaos of the modern world (very much a 'fallen' world) sees art as the only dependable reality and as an ordering principle of a quasi-religious kind. The unity of art is supposedly a salvation from the shattered order of modern reality.¹¹⁹

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 150.

¹¹⁹ Astradur Eysteinnsson, *The Concept of Modernism* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1990), 9.

The link to Taruskin's modernism is unquestionable. But, as Eysteinnsson goes on to claim, this is an unbalanced equation: the heroic side of modernism is emphasised by Anglo-American scholars at the expense of at least one other equally important side of modernism—the shattered modern reality—and this was effected principally because a rather pure, white, heroic modernism meshed most comfortably with a New Critical outlook. But in this process a different side of modernism is all but eclipsed, for modernism is always entangled in that from which it attempts to free itself—from, in the words of one of James Joyce's characters, the nightmare of history. In Eysteinnsson's words again,

It is highly significant that while modernism is often accused of being a *cult of form*, it is also (not infrequently by the same critics, such as Lukács) attacked for *formlessness* and for distorted and anarchic representation of society, disintegration of outer reality, and disorderly manipulation of language. It is at this point that the whole notion of modernism moving the communicative act of reading 'outside of history' shows itself to be a contradiction in terms, for the very detection of either exaggerated formal maneuvers or distorted representations of reality assumes some kind of 'norm,' a symbolic and semiotic order that underlies our every act of social communication.¹²⁰

And, pulling fewer punches, Eysteinnsson later characterises such one-sided construals of modernism as ahistorical and blind. That blindness, he argues, can only be overcome by paying attention to the history from which modernism sprang.

This diagnosis sets the scene nicely for my second significant example of a myopic appreciation of modernism. The book in question here has been far less influential, and the writer concerned is not even a musicologist. Nevertheless, she demonstrates particularly clearly (if a little unwittingly) how critical accounts of modernism and postmodernism project entire histories around themselves. The work to be put under scrutiny here is Georgina Born's *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Musical Avant-Garde*.¹²¹ Since modernism, in its late stages, was heavily institutionalised—essentially bearing the full responsibility of official Western culture during the Cold War—some appreciation of its institutions would seem to be central to its more complete comprehension, and it is in this context that Born's study might assume a particularly significant place, for there have been few studies of modernist musical institutions, and fewer still that are

¹²⁰ Ibid., 15–6.

¹²¹ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*. See note 9 for full bibliographical details.

quite as striking.¹²² The book is formally an ethnography of the Institut de Recherche et de Coordination Acoustique/Musique (IRCAM), the well-known Parisian institute that opened in 1977, and which many see to have been at the forefront of the production of computer music.¹²³ Born spent almost a year at IRCAM—not without irony, that year was 1984—investigating many different corners of the institute. Her motives were twofold: on the one hand, to ‘address a new kind of anthropological object’, by which she seems to mean ‘the workings of dominant western institutions and their cultural systems’;¹²⁴ on the other hand, and perhaps more significantly for musicologists, ‘to pursue research that might provide insight into the sense of crisis in late-twentieth-century composition, and in particular into the crisis of musical modernism.’¹²⁵ For once, then, here we have an author who is refreshingly blunt about the legacy of modernism, and who is not afraid to call the current impasse by its most appropriate name—that is, a crisis. Perhaps Born’s own disciplinary background—professionally a social scientist, with a healthy interest in music—opens up the space needed to claim dramatically what musicologists would feel needed to be argued carefully; in any case, it is interesting that where she does generate insights into modernism, Born does so despite her rather ambiguous placement within IRCAM: a pseudo-outsider speaking from not-quite-inside, as it were—she is not part of the culture she is investigating, but she is implicated in other forms of institutional culture by pursuing doctoral research in the first place. It goes without saying that she inevitably opens herself up to criticism simply by carrying out such work, for there will always be those within an institute who will rebut criticism as the inaccurate perception of an alien, limited by the tools and methodologies of her own discipline. This seems to be a particular problem when work from the social sciences is presented to audiences more comfortable with speculative aesthetics: it is so easy to be immediately placed on the defensive by the ethnographer’s empirical interest in power, freedom, and history. No matter how tempting, however, such suspicion is intellectually weak, since one of the most important points to observe of such

¹²² M. J. Grant’s recent *Serial Music, Serial Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), for instance, is not as richly informed by cultural theory as Born’s study, and thus would seem less likely to attract interdisciplinary attention. Though not strictly an analysis of a modernist institution as such, Grant’s study is certainly an investigation into the broader cultural context of modernism, focussing as it does on the key journal *Die Reihe*.

¹²³ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 310.

¹²⁴ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 7.

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 2.

institutions is that there is not necessarily any reason why one should accept the authority of those within them when describing how they operate, what work they do, and why. Moreover, the issue of whether the authority of the artist may reasonably be allowed to triumph at the expense of broad incomprehension and disinterest is, of course, a very sensitive one in high modernism; so in this respect any reception of the book may very well embody a tension that the text would seem merely to be documenting.

But Born's study is much more than just a write-up of empirical fieldwork, partly because right from the very beginning it places IRCAM in the context of not only its own national situation, but also in relation to the intellectual debates over modernism and postmodernism. This is done in a rather predictably mechanical way, with introductory chapters detailing the problems and objectives that the study will address, as well as giving a somewhat dubious overview of modernism and postmodernism. The subsequent presentation of the fieldwork is then measured against these brief characterisations, so that different features of IRCAM life can be made to relate to the broader tension between modernism and postmodernism that Born finds simmering in the IRCAM corridors. On occasion, this approach can lead to rather simple descriptions of certain tendencies as being postmodernist or modernist *tout court*. A particular example can be found in Born's discussion of what she calls 'dissident concerts', concerts that were not part of IRCAM's official series but which were largely run by IRCAM researchers:

These series contradicted IRCAM's dominant artistic ideology in several ways: most obviously by their relative unstructured informality, their 'unseriousness' and lack of focused, reverent ritual; by their inclusion of musics—jazz, improvisation, and rare references to pop—not deemed legitimate; and by their openness to amateur and professional musicians from outside IRCAM's usual network and aesthetic. The technological bent of the concerts was also mildly subversive in focusing on live uses of small, often commercial technologies and on video—a medium developing a strong amateur culture as well as professional uses and associated more with pop music and experimental art than with concert music. The series came, then, to connote 'youth' and offered different expressions of a postmodern alternative within IRCAM.¹²⁶

Thus postmodernism is used to denote a whole host of features which carry a barely disguised positive charge: informal, unserious, inclusive, open. The implication is, of course, that modernism is formal, serious, exclusive, closed. This line-up of the good and the bad is anything but unfamiliar to simple invocations of postmodernism, and

¹²⁶ Ibid., 177.

(as has already been noted) is reminiscent, for instance, of Ihab Hassan's very widely reprinted table from *The Postmodern Turn*.¹²⁷ Particular problems emerge, for instance, when the detail Born provides is evaluated through slightly less rose-tinted glasses. Whilst discussing the *Espaces Libres* concerts—a series considered to be dissident by Born—it is noted that they lasted

from 6:30 P.M. until after midnight. They attracted a large, young, intellectual, and bohemian Parisian audience. The evenings began with a theoretical discussion for an hour or two, normally about a composer's work—Boulez, Harvey, Manoury, HY himself [initials are used to protect the identity of Born's sources]—or introducing aspects of IRCAM's computer music and scientific concerns.¹²⁸

It is surely simple enough to see what Born is getting at here, valuing the exhilaration of communal cultural endeavour as and when it occurred outside of the channels in which it was officially supposed to flourish. But whether such activities are worthy of her classifications—informal, unserious, inclusive, open—is a rather different question. Take, for example, the timing of the concerts: from early evening until midnight. How open or inclusive is that, for people who have worked for a full day and who must rise early the next morning? What sort of domestic labour does such a lifestyle require for those with children, partners, families? What sort of audience will be attracted by two hours of theoretical discussion? To which social classes did the 'large' audience belong? The use of the key term 'bohemian', conjuring up Walter Benjamin's beautiful writings on Baudelaire—themselves seminal documents in both modernism and its theorisation—suggests that what we have here is anything but cultural democracy, no matter how risqué it might seem to *les dilettantes*. In other words, the postmodernist 'alternative within IRCAM' might be likened more to a fringe avant-garde movement—and a pretty feeble one at that, one which, rather than estranging the notion of art itself and its accompanying institution, tends instead to draw its wages from public money and, like student groups everywhere, sit up late and discuss its problems.

¹²⁷ Hassan, *The Postmodern Turn*, 91–2. The limitations of such tabulations have been thoroughly critiqued: John Frow, for example, notes that if postmodernism designates 'nothing more and nothing less than a genre of theoretical writing', then the 'table is the basic organizing format of the genre, and it makes it possible for you to denounce a reactionary or a subversive modernism in the name of a progressive or of a conservative postmodernism, or vice versa; or to celebrate or to denounce both modernism and postmodernism, from either side of the political fence.' See Frow, *Time and Commodity Culture*, 15, 21–2.

¹²⁸ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 176–7.

The weakness of this particular example stems not only from Born's tendency to value dissent and escape from the web of rationality, but also from the too simplistic alignment of these concepts with modernism and postmodernism. This is all the more striking given that it happens *despite* Born's deliberately rounded portrayal of modernism in her early chapters. She lists six principal characteristics of modernism:

1. reaction—both aesthetic and philosophical—against romanticism and classicism
2. fascination with new media, technologies, and science
3. theoreticism (now preceding the creative process)
4. at the political vanguard: interventionist aims
5. an oscillation between rationalism/objectivism and irrationalism/subjectivism
6. ambivalent relations with popular culture

Few would treat this summary as outrageously foolish, and Born invariably draws its components from celebrated theories of modernism: certainly in respect of the fascination with technology, the political aims, and the relations with popular culture, here we have very familiar and respectable ingredients of modernism, ones without which the term would require very extensive overhauling. Theoreticism is perhaps a little less convincing,¹²⁹ although it can be understood as a corollary of the politicised and factional nature of certain avant-garde groups. More interesting is the idea of an oscillation between rationalism/objectivism and irrationalism/subjectivism:

Thus the rationalism inherent in the scientific and technological aspects of constructivism contrasts starkly with the emphasis on intuition, the psychic, and the irrational associated with expressionism, while futurism was both ardently technophilic and irrationalist. In this sense different modernist tendencies took up and intensified two powerful strands of nineteenth-century art: on the one hand a positivistic naturalism and on the other late romanticism. While it is difficult to stabilize this oscillation and to gauge which side exerted the greater force, it is modernist rationalism that was so well allied to the importation of science and technology into art, while modernist theoreticism promoted the fusion between these elements.¹³⁰

¹²⁹ It unclear precisely what is meant by the term: artistic manifestos are scarcely unique to modernism, and early modernism was hardly theoreticist in the sense used to describe the kinds of high modernism of which IRCAM is an example.

¹³⁰ *Ibid.*, 44.

It is surely accounts such as this that provoke the wrath of those who argue that concepts such as modernism do more damage than good, or, put differently, that they are too hopelessly vague to be of any practical use for specialists.

Perhaps the first problem with this account is that it conflicts somewhat with one of Born's other criteria—namely, the relation between modernism and romanticism. Earlier she writes that one 'defining feature of modernism is its basis in a reaction by artists against the prior aesthetic and philosophical forms of romanticism and classicism.'¹³¹ If that is correct—and one struggles today to see how, for instance, the role of the creative individual in modernism is wholly opposed to its correlative in romanticism—then why the later implication that an irrational futurism and subjectivist expressionism are intensifications of late romanticism? And what significance is to be allotted here to the difference between romanticism and late romanticism? Picking holes in such arguments is admittedly easy and unrewarding; but whilst no one would deny that such words do not summon up readily ascertainable definitions, it is also true that they do have broad connotations, and that some awareness of the conceptual complexity of their myriad usages is a necessary prerequisite to their discussion.

Nitpicking aside, what becomes clear from Born's discussion—particularly in the passage quoted above—is that despite the difficulty of assessing the broad contours of modernism, it is the scientific-rational-technological side of modernism that emerges in the dominant historical position, even if Born does not quite manage to say it. So what emerges from Born's brisk overview of modernism is less six principal characteristics, more three crucial preconditions: the first is the feeling of being at the cutting edge of history, the vanguard position, which necessarily implies some politicisation, some reaction to what is perceived to have gone before. But what has to be added to this is some kind of confidence in the few rather than the many—the modernist as cultural prophet, prepared to stand alone and risk mass incomprehension. From here we derive the opposition of an elite, high artworld to the emerging forms of mass culture. The final ingredient in the mix is the fascination with technology and science; what this comes to be linked with, in a familiar gesture, is rationality. What does this key term mean for Born? She is clearly indebted to the most common—that is, Weberian—understanding of the word: rationality as the iron-

¹³¹ Ibid., 40.

cage of bureaucracy constructed by the modern world's attempt to quantify, so as, on the personal level, to derive the most profitable ends from the least costly means, and, on the level of society, to dominate nature ever more completely.¹³² This familiar theory is highly susceptible to linkages with the scientific world, not least because scientific progress is the motor that allows this sort of rationalisation to be ever more efficiently achieved, and also because the usurpation of theological underpinnings of knowledge—in favour of scientific rationality—is on anyone's definition a key determinant of modernity, and thus implicated in any theorisation of modernism.

IRCAM, it seems, is pervasively controlled by such rationalisation:

IRCAM is the culmination of an extraordinary degree of centralization and rationalization in the production of art music. Rationalization is evident at many distinct levels: institutionally and administratively; in terms of the 'content' of IRCAM's aesthetic, focused on the contribution of science and technology to composition; in IRCAM's extended division of labor and technological production practices; and in the increasing attempts to administer 'demand' through marketing and market research.¹³³

But this last face of rationality is evidence of a deep contradiction within IRCAM, one that is a signal of some of the more basic problems that such an institution must face:

We will see that IRCAM operates primarily according to the discursive 'laws' of avant-garde culture: aiming to maximize cultural capital, oriented to the future, and unconcerned with stimulating present demand. Yet we will also see fragmentary signs of a shift in the Institute's terms of legitimation influenced by its bureaucratisation, a shift from the avant-garde discourse of the pursuit of future knowledge toward one of legitimation by efficiency or 'performativity'—in which the assessment and manipulation of demand are pivotal.¹³⁴

In other words, the focus on rationality enables one to see something that cuts to the very heart of this institute: namely, that the sharp contours of Born's sketch of modernism paint a landscape that, compared to the one on view within IRCAM, is rather clear-cut. For what Born manages to show most persuasively is precisely the extent to which her analysis of modernism does not seem to hold for IRCAM: the vanguard belief is increasingly wobbly, laughed at by some; and, more significantly, the separation from mass culture and the free market is increasingly difficult to justify—because not only does it involve a cultural isolation that seems ever more

¹³² Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*, trans. Stephen Kalberg (Oxford: Blackwell, 2002).

¹³³ Born, *Rationalizing Culture*, 29.

¹³⁴ *Ibid.*, 29.

stupid, but also because it shuts the institute off from potential sources of funding that might considerably aid its research work.

What Born is saying, then, is that if IRCAM is a modernist institution, then it is one that is surviving in times that tend not to favour modernist culture. It will come as no surprise that the atmosphere surrounding this situation is that of postmodernism, which for Born signals both the supersession of the division between a vanguard elite and mass culture (between high and low culture, in other words), and a widespread rejection of the claims of aesthetic autonomy, so that increasingly music must be grounded within the socio-historical contexts in which it was written and in which it was (and is) received.¹³⁵ From this point on in her study, one senses that modernism is much less favoured than postmodernism, and since IRCAM is considered to be an embattled modernist institution, what started out as ethnography palpably metamorphoses into critique. There is an inevitability to this process, not least because it is implied by Born's intuition of a state of crisis in late-twentieth-century composition: the crisis is precisely the demise or displacement of modernism within new times. And seeing as Born views postmodernism as encapsulating the demise of artistic autonomy, then it is hardly surprising that—as a social scientist with a healthy interest in postmodernist theory—she finds this liberating or positive: in the baldest terms, the very concepts she is investigating have already prejudged the outcome of her inquiry, because her study is as much an artefact of postmodernism as it is an analysis of it.

Does this matter? It is hard to say. The ethnographer's intuition may well be correct—it might cut to the existential reality far more brilliantly than any amount of statistical survey; but it can also serve less upstanding purposes: it might simply want to associate modernism with various sorts of repression, with the overall goal of promoting postmodernism as the answer to so many problems. Most striking of all, however, about the empirical chapters of *Rationalizing Culture* is the extent to which such a simplistic scheme breaks down. For example, rationalisation seems in some cases to be the very opposite of the processes extant in IRCAM: Born reveals that she first ascertained the official structure of IRCAM by sneaking into Boulez's office by night,¹³⁶ and that she had spent several months of confusion before getting even this far. She found that the official version of IRCAM's structure did not correspond to the

¹³⁵ Ibid., 45–7.

¹³⁶ Ibid., 143–4.

functions that employees actually carried out; and, what is more, because the official structure was not widely dispersed, no one could know for certain how the institute was *supposed* to run. It turns out that some workers carrying out highly valued work were paid little, and kept on temporary contracts; others, notably the scientists, were well paid but engaged in lower-status research. The absence of any logic to this structure as it was experienced by those within it meant that, in effect, workers were socially levelled; the lack of information enforced a lull in rational response to that information, all of which cemented the authority of those in power—particularly Boulez, who does not fare at all well in the study. Born typically paints Boulez as some kind of presidential figure who can wield a meaty veto; in the absence of a tightly controlled meritocracy—or even basic tools of rationality to measure the relation between outputs and inputs—it becomes more important to secure the patronage of the powerful; accordingly, we are told of the struggles between Boulez’s would-be heirs, a dynastic story that is just as revolting as the modern political shenanigans to which it bears resemblance.

As expected, however, this tale of patronage and charisma is sharply juxtaposed against the fortunes of workers in the lower-status spheres. Whereas the artists were concerned with patronage, the long-term, and creative achievement, lower-status workers were more typically concerned with the ‘basic parameters of their jobs: pay, hours, conditions, the attitude of bosses, and the threat of sanctions and sackings by the Administration.’¹³⁷ Sadly, it seems that most of the workers of IRCAM were more or less bullied into submission, and discouraged from any unionisation that might rock the Institute’s political boat. Thus the modernist institution is further mauled: not only does it work unmeritocratically, but it also did not promote an internal climate in which some of its workers felt able to exercise a fundamental desire to be affiliated to a wider class-struggle. Moreover, the institution is presented as repressing overt engagements with politics—and thus the supposed formalism of modernist artworks is duplicated on an institutional level. The most shocking example of this given by Born is the proximity of technological research to the defence industry: one of IRCAM’s most powerful pieces of hardware, the 4X, was sold to a major defence contractor (the hardware was incorporated into a flight simulator). Thus commercialisation of the technology—which was in any case

¹³⁷ *Ibid.*, 155.

discouraged—actually came to serve a sector of the economy whose aims might be construed as being antithetical to those of the arts and humanities. Here, then, the familiar dark sides of science and technology, especially in their twentieth-century guises, reared their ugly heads, and a little of the appalling socio-economic conjuncture of late modernism was revealed for all to see.

These are some of the areas in which Born's ethnography charts a course round a modernism that is considered as some ugly monolith—repressive, restrictive, undemocratic, bureaucratic, and so on. The important coordinates of her initial analysis of modernism—opposition, rationality, high culture—coalesce, and there can be few who read the result as complimentary. What of the artistic, rather than institutional, side of IRCAM, however? Here Born uses her pre-existing template of modernism to understand the dilemmas of the avant-garde. Borrowing from the work of figures such as Raymond Williams and Pierre Bourdieu, Born reads IRCAM as being part of some tiny subsidised avant-garde which is able (and required) to shun commercial success in favour of risky long-term cultural investments 'with no significant market in the present'.¹³⁸ Put briefly, the shunning of short-term economic capital will hopefully result in a more profitable long-term investment in which cultural capital will accumulate. Meanwhile, in the present, the problem becomes one of legitimation: how can such movements relate themselves both to a subsidised mainstream (with which they may ultimately be bracketed) whilst at the same time maintaining an essentially antagonistic relationship towards this mainstream?

In one of her most suggestive chapters, Born later offers one way in which IRCAM might fulfil this precarious role. Firstly she observes that within the institute there was a great deal of uncertainty about the present, musically speaking—partly because of the necessary scientific-technological fog, but also because not everyone felt authorised to raise specifically musical issues:

[...] in comparison with the inarticulacy and sensory immediacy of lower-status workers' discourse, IRCAM intellectuals did not in fact enjoy sophisticated and articulate musical-aesthetic forms of talk. There was a lack of specifically musical and aesthetic discussion, and in its place a proliferation of scientific and technological theory and talk.¹³⁹

Although this is surprising, some of the revelations about other areas of uncertainty will raise sympathetic smiles in other elite institutions: we learn of the constant, all-

¹³⁸ Ibid., 26.

¹³⁹ Ibid., 167.

pervasive one-upmanship—the backstabbing and bitching that seem, regrettably enough, to be unavoidable fixtures. Born observes that this uncertainty often arose over the classification of this or that person as a composer (or not), thus validating her feeling that production was more highly valued than reproduction. Having seen that, it is all the more interesting to read of the institute's supposed certainty with regard to the past.¹⁴⁰ In her own words:

By contrast with the aesthetic uncertainty of the culture of music production, IRCAM's concert programming and courses, publications, records, and video cassettes—everything that contributed toward musical reproduction—constructed and maintained an extremely consistent and forceful perspective on the modern musical past. In other words, they embodied a canon: a view of the sacred landmarks in modern music, a genealogy of modernism in music.¹⁴¹

What was this canon, and, more importantly, who was included in it? Born decides the matter by referring to the number of works a particular composer had played in IRCAM's opening *Passage du Vingtième Siècle* concert series in 1977. She classifies the composers in three groups: classics (early twentieth-century masters), leaders (the mid-century generation), and others (the younger generation, the less successful, and IRCAM composers/directors). This typology leads to predictable results: the classic composers are: Schoenberg, Webern, Berg, Bartók, Stravinsky, Ives, Debussy, Varèse; the mid-century generation comprises Berio, Ligeti, Stockhausen, Boulez, Carter, Nono, Messiaen, Xenakis, and Cage; and the 'others' includes names such as Kagel, Babbitt, Zimmerman, Henze, Ferneyhough, Birtwistle, and Maxwell Davies. What is immediately obvious is just how mainstream this list now seems: if one were to ask for principal names of mid-century modernism, one could not omit any of Born's list. The same goes for the earlier phase of modernism, even if both lists could, one feels, be broadened considerably. But is IRCAM a derivative of this canon or its driving force? Born is unequivocal: 'the modern canon enunciated by IRCAM is one that, not least through Boulez's own historical efforts, has been largely accepted both by the musical establishment and by musicologists.'¹⁴²

Is this correct? Consider Born's earlier outline of modernism: a combination of science, high culture, and vanguardism. How might such an analysis be combined with the narratives of music history? Born tells a very familiar story here: 'the advent

¹⁴⁰ Ibid., 171–6.

¹⁴¹ Ibid., 171.

¹⁴² Ibid., 171.

of modernism is usually dated from the breakdown of the underlying musical systems of tonality that had lasted for over three hundred years, and that formed the basis for baroque, classical, and romantic music.’¹⁴³ Tonality falls, free atonality flickers briefly in the historical void, and then a new system of musical organisation emerges: ‘in the early 1920s a new compositional technique and philosophy called serialism was developed by Schoenberg and his pupils Webern and Berg (the Second Viennese School). Serialism, a stylistic revolution, became the most powerful development out of the crisis of tonality and was for some decades the organizing force of musical modernism.’¹⁴⁴ Later in the book, Born describes how a dominant serialism was later surpassed by none other than IRCAM composers:

Thus began the attempt to engineer a generational and discursive transition in the canon: from the older, postwar generation of leading figures whose heyday had been defined by serialist discourse, to a younger generation brought up in the postserialist tradition of everyday involvement with technological and scientific expertise, raised also in an environment in which postmodernism had become ubiquitous.¹⁴⁵

And there we finally have it, in all its glory: a bird’s-eye view of twentieth-century music, leading from tonal decay through resystematisation to a mistrust of serialism and the fragmenting of that tradition spurred on by the collapse of faith in artistic autonomy as well as the demise of the borderlines between high and low culture.

What should be fairly obvious is that Born’s initial reading of modernism has shaped the rest of her investigation: on some level, at least, this is surely epistemologically inevitable. But where one can query Born is on the particular configuration of this sketch of modernism: is it accurate, reasonable, justified? There are good reasons to suppose that it is not. The most severe difficulty is that of the circularity of the enterprise: Born, knowingly or unknowingly, takes her certainty that IRCAM is essentially a modernist institution and reads off from that a picture of modernism that is, to all intents and purposes, identical with many features of IRCAM. She can then engage in much (welcome) critique of IRCAM, all juxtaposed with a postmodernism that seems so more congenial. But this latter point is intellectually unmoving, since any currently dominant value-system will easily score points in the sympathetic reader’s mind; if modernism is characterised as rational,

¹⁴³ Ibid., 47.

¹⁴⁴ Ibid., 48.

¹⁴⁵ Ibid., 176.

closed, nepotistic, then what politically correct person in Anglo-America would balk at the implied oppositions: free, open, democratic? But that is only half of the problem: the real issue is the very association of these concepts and ideas with modernism in the first place. If the intuition that IRCAM is modernist underlay this project—and it must have done on some level—then Born should have been much more careful than to configure modernism *tout court* as so congenial to IRCAM's features. For what results is a kind of ideological done deal, in which an institution like IRCAM can only come off worse than any postmodernist alternative. No matter how much Born tries (laudably) to question the status of her own critique—particularly at the end of her Introduction¹⁴⁶—it is impossible, I submit, to read *Rationalizing Culture* and feel, put simply, that modernism was good.¹⁴⁷ Modernism comes out as bad, restrictive, manipulative, historically megalomaniac, domineering, and so on; but within Born's terms *there is no alternative*, because she unintentionally shows that such characterisations have become the lenses through which we view twentieth-century music history, and they are thus the rationale underpinning the sense of crisis that stimulates any interest in IRCAM in the first place. To go beyond the view of modernism presented here would be entirely to restructure the history of music, to read something other than tonal decay and serialism as the major headlines of the past 100 years.

It is often suspected that those who espouse postmodernism are reliant on impoverished conceptions of modernism; it is less often remarked that such readings can be interesting and provocative even whilst remaining inaccurate and somewhat unfair. Such an observation is arguably applicable here, for it is only after her too restrictive portrait of modernism that Born's postmodernist alternatives can find their feet. One cannot help feeling that *Rationalizing Culture* busies itself too much with trying (ultimately) to trash IRCAM; ironically, in so doing it arguably overlooks its own most powerful analytical observation, which is that IRCAM is simply late: IRCAM is the survival of the old regime in these new postmodernist times. What is supposed to be a book about IRCAM, then, turns out to tell us rather more about the narrative that leads from modernism to postmodernism. Closed off and elevated into a position of vast cultural significance, this story tends to become more interesting than

¹⁴⁶ Ibid., 10–11.

¹⁴⁷ Richard Hermann puts this rather more provocatively in his review of the book: he identifies 'blatant, unsubstantiated, and unmediated value judgments against modernism, at least as practiced by IRCAM.' See *Music Theory Online* 3/5 (1997), §5.1.

the particulars it is supposed to subsume. In a sense, the formalism supposedly superseded by postmodernism has in fact won out again: one's mental image of what modernism was has bludgeoned the glorious particularity of the cultural moment into submission. And what should be a meticulous photorealist portrait of a modernist institution in postmodernist times becomes instead a brisk cartoon sketch; or, as Theodor Adorno said of a strand of modernism itself, 'the palette becomes the painting'.¹⁴⁸

¹⁴⁸ Theodor Adorno, 'The Aging of the New Music', in *Essays on Music* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 192.

4 MODERNISM HO!

The avant-garde persists only as a state-funded priesthood, ministering to a dying congregation.¹

From the trends surveyed in the preceding chapter it is obvious that modernism has crystallised, rather haphazardly, as a critical musicological term: whilst it is often not given a comparatively specific chronological reference, it does denote certain theories and styles of criticism which are claimed to be closely related to the cultural products themselves designated modernist. This overlap between creativity and criticism has had significant implications for the musical and musicological reception of the notion of postmodernism. In one sense the perceived monolithic unity of modernism, used to denote some wholly repressive *Zeitgeist* which can now be superseded, has been enabling: it has allowed postmodernists to feel that a major stylistic and critical impasse has suddenly been bridged. The bigger modernism is felt to be, in other words, the bigger the sense of relief and exhilaration when it is finally swept away by something else.² The creative gains of such processes of change—no matter whether musically we are talking about minimalism, or neo-tonality, or something else—can hardly be underestimated, and they will form the basis of this chapter's analysis of musical postmodernism. On the other hand, however, it is obvious that the *tout court* approach to modernism risks any number of problematic generalisations and sloppy assumptions: this is particularly the case, as we have just seen, in respect of postmodernist musicology, and this perception of modernist tyranny pertains not only to criticism. As will become clear, musical postmodernism is also very much defined negatively against a tyrannically portrayed modernism: the *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* thumbnail entry on postmodernism, for instance, avoids

¹ Roger Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), 506.

² This aspect of postmodernism, it will be recalled, is explicitly discussed by Fredric Jameson. See Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 1991), 313–4.

assigning any substantive content to its subject, referring the reader on the one hand to sheer chronology, and on the other hand to ‘multiple associations’ with ‘modern’ and ‘modernist’, or ‘disagreement’ over what the ‘post-’ prefix implies.³

Such displacements are anything but untypical, and they are a sign of one of the most striking developments in the musical history of recent decades—namely, the growing rejection of musical (that is, stylistic) modernism.⁴ This rejection is explicitly linked to matters of reception as well as style: Roger Scruton, for instance, argues that

To create modernist music, the composer must also create the modernist audience. And the real question is whether such a thing is possible—indeed, whether audiences are ever truly *created*, and whether they could be created in *our* cultural conditions.⁵

This raises at least one more question than Scruton cares to mention: it makes one wonder, for instance, whether a modernist audience *was* once created, perhaps under different ‘cultural conditions’. But the Scrutonesque view is, even now, far from universally held: in a collection of essays that claims on its first page to be ‘a book about twentieth-century art music with popularity problems’, Arved Ashby writes that

This music has never achieved much success and acceptance, beyond the *success d'estime* that rules the Pulitzer Prizes and university appointments—or long did. But this doesn't mean that modernist music hasn't found an audience and couldn't find *more* listeners if we took a fresh look at its fabled difficulty[.]⁶

This is now, however, the viewpoint of a minority, despite there being some attraction to the idea that modernism can find a comfortable niche within postmodernism. It is more normal today to admit that something critical has altered in the move away from modernism, and that this is closely related to unpopularity. In these terms Robin Hartwell, for example, claims that the modernist position ‘relegates the products of the past to the past (or at least places the past as found in the present under the category of “history”)', whereas the postmodernist position understands ‘all cultural

³ By ‘thumbnail entry’ I mean the short summary that follows the subject-word itself. See Jann Pasler, ‘Postmodernism’, in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn, vol. 20 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 213.

⁴ It may seem somewhat conservative to say that modernism is suffering a ‘growing rejection’: many would claim that the rejection is done and dusted. However, in a British institutional context, where composers are still appointed to tenured posts in distinguished universities, it seems that high modernism is far from dead.

⁵ Scruton, *The Aesthetics of Music*, 451.

⁶ Arved Ashby, ‘Introduction’, in *The Pleasure of Modernist Music: Listening, Meaning, Intention, Ideology* (Rochester, NY: University of Rochester Press, 2004), 1–2.

products as equally extant in the present, and all styles as equally possibly [sic] and valid.’⁷ This therefore emphasises the putative return, in postmodernism, of the music of the past—a claim which projects an obvious stylistic prescription for postmodernist music. But the point is not so much the collapse of the modernist styles themselves; rather:

One could say that the 1980s were the time when quantity of choice together with the establishment of a taste for historical music led to the position of new art music [that] was no longer felt to command any authority. Further, the process of historical revival was so established as a cultural phenomenon that the demand for novelty could be satisfied by musicological research rather than by the composition of new pieces. The realisation that the history of art does not need to be teleological robbed art music of the assumption that an audience for the avant-garde would inevitably follow in the course of time. The realisation came that there was no compulsion for the contemporary audience to concern itself with contemporary music. Nor need it do so in the future. The avant-garde had battled ahead, but no one was inclined to follow.⁸

In a slightly similar vein, and in a recent survey of the social position of classical music in the twentieth century, Leon Botstein advances several blunt reasons for this rejection:

The suspicion of an incompatibility between mass democracy and the classical traditions was only reinforced by the dominant attitudes of leading musical modernists after 1945. On the one hand, contemporary music of the 1950s and 1960s, much of it inspired by the Second Viennese School (particularly Webern) and radical experimentalism (in the spirit of Ives, Cowell, and Cage), made little contact with such traditional audiences as still existed for classical music; on the other, and despite its resistance to convention, new music gained few converts among the young, even in the tumultuous 1960s. Defenders of post-Webern modernism often revelled in its lack of connection to a larger public and its lack of susceptibility to easy listening. [...] The dependence on philanthropy and the demeanour and etiquette of the concert hall marked the art-music tradition (even at concerts of new music) as old-fashioned and socially distant. Classical music signified snobbery and misplaced exclusivity.⁹

There are several important arguments here, and it is easy to confuse their separate strands. The ‘collapse’ of audience interest in modernism is of course a comparative collapse, and indeed, one suspects, not a collapse at all (at least in the UK and USA), but rather a slow process of metamorphosis on the part of a select few critics and connoisseurs. In this sense it is plausible to claim that there was very little authority around to collapse, since musical modernism has long shied away from popular

⁷ Robin Hartwell, ‘Postmodernism and art music’, in Simon Miller, ed., *The Last Post: Music after Modernism* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1993), 33.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 34.

⁹ Leon Botstein, ‘Music of a century: museum culture and the politics of subsidy’, in Nicholas Cook and Anthony Pople, ed., *The Cambridge History of Twentieth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 45–6.

acclaim and has relied more on its own sense of historical inevitability than on any tacit seal of approval by a teleologically inclined audience. What has changed, however, has been the extent to which even that small audience devoted to modernism has felt able to believe in it or to write like it.¹⁰ Postmodernist arguments concerning the waning of teleology or historical pastiche may well have influenced such an audience, but what is surely most striking in retrospect is not a modernism ever more beleaguered and embattled from the outside—after all, this had long been the case—but rather a steadily mounting internal crisis of confidence. As Paul Griffiths puts it, ‘Because the lapsing of modernism was a failure of confidence, once it had happened it could not be gainsaid: the belief of believers is changed in a world of unbelievers’.¹¹

However, all of this must be undercut by an important proviso: this crisis of confidence is certainly not new. The flip side of musical modernism’s self-proclaimed historical inevitability has been an atmosphere of chronic insecurity and doubt, as any reader of Schoenberg’s *Style and Idea* essays will recall.¹² So what has changed now is not so much the fundamental parameters of the modernist conjuncture, but rather their internal balance and the broader context in which they find themselves, where modernism itself has been displaced: whereas it was once the case that the scales came down (just) in favour of pursuing modernist styles through composition, now, or so many seem to claim, one can satisfy the longing for the new through musicological research—and it is no surprise to find that Hartwell, for instance, subsequently devotes attention to the historical performance-practice movement.

Again, though, one is struck by a certain impotence in such arguments. Despite the fact that familiar motifs have returned,¹³ and that these authors’ claims are profound, one still gets little sense of why all this should have happened when it did. The fact that the claims of Hartwell and Botstein have a distinct Anglo-American flavour suggests one answer to this question. Musically, it seems, the rejection of modernism is closely tied to a focus on (and reaction to) what might, following the model outlined in earlier chapters, be termed high modernism—specifically, the increasingly institutionalised high culture of the post-war years. It remains striking that it is this phase of modernism that seems to have provoked more resentment and

¹⁰ The crucial dimension of this is the rejection of modernism by composers: see Richard Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005), 451–5.

¹¹ Paul Griffiths, *Modern Music and After: Directions since 1945* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1995), 263.

¹² Arnold Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, ed. Leonard Stein, trans. Leo Black (London: Faber, 1975).

¹³ The relationship between modernism and historical performance-practice, for instance.

rejection than any other, and one of the causes of this resentment is obvious: for it is precisely the institutionalisation of this sort of modernism, the sense in which it migrated to the universities and state-funded institutions whose official culture it thus became, that gave it the aura of power and prestige against which a later generation felt the need to revolt.¹⁴

I shall explore this particular conjuncture in detail below. For now it suffices to say that opinions of musical modernism have recently tended to be heavily influenced by the supposed failure and supersession of high modernism. In turn, this failed high modernism, which was always popularly supposed to depend, of course, on rhetoric of progress, evolution, and advancement, now casts its own shadow back over the earlier phases of modernism which arose in very different socio-historical contexts. Thus when modernism is nowadays criticised it is often hard to know what is, at root, being targeted: our image of early and heroic modernism is so influenced (not to say tainted) by the later high modernism that modernism *tout court* can seem to be insidious, unenjoyable, and bleak. To put the point more simply, we conjure up an idealised and rather unfair mental image of some hideously complex and unpleasant piece from the 1960s, and then extrapolate backwards, as it were, to the beginnings of modernism, the whole of which can then be laughingly dismissed as an historical aberration.

It is therefore becoming increasingly hard to assess the claims that have surrounded any music that has been deemed to be modernist. On the one hand there is the acute crisis of confidence in the high-modernist mainstream, the extent of which is already obvious; but on the other hand, it is equally clear that the compositional developments that have dominated stylistic histories of the twentieth century cannot simply be wished away, so that we can take up anew from where Strauss and Mahler left off—although some composers have indeed returned to this soundworld. These dilemmas are difficult, and they have been compounded by the polemical and indeed polarised claims that have surrounded modernist music. Specifically, some modernism has historically had a great deal claimed for it, by its composers as well as by a small, influential group of critics. The obvious and most memorable claims have been Schoenberg's own sense of the historical inevitability of atonality,¹⁵ and then

¹⁴ Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5, 153–60. See the discussion of David Harvey and Terry Eagleton in Chapter 1, sections 2–3.

¹⁵ See, for example, the essays 'How one becomes Lonely' and 'My Public' in Schoenberg, *Style and*

Boulez's later assertion that musicians who did not see the historical importance of dodecaphony were useless.¹⁶ Now it is not difficult to suggest that such remarks are born of an agonising insecurity; but it is also telling that they should provoke such vehement rejections nowadays: the strength of feeling that is thus provoked is a sure sign of the perceived hegemony of the historical narrative that leads from late-Wagner through to total serialism. In other words, the fact that nowadays people bother themselves with atonality and serialism at all—if only to denounce them at length—only reinforces the nagging feeling that we are somehow dealing with something stylistically very significant indeed. Moreover, in reacting to modernism, some antimodernists and/or postmodernists have essentially made just as portentous claims, albeit simply with their aesthetic polarities reversed.¹⁷ In such a situation one could be forgiven for thinking that whilst stylistic solutions differ, the underlying compositional problems remain the same.

All of these difficulties are then raised to a higher power by the fundamental aesthetic problems posed by musical modernism. It is almost a platitude to say that perilously few people seem to want to listen to it; but modernist music has for some time now provoked much more damning reactions, to the effect, even, that the music is unnatural in some fundamental sense.¹⁸ Such claims remain highly contentious, and they are often, to be sure, polemical and provocative rather than seriously intellectual. However, their pull results from the fact that musical modernism has surely never achieved the sort of acceptance and audience that *have* greeted modernist literature and art. The (comparative) popularity and cultural reach of a Picasso or a Huxley, for example, must seem like the sheerest pipedream to devotees of Schoenberg or Boulez. It is not surprising, given this context, that interdisciplinary surveys of modernism regularly and indeed frequently make only the most cursory of references to music; the *Cambridge Companion to Modernism*, for instance, has no chapter devoted to music and pays no significant attention to the art-form.¹⁹ Thus an interesting historical situation arises in which there is scarcely a more radical or challenging modernism

Idea, 30–53 and 96–9.

¹⁶ Pierre Boulez, *Stocktakings from an Apprenticeship*, trans. Stephen Walsh (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1991), 113.

¹⁷ See, for example, Paul Griffiths's claim (discussed in section 1 below) that the composer approaches music history as if it were a completed building. Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 264.

¹⁸ A recent variant on this theme will be examined in Chapter 5.

¹⁹ Michael Levenson, *The Cambridge Companion to Modernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

than musical modernism—and everyone agrees that radicalism and challenge are central to what we understand modernism to be; but, at the same time, the very severity of this challenge has won for modernist music a tiny audience, and thus a seemingly minor role in modernism as a whole. This tense confrontation has been provoked by the fact that for much of the twentieth century there seems to have been a kind of institutionalised blindness to the ever-widening gap between the supposed historical importance of modernism and its actual social role in the concert halls and beyond.²⁰ To put the point in the language of today's anti-modernists: as the historical claims of the modernists became ever more inflated, so did their music become ever more unheard. Once again the appraisal of modernism as a whole is skewed by a violent reaction to high modernism.

A further difficulty of the subject is that of its parochialism: because high modernism did not win widespread attention, much of its theorisation and reception emanated from precisely the institutional background which was also supporting it financially.²¹ The story of the development of this putatively modernist academy, in which composition became tied to the professionalisation of music theory, has already been touched upon in Chapter 3; undoubtedly this convergence of power, particularly as personified in the figure of Milton Babbitt,²² goes some way towards explaining why high modernism was felt to be tyrannical. Indeed, much of the writing of the high modernists now appears to be little more than self-serving propaganda on behalf of composers who were all too transparently securing their own role in the Western post-war climate of ideas.²³ But the debunking and dethroning of this sort of modernism that is increasingly common today shows that similar desires remain: this debunking is often done by critics and composers who are in many ways merely clearing historical space for themselves in much the same manner as the modernists, and in the same institutional (that is, usually academic) settings.²⁴ In other words, it is a measure of the past ideological dominance of this modernism that it has nowadays fallen so far. Some claim that this modernism was never, in fact, dominant in the first place,

²⁰ This aspect of modernism is strongly critiqued by Dai Griffiths: see section 4 below.

²¹ This alliance is discussed by Patrick McCreless, 'Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory', in David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian, and Lawrence Siegel, ed., *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia: 1997), 13–53.

²² Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5, 136, 157–60.

²³ Notably Boulez's aforementioned claim as to the importance of serialism.

²⁴ Such an atmosphere pervades Peter Davison, ed., *Reviving the Muse: Essays on Music after Modernism* (Brinkworth: Claridge Press, 2001). The rallying point for several of the essays in this collection is Scruton's *The Aesthetics of Music*.

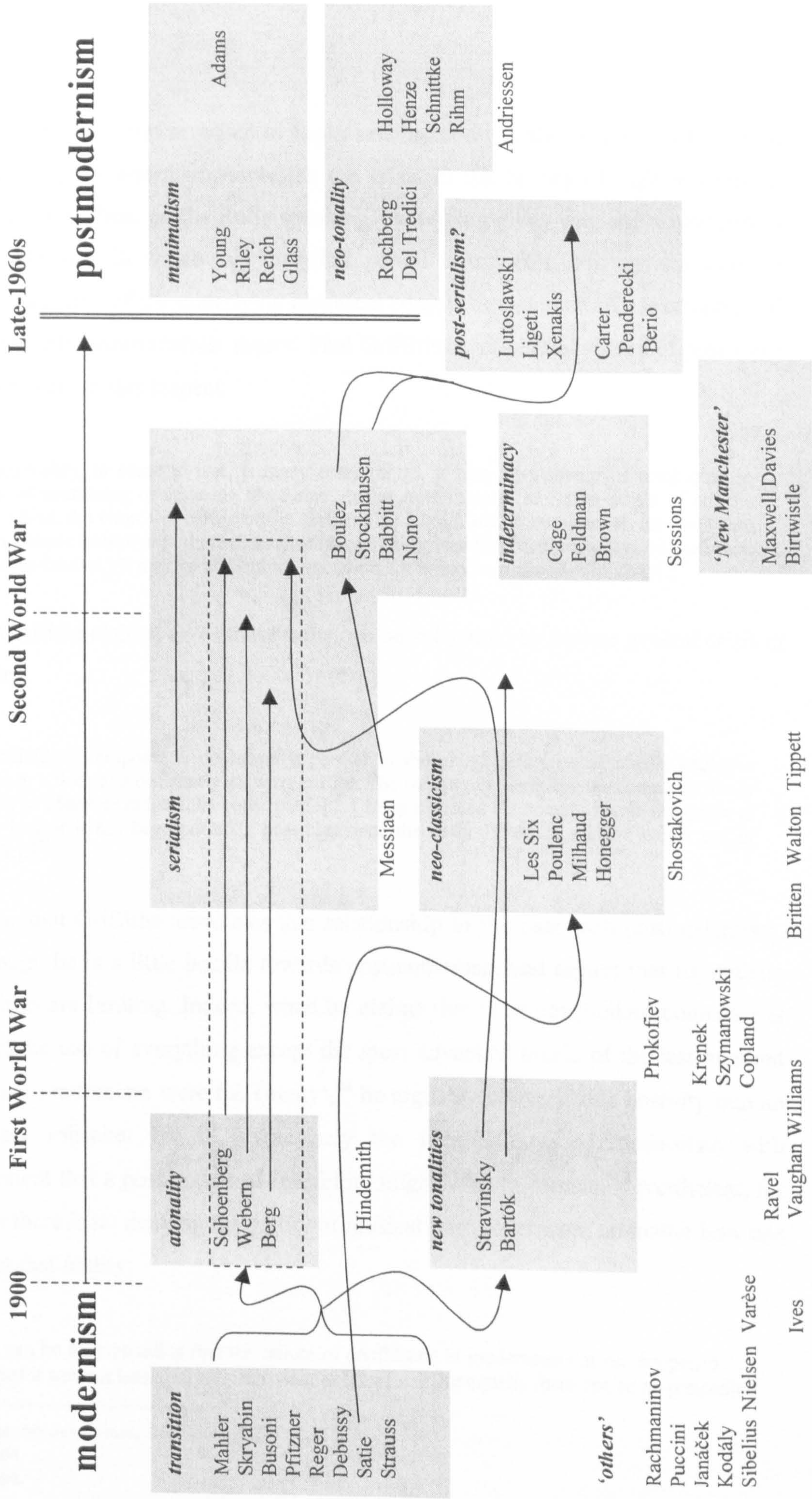
citing the rare performances it won, and the lack of attention it garnered.²⁵ But that is beside the point: modernism was clearly felt, whether one liked it or not, to be at the front-line of history, a judgement that had very little to do with its popularity in the present. The now unfashionable nature of this argument indicates not only our own distance from modernism, but also the pressing need for a sympathetic reassessment of its achievements.

But all of the above must be placed temporarily on hold: for there is a problem in formulating the difficulties of modernism, if difficulties they are, in the ways outlined above. What tends to result from consideration of the ideas proposed so far is a lurid tale, which goes as follows: modernism culminated in high modernism and then fell; the cultural supersession of modernism was marked by the way in which high modernism was read back into all of modernism; and the whole shebang was then consigned to the historical dustbin. In stylistic terms, that is, the underlying generator of this narrative remains, essentially, the twists and turns of tonality as an organising power in music. High modernism, then, represents a culmination of styles which can be defined negatively as avoiding tonality; this definition is not entirely helpful, but it removes the difficulties of formulating more positive stylistic criteria. This avoidance of tonality, however, is then read backwards into modernism to confirm what many have suspected, which is that a longer process of tonal decay can be traced back towards some idealised point when tonality was somehow fresh. The ramifications of this, in terms of a broader understanding of modernity, can scarcely be underestimated, and they will be discussed in Chapter 5. But what is important from the perspective of stylistic history is that such a narrative restricts early and heroic modernisms to those that can fit into the trajectory leading up to high modernism. Thus, the arguments of those postmodernists who take high modernism as starting-point and springboard from which to reject modernism *tout court* effectively underline the narrative that drove the progression towards high modernism in the first place. This is musically problematic, for what it continues to propose is a model of music history—for the twentieth century, at least—which remains rooted around considerations of pitch and harmony. The return of tonality, which is read by many as a sign of musical postmodernism, thus continues to accept that tonality needed to return—that something significant, in other words, interrupted it—and thus

²⁵ Joseph N. Straus, 'The Myth of Serial "Tyranny" in the 1950s and 1960s', *Musical Quarterly* 83/3 (1999), 301–343.

postmodernism ends up accepting more or less the same history as the modernists, albeit evaluated differently. If this sounds rather abstract and belaboured, then one should consider the ease with which we now tell the tale of the movement from modernism to postmodernism; what gets elided in these tonality-centred tales is the underlying socio-historical shift from one cultural era into another. Any assessment of the stylistic musical histories of the twentieth century will need to begin, therefore, with a critical survey of their narratives.

Figure 4.1 The twentieth century?



The most obvious point at which to begin such a survey is the very recent transition into musical postmodernism, in which the crisis in the history of high modernism reaches a point when, aesthetically speaking, something gives way and a new period is born. The way in which this historical period is transferred to stylistic musical detail reveals little of the underlying historical conjuncture, and often a less than ideal familiarity with postmodernist theory. Paul Griffiths's influential survey of post-1945 music is typical in this respect:

Postmodernism, to come to that, is many other things. It may be a matter of composing as before, of continuing or restoring the forms, genres, and rhetoric of earlier music, if not the ethics. (Also, the choice of earlier music seems to be forced, oddly, between, on the one hand, the symphonic tradition of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and on the other, Bach-cum-Pérotin.) It may be all jumbled quotation. Or it may be a question of irony[.]²⁶

In fact, Griffiths claims, all of these traits can be subsumed by a more general crisis in historicity:

The individual composer is no longer a partner in the grand enterprise of music, adding a cornice or a floor to a constantly growing edifice. The building is complete; the composer stands outside, as observer rather than participant. [...] Even the need for novelty seems no longer to apply, in that it has been perfectly possible, since the early 1980s, to make a career out of pastiche[.]²⁷

It is clear that Griffiths associates this relationship to the past with postmodernism, even though he is a little hostile towards postmodernism and argues that its stylistic possibilities are limiting. Indeed, when he claims that 'The postmodern composer is free to make use of everything except the most advanced music of the last hundred years, as if modernism were the enemy',²⁸ he arguably converts this hostility into an elementary mistake: for it is precisely the identification of modernism with advancement that a postmodernist sensibility might wish to dispute. Nevertheless, for Griffiths there is no denying the reality of musical postmodernism, no matter how one evaluates that reality:

There can be no pretending that the failure of confidence in modernism has not happened—or even that it was not bound to happen sooner or later [....] But equally there can be no pretending

²⁶ Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 240.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 264.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 264.

that the failure of confidence in modernism might make possible a replacement of confidence in the nineteenth-century symphony or whatever. The challenge of the postmodern age [...] is to search out what seems to be necessary, even if it may only be necessary for the moment. The opportunity of the postmodern age is that there need be no limitations to this search—least of all a limitation by canons of the past. A freedom only to quote and re-enact is a limp sort of freedom.²⁹

It is thus apparent that, for Griffiths, postmodernism consists mainly of what one might term a newly configured relationship to a musical past. He is far from untypical in this respect, for it is this relationship to the past, and its stylistic ramifications, which has come to be the principal reference of musical postmodernism. This embraces several differing but interrelated dimensions: firstly, some critics point to a return of tonality, albeit one in which imperatives of compositional originality are retained; others theorise a different return to tonality, this time via pastiche; a third strand of postmodernism would be the polystylism in which, as Griffiths says, music history appears complete, and thus a book from whose pages one might paste together new music.

A sense of this loss of diachrony can be found in Jonathan Kramer's well-known overview of musical postmodernism, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism'.³⁰ In a brief discussion of the psychologist Kenneth Gergen's study, *The Saturated Self*, Kramer makes it clear precisely what he associates with postmodernism: 'Fragmentation. Discontinuity. Lack of connection. Lack of linear logic. Postmodernism.'³¹ This comes after Kramer has already given a long list of the characteristics of musical postmodernism, in which familiar motifs predominate. Three of his 16 characteristics, for instance, seem to refer to polystylism on some level; the governing factor here is essentially the breakdown of the distinction between 'high' art and mass culture:

[Postmodernist music:]

4. challenges barriers between "high" and "low" styles;
6. questions the mutual exclusivity of elitist and populist values;
9. includes quotations of or references to music of many traditions and cultures;³²

And some of Kramer's other characteristics seem similarly complacent, echoes of a heavily aestheticised postmodernism:

²⁹ Ibid., 265.

³⁰ Jonathan D. Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', in Judy Lochhead and Joseph Auner, ed., *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 13–26.

³¹ Ibid., 20.

³² Ibid., 16.

11. embraces contradictions;
12. distrusts binary oppositions;
13. includes fragmentations and discontinuities;
14. encompasses pluralism and eclecticism;³³

It is unclear, however, how postmodernist music might 'distrust binary oppositions'; this odd statement seems to grant a degree of agency to the music which will strike many as quirky, to say the least. Moreover, claims 11, 13, and 14 might all be seen as variations on a similar theme, that of claim 9, since quotations of many styles of music will surely inevitably lead to discontinuities or 'contradictions'; and eclecticism is presumably also unsurprising in this regard since it would be reasonable to assume that it is a certain degree of eclecticism that allows such quotations in the first place. Kramer's other characteristics of postmodernist music are similarly unhelpful: postmodernist music 'is, on some level and in some way, ironic'—a significant-sounding claim which is, in fact, not aided by its not giving any sense whatsoever as to what musical irony might be.³⁴ Problems of agency return again when Kramer claims that postmodernist music 'considers music not as autonomous but as relevant to cultural, social, and political contexts': after all, it is surely not music itself that considers anything at all; it is rather musicologists who consider music, and seeing as modernism has increasingly been shown to be related to a particular socio-historical conjuncture,³⁵ it remains unclear why this characteristic should in any way help to define musical postmodernism. A similar problem pertains to Kramer's claim that postmodernist music 'locates meaning and even structure in listeners, more than in scores, performances, or composers': does the music itself do this? Surely it is rather postmodernist musicology that has tried to accomplish such a move,³⁶ unless Kramer is arguing that postmodernist music is *scriptible* in Barthes's sense—a text designed to produce its reader, and one which might more normally be associated with modernism.³⁷

³³ Ibid., 16.

³⁴ For one answer to this question, see Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 199–217.

³⁵ See, for example, Ben Parsons, 'Arresting Boulez', *Journal of the Royal Musical Association* 129/1 (2004), 161–76.

³⁶ And why claim that meaning or structure cannot be located in the audience (rather than scores) of modernist music itself?

³⁷ For a discussion in relation to the work of Fredric Jameson, see Steven Helmling, *The Success and Failure of Fredric Jameson: Writing, the Sublime, and the Dialectic of Critique* (Albany: SUNY Press, 2001), 22–23.

Such problems arise because Kramer has very little sense of what sort of concept postmodernism might be:³⁸ he tries to foreground this at the beginning of his essay ('Does the term refer to a period or an aesthetic, a listening attitude or a compositional practice?'),³⁹ but then falls into a familiar trap: after expressing some doubt over the very type of concept postmodernism is, he nevertheless stamps his foot and asks 'simply, what *is* postmodernism?'⁴⁰ Plausible answers to this question are then sifted through, but because they tend to be largely stylistic answers, the original (possible) breadth of the concept is lost. What this suggests is that the critic already has an idea of what postmodernism is in the back of his or her mind; and often enough this will come from some piece or other which s/he believes to be postmodernist, on the basis of what s/he has already admitted to be an uncertain appreciation of postmodernism. In Kramer's case this is then referenced back, retrospectively, to the work of (just one) psychologist, who is discussed quite out of any context and backed up by intuitive empirical evidence from Kramer himself as he sits—saturated by technological stimuli, his identity bombarded by many demands on its attention—at his desk.⁴¹ Thus postmodernism does indeed come to resemble a cultural logic in Fredric Jameson's sense, but with none of Jameson's subtlety in distinguishing between different levels of base and superstructure, and with none of Jameson's understanding of why this should happen when it does. After all, if Kramer wants to locate postmodernism in today's world, then he must surely realise that he writes from only one particular perspective in a rather privileged location; the geopolitics of this demand an explanation. Moreover, in focussing on the transformative potential of technology, he would seem to reconnect with a diachrony he claims is otherwise sundered in postmodernism, since any understanding of the development of technology and the changes in everyday life that it effects will require a genuine sense of history in the first place, in order to work out what, precisely, has changed (and continues to change) in a postmodernist age.⁴²

These conceptual problems are significant, but it is more interesting to probe the stylistic features of what writers such as Kramer consider to be postmodernist music. In Jann Pasler's *New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians* article on

³⁸ See Peter Sedgwick, untitled review of Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, *twentieth-century music* 1/1 (2004), 130–5.

³⁹ Kramer, 'The Nature and Origins of Musical Postmodernism', 13.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 13.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 20.

⁴² See, for instance, the Jameson's discussion of technology, as presented in Chapter 2, section 2.

postmodernism, the author identifies three trends which have 'determined the change from a Modernist to a postmodernist sensibility in music':⁴³

1. a 'postmodernism of reaction': a reaction to 'the internationalisation of Modernism, to the centrality of Europe in that tradition and to abstraction as a universal language, particularly that which developed in Darmstadt after World War II.'⁴⁴
2. a 'postmodernism of resistance', which 'question[s] rather than exploit[s] cultural codes and explore[s] rather than conceal[s] any associated social or political affiliations.'⁴⁵
3. a postmodernism of 'connection or interpenetration, [which] results when a work's juxtapositions involve an eclectic inclusion of material from disparate discourses'.⁴⁶

The differing modalities of these three postmodernisms are interesting, and they suggest similarities with two of the dimensions of postmodernism that were deduced from Griffiths's remarks discussed earlier. Pasler's postmodernism of 'connection or interpenetration' is clearly linked to an eclectic polystylism; her postmodernism of resistance, on the other hand, might be aligned with a return to tonality, but one which retains a sense of stylistic development and which is judged via a perceived desire for originality on the level of one's musical *content*, rather than originality in the *form* (assembling) of that content.

A predictable and familiar list of postmodernist works thus emerges from such stylistic prescriptions. In a significant and playful survey of this terrain, Robin Holloway identifies two ways in which modernism 'thawed' and metamorphosed into postmodernism. The first of these challenges 'came from within the citadel itself':⁴⁷

⁴³ Pasler, 'Postmodernism', 213.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 213–4. There are two aspects to this: the content of this particular mainstream is judged to be problematic; but also, of course, the very idea of a mainstream itself also comes under renewed attack.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 214. These two types of postmodernism are borrowed from Hal Foster: see 'Postmodernism: A Preface', in Foster, ed., *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture* (New York: Free Press, 1998), xii.

⁴⁶ Pasler, 'Postmodernism', 215.

⁴⁷ Robin Holloway, 'Modernism and After', in Davison, *Reviving the Muse*, 97.

Ligeti's *Atmosphères*, *Lontano*, *Aventures*, *Nouvelles Aventures*, and later the Horn Trio. The other thaw came from outside: the music of John Cage. Holloway writes, rather disparagingly, that

Under his mind-softening influence, the avant-garde changed overnight from total rigour to total anarchy, in a happy chaos of multimedia 'happenings', fast-food Zen Buddhism and games of chance, whose spiritual value could be assured by evoking the *I-Ching*, and whose intellectual respectability was provided by Mallarmé's *Un coup de dès*.⁴⁸

But it is a work by another composer that Holloway focuses on: one of the 'less pretentious pieces' from this second thaw by one of 'its more musical exponents': Berio's *Sinfonia*.⁴⁹ This piece has attracted significant attention from critics searching for a musical postmodernism because its third movement uses the Scherzo from Mahler's Second Symphony as a kind of compositional background, against which fragments, quotations, and distortions of many other works by many other composers are then juxtaposed. This creates a striking interweaving of musical material, which is commented upon by the vocal octet which complements the orchestra, adding another layer of quotations to the texture.⁵⁰ Pasler's postmodernism of 'connection or interpenetration' suggests itself here as an ideal critical model for this movement.

Another work that plays a central role in this stylistic understanding of postmodernism is George Rochberg's Third String Quartet.⁵¹ This quartet provides examples of both a return to a more tonal soundworld—particularly in the long central movement, a set of pseudo-pastiche variations hazily reminiscent of juicy and idealised post-Schubertian harmony—and also the brute juxtaposition of contrasting historical styles and allusions. The work, however, has won a critical following not so much because of its popularity, but because of the aesthetic claims of its composer. Reacting specifically against a dominant modernism, Rochberg fashioned arguments in his writings that now seem to mesh comfortably with stylistic understandings of postmodernism:

⁴⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁰ For a discussion, see Griffiths, *Modern Music and After*, 164–7. Jane Piper Clendinning also alights on the *Sinfonia* in 'Postmodern Architecture/Postmodern Music', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 119–40.

⁵¹ Holloway, 'Modernism and After', 100. For a discussion, see Mark Berry, 'Music, Postmodernism, and George Rochberg's Third String Quartet', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 235–48. See also Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5, 429–34. Holloway also mentions his own recompositions of Schumann alongside Rochberg's pastiche.

I stand in a circle of time, not a line. 360 degrees of past, present, future. All around me. I can look in any direction I want to.⁵²

The crisis in historicity thus provoked a magpie approach to composition, in which, if the edifice of history really is judged to be complete (as in Griffiths's claim viewed earlier), composers can pick and choose the bits that they would like to use to fashion postmodernist works. It is less often remarked that in Rochberg's case, at least, the change in style from academic serialism to pastiche had a direct biographical cause—namely, the death of the composer's young son, and Rochberg's subsequent desire, as Taruskin puts it, to 'recapture a lost expressive range'.⁵³

It is striking how this historical-quotation model of musical postmodernism has dominated recent writing on the subject. In a recent essay on Ligeti, for instance, Mike Searby associates postmodernism with a softening of modernism, particularly through 'much plundering of past styles'.⁵⁴ Ligeti's recent music, he claims, has tended towards 'greater approachability and an almost tonal or modal (or at least, in [Ligeti's] words, "non-atonal") language'.⁵⁵ Moreover, in a recently published collection of essays entitled *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* this sort of postmodernism rules the roost.⁵⁶ This is an unsatisfying and (already) much-criticised volume,⁵⁷ yet it deserves some consideration simply because it is one of relatively few books devoted specifically to musical postmodernism. It should not be assumed, however, that this collection of essays is in any way adequate: indeed, it is mentioned in the Introduction to the recent *Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* as seeming 'to represent the most conservative kind of extension of postmodernism's range'.⁵⁸ The author of this judgement, Steven Connor, pulls no punches in his appraisal of musicology:

The relative conservatism and autonomy of the world of academic music study may account for its long resistance to postmodernist formulations and arguments. [...] The essays are concerned to establish analogies and continuities between postmodern discourse and the discussion of

⁵² George Rochberg, *The Aesthetics of Survival* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1984), 158. Quoted in Berry, 'Music, Postmodernism, and George Rochberg's Third String Quartet', 238.

⁵³ Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5, 434.

⁵⁴ Mike Searby, 'Ligeti the Postmodernist?', *Tempo* no. 199 (1997), 9.

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, 9.

⁵⁶ Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*.

⁵⁷ See, particularly, Adam Krims, 'Postmodern Musicology in Combined Development', *twentieth-century music* 1/1 (2004), 127–30, and Sedgwick, untitled review of Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 130–5.

⁵⁸ Steven Connor, 'Introduction', in *The Cambridge Companion to Postmodernism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 17.

concert music. Scarcely anywhere in the collection is there acknowledgement of the difference made by the enormous reconfiguration not only of the sphere of music in general, but even of the terms and conditions of concert music. It would be possible to characterize the postmodernism of music not in terms of the stylistic changes and changes to musical language that take place in scores and in concert halls, but in terms of the explosion of collaborations and fusions, and the many ways in which the gap between classical and popular music has been narrowed.⁵⁹

If this seems a little harsh, one might point to the level of analysis in some of the essays Connor is referencing. In reply, for instance, to the question ‘How did postmodernism in music begin?’, Jane Piper Clendinning answers, ‘Composers simply started writing pieces that could be characterized as postmodern.’⁶⁰ Such explanations point to the weaknesses of the look-see approach to postmodernism, in which what is desired is a set of characteristics which one can spot at a quick glance: such theories remain superficial in any genuinely historical sense, because they fail to address (or even consider) why such stylistic changes should arise at the time when they do. In Clendinning’s case, this allows her to transfer a simplistic model of aesthetic characteristics from architecture to music, simply picking out works which fit the desired criteria: any focussed reflection on the musical materials of compositions, and the way in which they have become historically sedimented in particular ways which it might be useful to characterise as postmodernist, is avoided. What we are given instead are two quick examples of postmodernist music—John Corigliano’s *The Ghosts of Versailles* and Ligeti’s Piano Concerto, both of which privilege ‘multiple styles and allusions’⁶¹—and then the inevitable definition of postmodernism, drawn from examples which were already decided to be postmodernist:

complexity and contradiction, messy vitality, richness over clarity, many levels of meaning, a combination of forms, decoration and ornament for its own sake, mixed media, symbolism, representationalism, and starting with the listener’s value system rather than seeking to impose the composer’s values on the listener.⁶²

The similarities with Jonathan Kramer’s list are striking, as are the common weaknesses. Again, some of these characteristics might well be judged to be those of

⁵⁹ Ibid., 17. Some of this criticism is inaccurate, though: concert music is not the only focus of the volume, and some authors (notably Martin Scherzinger) do exhibit a sound grasp of postmodernist theory.

⁶⁰ Clendinning, ‘Postmodern Architecture/Postmodern Music’, 130.

⁶¹ Ibid., 134.

⁶² Ibid., 135.

modernism (complexity, messy vitality, many levels of meaning, and so on); others are too vague or undefined to be helpful (symbolism); others still impart, again, an agency to the music which it is difficult to take seriously: why should Ligeti's Piano Concerto be considered to start with the listener's value system? Who does this 'start'ing—Ligeti? The work itself? How do we know? Which listeners are we talking about?

Clendinning is by no means the only author in this collection of essays to fall into these difficulties, and she at least attempts to codify postmodernism. Other writers are much more evasive:⁶³ Ross Feller discusses Hal Foster's (by now) rather familiar scheme of resistive versus reactive postmodernisms, associating postmodernism generally with what might be termed the transgressive and anti-closural aspects of the music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough;⁶⁴ Paul Attinello scrupulously avoids defining either modernism or postmodernism, yet associates the latter with 'implosion of existing hierarchies and narratives';⁶⁵ and Björn Heile adopts a similarly inadequate approach in which he makes the by no means new claim that postmodernism is a counter-image of modernism rather than its antithesis, and thus the two can coexist in a fruitful artistic tension.⁶⁶ This is true enough, and Heile's reading of Mauricio Kagel's music in these terms is rewarding; but it nevertheless remains the case that modernism is associated simplistically with control and unity, with postmodernism signifying collage, intertextuality, and heterogeneity.

It is interesting that the essays in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought* that now seem particularly problematic are, by and large, those dealing with postmodernism as it can be found in contemporary art music, such as the latter term is acceptable. Traditional musicologists, that is, seem to have a particularly weak understanding of postmodernism, in which the concept is treated warily and uneasily,

⁶³ Or even faintly ridiculous: in his contribution Joakim Tillman takes us painstakingly through the shifting definitions assigned to postmodernism by Hermann Danuser. Every time the definition changes, so does the reading of particular works as postmodernist; one could barely imagine a more formalistic approach to style. See Tillman, 'Postmodernism and Art Music in the German Debate', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 75–91.

⁶⁴ Ross Feller, 'Resistant Strains of Postmodernism: The Music of Helmut Lachenmann and Brian Ferneyhough', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 249–62.

⁶⁵ Paul Attinello, 'Imploding the System: Kagel and the Deconstruction of Modernism', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 263–85.

⁶⁶ Heile reads this relationship as dialogical in the Bakhtinian sense. See Björn Heile, 'Collage vs. Compositional Control: The Interdependency of Modernist and Postmodernist Approaches in the Work of Mauricio Kagel', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 287–99.

before being equated with some or other stylistic characteristics which can then be found in the music of a composer decided in advance to be postmodernist. It is very striking that in the essays in this collection which attempt to conceive of postmodernism not as a particular set of stylistic attributes, but as a socio-historical era in which music is now consumed and created, a rather different sort of analysis results: Timothy D. Taylor, for instance, is one of very few authors in this collection to sense the way in which Jameson's theory of postmodernism is an attempt to bring together stylistic and historical aspects of postmodernism, and subsume them under a broader economic logic. 'Rather than claiming that there is some kind of music out there that we could call postmodern,' he writes, 'I am going to argue instead that modes of representation and marketing of music have changed in the last decade or so: classical musicians are more commodified than ever before, and contemporary composers face even greater pressures to make themselves known. [...] Most discussions of postmodernism and music talk about sounds only, and there is far less attention to what music (as form and practice) in postmodernity might be.'⁶⁷ Even if what results from this brief is a rather superficial and one-sided appraisal of contemporary culture, the attempt is at least made.⁶⁸

The same cannot be said for Robin Holloway's summary of modernism and postmodernism, which, although it appears in a different volume of essays, exhibits similar weaknesses to some of the authors in *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*. In his pithy appraisal of modernism he argues that 'Modernism meant an avidity for newness to carry music forward into realms of sensibility, organisation, sound itself, that had not existed before.'⁶⁹ But, crucially, and in a direct echo of Griffiths's assessment of our current historical position,

The prevailing feeling is now that everything is complete, all that can be discovered has been, the elements can only be recycled in different alignments and juxtaposition. There is a sense that the great pioneers went too far, too fast [...] and in doing so a certain straightforward reciprocity between composer and audience was warped.⁷⁰

This means that postmodernism in music

⁶⁷ Timothy D. Taylor, 'Music and Musical Practices in Postmodernity', in Lochhead and Auner, *Postmodern Music/Postmodern Thought*, 93 and 102.

⁶⁸ It is also made in several other essays in the book, notably those that emanate from newer branches of musicology, such as the study of pop and film musics.

⁶⁹ Holloway, 'Modernism and After', 107.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, 107.

is tidying up after the orgy, putting the pieces together again, restoring the gaps and attempting to set up an establishment that will attract and satisfy a clientele. Hence the backward-looking, whether evasive or frank, of so much contemporary music. It is saying: 'Come in and hear our pieces. You'll like them, you'll understand them—music is music again!'⁷¹

Stylistically this produces an understanding of postmodernism as a nostalgic return to the materials of an earlier expressive world. In so doing, postmodernism promises to assimilate and move on from modernism: 'The discoveries of atonal, serial and post-serial pitch organisation can be integrated into the unchangeable verities of the harmonic series and the perceptual powers and pleasures of the human ear.'⁷²

Such a formulation may well appear to be unproblematic; an excellent example, however, of the problems to which it might lead is provided by the strange case of musical minimalism. Minimalism has often been casually linked with postmodernism,⁷³ but it has been unclear in what respects this linkage is valid. In one sense, of course, minimalism is literally post-modernist and perhaps the most significant movement to succeed modernism in terms of sheer chronology: there surely can be no doubt that the early minimalist pioneers, La Monte Young and Terry Riley, positioned themselves negatively against a perceived institutionalised modernism—'serialism under a balmy Californian sun', as Holloway rather disparagingly puts it.⁷⁴ Or, in the words of Edward Strickland:

complexity had achieved the status of a professional credential; Serialism, particularly in its American academic institutionalization of received European wisdom, in practice often prized opacity for its own sake as evidence of the ingenuity and sophistication of the composer. [...] The spare figures of Minimal music would very likely not have emerged but from the intricate ground of academic Serialism.⁷⁵

Keith Potter puts it more strongly still: minimalism 'came to be widely seen as the major antidote to Modernism',⁷⁶ and, indeed, reference is made to Philip Glass and Terry Riley's 'synthesis of classical and "popular" styles' on the very first page of Jameson's *Postmodernism, or, the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*.⁷⁷ Several

⁷¹ Ibid., 108.

⁷² Ibid., 110–1.

⁷³ See, for example, *ibid.*, 100.

⁷⁴ Ibid., 101.

⁷⁵ Edward Strickland, *Minimalism: Origins* (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1993), 120. See also Taruskin, *The Oxford History of Western Music*, vol. 5, 356, 362–3, 366–7.

⁷⁶ Keith Potter, 'Minimalism', in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrrell, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn, vol. 16 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 716.

⁷⁷ Jameson, *Postmodernism*, 1.

different stylistic versions of postmodernism are thus invoked: there is a difference between, on the one hand, seeing minimalism as stylistically opposed to modernism, and, on the other hand, seeing minimalism as a synthesis of classical and popular. The latter of these alternatives is surely the one that meshes most comfortably with the understanding of postmodernism that views music history as complete—a polystylistic postmodernism, in other words, of collage and juxtaposition.

However, it is another dimension of minimalism which might also seem to draw it close to postmodernism: namely, its commercial success, which contrasts sharply with the immediately preceding high modernism. Indeed, it is precisely this sense of difference that provides minimalism with its customary role in music history: it is palpably configured as something new, popular, accessible, and exciting, as opposed to the boring, unfriendly, and, above all, difficult modernism. It is hard to capture this sense of refreshment for which minimalism stands, but a measure of it can be sampled in Holloway's jealous jibe that 'younger successful composer in this vein tend to put their most fetching invention into their titles—e.g. John Adams (*Nixon in China*; *Harmonielehre*; *Shaker Loops*); Michael Torke (*Ecstatic Orange*; *Bright Blue Music*; *The Yellow Pages*). There is no neo-classicism or neo-romanticism in this music, but neither is there much to listen to.'⁷⁸ These unguarded remarks reveal that originality on the level of content is indeed no longer vital; what is important instead, and what Holloway is clearly rankled by, is the *poverty* of content. However, to construe such content as poor is to rely on criteria of depth and profundity that may well contradict with the sense that, in postmodernism, the surface rules. Indeed, one might well wonder by what criteria Holloway makes his assessment that 'there [is not] much to listen to'; one can hardly criticise minimalism for using minimal amounts of musical materials, after all.⁷⁹

On some level, however, the very designation of minimalism as 'postmodernist' rests on another dimension of its opposition to modernism: namely, its return to tonal harmonies, which is by no means a universal stylistic property of the repertory, but which is, historically speaking, one of its most valued features. It is striking, though, how even this stylistic attribute can still fail to generate a

⁷⁸ Holloway, 'Modernism and After', 101.

⁷⁹ Moreover, if postmodernism has forsaken criteria of development and evolution that formally governed the 'progression' of music history, then one presumably cannot criticise minimalists for returning to 'simple' tonal harmonies. Holloway does not make this criticism, but others do.

sympathetic reading of minimalism. Holloway, for instance, differentiates popular minimalism from other styles of postmodernism:

Glass's much-quoted opinion of the modernist music he encountered during his years in Paris [...] is no doubt symptomatic. In finding Paris a 'wasteland' and its dominating musical taste 'crazy and creepy', he probably spoke for the unwitting millions who have subsequently flocked to minimalist events and bought their recorded albums. The huge international success of this movement in recent years is more akin to pop than classical mainstream and a far cry from the three-quarters-empty halls which confront contemporary composers of any other stylistic persuasion.⁸⁰

Popularity itself, then, is no guarantee of postmodernism, because Holloway fairly obviously would include himself under the category 'contemporary composers of any other stylistic persuasion'. And it is likewise clear that, for Holloway, a blunt opposition to a formerly dominant modernism does not allow for a productive understanding of postmodernism, because this would foreground (amongst others) the composers whom he here criticises, whilst sidelining postmodernists who are relatively unheard yet decidedly anti-modernist. From a stylistic point of view, too, this reading of postmodernism is unconvincing: one must surely differentiate between postmodernisms which use tonal materials (that is, a lot of classical minimalism) and those which actually stage a return of tonality itself (for example, the third movement of Rochberg's Third String Quartet). There is a further problem, however, which is that just referencing a refreshing change of sound-world does not necessarily take enough account of the conditions in which these new sound-worlds may be received: Judy Lochhead makes the astute point that whilst early minimalism did indeed reconfigure the role of the listener, by providing him/her with a more easily apprehendable structure, the underlying—supposedly modernist—concern with structural design remained paramount.⁸¹ Thus in respect of the early Steve Reich, for instance, rather than concentrating on the differences from modernism exhibited by the audibility of the music's processes, one might instead note the underlying concern on the part of the composer to achieve tight structural control over his music. In other words, postmodernism too can provoke or demand very close, focussed, structural listening; the sensuousness of its aural surfaces no more implies that it must be 'easy' to listen to than the expressiveness of modernism implies that *it* must be 'difficult'.

⁸⁰ Ibid., 100–1.

⁸¹ Judy Lochhead, 'Refiguring the Modernist Program for Hearing: Steve Reich and George Rochberg', in Ashby, *The Pleasure of Modernist Music*, 325–44.

Any appraisal of modernism and postmodernism which is, at root, based on little more than the feeling that modernism is nasty whereas postmodernism is nice will come to grief whenever it runs up against pieces which are stylistically postmodernist whilst also being aurally challenging in a way more normally associated with modernism. Indeed, any genuinely critical appraisal of modernism will surely find it necessary to re-examine the notion of difficulty itself, and refrain from making the essentialising move in which the complexity of high modernism is read back into all of modernism.

In any case, the problems that result from associating postmodernism with the return of tonality (or expression, or a simpler musical idiom, or whatever) arise not least because there is a mismatch between the two concepts. Postmodernism, on the understanding advocated in this thesis, is an historical period governed by a distinctive shift in the way in which capitalism has been viewed by certain Marxist cultural theorists. It thus cannot be restricted to matters of musical style alone, but rather indicates the historical context in which any style will be composed and received. Models of stylistic postmodernism are thus problematic: not only do they encourage a look-see approach to criticism, in which the critic essentially wants to identify (or not identify) a particular work as postmodernist, but they also establish style as a regulative idea when what might be seminal about postmodernism is the very dissolution of (classical) musical styles. In other words, this sort of understanding of postmodernism effects a reification, and the important backdrop to—and, indeed, cause of—postmodernism is lost from view amid a concentration on more formalistic details.

2

It should not come as a surprise, though, that stylistic histories of postmodernism engage in a certain amount of socio-historical abstraction: after all, postmodernism is defined more in negation of modernism than in positive affirmation of something new. And one of the most obvious characteristics of many extant musical histories of modernism is likewise a large degree of socio-historical abstraction. This has been especially true of stylistic histories: many Anglo-American histories essentially cover

the birth, maturing, and decline of the musical styles deemed to be modernist. Their most characteristic methodology has been a rather ad hoc mixture of piecemeal analytical observation and evolutionary narrative: what they provide is, basically, a story illustrated by examples.⁸² That the story is a particularly racy one is indisputable: the transformation of music around this time is staggering, one of the most signal changes of any art of modernity. Who could not be enticed by the internal changes of a musical system that had formerly seemed the bedrock of the art? Social histories of musical modernism are thus less common, for it must be supposed that they appear unable to address the specificity of the technical developments in musical expression of the time: indeed, one struggles to find an adequate example.⁸³ Some more recent histories of modernism have, to be sure, drawn on the contemporary fashion for contextualism to ground musical modernism amongst the other arts of the time⁸⁴—but these have not been social histories in the older, materialist sense of the term.⁸⁵

In the absence of socio-history, the fundamental stylistic development on which the stylistic histories have focussed is, of course, the rise of atonality. In the most general terms, this history tends to start with Wagner and trek inexorably towards Schoenberg. In the words of Robin Holloway:

Modern[ist] music as a whole consists of the entire spread of the post-Wagnerian century, a release of energies from the impact, whether direct, oblique, or in vehement rejection of the most influential composer there has ever been.⁸⁶

There is a strong touch of the hyperbolic in such analyses: the underlying historical thread is a much longer one, as pointed out on the very first page of Robert Morgan's *Twentieth-Century Music*. This is a sober and lengthy musicological account of the Western tradition viewed from the perspective of post-war American cultural life, which sees itself as having assumed an authority that formerly resided in Paris and

⁸² For celebrated examples, see Hans Heinz Stuckenschmidt, *Twentieth Century Music*, trans. Richard Deveson (London: Weidenfeld and Nicolson, 1969); William W. Austin, *Music in the 20th Century: From Debussy through Stravinsky* (London: Dent, 1966); Arnold Whittall, *Musical Composition in the Twentieth Century* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999).

⁸³ But see Robert P. Morgan, *Modern Times: From World War I to the Present* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1993).

⁸⁴ Glenn Watkins, *Pyramids at the Louvre* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994) and, particularly, Daniel Albright, *Untwisting the Serpent* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000).

⁸⁵ For a particularly provocative example, see Arnold Hauser's notorious *The Social History of Art* (London: Routledge, 1951).

⁸⁶ Holloway, 'Modernism and After', 93.

Vienna. A French or German musicologist would, given the same brief, produce a history that moved in a rather different direction. But few would disagree with the following claim:

traditional tonality did not collapse at once. The entire nineteenth century—arguably even the common-practice period as a whole—had witnessed a progressive weakening of its constructive force, along with corresponding shifts in compositional esthetic.⁸⁷

Morgan details this gradual collapse of tonality in terms which are very familiar. The common-practice period is located between, roughly, 1700 and 1900, and it was a time of common foundation. The classical style represents for this sort of history a kind of point of agreement: 'these composers [Gluck, Haydn, Mozart, and Beethoven] were all, in an essential way, speaking a shared musical tongue.'⁸⁸ It is this universal style that is progressively lost as the nineteenth century slips by, a consequence of the supposedly more individualist bent of composers increasingly surrendering classicism for romanticism. One of the technical results of this is an increased use of chromaticism and dissonance, 'stressed to a point where it became difficult to ascertain the consonant and diatonic basis from which they represented a departure. What this meant, in fact, was that both chromaticism and dissonance were no longer really thought of as "departures," but rather as norms.'⁸⁹

A change in the role of dissonance on a chordal level eventually filters through to the deeper levels of tonal music. Formerly the primacy of a single key (the tonic) was typically guaranteed, and it would be duly articulated in any given movement or work. This primacy ceded ground to more ambiguous tonal schemes—such as directional tonality,⁹⁰ or double-tonic complexes⁹¹—until the point is reached when the very notion of a governing key, and its concomitant, hierarchical distribution of subsidiary keys, is no longer appropriate. The power of tonality, in other words, wanes. There is a distinct sense in which the logical limits of tonality are felt to be reached; tonality is now felt to be a system of which composers are historically aware,

⁸⁷ Robert P. Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music: A History of Musical Style in Modern Europe and America* (New York: Norton, 1991), 1.

⁸⁸ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*, 3.

⁹⁰ This term is used to refer to movements which begin in one key and end in another, and also to whole works which begin in one key and tend towards another. An example of the latter is Nielsen's Fifth Symphony, in which some critics sense a discursive use of E-flat which supposedly prefigures the key of the final bars of the symphony.

⁹¹ Robert Bailey, ed., *Prelude and Transfiguration from Tristan and Isolde* (New York: Norton, 1985).

rather than it being merely some kind of second nature. The estrangement that this awareness effects catapults the gestures of tonality into the realms of cliché and convention; and so tonality itself hardens into something that might not yet *be* past, but undeniably something which now *has* a past, and can no longer be taken for granted.

To this Morgan adds a number of other important historical factors. One is the rise of nationalism: in a manner that parallels the mainstream developments (as they are portrayed), local resources drawn from the geographical periphery of Western art music are able to enrich tonality in new and interesting ways, most notably through the compositional incorporation of folk melody and harmony.⁹² But all of this takes place in a time when the social role of the artist is changing drastically: from the security and constraints of the older systems of patronage composers are ejected into a modern world in which they are nominally a littler freer, but very much less culturally secure.

These three coordinates—the decline of tonality, the shattering of a common practice, and the new social role of the artist—triangulate a terrain whose historical essence has been captured, in a notable study, as simply transitional.⁹³ There are obvious drawbacks to this designation, but it signifies one of the most important aspects of this moment, which is that of uncertainty. It is a period, a crisis, that undeniably produces some of the most enduring music of the Western world—from Mahler to Debussy, from Skryabin to Nielsen—but all of these developments have crystallised most significantly in the first years of the twentieth century, at which point a logical step is taken that overshadows them all, and tonality is finally abandoned in favour of something different: atonality. It is at this point that musical modernism is most commonly thought to begin.

Out of the ashes of tonality, then, a new sort of expression is formulated, one in which the former relations of consonance and dissonance are dissolved:

⁹² For an overview, see Jim Samson, 'Nations and nationalisms', in Samson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 568–600.

⁹³ See Jim Samson, *Music in Transition* (London: Dent, 1977). See also Anthony Pople, 'Styles and languages around the turn of the century', in Samson, ed., *The Cambridge History of Nineteenth-Century Music*, 601–20. Carl Dahlhaus presents a rather different view in his *Nineteenth-Century Music*, trans. J. Bradford Robinson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1989), 330–9.

The heroic pioneering phase [of modernism] is above all a time of liberations—emancipation of the dissonance in the atonality of Schoenberg, Berg and Webern, which seeks to register an unprecedented intensity and ramification in expressionist “onomatopoeia of the emotions”[.]⁹⁴

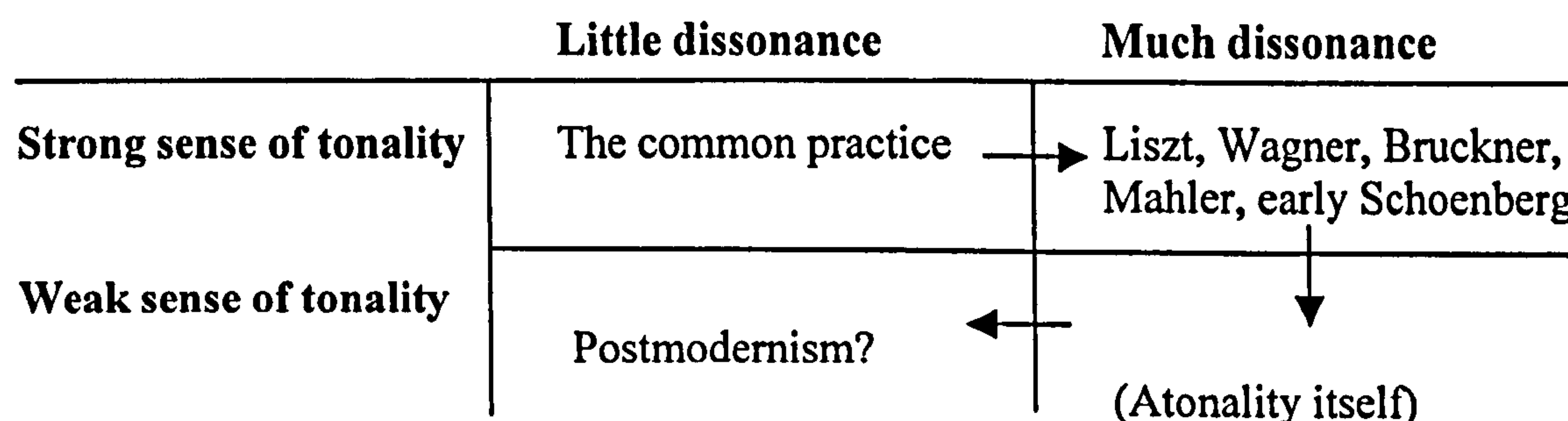
Dissonance is ‘freed’ and tonality falls. Much can be (and has been) said of this narrative, of course. One of the most common misunderstandings, ably dispatched by Morgan, is a persistent conceptual slippage between the realms of harmony and tonality, the result of a more generally uneasy appreciation of the hierarchal structure of tonal music. An increasing use of chromatic chords—the most historically emblematic case is invariably the *Tristan* chord—does not necessarily weaken the primacy of the tonic key at the top of the tonal hierarchy. Indeed, if the force of tonality wanes, then it is unclear quite what chromaticism (as a technical term) might refer to, since the very definition of chromaticism refers to those notes in the twelve-tone universe that do not belong to the diatonic scale on the tonic note. And, likewise, if dissonances are emancipated, and thus not expected to resolve, then to talk of dissonance is to tend towards meaningless: the most striking dissonances could be accommodated in hierarchical tonality—indeed, they were an inevitable projection of the logic of consonance itself—provided that their resolution, whether stated or implied, could be deduced. As long as dissonance was felt to be structurally secondary to consonance—which of course it was—then, no matter how dissonant any particular chord or passage of music was, the overall governance of tonality remained intact. The sheer weight of such dissonance does not necessarily weaken tonality; tonality weakens when dissonance begins to be no longer perceivable as such—when the relationship between consonance and dissonance starts to dissolve or reshape. But in such a situation, the very notions of chromaticism and dissonance become problematic, and eventually meaningless, because there is no longer anything to which they can be secondary. Clearly the weakening of tonality as an entire system points historically towards atonality, but if this cannot be explained by an internal narrative, in which tonality is itself the agent of its own demise, then one wonders what socio-historical explanations there might be for the phenomenon. To say that dissonance is freed, and tonality falls, begs two important questions: who is doing this freeing, and why?

Even if one remains unconvinced that one can differentiate usefully between degrees of tonality and dissonance, and even if one is sceptical as to the viability of

⁹⁴ Holloway, ‘Modernism and After’, 94.

such narratives based on changes in style that happen as if for no discernable socio-historical reason, it is theoretically possible to separate harmony and tonality and to show the various combinations that result:

Figure 4.2 Combinations of chromaticism and tonality



This, or something like it, is the implicit stylistic projection of contemporary narratives of the decline of tonality. In this combinatory atonality is a limiting case where tonality no longer functions and little substantial meaning accrues to dissonance; the combinations in which tonality remains in effect are comparatively uncontroversial. The slot into which one might drop postmodernism is more interesting: a return of common-practice harmony, but one in which tonality itself is felt to have lost something of its regulative force in any historical sense—thus one writes ‘tonally’, but the very quotation marks that must now surround ‘tonally’ mark the distance from an era when tonality was merely second nature.⁹⁵

The problem with the combinatory, however, is not the position given to postmodernism, but the arrows which point from the transitional figures towards atonality. If we have established that a simple increase in the frequency of dissonant chords or chromatic harmonies does not necessarily weaken tonality, then it is not clear what does weaken it. The stylistic answers to this question are increasingly well known: on one hand, the diminishing structural role of triads, and growing structural significance of sevenths and non-diatonic chords;⁹⁶ on the other, a barrage of techniques to weaken the effect of triads when they are present (from the repetition

⁹⁵ See the discussion of the Adorno’s critique of second-nature tonality in Max Paddison, *Adorno’s Musical Aesthetics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 81–97.

⁹⁶ For a survey, see Samson, *Music in Transition*, 1–55.

patterns of Debussy, the intricate counterpoint of Mahler or Reger, to the block-like constructions of Bruckner). This suggests that it is not so much the effect of chromaticism and dissonance that weakens tonality, but rather the treatment of diatonicism and consonance. But the causes of this change remain conspicuously unclear: why should tonality be weakened in the first place? What drives this process? Stylistic histories cannot answer such questions; or rather, they cannot answer them satisfactorily. Such histories of the twentieth century have great difficulties with this transitional phase, difficulties which are signalled by its very characterisation as 'transitional': for within the constantly evolving schemes of such stylistic histories, what music of this (or any earlier) period is not transitional?

Regardless of the difficulties posed by this era, however, its most important historical function has been to act as a conduit for the birth of modernism proper, which is located in the early works of Schoenberg. The basic parameters of Schoenberg's modernism can be briskly summarised. The essential break with tonality comes in the years from 1907 to 1909, when the frequent moments of considerable diatonic unease that one finds in *Verklärte Nacht* and the *Kammersymphonie no. 1* finally give way to the nascent atonality of the Second String Quartet, op. 10. This is, as it were, the critical moment of revolutionary musical modernism: a first movement in which the triads no longer work; a scherzo in which expression falls apart before our very ears; a slow movement which introduces a soprano voice, as if untexted music can no longer articulate the required content; and then a finale which again struggles to find its way of speaking and eventually resorts to the use of the soprano once again, whose first line—'I feel the air from other planets'—has become historically emblematic of the frontier spirit of the work as a whole. With this quartet, then, music history has reached modernism, and over the next six years Schoenberg produced a series of atonal compositions that 'fundamentally altered the course of music'.⁹⁷ These were the years of the Three Piano Pieces, op. 11, the Five Orchestral Pieces, op. 16, and *Erwartung*, op. 17, to mention only the most familiar names. By this time others have followed Schoenberg's lead: in 1909 Webern makes the move to atonality in his Five Songs on texts by Stefan George, op. 3, composing several works whose sound-world contrasts radically with that of Schoenberg; and at about the same time Berg composes his

⁹⁷ Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 67.

Quartet, op. 3, which marks his own move to the expressive world of Schoenberg's Second Quartet, although Berg's piece (and indeed his style in general) seems to be rather more superficially closer to the materials of tonality than either Schoenberg or Webern.

The early modernism of Schoenberg and his two followers (who were also his pupils) thus comprises no more than twenty pieces, but few dispute the historical significance of the music: whilst there are obviously dangers involved in centring musical modernism on just one technical development, as achieved in the work of just three composers, all of whom were friends, the sound-world of the new music is too striking to ignore, both historically and aesthetically. As a result, the birth of musical modernism is a narrow phenomenon indeed: it deals with a very small amount of material, but that material is judged to be of the greatest importance. For a later postmodernism, the narrowness of modernism will turn out to be one of the latter's most problematic aspects; for the modernists of the early twentieth century, however, the essential historical progress of their discovery outweighed the incomprehension and unpopularity that it provoked.⁹⁸

The hackneyed story of musical modernism does not end here, however, and in fact continues in terms that are ever more journalistically racy. In Donald Mitchell's rather hyperbolic words,

Schoenberg made a heroic effort during his non-tonal, pre-serial period to make 'freedom' work, but failed, brilliant and influential though his failures were. Out of that extraordinary period of creative turbulence, truly a cauldron in which the future of the New music was on the boil, emerged the serial method, the principle which, as time has shown, proved capable of serving a large body of composers as a rule.⁹⁹

After *Pierrot lunaire*, *Die glückliche Hand*, and the Four Orchestral Songs, op. 22, that is, Schoenberg fell into a compositional silence that lasted from 1916 until 1923. The problems of atonality had become more and more apparent: some kind of structuring device was needed to impart greater rigour to, and organise, the mass of notes which could sound, to the uninitiated at least, to be lacking order.¹⁰⁰ By 1923 he had theorised the first form of dodecaphony (twelve-tone composition), which made its first full appearance in the Piano Suite, op. 25, of 1924. From this point musical

⁹⁸ See, for example, Schoenberg, *Style and Idea*, 30–53 and 96–9.

⁹⁹ Donald Mitchell, *The Language of Modern Music* (London: Faber, 1993), 59.

¹⁰⁰ Morgan, *Twentieth-Century Music*, 187.

modernism moved into its heroic phase, and Schoenberg produced a long series of dodecaphonic works which, so he thought, would ensure 'the supremacy of German music for the next hundred years.'¹⁰¹ Webern and Berg both followed in Schoenberg's wake, the former developing one of the most striking stylistic voices in all of music history, the latter pursuing a different sonic trajectory that produced an astonishing series of works—from *Wozzeck* to *Lulu*, from the *Lyric Suite* to the Violin Concerto. By the end of the Second World War both pupils were dead, and Schoenberg himself lived only until 1951. The core of musical modernism was by this point established: it comprised the works which moved from atonality to dodecaphony. This was the mainstream of music—or so its protagonists and their defenders believed—and everyone else would have to configure themselves in relation to it.

Whose music demanded the most urgent such configuration? If the history of musical modernism is comparatively unsurprising up until this point, from hereon it becomes much more contentious. One of the first problems is the very narrowness of the narrative just recounted: it is not just postmodernists who find such tiny dimensions unacceptable, for if musical modernism is confined to just the Second Viennese School, then straight away one wonders how to sum up the achievements of the early Stravinsky and Bartók—who, according to Holloway, constitute with Schoenberg 'by common consent the principal figures in twentieth-century music'.¹⁰² As Holloway noted earlier, the pioneering phase of modernism 'is above all a time of liberations'—and the plural form in this quotation is important, for it is not only dissonance that is emancipated, but also, to some extent, rhythm:

The Viennese version tends towards extremes of fluidity and fluctuation, the Franco-Russian towards a strict mechanisation of metre and pulse heard, at its most drastic in Stravinsky's *Rite of Spring* and *Les Noces*[.]¹⁰³

And the general atmosphere of liberation can be extended also to timbre, form, and material.¹⁰⁴

Holloway characterises the heroic period that follows this early, revolutionary modernism in rather different terms from those of Morgan. Whereas Morgan treats dodecaphony as evolving from atonality, Holloway describes this as a process of

¹⁰¹ Ibid., 188.

¹⁰² Holloway, 'Modernism and After', 97.

¹⁰³ Ibid., 94.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 94–5.

retrenchment, and, significantly, he captures Stravinsky and Bartók in this net too: Bartók, claims Holloway, 'turns (aged 42 in 1923) to increasingly formulaic treatment of rhythmic, melodic and structural symmetries', and Stravinsky 'rebound[s] from his own modernism',

open[ing] up a previously latent aesthetic of creative 'kleptomania' (again his own term), rifling given areas of the past for raw cliché material that he then recomposes and makes his own. [...] So the way lies open for another quarter-century or so of transformational theft, culminating in a full-length neo-Mozartean opera (*The Rake's Progress* 1948–51).¹⁰⁵

In other words, in terms of Stravinsky we are moved onto the terrain of neoclassicism proper, which is characterised by more than a few writers as a regression when compared with the 'progress' made by dodecaphony and the Second Viennese School. It is here that Holloway makes his most striking observation:

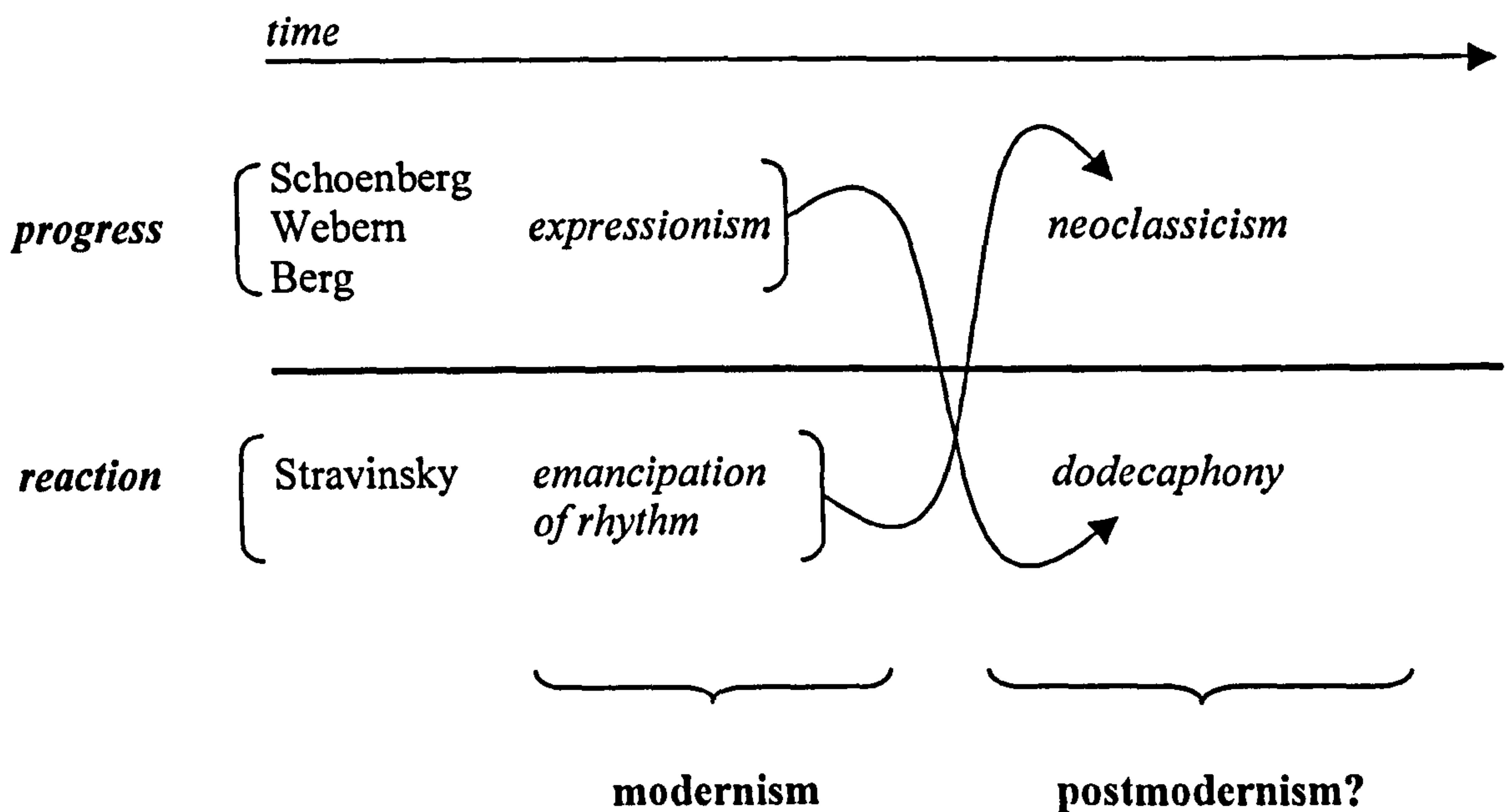
All these are in the obvious sense 'postmodern' reactions by the principal modernists themselves. Radical innovation that had been largely intuitive is followed either by laborious rationalisation or brilliant evasion. Even when viewed with sympathy and affection, a sense persists in all three composers [...] that an astonishing youthful achievement brings forth occasional mature masterpieces—rather than a sustained harvest.¹⁰⁶

So from a very early point in its evolution, modernism is defined not just by its own, self-assured historical inevitability, but also by its opposition to another important line in twentieth-century composition. A polarised structure thus emerges, in which the Second Viennese School is the main stream of modernism, but it is accompanied or at least complemented by another stream, one which eventually will emerge as the precursor of postmodernism proper. It is possible that a structure emerges whereby progress is thus pitted against reaction, but in each principal period (modernism and postmodernism) different figures fulfil these historical roles:

¹⁰⁵ Ibid., 96.

¹⁰⁶ Ibid., 96–7.

Figure 4.3 A model of modernism?



Put very simply, this reading of modernism (though obviously not postmodernism) is the one that has exerted the most influence over histories of the twentieth century. The essential axis, as it were, of modernist music is taken to be that which cleaves the space between Schoenberg and Stravinsky, and the most influential exponent of this aspect of modernist music history is undoubtedly Theodor Adorno, whose *Philosophy of New Music* is the key contemporaneous analysis of musical modernism.¹⁰⁷

3

The broader historical sweep of Adorno's philosophy of music will be examined in greater depth in Chapter 5.¹⁰⁸ For the moment, however, one can note that in Adorno's study Stravinsky was cast as a kind of dialectical foil to the free atonality of a handful of Schoenberg's works; this was the moment of truth of modernism, as it

¹⁰⁷ Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans. Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Blomster (New York: Continuum, 2003).

¹⁰⁸ For an introduction see Alastair Williams, *New Music and the Claims of Modernity* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 1997), 22–42.

were, and against it Stravinsky was held essentially to be regressive. Although Adorno later modified this picture and gave a considerably more rounded (though still critical) assessment of Stravinsky,¹⁰⁹ the early essay has haunted Stravinsky scholarship. The most striking engagement with this model has undoubtedly been that of Richard Taruskin, who has long argued that Stravinsky deserved a far richer historical appreciation than anything provided by Adorno. For it would seem that Taruskin feels that Stravinsky has not been paid the right sort of attention by historians of music. In several of his articles from the early 1990s Taruskin bemoans the father-figure role that Schoenberg has played in musical modernism, as well as his (supposed) baleful influence on much later modernism. And whilst Taruskin is careful not to slight the actual historical importance of Schoenberg himself (indeed, he accords him conspicuous respect), he does criticise modernism in broader terms, reserving particularly powerful venom for unthinking acolytes of the great man. But that is only one half of the historical discontent felt with regard to Stravinsky: the other half concerns the trajectories of modernism that have been derived from Schoenberg's centrality to customary portraits of twentieth-century music. The resulting focus on the decline of tonality—essentially, then, a focus on pitch and harmony—has become the yardstick against which every other composer's 'progress' or 'originality' is then measured; here, then, we have the outlines of a familiar postmodernist critique of musical modernism. In the case of Stravinsky, this modernist reading makes much of the composer's late 'conversion' to dodecaphony, and his (at the time) surprising embrace of Schoenberg's music. This trajectory towards serialism has other effects, too: it slights Stravinsky's neo-classical phase, which appears as a distasteful historical regression, and it does not deal in any way with the earlier Russian phase which constitutes a major chunk of the composer's oeuvre.

This branch of Taruskin's project provokes its second important overall charge, and this is where Taruskin's work is most theoretically rewarding, demonstrating how aesthetic judgements can always be unravelled to project an entire philosophy of history. Put simply, the critical philosophy that has underwritten such portrayals of twentieth-century music, in which Stravinsky is not paid attention commensurate with Taruskin's estimation of his music, is essentially that of

¹⁰⁹ Theodor Adorno, 'Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait', in Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1998), 145–75.

formalism, which is presumably (for Taruskin) also modernism: a story of technical development that has quite ignored the context of much of the music with which it deals. What is needed to counter this formalism, then, is a sustained historical and critical investigation (as presented by the massive *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, Taruskin's two-volume magnum opus)¹¹⁰ into the composer's early background. The resulting picture of Stravinsky is very different from the more or less formalist analyses of work after work that supposedly constitute a significant proportion of the Anglo-American critical literature on the composer.¹¹¹ And it is worth remarking that although Taruskin is no 'new' musicologist, he arguably presents here a type of musicology that could truly marry criticism with positivism, all wrapped up with savvy references to the world of theory.

An excellent example of such concerns can be found in 'Revising Revision', a review-article that assesses some (then) recent uses of Harold Bloom's well-known theory of poetic influence. In this article Taruskin is not as bullish as he would later be about Stravinsky's status, but his prose is forceful nonetheless: he rails against the progress-oriented ('evolutionary') historical scheme that has underpinned much twentieth-century music history.¹¹² There is little doubt who is the target of the following passage:

The central evolutionary problem is compounded by one of asserted legitimacy. Unlike tonality, atonality (the kind that has survived) has one father. This has given rise to a cult of personality, has intensified polarization, and has lent the historiography of twentieth-century music a characteristically post-Romantic Caesaristic mode that has long been under siege but will not capitulate until those who have cast themselves as the victorious father's dynastic heirs have relinquished their power bases. [...] The cast of characters is still divided into sheep and goats, strong and weak, rebels and conformists, and its central myth still hopelessly confuses all these categories by attempting to marry the Permanent Revolution to the Great Tradition.¹¹³

Neoclassicism, Taruskin argues, is a problem for such evolutionary narratives—he mentions Adorno's diagnosis of a 'retrogression into the traditional'¹¹⁴—because it occurs after the new music (essentially the rise of atonality) has appeared on the scene. The implications for a critical biography of Stravinsky's work are thus

¹¹⁰ Richard Taruskin, *Stravinsky and the Russian Traditions*, two vols (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996).

¹¹¹ For example, see Pieter C. van den Toorn, *The Music of Igor Stravinsky* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983).

¹¹² Richard Taruskin, 'Revising Revision', *Journal of the American Musicological Society* 46/1 (1993), 114–38.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 125.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 125.

manifold; but, as has already been noted, there is a concomitant tendency to value the composer's late swerve towards serialism. Taruskin's comments on Joseph Straus's *Remaking the Past* are particularly vivid. Straus claims that Stravinsky's

turn towards serialism and his late recomposition of Bach and Wolf [...] have a common source. In both, Stravinsky confronts the musical mainstream and shows a remarkable ability to remake his predecessors in his own image.¹¹⁵

This provokes a spectacular outburst of Taruskinian indignation:

Beyond the patronizing implication that Stravinsky became a 'strong poet' only upon embracing serialism, what gives offense here is the complacent perpetuation of creaky shibboleths: the impudent identification of *the* classical mainstream with an ad hoc and insularly German tradition (Bach and Wolf, the latter suddenly a giant), and the stale parochial propaganda that casts the New Vienna School and its self-defined legatees on American campuses as the exclusive custodians of this mainstream. It is understandable that Schoenberg might have wished to go on fighting World War I with slogans such as the one that stands as epigraph to this section. ['My music, produced on German soil, without foreign influences, is a living example of an art able most effectively to oppose Latin and Slav hopes of hegemony.'] For an American scholar of Straus's generation to go on affirming these things is worse than provincial.¹¹⁶

It is particularly notable that the force of Taruskin's argument simply leaves no grounds for argument here: Schoenberg can be forgiven his self-obsessed ramblings that placed himself at the front-line of history; but, or so the passage implies, *now we Americans know better*—and thus another familiar postmodernist motif returns. Straus's reading, then, is portrayed as being not ideological, but simply incorrect. One wonders to what extent this is a defensible position, especially given the paucity of Taruskin's earlier portrayal of Schoenberg as the one true father of modernism. For whilst Schoenberg is undeniably a central figure, matters are not anywhere near as clear-cut as Taruskin tries to make them seem: in fact, the comparatively early Habsburgian modernism of Schoenberg emanates from a different socio-historical conjuncture than Stravinsky's late Cold War wobble towards serialism. No serious effort is devoted to exploring these problems, and thus Stravinsky's relation to what we might refer to as 'high', institutionalised modernism—surely something that niggled the composer in his later years?—is thus skimmed.

But, again, all of this is only half of Taruskin's critique. For it is clear that Taruskin associates such readings of history with formalism (again: modernism?)

¹¹⁵ Quoted in *ibid.*, 132.

¹¹⁶ *Ibid.*, 133.

itself. There is a good deal of justification for him here: the pitch-class set analytical method that developed around atonal music, and which is sometimes read as somehow legitimising the construction of this music, is indeed ‘an analytical prejudice, one largely confined by now to a dwindling strain of composers and theorists who persist in upholding the wistful creed that “there is one main way of doing things.”’¹¹⁷ But, more damaging than the ‘analytical machine that levels distinctions and produces an adventitious homogeneity regardless of what is fed into it’,¹¹⁸ such formalism essentially overlooks (or proscribes) the historical information that might offer a much more rounded picture of both Stravinsky and, importantly, Schoenberg. Thus, what gets forgotten is Schoenberg’s own neoclassical ‘strain in his own works of the twenties. The enduring power of the modernist (r)evolutionary mythology has put these questions off-limits.’¹¹⁹ And in one of the most striking revisionist claims of all:

if we are interested in writing history rather than recycling hoary propaganda, we must deconstruct the dear old dualism that casts Schoenberg and his school in heroic opposition to the right deviation, and (so far from assimilating the deviation to the “mainstream”) learn to see what happened in Vienna as a part of the general swerve. If there is an assimilation to be made, its dynamic has got to be the opposite, the harder, one.¹²⁰

It is unclear quite what would result from such a history. Taruskin gives a hint, however, in another article written around this time, ‘Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology’.¹²¹ He begins with the (by now expected) construal of the Schoenbergians: a ‘tainted aesthetic of “psychology, emotions, feelings, desires, aspirations,” and the individualistic subjectivity it glorified.’¹²² In this article such modernism is often characterised as an offshoot of Romanticism (indeed, a kind of maximalised Romanticism),¹²³ and against it Taruskin posits two different alternatives: one of the Right, one of the Left. The Right is the Stravinskian response, embracing an aesthetic of craftsmanship and crystalline objectivity that is held to be French, versus the more Romantic effusions of post-Wagneriana. The Left, however,

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 132.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 131.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 135.

¹²⁰ Ibid., 136.

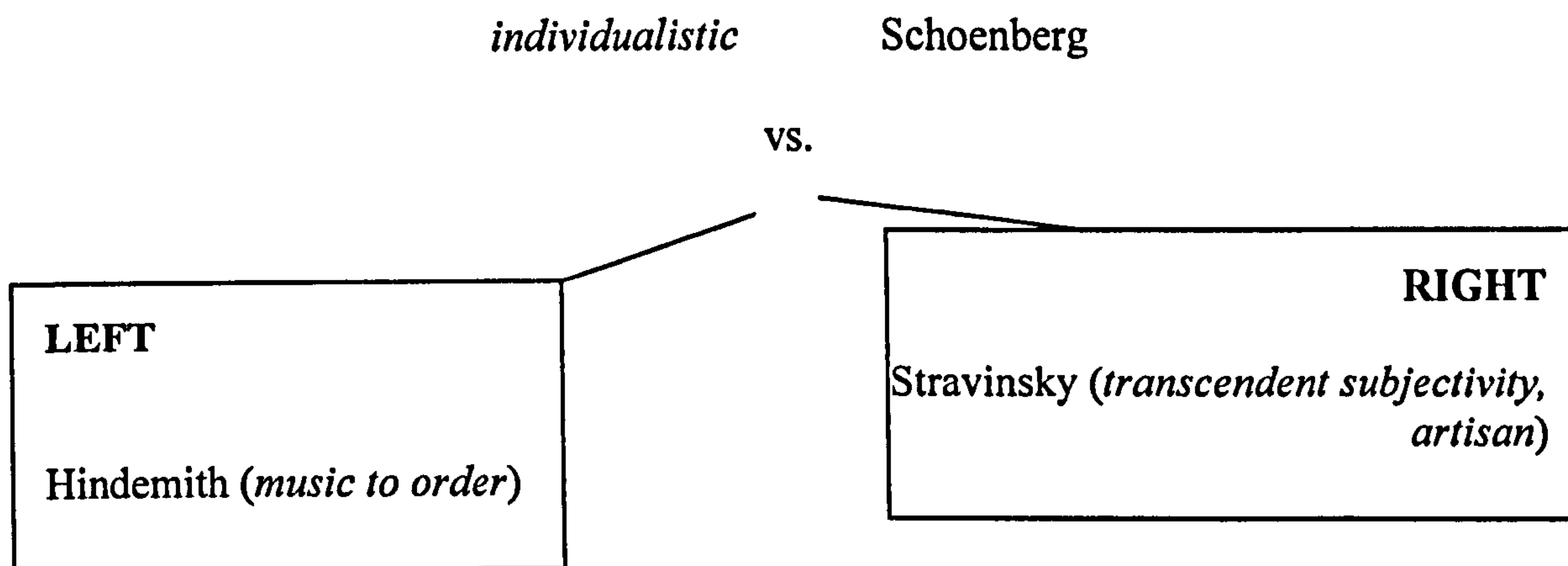
¹²¹ Richard Taruskin, ‘Back to Whom? Neoclassicism as Ideology’, *19th-Century Music* 16/3 (1993), 286–302.

¹²² Ibid., 297.

¹²³ Ibid., 287 and 298.

is Hindemith and the legacy of music as a socially useful good: *Gebrauchsmusik*. So the form of this period of history is essentially:

Figure 4.4 Schoenberg and opponents



As in 'Revising Revision', however, Taruskin is concerned actively to reconfigure these allocations, characteristically aligning Stravinsky with Schoenberg:

As "pure" utopian craftsmanship, intricately made but "ohne Zweck," Schoenberg's Bachianism had far more in common with Stravinsky's snooty art than it had with the socially motivated *Gemeinschaftsmusik* of his fellow Germans, toward which his attitude would always remain ironical. Yet because it was largely confined, unlike Stravinsky's, to abstract instrumental genres, Schoenberg's neoclassicism (and Webern's) quickly metamorphosed into technical research and *tours de force*, foreshadowing the fetishized "professional discourse" espoused by those who later donned the mantle of their authority.¹²⁴

So an earlier motif returns: the German 'line' is assimilated to Stravinsky, rather than the other way round, and it is the later 'descendants' (of the German side of the situation) who become the principal targets of Taruskin's criticisms.

The scheme of 'Back to Whom?' follows that of 'Revising Revision' still further. Once again, the (supposedly) prevailing formalism is what has perpetuated these (mis)readings, which were strongly utopian both before the Second World War and after it. Whilst Taruskin does not make the claim entirely explicitly, it seems that what he desires is a much more well-documented account of modernism in relation to

¹²⁴ Ibid., 298–9.

the socio-historical events of the time—notably the rise of fascism. Taruskin is careful to assert the complicity of formalism (or, more accurately, the formalists who ignore such issues) in this process of forgetting, and the case he makes is a very strong one:

Formalism's claim to germ-free moral purity has been tarnished by the disclosure of Webern's political leanings; by the recognition of an officially tolerated school of twelve-tone composers in the Third Reich; and perhaps especially by the self-indicting rhetoric—the purebred rhetoric of *Blut-und-Boden* or *agitprop*, take your pick—with which a new dialectical monstrosity asserted itself after the war at Darmstadt and Donaueschingen[.]¹²⁵

So what formalism avoids can be the most historically pertinent of information, and the attempt to veer away from that content must be seen as the political act that it undoubtedly is.

Both of these essays are powerful analyses of the dominance of formalism, and its congenial alliance with modernism. They show just how untransparent formalism is, underpinning as it does an entire history of twentieth-century music. Taruskin claims, with justification, that Stravinsky has not been appreciated in all his historical richness as a direct result of the dominance of such formalism; and he shows quite clearly how formalism's alliance with trajectories of modernism results in a linear history of twentieth-century music, showing the skimping of Stravinsky that such models effect. But whereas in these essays there is an atmosphere of injustice surrounding Stravinsky, more recently Taruskin has tended to emphasise the ways in which such formalism is *itself* Stravinskian—or, at least, consonant with the very widely circulated aesthetic claims made by the composer in the later years of his life. A pointed example of the way in which Taruskin's musicology now deals with these concerns can be found in his typically (and deliberately) provocative essay 'Stravinsky and Us' in *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky*. As always, this essay is a fine set-piece:¹²⁶ written with a fast-flowing keynote zing that makes its sudden denouement all the more abrupt, it cleverly demonstrates how some approaches to music—approaches that Taruskin deems formalist—really do exclude music's semantic and contextual dimensions to the detriment of everyone. This is, let it be said, one of very few occasions when it has been quite so disturbingly shown that a 'formalist' approach is undeniably ideological and plausibly insidious. Briefly,

¹²⁵ *Ibid.*, 301.

¹²⁶ Richard Taruskin, 'Stravinsky and us', in Jonathan Cross, ed., *The Cambridge Companion to Stravinsky* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 258.

Taruskin is able to show that the exclusion of extra-musical ideas from considerations of Stravinsky's *Cantata* (1951–2) passes over a text—that of the second *ricercare*—that many will read as anti-Semitic. There will be few who can convincingly argue against Taruskin here, and fewer still who will be able to contend that we are, as he claims, 'called upon to face it and talk about it'.¹²⁷ What is more interesting, however, is the portion of the essay that sets up formalism's fall. These sections are, as it later becomes clear, deliberately portentous, repeatedly stressing that the supposed formalist approach to art is both 'learned from Stravinsky' and also, more ominously, 'has its costs.'¹²⁸ The essay has a further, brilliant layer of historical depth, however, because the *Cantata* is, of course, the piece that supposedly inaugurates Stravinsky's sudden interest in Schoenbergian dodecaphony, responding to what was ostensibly a compositional crisis triggered by Stravinsky's worries as to the richness of his own music in comparison with Schoenberg's.¹²⁹ So, as Taruskin points out, what we are dealing with is 'one of the great myths of the twentieth century, that of the general teleology according to which the structure of music, and the compositional practices that produce that structure, have been said to evolve by stages, and inevitably, from tonal to atonal, finally to serial.'¹³⁰ In this way, a formalist aesthetics is inscribed into Stravinsky's career (or is it the other way around?) as its pinnacle, and it confirms the preoccupation with technique and the music itself over and above its extra-musical content.

Right from the very start, Taruskin makes similarly sweeping assertions about Stravinsky and his place in twentieth-century music history. On the first page of the essay, for instance, we read that 'Stravinskian ideas have been so influential that one could almost say that twentieth-century European and Euro-American musical culture has been created in the image of Stravinsky.'¹³¹ This is merely the first of a strikingly ambitious series of statements, all of which place Stravinsky atop of the twentieth century: 'by 1966 he did not merely represent the history of twentieth-century music; he practically constituted it.'¹³² Later, Taruskin details Stravinsky's turn towards neo-classicism, and the rise of 'a new aesthetic of abstraction'; the *Symphonies d'instruments à vent* is a turning point that ushers in a conception of the artwork as

¹²⁷ Ibid., 282.

¹²⁸ Ibid., 264.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 269–70.

¹³⁰ Ibid., 274.

¹³¹ Ibid., 258.

¹³² Ibid., 259.

transcendent and ‘entirely formalist’, even though, as Taruskin points out, this hardly fits with the poetic conception of the piece.¹³³ But what is important is that Stravinsky himself was happy to adopt such views and think of the *Symphonies* as neo-classical; and in the most breathtaking passage of this portion of the essay, we are told that

the fundamental formalist commitment is the great Stravinsky myth, the great Stravinsky idea, the great Stravinsky truth—the precept or edict (shall we call it the ukase?) that has been regulating the behaviour of twentieth-century (and now twenty-first-century) musicians ever since. Ever since the 1920s, in other words, a commitment to formalist aesthetics has been the great distinguishing feature of panromanogermanic classical music.¹³⁴

This formalism not only leads to an avoidance of matters such as the anti-Semitism of the Cantata, but, more worryingly, can be connected with the current lowly status of classical music:

for a final disquieting thought, has that commitment got nothing to do with the catastrophic decline that the prestige of classical music—and of high art in general—has suffered in our time?¹³⁵

The tone of such remarks is strikingly reminiscent of some of Lawrence Kramer’s most moving pleas, as quoted in Chapter 3:

For those who care about “classical” music, the possibility of tapping new sources of cultural and intellectual energy may come not a moment too soon. It is no secret that, in the United States anyway, this music is in trouble. It barely registers in our schools, it has neither the prestige nor the popularity of literature and visual art, and it squanders its capacities for self-renewal by clinging to an exceptionally static core repertoire. Its audience is shrinking, graying, and overly palefaced, and the suspicion has been voiced abroad that its claim to occupy a sphere of autonomous artistic greatness is largely a means of veiling, and thus perpetuating, a narrow set of social interests.¹³⁶

There is some irony in the fact that such hand-wringing gestures are quite clearly the intellectual descendants of a tradition of *Kulturkritik* that is exemplary of a kind of modernism that Kramer and Taruskin would not unequivocally endorse. But these now emanate from a rather different context: here the wish is for what we might term a renewal of classical music’s social dimension; in a word, for greater popularity—far from the essential elitism of an earlier despair.

¹³³ Ibid., 261.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 262.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 281.

¹³⁶ Kramer, *Classical Music and Postmodern Knowledge*, 3–4.

The stakes are high, then, in Taruskin's essay. Very high, in fact, for it does not take much imagination to sense that the paradigm shift that underlies the article is once again the familiar 'liberating' drive of recent postmodernism. In Taruskin's article what becomes clear is that Stravinsky's supposed formalism—his famous denials of music's expressive capacities, for instance—is married off with a more general preference for abstraction—here the key term tends to be neoclassicism—and the parent term 'modernism' dangles over all of these particulars like the greyest of storm clouds. But, strikingly, the burden of these terms is placed not on modernism's shoulders, but on Stravinsky himself. It is Stravinsky who has regulated such ideas and behaviour, and therefore, one presumes, their critical dominance is a marker of the composer's importance. Taruskin's long crusade on behalf of Stravinsky's music thus finally metamorphoses into an act of assimilation: formalism reigned, Stravinsky reigned, and the certainty that this era has now passed can be measured by the widespread agreement that formalism has been debunked, and that Stravinsky is now comfortably ensconced alongside Schoenberg (as he always was) as a towering presence in twentieth-century music. Musical modernism has remained, in terms of its content, the same; what Taruskin effects is a slight reshuffle in the estimation of its father-figures, even as modernism as a whole is shown more generally to be politically and ethically suspect. Stravinsky's stock rises, but the market falls.

4

One can toy with the master narratives of musical modernism, then, without evaluating modernism itself positively. Indeed, in this respect the fate of the principal character of this narrative, Arnold Schoenberg, has been striking: for whilst there can be no doubt that he continues to be treated as historically significant, it is increasingly evident that this significance is now judged to have manifested itself in a way that ultimately marks an aesthetic failure. As one of the most eloquent of academic writers on Schoenberg strikingly writes:

Abstract, inaccessible, unfriendly, harsh, hard to follow, dense, even boring are still the adjectives applied by most concert-goers to Arnold Schoenberg's music. The twentieth-century composer, once most highly respected by generations of academics, whose music and theoretical writings reveal a daunting intellect and capacity for analysis, and whose own

legendary contempt for others became routinized posthumously among those who specialized in his defense, now appears entirely vulnerable.¹³⁷

Schoenberg continues to provoke, that is, but to provoke largely negative reactions, and it is in the recent critical fortunes of this key composer that one can best grasp some sense of modernism's demise. He is central, for instance, to Dai Griffiths's celebrated, if rather elusive, critique of institutionalised British modernism. The title of this brief essay, 'Genre: Grammar Schoolboy Music',¹³⁸ is already acidic, since the assignation of such a broad generic tag suggests a level of generalisation amounting to little more than 'nasty modern music'; and Griffiths removes all doubt when he claims that 'grammar schoolboy music is one long procession of tough sound. You never know when grammar schoolboy music is going to end, or why it started.'¹³⁹ But this characterisation of the soundworld of modernism—specifically, in Britain, the modernism of the Manchester School (principally Harrison Birtwistle, Peter Maxwell Davies, and Alexander Goehr)¹⁴⁰—is, one suspects, at one remove from its historical legitimating figure. The key composer, writes Griffiths,

grammar schoolboy music's best friend (even if he's no longer recognised as such), is Schoenberg. Here's music you can talk about and admire without ever really having to say why it's any good or why you like it. [...] Schoenberg's writings are the manifesto of grammar schoolboy music: regulating abstraction, through the Grundgestalt, its developing variation, and the various operations, they also define the underlying tone of grammar schoolboy music. [...] Grammar schoolboy music's like that: radical but reactionary; always ready to spot the main chance for self-promotion, and regarding the locals with disdain, as though they belong in the secondary modern.¹⁴¹

And in a remark that points to the close linkages between the critical and creative forms of modernism, he goes on to claim that

The home of grammar schoolboy music is the university music department. No-one else wants it. Grammar schoolboy music is the practice, music analysis the theory. [...] Watch carefully the relation between music analysis and grammar schoolboy music: something's gone wrong there. Music analysis is growing up and wants to go its own way; it's got the language, the accent, the looks; it's hanging out with other people; and a traumatic divorce characteristic of grammar

¹³⁷ Leon Botstein, 'Schoenberg and the Audience: Modernism, Music, and Politics in the Twentieth Century', in Walter Frisch, ed., *Schoenberg and his World* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 19.

¹³⁸ Dai Griffiths, 'Genre: Grammar Schoolboy Music', *Critical Musicology Newsletter* 3 (1995).

¹³⁹ *Ibid.*, § 4.

¹⁴⁰ For a brief introduction see Jonathan Cross, 'Manchester School', in Stanley Sadie and John Tyrell, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn, vol. 15 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 726–7.

¹⁴¹ Griffiths, 'Genre: Grammar Schoolboy Music', § 7.

schoolboys is on the cards. Without music analysis, grammar schoolboy music's in trouble deep. No-one wants to hear it[.]¹⁴²

This pointed critique is extremely powerful: it bundles up post-Schoenbergian modernism of a certain type with astonishing efficacy, and then rejects it with considerable aplomb. In its naked appraisal of the class antagonisms that surely lie beneath the wider social position of modernism, Griffiths manages to caricature a reality that has yet to disappear from many British university departments. And yet, one still has the feeling that Schoenberg is found guilty by association; and since no one with any serious interest in texture and timbre could plausibly claim that the stylistic worlds of high modernism and Schoenberg are at all similar, one wonders about the levels of reduction in Griffiths's charges. Put simply, whilst there is no doubting the significance of Schoenberg for the generation of composers at whom Griffiths is aiming his critique, does Schoenberg himself not emerge from a rather different historical context—one in which his music was emphatically not at home in the cultural surroundings, and certainly not as close to the institutional centres of power? Is the reaction to a rather complacent (if insecure) high modernism again casting a negative shadow over earlier phases of modernism? After all, as Leon Botstein writes, 'Our distance from the horrors of the European mid-century and more than a decade of neoconservatism in American politics may have weakened our appreciation of the cultural critique located in Schoenberg's aesthetic evolution at the turn of the century.'¹⁴³

The extent of this distance becomes disturbingly apparent in a more recent consideration and overview of Schoenberg's creative (modernist) legacy. In an essay somewhat ominously entitled ' "... the madness that is believed..." a re-evaluation of the life and work of Arnold Schoenberg', Peter Davison embarks upon an astonishing assassination of Schoenberg's turn towards dodecaphony; even if the general tenor of his critique is not new, historically speaking, it is surprising to find it recapitulated today in such stark terms. For in Davison's opinion,

The twelve-tone theory could be understood as the intellect's response to the sudden release of irrational forces in expressionist scores such as *Erwartung*. The theory was an overreaction on

¹⁴² Ibid., § 9.

¹⁴³ Leon Botstein, 'Music and the Critique of Culture: Arnold Schoenberg, Heinrich Schenker, and the Emergence of Modernism in Fin de Siècle Vienna', in Juliane Brand and Christopher Hailey, ed., *Constructive Dissonance: Arnold Schoenberg and the Transformations of Twentieth-Century Culture* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997), 19.

Schoenberg's part; a mistrust of his own psyche. Ironically, what was motivated by the desire to shore-up a particular and personal view of tradition, became a revolutionary rupture with it.¹⁴⁴

So far, so familiar. But Davison is careful to paint some of the social backdrop to this modernism: he writes of the 'collapse of European culture' as being a 'failure of leadership in times of difficult change',¹⁴⁵ and claims that

The cause stemmed from the cultural hegemony among nation states and the ethnic groups within them. There were vain rivalries among the corrupt ruling elites with their futile and destructive adventures meddling in other cultures around the world. The internal pressures of urbanisation and industrialisation and growth of mass political movements among the increasing number of working class people created polarisation within society. A huge pot was boiling over with repressed anger and frustration.¹⁴⁶

We are, therefore, apprised of something of the conjuncture of modernism, even if this is done rather unspecifically, historically speaking. But Davison gives this reading a very particular hue by his concentration on the themes of nature and artifice. Specifically, Davison paints Schoenberg himself as reacting to a crisis for whose cause he blamed 'errant human emotions and hostile Nature';¹⁴⁷ thus, 'Serialism was born of the need to reconstruct culture by means of an unprecedented artifice, where the past, the established order and even Nature itself could not be trusted. In a world, [sic] where established culture hid the darkness within, someone had to express the reality of the wilderness behind the façade.'¹⁴⁸ And in this, apparently, Schoenberg was wrong, for human nature and Nature itself were not at fault: 'it was the constraining of the human spirit in the arid wilderness of the urban and industrial lifestyle that brought moral decline.'¹⁴⁹ Schoenberg's response, therefore, was based on an inadequate appraisal of the problem.

On this view, dodecaphony can thus be seen as a giant wrong turn taken by music history. The early twelve-tone pieces exhibit, '[a]t best, [...] an obscure "wrong note" irony, as the familiar is parodied through denial', or '[a]t worst, there is a delusional neurosis, which denies the intent to provoke rejection and gain identity through being a famous victim and cultivating a puritan's sense of moral

¹⁴⁴ Peter Davison, ' "... the madness that is believed..." a re-evaluation of the life and work of Arnold Schoenberg', in Davison, ed., *Reviving the Muse*, 57-8.

¹⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, 59.

¹⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 60.

superiority.’¹⁵⁰ Hence a blunt question: ‘Why did a man of Schoenberg’s musical credentials do something so unmusical and unnatural as to invent a composing method out of the ether as a self-conscious historical act?’¹⁵¹ The answer that Davison gives is astonishingly offensive:

This is the sad outcome of an unresolved psychological trauma. The natural tendency of the human psyche is towards integration and harmonisation, the return of stability in the wake of crisis. The alternative is a descent into madness. [...] Thus the invention of serialism consolidated his pathological condition[.]¹⁵²

This is a very weak argument, relying as it does on a questionable opposition between integration/harmonisation and serialism, and its cogency is hardly aided by Davison’s recapitulation of the well-known details of Schoenberg’s personal life around the time of his move towards atonality: the story of Schoenberg’s wife’s affair with his friend Richard Gerstl and the latter’s subsequent suicide is advanced as one of the problems of Schoenberg’s own ‘psychological development’.¹⁵³ Whilst no one would plausibly want to exclude such considerations from an overall appreciation of Schoenberg’s state of mind at a critical point in his artistic development, it seems a little rash to pin a more general sense of madness on just one individual’s personal trauma. After all, musical modernism neither begins nor ends with Schoenberg; and modernism *tout court* can hardly be explained through a simple process of searching out the psychological ruptures that produced several generations of culture. Certainly Schoenberg was greatly upset by his situation; but how does this explain the formal developments and innovations in literature and painting which also mark the turbulence of the turn of the twentieth century? Such ridiculous charges feel rather unreal, and this is only exacerbated by Davison’s subsequent claim that Schoenberg’s music offers little to the listener: it apparently lacks both a sensual surface and any sense of natural flow.¹⁵⁴ In Davison’s words, ‘The listener is left in a state of cold alienation that means it is only possible to engage cerebrally, if at all.’¹⁵⁵

Such unsympathetic criticism might well be unfair and unreasonable, but it is certainly not unrepresentative of the broader problems that Schoenbergian modernism

¹⁵⁰ Ibid., 67-8.

¹⁵¹ Ibid., 71.

¹⁵² Ibid., 72-3.

¹⁵³ Ibid., 58.

¹⁵⁴ Ibid., 72.

¹⁵⁵ Ibid., 72.

nowadays provokes. Approaching the subject from virtually the opposite angle, a striking recent article on British attempts to popularise Schoenberg has pointed to the widespread sense that these efforts can now be seen to have failed.¹⁵⁶ Indeed, Ben Earle's essay, 'Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand op. 36: British Attempts to Popularize Schoenberg', pulls few punches: his appraisal of British Schoenbergian reception might be codified in three theses and three judgements:

Figure 4.5 Earle's theses

Thesis 1 Many British post-war commentators on Schoenberg's music believed (or pretended to believe) that one day the composer's music would receive its due wider acclaim and popularity; no matter whether or not they felt this to be desirable, there was a concerted effort to popularise Schoenberg through a variety of critical channels—from the music appreciation of a patrician 1960s BBC to the apologetic and genteel recent efforts of a musicology on the brink of real change.

Judgement: these efforts failed.

Thesis 2 These efforts, however, were always ambivalent and uneasy, due to the fraught relationship between the possibility of mass reception and the reality of an elite provincialism—a relationship that itself seems now to be highly characteristic of modernism.

Judgement: the efforts of popularisation were structurally predisposed to fail because they neglected to theorise adequately the ideological nature of the type of listening they advocated.

Thesis 3 But all of this is limited by its regulative assumption that popularity was, in fact, possible. A closer study of the music and the conjuncture which produced it shows that the music's constitutive difficulty was inevitably traduced by attempts to popularise it which must now seem misguided.

Judgement: popularisation failed because it acknowledged neither the music's difficulty nor the cultural moment from which it emanated—both of which still carry some redemptive promise.

¹⁵⁶ Ben Earle, 'Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand op. 36: British Attempts to Popularize Schoenberg', *Music & Letters* 84/4 (2003), 608–42.

The popularisation highlighted and critiqued by Earle is that of a generation of British critics who came to institutional power in the post-war years. Citing figures such as Donald Mitchell, Hans Keller, and the key appointment of William Glock as BBC Controller of Music, Earle claims that

It was not so much that the British public had suddenly woken up to serialism. A small and rather close-knit group that defined itself musically in terms of its enthusiasm for twelve-note technique, as against the general distaste in which 'the Method' had previously been held, had simply been handed control of those means by which the nation's taste was shaped.¹⁵⁷

This close-knit group was latterly supplemented by more recent critics—Arnold Whittall, Malcolm MacDonald, Anthony Payne—whose work also, in Earle's view, demonstrates faith in the possibility that Schoenberg could one day be widely understood.¹⁵⁸ But these three theses are complemented by something of a rather different nature. Specifically, Earle focuses his third thesis, but also much of the rest of his article, on Schoenberg's Violin Concerto, op. 36—or, more accurately, he focuses on the opening of the first movement of the concerto.¹⁵⁹ The text gives the impression of being fundamentally motivated and provoked by certain interpretative difficulties thrown up by this piece, which, *pace* Davison, is surely one of the most sensual and expressive dodecaphonic works yet written. Earle's basic point tends (necessarily) to get rather buried beneath his other theses, but it runs roughly thus:

If we think of this first movement as some kind of sonata form (as many do), then the fragmentary second subject group in the exposition sacrifices the rich melodic continuity that characterises the opening of the concerto, and instead teeters on the brink of incomprehensibility; musical coherence is lost.

¹⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, 614–5.

¹⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, 609.

¹⁵⁹ It is striking that, out of Schoenberg's later serial works, Earle chooses to focus on the Violin Concerto. The piece is a comparative rarity even within Schoenberg's mature twelve-tone music: it is surely the Cinderella (or just one of the ugly sisters?) of this group of pieces. No doubt this results partly from its rare performances—a fate destined for much of the later Schoenberg, one suspects—but Earle is right also to make the case for the concerto's interpretative problems and the sheerness of its bottom-line aural difficulty. To judge by the disrepute into which Schoenberg has fallen, however, it would seem that hyped accounts of Schoenberg's historical significance have at the very least removed some of the intimacy needed for a really successful encounter with the piece. Perhaps this has long been the case: it is striking, for instance, that Charles Rosen's 1976 study of Schoenberg—a respected, urbane monograph—does not say a great deal about the piece. See Charles Rosen, *Schoenberg* (London: Marion Boyars, 1976).

Or, as Earle puts it:

The Violin Concerto is here losing its ability to 'speak' [...] It is not 'richness' but the failure to cohere that constitutes the later Schoenberg's difficulty. One cannot 'just listen' to music that is a 'chaos of sounds and rhythms, colours and lines, without rhyme or reason'. It is not merely that, as Subotnik suggests, verbal mediation could serve as a bridge for those unfamiliar with Schoenberg's style. Such verbal mediation is indispensable. The music's moments of meaninglessness make conceptless contemplation of its form impossible. It is not enough to be able to recognize that, somewhere around bar 60, the first movement of Schoenberg's Violin Concerto arrives at its second subject. The problem lies deeper. Little short of the mythical ability spontaneously to hear the sense of serial relationships would return this music to autonomy.¹⁶⁰

A great deal hangs on Earle's intuitive sense that something important happens in the concerto at the aforementioned point in the first movement's exposition, and Earle advances a neat and straightforward analysis of this moment.¹⁶¹ This commonsensical tone has an important purpose. One of Earle's tasks is to accomplish an estrangement of a generation of British critics who had a great deal to gain from promoting Schoenberg as the father of a true modernism. Some of his principal targets (notably Hugh Wood) were closely associated with the regime at the University of Cambridge under the professorship of Alexander Goehr—all of which is given a piquant twist by the fact the Earle is a former student of Goehr, and Goehr himself the son of a pupil of Schoenberg.¹⁶² In a very limited way, this British Schoenbergian generation did, in fact, exert considerable influence over a later generation of critics, teachers, academics, and musicians. That is not to say that it had much practical power, nor that its composers were performed or talked about very much. But, crucially, this generation held all the cards of prestige: it was the Goehr generation that had the personal links straight back to the Schoenberg generation, and this blessed it with an authority. Its lack of popular recognition is unimportant, given that we are talking

¹⁶⁰ Earle, 'Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand op. 36', 639.

¹⁶¹ Earle admits that his musical analysis takes as its point of departure his listening experiences; it seems likely that the rest of the article too sprang from issues surrounding the comprehension of op. 36. See *ibid.*, 630.

¹⁶² The Cantabrian modernism which Earle explicitly and implicitly critiques is presented as a well-nigh farcical mixture of anti-intellectualism and the most ridiculous dilettantism. Here was a Kantian bunch indeed, in which taste was universal (amongst the four or five composers who were deemed to have it) and one's mind jumped like lightning straight to the heart of the matter, with no need for any concepts. In the most caricatured traditions of this sort of high modernism, the absence of rationality made critique ineffectual, because a good argument could exert no leverage against the blunt rule of personal authority. Compare Georgina Born's portrayal of Boulez's rule at IRCAM: see Georgina Born, *Rationalizing Culture: IRCAM, Boulez, and the Institutionalization of the Avant-Garde* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1995), 143–4.

about a tenured high modernism that had, in a certain sense, neither time nor care for popularity; the point is that they ruled the roost. One suspects that, statistically, the Schoenberg generation in Britain were as negligible as the Babbitt generation in America¹⁶³—possibly they felt themselves to be even more marginal, but even this is difficult to verify since persecution is one of the modernist artist's most recognisable relations to the outside world.

The point of Earle's critique, however, is that we now approach such figures in our own moment, when this generation has failed, when modernism has been thought to have failed. The standard story is a simple one: institutionalised, the high modernism of the post-war years lost its radical edge, and thus lost one of its governing coordinates. For Earle, modernism still retains its constitutive difficulty: its social encoding of historical trauma remains open and unresolved; we have just found anaesthetised ways of dealing with it—which is to say, we do not deal with it at all, by letting it fall into unpopularity. And this is where the most surprising claims of all are made; in his discussion of Adorno, Earle states that

at the heart of his account of the later Schoenberg stands a basic phenomenological realism, which British 'popular' writing on this music has been singularly lacking. [...] Before concert planners and musicologists prepare once again to place the serial Schoenberg before a bourgeois listening public or to teach this music to undergraduates, they could do worse than engage in a little introspection. It is not only that the nettle of the music's ugliness must be grasped. [...] Commentators who continue blithely in the promotion of Schoenberg, praising music that does more than merely tend to the objectively unpleasurable as something it can never truly be, are bidding (if unwittingly) for a potentially endless means to promote themselves.¹⁶⁴

Once again, then, Schoenberg is seen to provoke a take-it-or-leave-it approach, and one that is heavily influenced by Schoenbergian reception as much as by Schoenberg himself. If a kind of caricatured high modernism cast its shadow over Schoenberg in Peter Davison's essay to the extent that abstraction and the cerebral were read into the dodecaphonic Schoenberg, here Earle criticises those whose reception of Schoenberg is self-serving. Where Davison would simply imply compositional (if not psychological) derangement, Earle sits back in his armchair and tosses the Schoenbergian bottle back onto the ocean, and the underlying aesthetic conservatism of this approach is just as questionable as Davison's psychobiography. For whilst modernism, in Earle's view, retains its importance, its depth, its difficulty, it is still

¹⁶³ On this see Straus, 'The Myth of Serial "Tyranny" in the 1950s and 1960s'.

¹⁶⁴ Earle, 'Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand op. 36', 642.

held to encode something essentially redemptive; but because modernism is out of reach—indeed, because it is by definition, necessarily out of reach—the status quo is preserved, and instead of an attempt to account for the music in any socio-historical sense, or to point towards its naked confrontation with a bourgeois tradition that it supposedly critiques, a peculiar, almost autumnal stasis descends on the field of music history, a respectful hush as we wait, in Fredric Jameson's words, 'for the missing next tick of the clock'.¹⁶⁵

Thus Earle revokes the most refreshing aspect of his understanding of Schoenberg—namely, the redemptive promise of this sort of modernism. His last line, a quotation of Oliver Neighbour's on Schoenberg, intimates that 'no other composer of the time has so much to offer'.¹⁶⁶ Given the recurring but rather self-effacing references to various sorts of radical critique throughout the article, it seems to be a little cowardly not to come out with the M-word and admit that the Marxist writers Earle considers—such as Jameson and Perry Anderson—have produced a philosophy of modernism that needs to be more widely acknowledged. Earle, however, prefers to finish with a more trivial Marxism, a final sentence turned open towards a mutable future. But most trivial Marxists are at least able to admit their own colours; Earle is nowhere clear on the matter and prefers to remain elusive: as a result, his last-minute turn towards this sort of social analysis reads weakly. A touch risqué, inclusive, optimistic—it is the outer shell of a mushy, feel-good commitment to radical social critique, which is hardly given much credibility given its emanation from that bastion of social privilege that is the University of Oxford. One can have one's Schoenberg and not enjoy it: Oxbridge aesthetics, if you will; an elite, mandarin, establishment modernism returns, and one that is just as self-interested as Earle claims the British popularisers of Schoenberg to be.¹⁶⁷

In other words, there is a certain self-satisfied Adornian impotence here. If one judges musical material to be at a particular state of historical development, and if one assumes that popular successes will be not successes at all, then it is not surprising that Schoenberg can be laid down for a future generation of connoisseurs. Certainly the uncompromising tone of the *Philosophy of New Music* casts its baleful shadow across such an aesthetic position; but Adorno subsequently revised many of his

¹⁶⁵ Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (Columbia: Columbia University Press, 1994), 71.

¹⁶⁶ Earle, 'Taste, Power, and Trying to Understand op. 36', 642.

¹⁶⁷ *Ibid.*, 642.

judgements, so that the types of failure that he had formerly diagnosed in the Violin Concerto, which were originally a blunt measure of the work's historical truth-content, were later seen as convincingly successful.¹⁶⁸ For the Earle position this is an unmitigated disaster, for it is the failure of the Violin Concerto that guarantees its purchase on the social life from which it sprang. This is the essential foundation of the work's continuing importance, its continuing promise. Earle's musical response to the Violin Concerto, that is, resulted in a search for a critical model, which came finally to rest on Adorno—and the rather extreme Adorno of the *Philosophy of New Music* more than anything else. Like iron filings around a magnet, everything else in the article is thrown into position in relation to this Adornian reading. There is a sense of progressive revelation as we trek inexorably closer to what Earle, following Jameson, calls 'a key moment in Adorno's aesthetics, the famous "crisis of *Schein*"'.¹⁶⁹ Crudely, then, what Earle does is this: from an Adornian perspective, he assumes that the attempts to popularise Schoenberg failed; then he shows why they had to fail; and then he shows how all readings of this particular critical Schoenbergian moment must fail—at least for now. In aesthetic terms the text is a done deal right from the beginning. The situation is read via Adorno and then used to justify an Adornian reading: the elegant logical circularity of this model is what gives the article its argumentative force, not to mention its moral fervour. Given that superficial popularity would be judged as a failed success—a neutralisation by the culture industry, so to speak—it is surprising that no consideration is given to the situation which might turn a successful failure, the Violin Concerto, into a successful success. An article charting the demise of modernism thus becomes a victim of its own subject-matter, as it too fails to redeem the critical promise of modernism or to point towards what might be involved in that redemption. For different reasons, and with an untypical degree of regret, Earle thus implicitly underlines the message of the writers considered in this chapter: musical modernism is over.

¹⁶⁸ Ibid., 635 n. 126.

¹⁶⁹ Ibid., 640.

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Two traditions of thought have thus been presented in this thesis. Their intersections are not yet overly visible, and this is obviously a significant problem. It is here, then, that we must make the most difficult leap of all: the dialectical transformation, along the lines theorised by Fredric Jameson, of a problem into its own solution. Such is the way in which the concept of modernity enters this thesis. The problematics of modernity lie behind not only the theorisation of postmodernism examined in this essay, but also the difficulties encountered by recent musicological criticism and musical creativity. The following chapter will thus slowly outline two models of modernity, both of which come together in my Epilogue, where the intersections between musicology and Marxism are reduced to their lowest common denominator.

5 AURALITIES OF A MODERNITY

1

It is reasonable to assume that modernity is first and foremost a crisis of representation. The foundational assumption of such a modernity is that a distance opens up between the world and the ways in which we represent that world. Many conventional understandings of modernity are in reality little other than variants on this thesis, even if they do not know this: the demise of theological authority, for instance, can be thought to cause this estrangement in its own way by implying that nature is not as a God might have intended it to be, because there is no longer any certainty that there is a God. This is a coded way of referring to perhaps the most respectable philosophical understanding of modernity, in which the subject, understood roughly to designate a mind conscious of itself, is placed centre-stage. Where a deity once was, there now stands man: or as Andrew Bowie puts it, 'Modern philosophy begins when the generally accepted basis upon which the world is interpreted ceases to be a deity whose pattern is assumed to have already been imprinted into the universe.'¹ To summarise the situation briskly: if with the Kantian Copernican revolution it becomes clear that to some extent the mind might constitute the world, rather than the other way around, the task of philosophy is now somehow to ground itself in thought. The point is that if one is prepared to accept the existence of modernity, then it is not just the nature of the connection between self-consciousness and an external world that is at stake; rather, it is precisely the question as to whether there can be such a connection in the first place—and whether we can *know* that there is such a connection—that is now crucial.

These metaphysical and epistemological questions soon generate problems that are aesthetic; indeed, the very notion of aesthetics arises at this point in history

¹ Andrew Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity: from Kant to Nietzsche*, second edn (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003), 1.

precisely because of the distinctive intellectual issues that are being thrown up by the new metaphysical order.² The reason for this can be stated rather simply: whether or not the external world is ultimately knowable or understandable in any hard epistemological sense, we often use language and visual forms to represent and know this world as best we can; at the same time, however, and this is the distinctively modern crux, the meanings we pour into language and visual representations speak to (and of) our own subjectivities in ways which we cannot now know to be universal. When we are looked upon as objects by others, the modern problem of representation returns for the person observing us; how can we communicate the inner dimensions of our subjectivity, the emotions and feelings that we might well feel to be apodictic, but which, to an observer, are merely objects ripe for representation and interpretation like any others? A gulf opens up between our subjectivity—our consciousness of ourselves—and any objectified communication of this, and a major line of modern thought will devote itself to questioning the nature of our subjectivity in the first place.³

One can gauge the centrality and durability of this understanding of modernity by observing that even the most notorious and contentious reaction to the history of German idealism and its phenomenological aftermath—namely, structuralism—still concerns itself with a concept of modernity that is explicitly figured in terms of a crisis of representation. Indeed, such a concept is one of the most important themes of Foucault's *The Order of Things*,⁴ which attempts to articulate the crisis via a philosophical method that grants very little place to subjectivity (in the idealist sense) at all. The elegant audacity and baffling rhetorical world of this landmark study are well known, and it has, for better or worse, become a rallying-point for all kinds of supposedly post-structuralist or postmodernist theories of interpretation based on the ideas of archaeology and *epistemes*. Of rather greater note, however, is the way its vision of modernity intersects with and yet differs signally from the more philosophically accepted Teutonic understanding of modernity.⁵ The problem is, again, figured as that of representation, but Foucault works within a periodising

² Ibid., 5–7; for a materialist interpretation, see Terry Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990), 13–28 and 366–70.


³ See, for example, Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 27–9.

⁴ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: An Archaeology of the Human Sciences*, uncredited translation (London: Routledge Classics, 2002).

⁵ This collision famously occurs in Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, trans. Frederick Lawrence (Cambridge: Polity, 1987).

scheme that embraces three distinct eras, of which only one is termed modern, with the possibility of a further, post-humanist future held in abeyance:

Figure 5.1 Foucault's history

time 

	c. 1650	1800	
Renaissance	Classical age	Modern	???
resemblance	representation	signification	
	general grammar taxonomy analysis of wealth	philology biology political economy	
	order	history	
commentary	criticism		

Foucault's own conception of the modern is, in fact, not particularly relevant to the theory of modernity offered here. His understanding of modern in *The Order of Things* marks the transition from an age of order and taxonomy (the classical age) to one of organicism, in which humanism (and thus, in a certain sense, 'man') is configured for the first time. It is more useful for the purpose of my argument, however, to understand the shift from the Renaissance to the Classical age as being the crucial movement towards modernity, for modernity, on this view, is not restricted to the advent of humanism and is dependent rather on the eclipse of theology as a guarantor of knowledge.

It is important to recognise, however, that in Foucault's scheme the Renaissance is already a fallen world: there is, apparently, a 'kinship of language with

the world',⁶ but this kinship is no longer immediate. Whereas originally, when God-given, language 'was an absolutely certain and transparent sign for things',⁷ in the Renaissance this is no longer the case. Words no longer immediately resemble things; instead, Foucault claims that writing and its designated content are linked by what he calls similitudes, all of which is then 'resolved into a single form'. There is, in other words, a tripartite structure:

Figure 5.2 Renaissance resemblance



This structure might be recast graphically as follows:

Figure 5.3 Language and the world



The sense in which this model, despite the gap between language and the world, still encodes a kinship between the words and things is central to one of Foucault's most important levels of analysis: in the Renaissance, he claims, language was 'perpetual commentary',⁸ by which he means that language as inscribed in the world is an inescapable precondition of the theory of resemblance. In a significant claim, language 'silently pre-existed' within the discourse by which one tried to make language speak;⁹ the point, therefore, is that this is a world which is approached as if

⁶ Foucault, *The Order of Things*, 47.

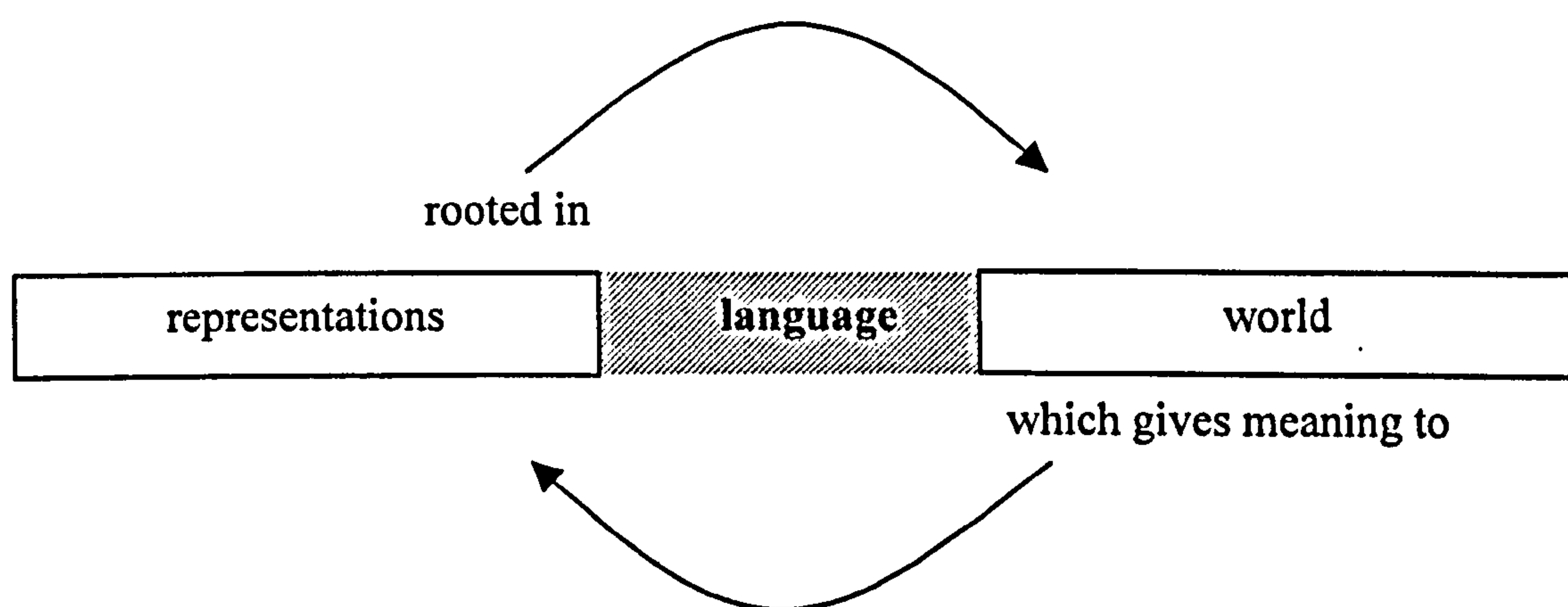
⁷ *Ibid.*, 47.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 87.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 87.

it were already textualised, and language itself is able to resemble the world through the manner in which it comments on a prior textualisation. In Foucault's Classical age, which is closer to common conceptions of modernity, it is precisely this anchor that is weighed: 'the primary Text is effaced, and with it, the entire, inexhaustible foundation of the words whose mute being was inscribed in things; all that remains is representation, unfolding in the verbal signs that manifest it, and hence becoming *discourse*.'¹⁰ So the structure of resemblance is replaced by a theory of representation, in which an important reshuffling occurs amongst the constituent parts of Foucault's paradigm:

Figure 5.4 Classical representation



The changing status of language here signals a mutation of considerable import: no longer is language approached with a view to what lies beneath its signs; instead, Foucault claims, one asks how language functions.¹¹ The discursive paradigm of commentary is thus eclipsed by one of criticism, and this marks a decisive point in the conceptualisation of the relationship between words and things. Put simply, from a tripartite structure of marks, similitudes, and designations, we move to a system of binary structures: the sign itself.

In *The Order of Things* the sign is theorised in a manner that is difficult to grasp but ultimately useful. Foucault initially approaches the sign through three of its dimensions; in his first, essentially epistemological, claim he again distances the Classical world from any prior textualisation: previously, he writes, knowledge

¹⁰ Ibid., 88.

¹¹ Ibid., 88.

presupposed signs anterior to itself, and its task was thus 'to uncover a language which God had previously distributed across the face of the earth'.¹² Now this is no longer the case: knowledge itself embraces and one might say constitutes the sign; the sign now functions within knowledge, rather than anterior to it. Secondly, this constitution of the sign through knowledge makes the sign inseparable from its analysis, because knowledge is itself implicated in the understanding of the sign in the first place, rather than simply uncovering its meaning. This is the sense in which Foucault claims that signs spread out the world, making things distinct; the act of knowing signs differentiates the world, rather than tracing a relation of resemblance between words and things.¹³ Finally, the sign is conventional, which is to say, man-made (and ultimately arbitrary, although this should not be understood in a completely unconstrained sense). Foucault does not deny the existence of natural signs, but they are now constituted by our knowledge. All of these observations combine to formulate a conception of signs that wants to produce an age of taxonomy and ordering, an age which will, in spite of its uncertainty, build up a network of signs 'in accordance with a knowledge of what is probable';¹⁴ in a marvellous passage he writes

It is no longer the task of knowledge to dig out the ancient Word from the unknown places where it may be hidden; its job now is to fabricate a language, and to fabricate it well—so that, as an instrument of analysis and combination, it will really be the language of calculation.¹⁵

To accomplish this task, the sign effects an important change from the Renaissance paradigm of resemblance. The Classical sign, instead of resolving a tripartite structure into a single form, is a duality. The sign comprises two parts: a thing that represents, and a thing that is represented; in more conventional terms, something signifying and something signified. But, in an important addition, the sign itself manifests the relation that links it to what it signifies; what Foucault means is that the sign carries within its signifying half an idea of its own role as representation. So when we look at the sign, we know it to be a sign because it not only manifests a relation to the thing it is representing, but it also carries within it some way of signalling itself as a representation. To know that a sign is a sign, this elusive self-reference is crucial.

¹² Ibid., 65.

¹³ Ibid., 67–8.

¹⁴ Ibid., 66.

¹⁵ Ibid., 69.

The conceptualisation of the sign that results from this account is difficult to grasp, but to criticise its abstruseness or its ultimate logical coherence is to miss the point. Indeed, what is central to this understanding of language is the issue raised earlier: one no longer attempts to read reality from beneath the signs; instead, one asks how they function. If this is what Foucault means by criticism, then he has in mind a conception of language in which the ultimate correspondence between it and reality cannot be questioned—not because it is transparent, but precisely because there is no way of grasping its transparency or otherwise. This means that language cannot grasp its own truth or falsehood, nor its transparency or opacity; so, importantly, criticism questions language *as if* it is a totality of signs, working, one might assume, on the assumption that this totality can be hoped (but not known) to correspond to reality. From this a distinction arises that is of considerable significance: namely, form is sheared away from content; the patterns of knowledge which try to represent the world are now distanced from that world, and they comprise an autonomous structure all of their own. Language can no longer be the medium of commentary, but it can be the medium of critique; and from this point on, the possibility arises that one day language might be turned into the object of critique. At the moment when commentary is eclipsed, there opens up a space in which a metacommentary might one day reside, in which one might realistically be able to comment on language itself. And whilst Foucault intriguingly refers to Mallarmé as the historical moment at which language wins an autonomous existence, achieving ‘the very essence of literature when one is no longer interrogating it at the level of what it says but only in its significant form’,¹⁶ it is equally possible to suggest that here is surely a point at which music might be central to modernity, since it is a medium which undeniably expresses, but equally undeniably does not do so as a language.

It is striking to discover just how many roads lead to this Mallarméan threshold of modernism. It is perhaps unsurprising that Foucault’s rather eccentric Frenchified survey of the history of ideas should come to devote attention to Mallarmé, but similar themes emerge from a very different tradition of thinking about modernity. Even if one might beg to differ with Foucault’s assessment of when this modern era begins, there is little doubt that gradually there emerges a line of thought that places the thinking, reflecting subject at the centre of the philosophical stage, and

¹⁶ Ibid., 48.

this subject will be the focus of what Jürgen Habermas has termed the philosophical discourse of modernity.¹⁷ For Habermas, however, modernity comes to the boil not with Descartes, Kant, or even Fichte, but with Hegel: in an historical leap of considerable audacity Habermas locates modernity as a crisis that kicks in only once it has become clear how this thinking subject whose powers of (pure) reason have been considerably curtailed by Kant comes to realise its need to fashion its normativity out of itself. If the modern is truly modern, then it must detach itself from the welcoming arms of history and instead try to find some way to ground itself, some way to understand itself that will go beyond a solipsistic shrug of the shoulders or a portentous Kantian imperative: what can provide the moral concepts to enable the free-thinking subject to pursue its own ends whilst not conflicting with those of other subjects? What can hold together the Kantian spheres of value—science, law, and art—and provide a unity fashioned from within? For Habermas, this is Hegel's dilemma. Only by providing a critique of modernity can the spirit of modernity be satisfied, but this critique undoes modernity from within, and therein lies the problem. Somehow modernity is pitched into a crisis: its secular 'conviction that the future has already begun'¹⁸ is blunted by the growing realisation of what this future has forsaken, and, although Habermas does not make such a claim, one might plausibly argue that modernism is the cultural realisation of—and reaction to—this crisis.

Habermas's Hegelian modernity basks in its self-consciousness, and in this respect it is similar to that of the literary critic Matei Calinescu. In *Five Faces of Modernity* Calinescu grounds the very notion of the modern in the idea of measurable time.¹⁹ Once time can be measured—which was difficult to achieve with accuracy until the invention of the mechanical clock in the thirteenth century—it can be divided up and treated as a commodity. Modernity's time is linear, irreversible, onward-flowing, and no longer cyclical, recurring eternally like the beating of an immortal heart. Out of this awareness flourishes the distinction between ancient and modern, or, rather, the tripartite partitioning of history into three eras: namely, an antiquity which modernity reveres, and the Middle Ages from which it differentiates itself. In terms of the history of ideas, the struggle between ancient and modern finds its most famous instantiation in the *Querelle des anciens et des modernes*. This 'Battle of the Books',

¹⁷ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 5.

¹⁹ Matei Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1987), 19.

as it was known in England, is a focal point of several key issues which are of considerable importance for a modernity trying to differentiate itself from the past. In particular, the formulation of neoclassical rules of beauty, developed and refined in service of the notion of a transcendent beauty whose norms are timeless and unchanging, is one of the points of departure for a romanticism that will increasingly come to understand beauty as being historically contingent.

For Calinescu, it is against this background, painted here in broad brush-strokes, that modernity splits into two different versions: the first, a cultural modernity of the Enlightened bourgeois middle-class, which places its faith in technology and science, whereas the second, which Calinescu calls an aesthetic modernity, spins off and is vehemently critical of the audience whose leisure-time art fills:

[T]he other modernity, the one that was to bring into being the avant-gardes, was from its romantic beginnings inclined toward radical antibourgeois attitudes. It was disgusted with the middle-class scale of values and expressed its disgust through the most diverse means, ranging from rebellion, anarchy, and apocalypticism to aristocratic self-exile. So, more than its positive aspirations (which often have very little in common), what defines cultural modernity is its outright rejection of bourgeois modernity, its consuming negative passion.²⁰

It is, as Calinescu hints, easy to see in this aesthetic modernity the seeds of what might in time develop from a critique of cultural modernity into a fully blown antagonism towards art itself—that is, the strategy of the avant-garde as it is conventionally understood. But to leap so confidently into the twentieth century is to jump the gun: this position is, of course, considerably different from that of the proponents of *l'art pour l'art* whom Calinescu has in mind. In fact, Calinescu's survey is at this point centred around just one figure who is of 'cardinal importance as a theorist of aesthetic modernity': Baudelaire.²¹

Baudelaire's writings respond to modernity with a mixture of hope, nostalgia, and despair. Particular themes, such as the crowd and the city, provoke both enjoyment and fear—which encourages one to draw the conclusion that there is a genuine degree of uncertainty in the poet's reaction to modern life. Especially enigmatic is the essay *Le peintre de la vie moderne* (The Painter of Modern Life [written in 1859–60 and published in 1863]), which has spawned many competing

²⁰ Ibid., 42.

²¹ Calinescu, *Five Faces of Modernity*, 42.

interpretations.²² In this essay—and it is worth pointing out that modernity is a theme in several of the poet's other writings—the key issue is one of beauty: Baudelaire identifies a general beauty, that of the classical poets and artists, and a particular beauty, which is that of circumstance. (It is this latter beauty with which Baudelaire is immediately concerned in this essay, which is focused on, amongst other things, the sketches of manners of the painter Constantin Guys.) After identifying an immortal thirst for beauty, which has, claims Baudelaire, always found satisfaction, he comes to conceive of this beauty as a variety of expressions gathered into a unity, a variety that consists of the eternal, invariable beauty (likened to the soul) as well as the relative, circumstantial beauty (likened to the body). It is this circumstantial beauty that is of the contemporary age, reflecting its fashion, morals, and emotions. In an exquisite simile, circumstantial beauty is 'appetizing icing on the divine cake',²³ and, nonchalantly giving the whole affair a sudden dialectical twist, Baudelaire claims that this immutable, classical beauty is not appreciable without the other, transient beauty.

In the art of Constantin Guys—whom history has not, *pace* Baudelaire, viewed as epitomising modernity—the sketch of manners, which depicts bourgeois life, concerns itself with the transient type of beauty. The paintings are finished with some rapidity and minimum cost, and they do not deal with heroic or religious subjects; the artist is more an observer, a philosopher, a *flâneur*, grasping the passing moment rather than enshrining the everlasting. This ephemeral, fugitive, contingent half of art is, famously, what Baudelaire understands as *la modernité*—the other half of art being, of course, the immutable, the eternal. But this modernity is more than just the sum of its parts: the artist is not simply a passive observer; he is more than a *flâneur*. The art of the modern looks for the modern, in order to distil, in another well-known phrase, the eternal from the transitory. From this perspective (although not, it is worth stressing, all others) and from the point of view of understanding current beauty, the past is useless. The modern must search for itself in the modern, an imperative oriented in the now which calls to mind Habermas's Hegelian notion that the modern must somehow ground itself in its own conscious: '[A]lmost all our originality comes from the seal which Time imprints on our sensations.'²⁴

²² Charles Baudelaire, *The Painter of Modern Life and Other Essays*, trans. Jonathan Mayne (London: Phaidon, 1964), 1–41.

²³ *Ibid.*, 3.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 14.

Baudelaire's theory of modernity is not, at least in *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, a foretaste of the radical strategy of the anti-art, anti-bourgeois avant-garde. The extent to which Baudelaire's politics permeate his writings remains a matter of debate, but it is clear that in the 'Dandy' section of *Le peintre de la vie moderne*, which deals with fashion and decadence, Baudelaire comes close to mourning the passing of a figure he earlier describes as rich, idle, and with a vast abundance of time and money—a sort of spiritual aristocrat who flourishes briefly in conditions of considerable political upheaval as the aristocracy finally dies and liberal democracy is more nearly implemented. Indeed, in a remark which might be appropriated by those of very different political inclinations today, Baudelaire moans that democracy levels and invades everything—and this is almost certainly an early portent of the twentieth century.

A mixture of praise for the modern artist and regret for what is passing captures very neatly the janus face of modernity, but Baudelaire's ideas have, in their carefully crafted ambivalence, fallen easy prey to the interpretations of others. Calinescu surprisingly talks of modernity having a 'deep hostility' to the past, a view which is insufficiently dialectical, and argues that the poet sees modernity as the possibility of going beyond history whilst conscious of it—a kind of 'forgetful immersion in the "now"', which the past can only hinder, and thus a dangerous, risky affair.²⁵ But this is not quite what Baudelaire has in mind: the past might well be frozen, but the modern transience is transient in itself, due one day to be engulfed by history's onward march. It is only awareness of the now as being transitory that counts for the Baudelaire of *Le peintre de la vie moderne*; once that immediacy is lost, the modern has moved on, which is perhaps what another of Baudelaire's interpreters has in mind when he writes that '[m]odernity designates an epoch, and it also denotes the energies which are at work in this epoch to bring it close to antiquity.'²⁶ Modernity seems to be entangled in the endurance of that from which it differentiates itself, and if that again suggests dialectics, then it will come as no surprise to learn that the author of that description is Walter Benjamin.

Frankfurt is not the obvious place to which to travel in order to get to Paris: enchanting (and undoubtedly influential) though Benjamin's essays on Baudelaire may be, they are interpretations with which others (not to mention the texts

²⁵ Ibid., 49–50.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1997), 81.

themselves) might well beg to differ. Hans Robert Jauss, for instance, comments that Benjamin's desire to demonstrate Baudelaire's unique significance as the one who 'first and most unflinchingly fixed, that is, recognized and concretized, the productive energy of alienated man' leads, by no means inevitably, to a one-sidedness: Benjamin 'interprets the *Fleur* [sic] *du mal* as testimony exclusively to the denatured existence of the urban masses. In the process, he overlooks the dialectical "other face" of alienation, the new productive energy liberated by the repudiation of nature, to which Baudelaire's *Großstadt* (metropolitan) lyric poetry and theory and modernity offer no less significant testimony.'²⁷ This is no trivial matter: 'It is thanks to Walter Benjamin that we no longer see the *Fleurs du mal* in the thrall of *l'art pour l'art*, as a withdrawal of poetry into itself; through him we now recognize in it the product of a historical experience, which rendered the social processes of the nineteenth century intelligible to art.'²⁸ Of course, one might reply to this observation that this is precisely one of Benjamin's intentions: to ground an intense aestheticism in a particular socio-cultural milieu, which can only now be more knowledgeably appreciated. Such thinking is not at all surprising, given the materialist aesthetic views of the Frankfurt School.

There might be a grain of truth, however, in Jauss's claim that one 'face' of Baudelaire's poetry is neglected: sensitive though Benjamin is to the vacillating opinions of the poet, it is only in a short addendum to his book on Baudelaire that he devotes consideration to *l'art pour l'art*.²⁹ He concedes that his approach

seems like a complicated process, and it is. Is there not a more direct, a more decisive one? Why not simply confront the poet Baudelaire with present-day society and answer the question as to what he has to say to this society's progressive cadres by referring to his works—without, to be sure, ignoring the question whether he has anything to say to them at all?³⁰

The answer to this question is that, for Benjamin, 'when we read Baudelaire we are given a course of historical lessons by bourgeois society.'³¹ From this assumption Benjamin moves swiftly into a discussion of taste which is as provocative as it is simplistic: commodity production has increasingly led to a situation in which people

²⁷ Hans Robert Jauss, 'Reflections on the Chapter "Modernity" in Benjamin's Baudelaire Fragments', in Gary Smith, ed., *On Walter Benjamin* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1988), 177.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, 176–7.

²⁹ This book is, of course, a collection of fragments from an unfinished project, so one should avoid reading a narratological teleology into Benjamin's remarks.

³⁰ Benjamin, *Charles Baudelaire*, 104.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 104.

are less aware, or even unaware, of the conditions of production, whether social or technical. The consumer, buying a mass product, is no expert—which is a good thing, given that mass production ‘must’ be bent on disguising bad quality.³² As the expertise of the consumer declines, the importance of taste increases: for the consumer, this simply masks the lack of knowledge, whilst it also allows the manufacturer to pass over other requirements which might be more costly to meet.

Many people would nowadays dispute this analysis, relying as it does on an obviously Marxist notion of reification, but it is not necessary to accept it in order to follow Benjamin’s argument. In a passage worth quoting at some length he claims that this response of taste to commodity production is the development which literature reflects in *l’art pour l’art*:

In *l’art pour l’art* the poet for the first time faces language the way the buyer faces the commodity on the open market. He has lost his familiarity with the process of its production to a particularly high degree. The poets of *l’art pour l’art* are the last about whom it can be said that they come ‘from the people’. They have nothing to formulate with such urgency that it could determine the *coining* of their words. Rather, they have to choose their words. [...] The poet of *l’art pour l’art* wanted to bring to language above all himself—with all the idiosyncrasies, nuances, and imponderables of his nature. These elements are reflected in taste. The poet’s taste guides him in his choice of words. But the choice is made only among words which have not already been coined by the *object* itself—that is, which have not been included in its process of production.³³

It is in this analysis, which tries a little incoherently and unsuccessfully to map aestheticism onto standard Marxist notions of reification, that Benjamin locates Baudelaire’s resistance to the bourgeoisie. The process in which the poet faces language as if it were a commodity, sheared from the social reality that produced it, leads ultimately to the *poésie pure* of Mallarmé, which produces a poetry containing words which the bourgeoisie recognises, but cannot comprehend. And it is this stage in modern poetry—at which ‘the poet no longer undertakes to support any of the causes that are pursued by the class to which he belongs’³⁴—whose beginnings Benjamin reads into Baudelaire, and which also might be read not just as being a product of modernity, but also as the beginnings of a modernism.

That the two different lineages of modernity surveyed so far approach the same Mallarméan point is very suggestive. For ‘Mallarmé is at once the most musical and

³² Ibid., 105.

³³ Ibid., 105–6.

³⁴ Ibid., 106.

the most philosophical of modern poets',³⁵ claims Henry Weinfield, and the relations between his poetry and music have long been a source of academic interest.³⁶ These conceptions of modernity therefore drive towards a poet who is consistently thought to be musical; this reminds us of a significant dimension of modernity, which is precisely the fact that during modernity the status of music, when set amongst the other arts, is subject to a very considerable mutation. Music had formerly been held to be an inferior art, because it required the help of another (literature) to enable it to articulate specific concepts; in the modern era, however, and in a development of seminal aesthetic importance, the polarity of this judgement was reversed.³⁷ Now music was to be valued precisely because it could articulate something beyond language—and this, unsurprisingly enough, in an epoch defined (at least in the Foucauldian scheme) by the gap between language and the world.

From a musicological point of view the most intriguing remarks on this topic have surely been those of Carl Dahlhaus, who traces these themes from an Austro-Germanic viewpoint which is (thus) heavily influenced by the notion of 'absolute' music. Absolute music, on this view, is closely linked to the notion of aesthetic autonomy;³⁸ that is, it signals music that is explicitly dissociated from so-called extra-musical functions and programmatic texts. The claim of Dahlhaus's *The Idea of Absolute Music* is that whereas music enters the eighteenth century as an inferior art, because it lacks an expressive specificity that can only be rectified by the addition of words, by the end of the nineteenth century this judgement has had its polarity reversed: now music is valued precisely because it can articulate a realm of feeling beyond words. In Dahlhaus's own words:

The idea of "absolute music"—as we may henceforth call independent instrumental music, even though the term did not arise for another half-century—consists of the conviction that instrumental music purely and clearly expresses the true nature of music by its very lack of concept, object, and purpose. Not its existence, but what it stands for, is decisive. Instrumental music, as pure "structure," represents itself. Detached from the affections and feelings of the real world, it forms a "separate world for itself."³⁹

³⁵ Stephane Mallarmé, *Collected Poems*, trans. Henry Weinfield (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1994), 1.

³⁶ The most significant recent addition to this tradition being Elizabeth McCombie, *Mallarmé and Debussy: Unheard Music, Unseen Text* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003).

³⁷ Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 221–7.

³⁸ Carl Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, trans. Roger Lustig (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 6.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 7.

In the final, suggestive chapter of this study, Dahlhaus moves somewhat away from the texts of Romantic aesthetics that are his principal focus, and turns his attention to the possible connections between absolute music and the *poésie pure* of Mallarmé. It is quite clear that Dahlhaus does not believe there is a strong historical link between the two conceptions, reserving typical scorn for any notion of a *Zeitgeist* that might secure such a link,⁴⁰ but he nevertheless contends that there is some merit in grounding them both in a broader conjuncture. Whilst his remarks are perfunctory and to some extent rather repetitive of issues addressed earlier in the study, he nevertheless suggests some interesting correspondences.

The most significant of these concern the way in which Dahlhaus contends that music's status amongst the arts was gradually elevated from a position of inferiority to that of the ideal art. The new viewpoint is captured by a writer such as Ludwig Tieck, for instance, when art's independence and freedom, not to mention its own law-giving autonomy, is valued most highly: it is inevitable that music will come to be valued highly in such a system of priorities. But this is a system, claims Dahlhaus, that at least initially was supposed to release poetry from more mimetic theories of representation, and open itself up to the supersensible.⁴¹ The point was to get away from crudely imitative forms of realism and crystallise a realm of linguistic freedom in which language would no longer be merely the conduit for emotions or concepts; language would instead be itself the substance of poetry, in the way in which the content of an instrumental piece of music might be thought to be none other than its form.⁴² There is thus a turn away from the sentimental and a move towards the esoteric, as well as a revolt against the quotidian; notions of the absolute intermingle with more familiar conceptions of (intense) artistic autonomy, conceptions which find their most powerful historical realisation in absolute music.⁴³

This, or so Dahlhaus claims, is a direct response to instrumental music. 'Instrumental music, lacking in object and function, and only partially comprehensible as a mere "language of feelings," required a legitimizing doctrine so as not to appear as pleasant but empty noise';⁴⁴ and the formalism that is to some extent inevitable in discussions of music's inner logic comes to stand as a principle that can be applied to

⁴⁰ Ibid., 142.

⁴¹ Ibid., 143–7.

⁴² Ibid., 143–4.

⁴³ See also Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

⁴⁴ Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 152.

literature too. Form, that is, is no longer the external shell of something else,⁴⁵ but rather essential in its own right. Indeed, what we witness is the rise of an aesthetic of form: in a direct link to the more Mallarméan philosophies of composition that push symbolism into a somewhat unexpected linkage with Romanticism, the atmosphere of intense, intricate craftsmanship and engineering that is closely associated with French symbolism can ultimately be viewed as a parallel to the conceptions of language once current in German literary circles. With the rise of this aestheticism, we have come full circle, as summarised in Dahlhaus's quotation of Valéry: 'The supreme object in the world, and the justification of its existence ... could be nothing but a book.'⁴⁶ The idea that the world can be read like a book, that words and things are interlinked more tangibly than can now be represented, returns us to our Foucauldian point of departure, and Dahlhaus's wry closing twist—reminding us that Heglian philosophy long predicted that a turn to the formal would occur in the modern world, even if Hegel did not quite grasp the significance music would play in this turn—suggests that the problematic of modernity lies once again in the critical background.

2

If this turn to the formal is central to modernity, however, then it should already be clear that several of the problems being addressed are rather uncannily proximate to those raised in the tussles between old and new musicologies discussed in Chapter 3. The opposition between formalism and whatever it is that formalism is supposed to oppose is particularly relevant here: as will be recalled, Lawrence Kramer, for instance, has formulated a scheme in which modernism (understood as formalism and positivism) was superseded by postmodernism (understood as his own brand of contextualising criticism). However, an interesting point arises here: it is by no means clear what musicologists understand by the term 'formalism'. Indeed, one is tempted to say that if the word *has* gained any widely shared musicological currency in the past few decades, it would seem to have done so as an implicit form of derogation; and, in case anyone is unsure what is implied by the slur, to be called a formalist is to be characterised as the worst sort of analyst or—even lower—theorist. That is, a

⁴⁵ Ibid., 153.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 154.

narrow-minded, geekish pursuit of the theoretically demonstrable, carried out with a self-propelling zeal that ignores or brackets the way music gets interwoven into the social fabric of cultural life; formalism is all those analyses which reduce music to numbers, or graphs, or diagrams, or whatever is deemed unfeeling or unmusical: a kind of maximally smooth musicology that Scott Burnham, for one, has characterised (albeit in its defence) by the neat quip that its balloons are filled by the hot air of abstraction.⁴⁷ Such criticisms are nowadays a commonplace, relics of a battle that has, it seems, been fought and won (or lost, depending on one's viewpoint); and one might take a measure of such criticisms' incoherence simply by observing that it is often unclear whether formalism is being criticised because it succeeds at what it does—and thus ignores the cultural practices now deemed important; or, alternatively, that it is being criticised because it fails—since it merely misreads its own cultural situation as being somehow transcendent or irrelevant to what it is doing. This is an important point, because it is also unclear why criticism would follow from these judgements: if formalism *is* successful in bracketing worldliness, then presumably it accesses objective dimensions of music which are just as academically respectable as any other; but if formalism is defensible in this way, then critiques of it are pretty meaningless, since the critique must concede what it is trying to avoid—namely, that the worldliness of music *is* detachable from the musical object. Alternatively, if formalism fails, then it must surely become interesting in its own right as a particular contextual way of approaching music intellectually. If this is acknowledged, then it remains to be explained why any normative charge should be accorded to the supersession of formalism. Why should it not itself be considered one of the worldly approaches to music, albeit one that has supposedly flourished in the artistic traditions of the West? Also, if formalism fails, is this failure simply a failure of execution, or is it structural? Does this failure open up the space in which a successful, better formalism might reside—and, if so, does this not allow for the return of the criteria of objectivity that had initially been assumed to be no longer viable?

These musicological understandings of formalism do not exhaust the semantic ambit of the term, however. Throughout its history, the term has traversed virtually the entire gamut of academic disciplines: one could easily trek, on one hand, all the way back to Platonic forms; on the other hand, the mathematical formalism that fell

⁴⁷ Scott Burnham, 'Theorists and "The Music Itself"', *Journal of Musicology* 15/3 (1997), 327.

early in the twentieth century is potentially no less relevant to postmodernist concerns. Giving a sense of the principal semantic field of such words is always difficult—it is so easy to find usages which escape conventional definitions, and thus to conclude triumphantly that any given theorist has overlooked some key sense of the term—but it seems worthwhile nevertheless to give some preliminary summary of the connotations of the word, even if the territory initially appears to be far from musicological concerns. One of the most consistent senses in which the word is used involves what we would nowadays term autonomy. The problem, put simply, concerns the accumulation of knowledge in the modern world. Kant's first Critique demonstrates 'how it is that we can generate a potentially infinite number of laws of nature',⁴⁸ but we emphatically do not have any guarantee that these laws constitute some larger totality or system: there can be no certainty that our many laws, derived ultimately from empirical observation, form any kind of unity. If there were such a guarantee, a kind of basic principle that stated firmly that nature is inherently intelligible, we would invalidate one of the central (cl)aims of the *Critique of Pure Reason*; such metaphysical dogmatism is precisely what Kant is attempting to avoid. Thus the key question becomes, in Andrew Bowie's formulation: 'How are we to know that those parts of nature for which we as yet have no laws are subject to laws at all?'⁴⁹

One way of answering this question involves paying attention to the way in which the mind connects universals and particulars. If experience of nature is codified into laws, then what the mind is doing is subsuming particulars under universals. Let us assume for the moment that there is a power of judgement in the mind that achieves this subsumption: Kant calls it 'determining' judgement, in which temporal-spatial experience is subsumed under more general concepts and categories of the mind. This scheme does not sufficiently explain how judgement must work, however, because it does not make clear by what rules the power of judgement functions. If these rules are laws like any other, then it is apparent that an infinite regress opens up, since judgement is what generates such laws in the first place. What is needed instead is a type of judgement that generates the universals under which the particulars are to be subsumed. To enable this, it must be presupposed that particulars *can* subsequently be subsumed under universals; in other words, we are in need of precisely the

⁴⁸ Bowie, *Aesthetics and Subjectivity*, 24.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, 26.

principle that is not permitted within the Kantian system. Kant's solution to this grave problem is that we presuppose such a principle, even though we cannot know that it is true. In Bowie's words, then, 'the principle is a necessary *fiction*, which assumes that nature in fact does function in a purposive way':⁵⁰

Natural products *appear* to contain an 'idea' which makes them take the form they do, in the way an artist can realise an idea by making a work of art. It is as if the whole of an organism preceded the parts which we can analyse in terms of the understanding[.]⁵¹

This Kantian solution moves us very close to an understanding of formalism. If one were to think of form as some kind of corollary of this mysterious principle (that nature is inherently intelligible), then formalism is what concerns itself with that form and usually that form alone. Form, that is, would seem to be an immanent regulating property of an object: if an object is considered as a whole, then form seems to be something to do with the way in which that whole presents itself to us all by itself. Often there is an assumption of coherence or closure, so that form is necessarily complete: when we perceive an object's form, that is, we are perceiving the entire object in all its self-regulating splendour; and often, of course, the crucial metaphor used in such descriptions is the organicism which is latent in Kant's epistemology.

There are obvious connections here with the modern project of aesthetic autonomy.⁵² The principal figure here is, again, Kant, whose third Critique attempts, amongst other things, to establish the conditions of what he terms the pure judgement of taste—a judgement which is disinterested and universally valid.⁵³ When perceiving a natural object, there exists a type of aconceptual satisfaction that is quite different from any feelings of agreeableness or moral approval; it is beauty, so Kant argues, that is the object of such satisfaction, which is disinterested—that is, it has no purpose.⁵⁴ But the a priori principle that underlies this faculty of judgement is that of purposiveness: since we cannot judge nature via a concept, which would gather up the particulars under some broader universal, thus providing a purpose (an end), we must

⁵⁰ Ibid., 27.

⁵¹ Ibid., 27.

⁵² This is noted by Jim Samson in his consideration of musical formalism to be discussed below. See Jim Samson, 'Analysis in Context', in Nicholas Cook and Mark Everist, ed., *Rethinking Music* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999), 37–42.

⁵³ See Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 5: 181–193 (p. 68–78), as well as the first two moments of the Analytic of the Beautiful, 5: 203–219 (p. 89–104). [Bracketed pagination refers to Guyer and Matthews's translation.]

⁵⁴ Ibid., 5: 205 (p. 90–1).

instead look at nature as if it were created purely in accord with our powers of perception. In order to be aconceptual, then, beauty arises thanks to the harmonising of our powers of perception with the forms of nature. In a further twist that will seem yet more unpalatable to current academic dispositions wary of the pitfalls of ethnocentricity, the sense of taste is thus universal, communal, since what we are mapping onto nature is simply the forms of our subjectivity itself, which for Kant is shared. So the pure judgement of taste is universally valid, but also subjective, because what it is marking is the shared subjectivity of Enlightened mankind.

The links with formalism as now understood—as a straightforward concentration on the autonomous aesthetic object, with a putative denial of the claims or relevance of anything external to this crystalline structure⁵⁵—are not immediately obvious. Most notable of all is the fact that such (Kantian) aesthetic judgements are primarily concerned with natural objects—that is, explicitly not art, which is plainly not purposeless in the sense Kant intends for nature, since to know it as art is presumably already to fall into conceptual judgements. Kant struggles from this point onwards to adapt his outline to art: the position he ends up at is that fine art purposely appears as natural or undesigned (that is, purposeless), and that is, in fact, the measure of its purposiveness. Consequently, we judge it as nature even though we know it to be art; and fine art must achieve this purposeless purposiveness. How can it do so? The answer is through its own autonomy: art must, like nature, be produced by an internal cause, a self-propagating formative force which appears to us as purposeless, however, and the way that this is achieved is by the creation of fine art by the genius.⁵⁶

The problems that this ‘solution’ brings Kant are outside of the purview of this dissertation.⁵⁷ The meaning of formalism, however, somehow crystallises around these Kantian ideas; the result is not especially Kantian,⁵⁸ but it is often associated with the philosopher nonetheless. What takes place, in effect, is a marriage of the earlier (epistemological) presupposition of autonomous organicism with the later

⁵⁵ See, for instance, the editors’ Introduction to Richard Leppert and Susan McClary, ed., *Music and Society: the politics of composition, performance and reception* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1987), esp. xi–xiii. Also see Janet Wolff, ‘The ideology of autonomous art’, *ibid.*, 1–12.

⁵⁶ Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, 5: 311–20 (p. 189–97).

⁵⁷ For an overview see Henry E. Allison, *Kant’s Theory of Taste* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 271–301.

⁵⁸ Guyer and Matthews, indeed, speak of ‘a rich trove of insights for aesthetic theory that is often overlooked under the spell of the formalism of the earlier “Analytic” [my italics]. See the editors’ introduction to Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, xxxii.

(aesthetic) aconceptuality. Formalism thus becomes linked with approaches to art which treat art as if it were autonomous, and, at a key moment in the history of aesthetics, this autonomy becomes tied to a denial of conceptuality—which is taken to mean a denial of content itself, whether historical, semantic, or whatever. From its modern beginnings in epistemology, then, formalism eventually metamorphoses into a critical orientation which becomes predicated on a shearing of objects from their contexts, the contexts in which the forms are generated. Form, that is, is thrown into a dialectical tension with content.

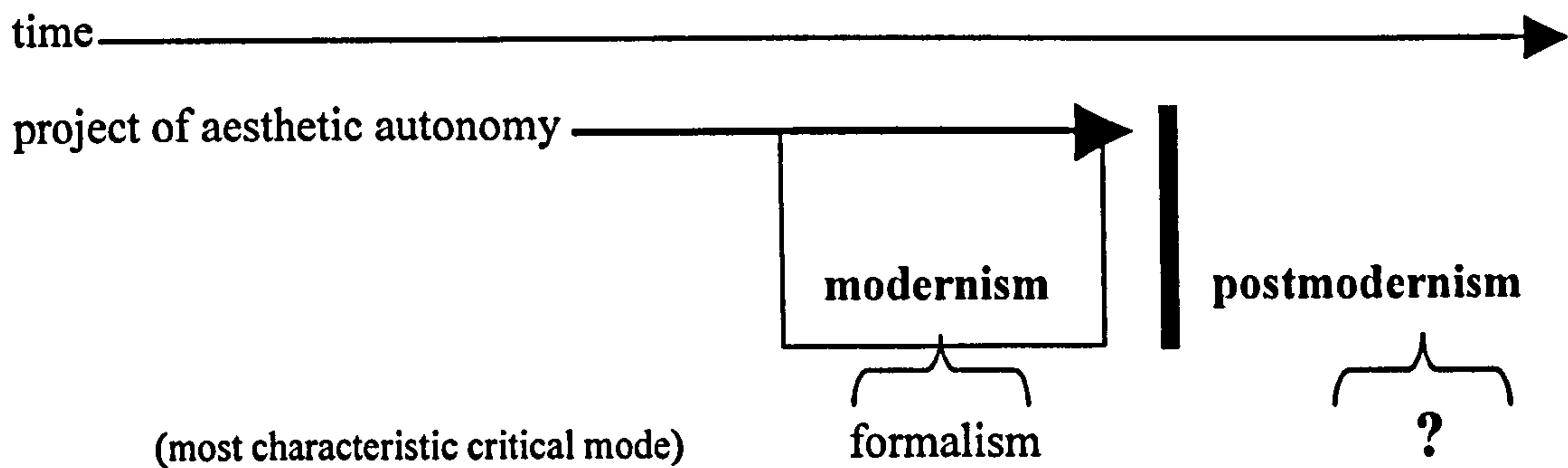
Formalism, then, is intertwined with modern aesthetics right from the latter's beginning, but in recent times the word has tended to lose a great deal of its depth, and has come to designate something far narrower than any of the myriad senses of the word that have been sifted here. As was argued earlier, in musicology formalism has been aligned with modernism, and the supersession of both has tended to mark a putative paradigm shift. Like Lawrence Kramer, Jim Samson, in an important essay on the history of musical analysis, is explicit on the matter of this linkage:

modernism and formalism [...] were firmly grounded in, and closely connected by, the project of autonomy. The cultural era of modernism represented the summation of that project, just as formalism represented its most characteristic critical mode.⁵⁹

So if one were to construct a diagram to represent Samson's position, it might look like figure 5.5:

⁵⁹ Samson, 'Analysis in Context', 51.

Figure 5.5 Samson's 'project of autonomy'



This seems comparatively straightforward, but already there is an interesting slippage in the argument. Near the beginning of the essay, Samson's stated intention is 'to problematize music analysis in our changing world.'⁶⁰ By the very last line, however, the text has seemingly transformed itself into 'a defence', should one be needed, 'of formalism.'⁶¹ Several aspects of this slippage are striking: firstly, it comes at the point in the essay where Samson is discussing modernism and postmodernism, giving the effect that the linkage between analysis and formalism is a feature of modernism; secondly, if this essay is a defence of formalism, then it is a strangely muted one, because the word is first mentioned with any significance only in the final fifth of the essay, at a point when Samson has detailed the shift of analysis from the dominance of aesthetic autonomy to the more recent rebirth of interest in contexts. If we can gather from the slippage that analysis and formalism are closely related, then we can also say that it is not made clear why this is so, nor whether they diverge in any respect, nor what their relationship is to modernism itself. Since analysis predated modernism, and formalism predated both analysis and modernism, the subtle interplay of these concepts will heavily impact upon any reformulation of them for the postmodernist world; specifically, we shall need to ascertain precisely how they coalesce during the era of modernism.

The key to such an analysis is to travel via postmodernism: whatever one makes of the status of analysis, it is clear that the change in its status is part of a broader shift in cultural sensibility, for the relocation of analysis has brought with it

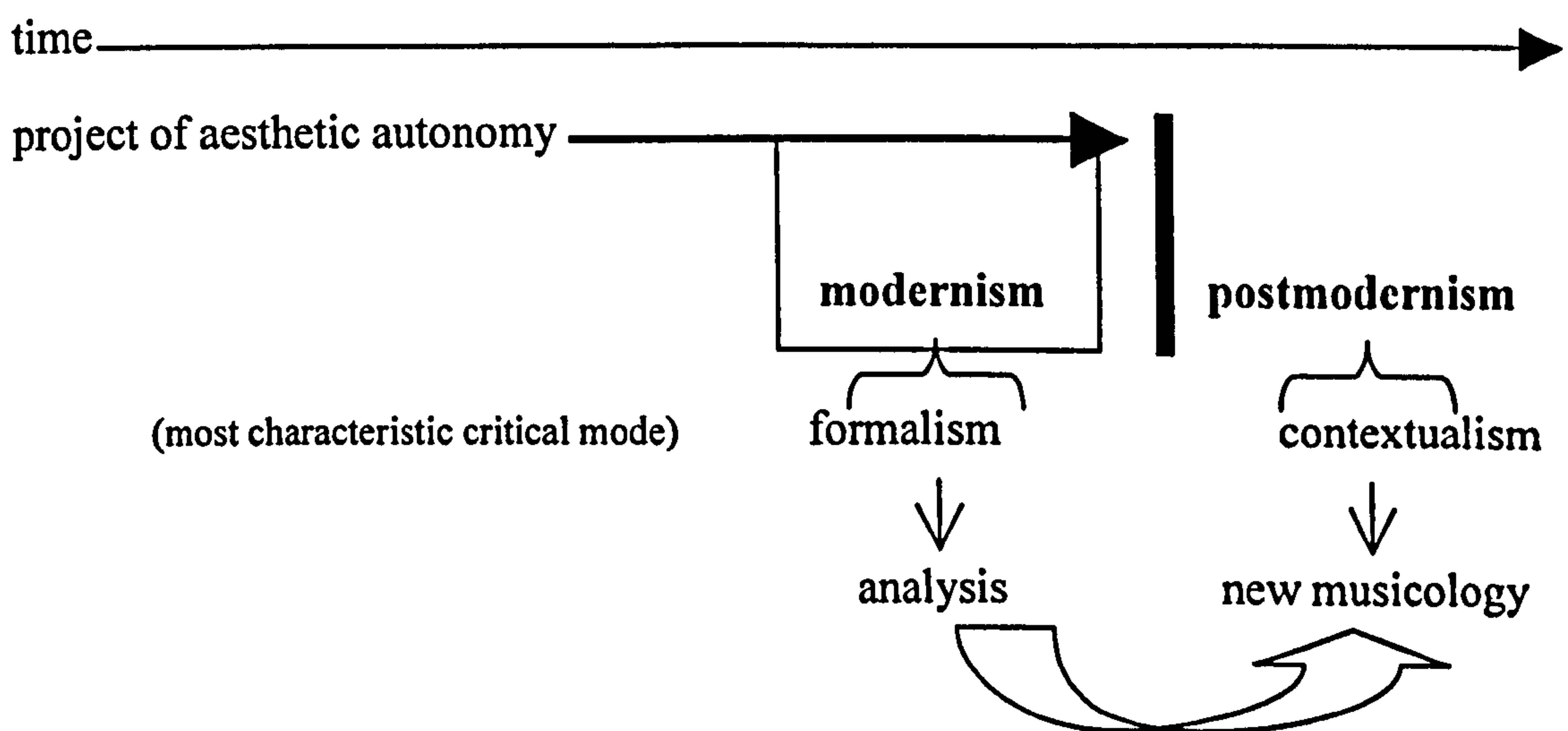
⁶⁰ Ibid., 37.

⁶¹ Ibid., 54.

a frank dismissal of the austerities and exclusions of formalism. The emphasis lies rather on *inclusion*, the 'bringing together' of disparate perspectives and separated categories, and that speaks of a postmodern world.⁶²

So the term that should replace the question-mark in figure 5.5 is probably contextualism, and to ground the diagram in a more musicological context one might add an additional set of descriptions underneath the characteristic critical modes:

Figure 5.6 The 'project of autonomy' viewed musicologically



In the light of Kramer's periodisation of musicological history, this scheme seems unproblematic enough. In fact, Samson's version is far richer, historically speaking, than Kramer's: Samson starts with Guido Adler's influential division of an emergent *Musikwissenschaft* into historical and systematic musicology, representing respectively historicism and scientism. It was from the historical side of this division that analysis emerged, and Samson sees its move to autonomy as being 'prepared' by a number of contemporary tendencies, notably the rise of the work-concept and the process of canon-formation which was, more or less, *Musikwissenschaft's* implicit goal. But at this stage analysis got caught up in another, quite different evolution: the progress of modern aesthetics, in which increasingly the science of sensory perception was felt to be the key bridging point between perception, cognition, and (often)

⁶² Ibid., 51.

morality. The upshot of this confluence of emergent musicology and maturing aesthetics was, in Samson's words, 'the development of an inherent (energetic) organicism, purged of context, [in which] art [is] transformed from an idealized image of what the world is to one of what the world might become.'⁶³ So in a turn rather reminiscent of Kant's linking of beauty with our perception of the natural world, the figure of organicism—a living, breathing work in which each part is vital to the whole whilst indelibly marked by that same whole—is the recipient of a colossal intellectual investment.

Although Samson does not spell it out in so many words, one can say that this is not so much the moment of modernism as it is a consequence of modernity itself. The shift in music theory that Samson details so convincingly—the shift 'from doctrinal to rational knowledge'⁶⁴—is on anyone's definition a marker of modern consciousness, and the reorientation it brings in music analysis is that which takes us from theory to analysis: put crudely, from concern with universals to an interest in particulars, although the two are inevitably dialectically related. Samson uses a charged word to characterise this crucial development: firstly he notes the separation of the older types of music theory from a newer 'structuralist poetics';⁶⁵ and then he writes that

The effect of this reorientation within music theory (mainly a product of the eighteenth century) was to change the status of the musical work from a prospective to a retrospective object. The work itself became the principal locus of enquiry, its structure transcending the rules of speculative theory, or understood negatively in relation to those rules. There emerged, in short, a structural sense of form in the nineteenth century, given expression through the developing tradition of *Formenlehre*.⁶⁶

The key word in these arguments is 'structural'; and it becomes clear at this point that a distinction between history and structure has in fact been present in this essay's background right from the very beginning. One is tempted to read it into Samson's presentation of Adler's division between history and system; less tenuously, Samson earlier remarks that 'Resolving an opposition between Hegelian–Marxist and structuralist theories is not the imperative it once seemed'.⁶⁷ The tenor of this remark is curious in a musicological context: this particular theoretical corner—which was for

⁶³ Ibid., 39.

⁶⁴ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁶ Ibid., 41.

⁶⁷ Ibid., 37–8.

some time highly fashionable as well as sharply contested in the literary criticism of the 1970s and 80s⁶⁸—has never made much headway in musicological circles, and neither also have openly Hegelian–Marxist schemata dominated musicological discourse. Indeed, precisely the liberating charge of some of the new musicology has been to baptise musicology into this theoretical climate—to drag it, kicking and screaming, into the theoretical mainstream; so Samson’s use of it as some kind of structuring opposition underlying his argument is interesting, as is his use of the term ‘structuralist poetics’, the title of a very widely read study by Jonathan Culler which was partly responsible for the burgeoning Anglo-American interest in structuralism itself.⁶⁹ There is a piquant irony here, however, because Culler’s study has been characterised as a rather formalistic reading of structuralism: in Terry Eagleton’s words, structuralism made safe for the free world, purged of the political content that was undoubtedly part of its surrounding theoretical atmosphere;⁷⁰ the absence of such politicisation from some of the wilder theoretical flights of recent years already hints at the extent to which an unwitting formalism can permeate even those attempts to criticise it.

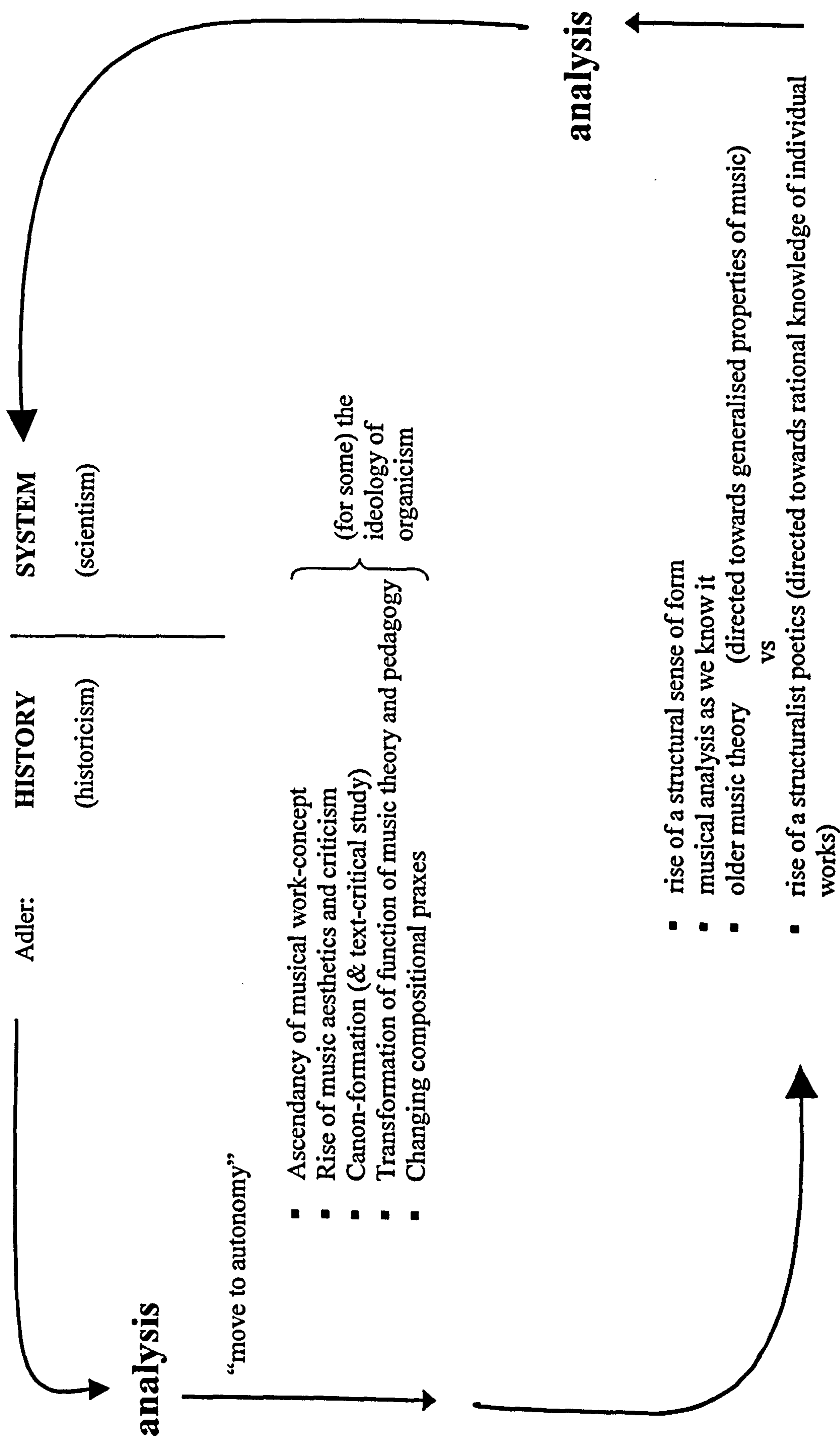
Samson’s exposition of the passage from the birth of analysis to the twentieth-century preoccupation with structure shows neatly that Adler’s original division—between history and system (historicism and scientism)—eventually collapsed; or, more accurately, music analysis increasingly caused a short-circuit between the two poles. Although Samson again does not make the point explicitly, what started out as history eventually migrated towards science (see figure 5.7), and one is tempted to claim that the current debates in which analysis is pitted against history, formalism against context, are much indebted to the basic scheme of this influential division. But a distinction between history and science, between history and structure (as it becomes here), is by no means restricted just to musicology; it also happens to be a key foundation of another school of thought which has played no little part in the shift from modernism to postmodernism. In Samson’s essay the status of this initial opposition between history and structure is left unprobed, and it tends to presuppose a division to which the essay is ostensibly a reaction. The intellectual heritage of this move is significant indeed.

⁶⁸ David Harvey, *The Limits to Capital* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1982), 25–6, n. 12.

⁶⁹ Jonathan Culler, *Structuralist Poetics* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1975).

⁷⁰ Terry Eagleton, ‘The Idealism of American Criticism’, in *Against the Grain* (London: Verso, 1986), 52–3.

Figure 5.7 Samson's circle



The distinction between history and structure that is Samson's starting point is also the classic starting point for Saussurean structuralism, and one that plays a significant role in Foucault's original analysis.⁷¹ This original structuralist position—one, it must be said, which was abandoned by linguists long ago but which has lived an extraordinary afterlife in the intellectual history of the twentieth century—was an attempt to put a certain question of linguistic meaning on hold and investigate instead *how* a text might mean, not *what* it might mean. This is an important motif reminiscent of Foucault's claim, cited earlier, that one no longer uncovers a reality beneath language, but rather asks how language functions. The Saussurean model goes about achieving this by carving linguistic systems up into synchronic slices and, more importantly, by severing their connection with the real. All the Saussurean model allows for is an arbitrary relationship between the acoustic image of the sign (the signifier) and its conceptual content (the signified); thus the older substantialist theories of language, whereby the word literally picks out the thing itself that it names, are replaced with a conception of language as a relational system (the *langue*) from which all individual utterances (the *parole*) can be produced. To say that the relationship between signifiers and signified is arbitrary is not to deny the fact that it is this relationship that will, in any given situation, produce or contribute to the production of meaning; but the result of this position is that meaning becomes very much a contextual affair, produced by given communities at given moments and understandable by those within those communities. And, to reiterate the point, the key problematic here is that of what many would term modernity itself, understood, in a manner reminiscent of Foucault (even though he uses the term modern to signify something quite different), as an epoch in which theological authority for the naming of things has collapsed.

The structuralist approach to a whole variety of cultural phenomena adopts this model to bracket the question of what objects might mean to any given community, and instead concentrates on the immanent structures of the object which might produce meaning in the first place (here structuralism swerves towards formalism, one would think). But, of course, there are two respects in which the Saussurean model is deficient at this point: first, its relationship to material actuality

⁷¹ The following section is greatly indebted to Fredric Jameson's analysis in *The Prison-House of Language* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972).

(the real) is under-theorised.⁷² In the Saussurean model the real is not denied, but language is conceived as lying somehow parallel to reality itself, but in such a way as to bracket that reality entirely. Any theory of meaning will presumably have to traverse that gap in some respect, and the simple claim that the structures of objects in some sense mirror those of the real just seems too pat, too easily come by to be theoretically satisfying, and, indeed, seems to return to something formally very similar to the substantialist model of language that structuralism was supposed to replace. Secondly, as post-structuralism has taught us, there is an internal slippage in the Saussurean model and it arises from what is an extraordinarily difficult problem to resolve: namely, what is the status within structuralism of theoretical writing *about* structuralism? The very presuppositions of structuralism imply that there are signs which can be split into two halves, thus ruling out an approach by which one could simply attach words to things in a scheme of one-to-one resemblances; but the very act of saying this seems to do precisely what, in the same breath, structuralism rules out: it names these things called signs. The theory thus comes to resemble something like a metalanguage which exists in rarefied air indeed, majestically descending with prelapsarian authority to name signs whilst at the same time denying the possibility of naming anything at all. In other words, there is the potential for an infinite regress, in which a more basic metalanguage is always invoked to explain the functioning of whatever theoretical level we seem to be working on. It is this longing for some basic language in which a plenitude of meaning resides that we might term the search for a 'metaphysics of presence';⁷³ and a logical endpoint in structuralism is reached when structuralism's own tools are brought to bear on itself, so that the signified is itself critiqued as being just another sign, with its attendant two halves.⁷⁴ And thus another sort of infinite regress opens up, one in which the signified, the conceptual, continually disappears out of view just at the very moment when we think we are getting close to it.

But what one should note here is the return of problems which the Kantian system set out to address.⁷⁵ Is the presupposition of meaningful structure really so far from a principle of organic purposiveness? There would seem to be a conception of

⁷² The dominance of a certain linguistic idealism can be measured by the chorus of those who will reply to such a statement with a denial that reality can be conceived independently of language anyway.

⁷³ For an introduction to this key term, see Christopher Norris, *Deconstruction: Theory and Practice*, second edn (London: Routledge, 1991), 24–32.

⁷⁴ Jameson, *The Prison-House of Language*, 173–88.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 214.

systemic autonomy underlying both theories, and one might claim that the poststructuralist fetishism of the text merely reaffirms the systemic autonomy that was always the (synchronic) starting point of structuralism, but it does so in a way that closes off any hope of escape. From this point one can only write, in a suitably virtuosic, playful style, from within the prison-house of language: language has become the conceptual walls of the structuralist mind, which can no longer even begin to think its way out of the situation, because that would require a language of a type that is no longer possible.⁷⁶ We thus return to the more damning charge against structuralism proper, which was its isolation from the real, the manner in which it sheared the synchronic system of language from the diachronic systems of history which caused the synchronic slices to mutate and change. Once language too has become the subject of structuralism's investigations, what started out as a type of formalism, to describe the form of cultural objects rather than their semantic content, has come full circle. Language has become the form *and* content of the structuralist projection, and is lock and key to the interpretative door, because it is at once the object of critique and the medium of critique; a short-circuit which has been ever-present within structuralism finally returns to seal off texts in their own little world, and in the process highlights the extent to which these interpretative problems are themselves posed particularly acutely by music.⁷⁷ The structuralist model fails, then, but it fails brilliantly, echoing the modernity to which it tries to respond.

What emerges from this is that, whether or not Samson has chosen this model with these implications in mind, the questions surrounding formalism and context eventually dissolve back into the epistemological mix from which they were originally filtered; all that is left following this operation is the initial problem, which is the status of knowledge in the modern world, in which there are supposedly no limits on what one can know, as well as no ultimate authority to underwrite knowledge, beyond that which can be generated by the self-consciousness of the subject itself. System and history, form and content, structure and context, are closely related, almost exchangeable endpoints on the short-circuit between rationalism and empiricism that the Kantian project attempted to break; configuring recent intellectual history as a migration from one to the other is a curious action, since these terms are

⁷⁶ I borrow these characterisations from Jameson's marvellous closing section, *ibid.*, 206–16.

⁷⁷ Recall, for instance, Dahlhaus's discussion of Mallarmé. See Dahlhaus, *The Idea of Absolute Music*, 147–55.

not modes of enquiry that one can adopt on the basis of personal preference, as one might choose between analysing Puccini or investigating his reception history. Indeed, to argue for one or the other is to become caught in the web containing both of them, which defines oneself as being simply modern.

Terms such as form and content, then, refer (often obliquely) to the dilemmas faced by anyone who wants to interrogate what can be known in the modern world: they ultimately lead to questions of representation, language, and knowledge—which is to say, back to the Foucauldian modernity with which this chapter opened. To announce that the project of autonomy has reached its summation begs all sorts of questions, but until we can answer the obvious one—what of the autonomy of this very assertion? (no historical contingency here!)—there is no particular reason to suppose that these problems have been resolved. One is reminded of the playground versions of postmodernism, in which the denial of the possibility of truth was always made via one last truth-claim, thus reopening the Pandora's Box of antifoundationalism. Something of this situation is applicable here: how has formalism fallen, if one relies on a certain formalism to understand that very pronouncement? What does it mean to speak of a shift of interest towards contexts, when that was always dialectically implied in an earlier formalism in the first place? And why are such tales so formalistic, essentially weighing up the logical pros and cons of ideas? Why do they not assess the social background that has accompanied the supposed shift towards context, and the sorts of musical interpretations that have followed in its wake? Ironically enough, it seems, the realm of the aesthetic, which promised some kind of reconciliation between knowledge and experience seems—after all these years—merely to have led straight back to the problems that started it off in the first place, impaled sceptically on the modern problem of pulling meaning from the void, and all the while secretly harbouring that most academic (and most formalistic) of distastes for any sociology of its own position.

3

The line of thought that views modernity as a crisis of representation thus creates a problem which it then by definition cannot solve. That this problem gives birth to some of the most fertile and interesting questions of aesthetics—especially musical

aesthetics—is undeniable; but it remains unclear as to whether a less tortuous and more practically useful notion of modernity can be formulated. It is in this respect that another understanding of the term foregrounds itself, although it too will be seen to lead straight back to a similar dilemma as the first theory. On this second view modernity is initially thought to concern chronology. At its simplest and least useful, then, modernity might be understood to be synonymous with sheer contemporaneity, but this is already an unacceptable mistake, approximating to its frequent colloquial usage, in which to be modern marks a proximity to a conception of the present. This is something that surely few in the West (and elsewhere) can avoid, so saturated as we now are by marketing techniques which deliberately inculcate in us a feeling for what is both contemporary and advanced, and thus desirable for purchase. Such understandings are mistaken if they think they are measuring contemporaneity, though, for they are already far from exclusively temporal: it is possible, of course, to be contemporary (in the sense of a sheer existence in the present) but not modern. Even on this view modernity carries a strong evaluative charge: it measures a point at which we think we are most advanced—and the precise configuration and measurement of this advancement is, naturally, a very fraught matter indeed. It is experienced on a daily basis most obviously in the sense of what is fashionable—and this is one of the most astonishing successes of capitalism, namely, to generate such intense feelings of modernity through subtle redesigns and changes in style. It is striking, however, that when one moves from the quotidian experiences of this sort of modernity to more academic matters, such as the question of whether we can take capitalism or Western-style democracy as a shared goal at the end of a narrative of evolution and development, modernity starts to lose its intellectual respectability. At a time when the older linear trajectories of human evolution are being increasingly rejected in favour of bald recognitions of cultural difference, modernity itself, if one follows this line of argument, starts to dissolve as a meaningful concept, because there seems to be no necessary fixed point of agreement from where modern-ness might plausibly be measured; and it might well seem that such a notion was therefore always already insidious, essentially measuring simply the power of those nations who were able to use (or impose) their own political systems and modes of production as blueprints for a modernity in which few others could take a dissenting voice.

Even on a very simple understanding, then, modernity immediately balloons into something seemingly much more portentous than might have been intuitively

sensed. Such an observation is far from unhelpful: if anything captures the labyrinthine complexities of the concept of modernity, it is surely the sense of cerebral overload that immersion in its theorisation can bring. For modernity is more a mega-concept than a concept: it can subsume almost anything that one cares to name, and there is a very real possibility that it will simply inflate to such gross dimensions as to become meaningless in any concrete academic sense. This problem is not aided by its current semi-fashionability as an academic subject of debate.⁷⁸ As an ironic slogan writer might claim, modernity has never been so modern. Modernity has blossomed into a marker of more or less anything that one cares to choose: Fredric Jameson, for example, gives fourteen plausible referents for the term, and then concludes dryly that 'many more are lurking in the wings'.⁷⁹ How, then, can such a catchall buzzword prove itself useful in a sense other than the philosophical one outlined so far?

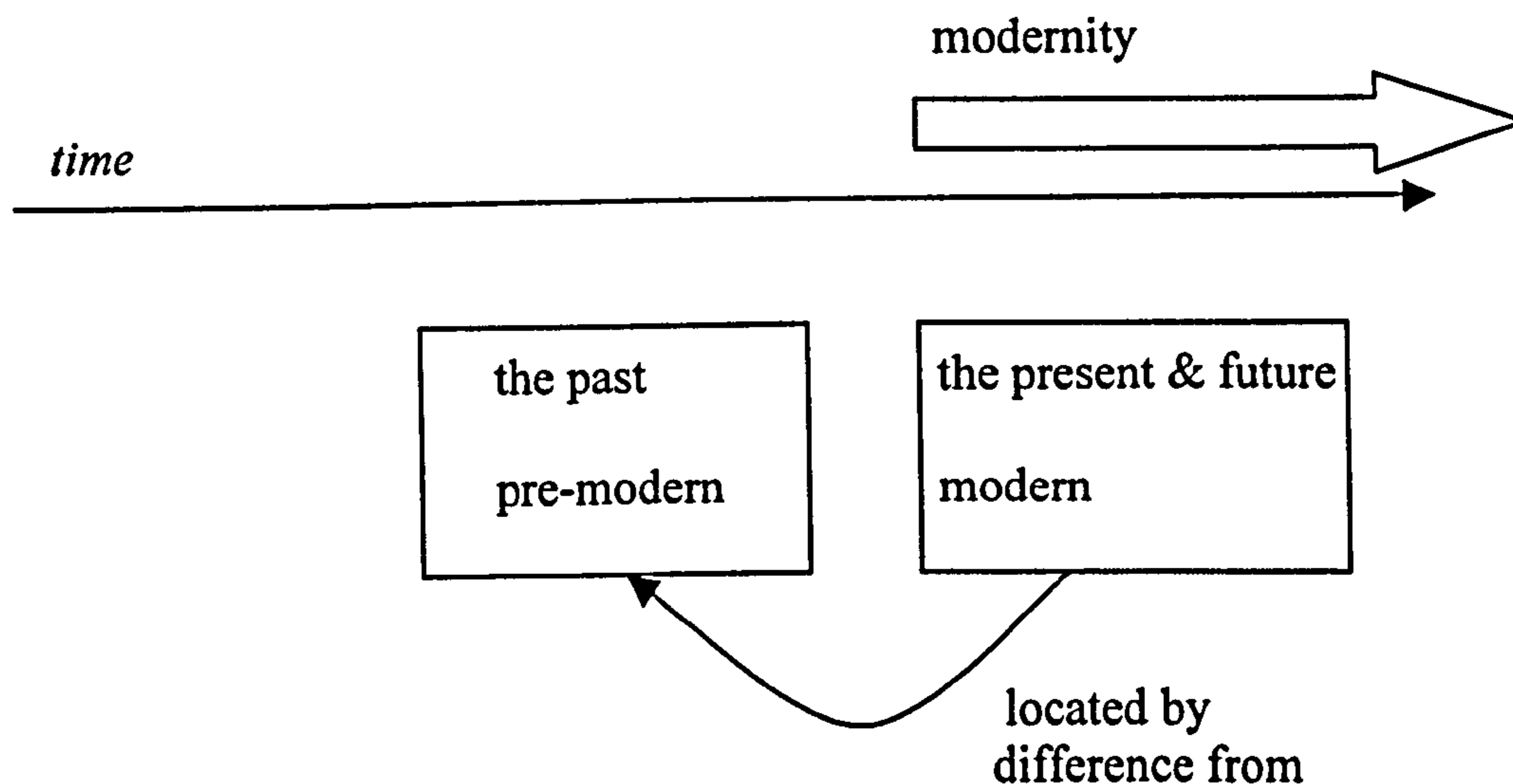
It might be useful first of all to reverse our earlier assumption: modernity is *not* concerned with temporality in the sense of sheer chronology. That is, it will be well to assume that modernity does not exist as a comparative term that is continually renewed as time passes and can thus only be used in the present. It is exceptionally hard, incidentally, to think of any word that derives purely from the present in that sense: both 'new' and 'contemporary' can easily be discounted, for they can both be used to signal what was new or contemporary at some point in the past, and something similar is true of modernity, which is often invoked in this sense. We can thus assume that modernity can stretch well into the past and escape the gravitational pull of the present. However, to this assumption one must add an important qualification, which is that whilst modernity is in fact a comparative term, its usage can be subtly differentiated from 'new' or 'contemporary'. What modernity favours, essentially, is difference. This is emphatically not just a trivial, contextual difference of the sort that would enable us to say that Mahler was modern in his orchestral textures just as Haydn was modern in his sense of phrase rhythm—even though it is entirely normal (and acceptable) to make such claims. What modernity might refer to is rather a sense of one-off, final difference from what came before. It signals a

⁷⁸ For a discussion, see Christopher Prendergast, 'Codeword Modernity', *New Left Review* 24 (November–December 2003), 95–111.

⁷⁹ Fredric Jameson, *A Singular Modernity* (London: Verso, 2002), 32.

moment when everything that has happened in the past can be seen to be emanating from a qualitatively different epoch, which can now be seen to be over:

Figure 5.8 Another model of modernity



The corollary of this judgement is that modernity is thus a periodising concept, and modernity becomes itself a period, a slice of sheer chronology, because it is emphatically open to the future, which it believes has already begun;⁸⁰ but it is identified not by its chronological location (for example, 'modernity began in the fifteenth century') but by the qualitative characteristics that measure its difference from the past in the first place.⁸¹ Thus, if modernity begins when it is felt that the rule of theological authority has lost its legitimacy (and this is often a central element in its definition), then whilst that can be located at particular chronological points, the more astute marker of modernity's identity is the existence of a belief in the change itself, which can then be unfurled around the significant chronological points. In this sense modernity starts to seem just as sheerly idealistic as some of the understandings of postmodernism that were discussed earlier (see Chapters 3 and 4): the recognition of the change is itself a marker of the change, and thus one cannot discuss the matter

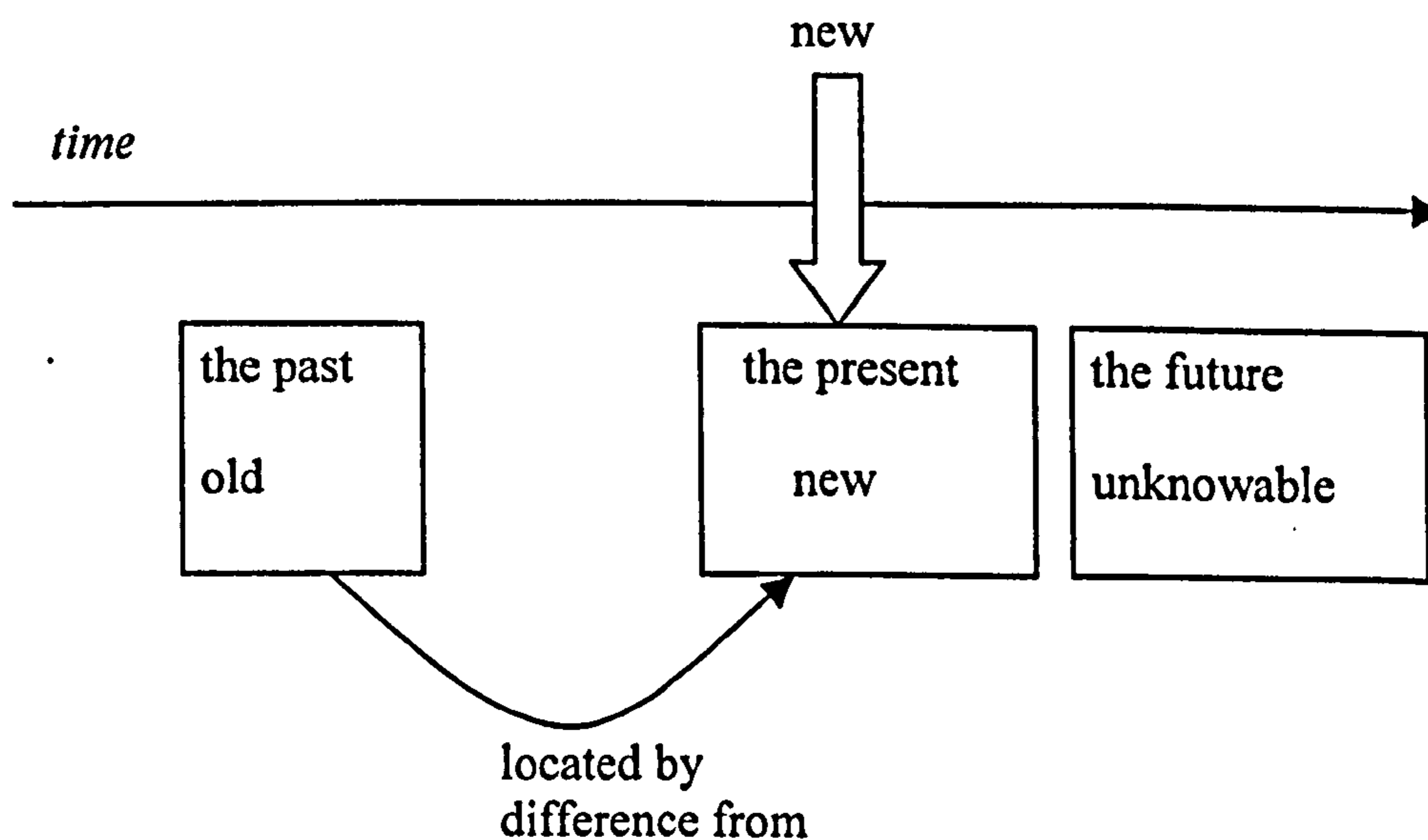
⁸⁰ Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity*, 5.

⁸¹ Thus, as Jameson's theory of interpretation surveyed in Chapter 2 suggested, the conceptual projects a narrative. In other words, synchrony resituates itself in diachrony.

without being situated *by it*. The only options in this scenario are either to remain silent, or to assert bluntly that we have never been modern.⁸²

Modernity thus refers to a singular state of advancement on the line of evolution; on this view, once entered it cannot apparently be quitted, unless by regression or blunt refusal. It is true, of course, to say that both 'new' and 'contemporary' might also be used in precisely this way (one thinks of the use of the term *der neue Musik* in German-language musicology), but it is modernity that has developed the richest historical associations as a final epoch. This is quite different from the underlying mechanisms of comparative terms such as 'new' and 'contemporary'—at least as they are typically used. These terms essentially measure identity, since they read off from the present (or a contemporaneous present) a state of development, and then measure their objects against this point, which exists in the present and is felt to be most proximate to the future.

Figure 5.9 The new



When these terms are used, they are immediately known to be ultimately without finality: their sense will rest on judgements of difference from some agreed state of development, but the identity of an epoch itself cannot be deduced from them,

⁸² The latter option is one that has been taken most prominently by Bruno Latour, and will be mentioned in my Epilogue. See Bruno Latour, *We have never been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993).

because the sense of openness towards the future, the way in which modernity looks to the future with a confidence that imagines itself to be already part of that future, is not present. Modernity therefore designates a sense of historical urgency—an epoch aware of itself, and a change in conditions so significant that everything before it must be parcelled up and sent away.

In a certain sense, then, modernity begins when history ends. To put it this way is, of course, to exaggerate; but it is nevertheless useful to remember that, as in the title of an important article on this subject, modernity is a qualitative, not a chronological, category.⁸³ Its author, Peter Osborne, stresses that

‘Modernity’ [...] plays a peculiar dual role as a category of historical periodization: it designates the contemporaneity of an epoch to the time of its classification, but it registers this contemporaneity in terms of a qualitatively new, self-transcending temporality, which has the simultaneous effect of distancing the present from even that most recent past with which it is thus identified.⁸⁴

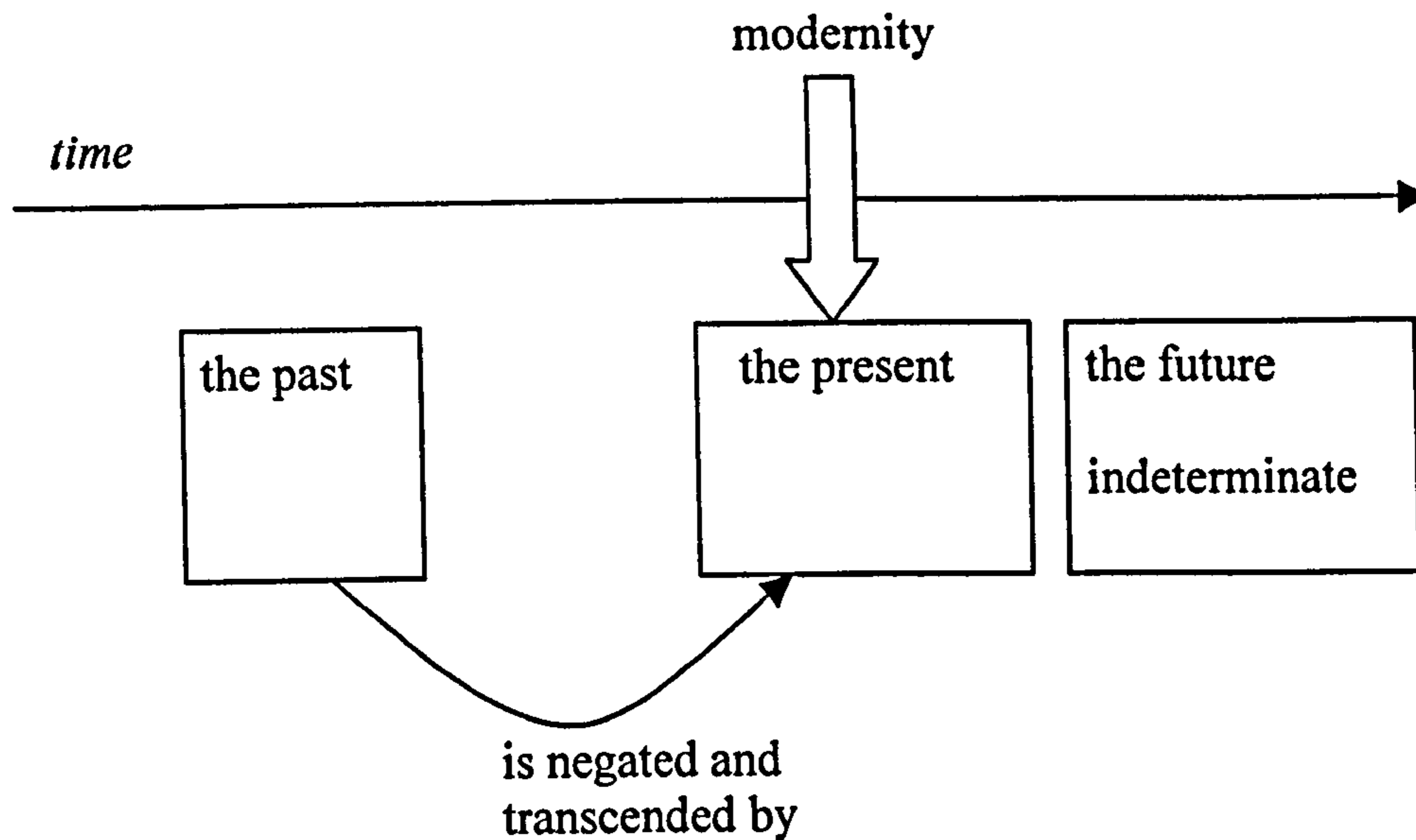
But, contrary to the theory advanced above, Osborne explicitly holds open the prospect of an indeterminate future. He thus restores something of the relational model used above to characterise newness; his point is that the present is emphatically not merely a chronological present, but an historical present, meaning that the present is a qualitative category that is located by its difference from (or transcendence of) an historical past. This is familiar enough from other understandings of modernity; but, importantly, Osborne contends that this historical present is open to an indeterminate future because it too can be prospectively transcended in the future, and itself relegated to a future past.⁸⁵

⁸³ Peter Osborne, ‘Modernity is a Qualitative, Not a Chronological, Category’, *New Left Review* 1/192 (1992), 65–84.

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, 73.

⁸⁵ *Ibid.*, 73. The evocative term ‘future past’ refers directly to the work of Reinhart Koselleck, whose analyses and histories of the concept of modernity are briefly discussed by Osborne.

Figure 5.10 Osborne's modernity



To this model Osborne then adds a crucial extra dimension. It is clear that a conception of modernity as an historical present in this sense rests on some notion of identity; in the Jamesonian dialectical model discussed in Chapter 2, one might imagine that a particular mode of production proves to be the criterion of identity for a particular historical period, which is then differentiated from other periods by a process of negative extrapolation. This seems eminently logical; but, importantly, if the present is construed along these lines then it must be admitted that it is not an homogenous lump of historical time in which the new follows the old, because newness is no guarantee, by itself, of the qualitative characteristics of modernity. However, the point is not just that a homogeneity of time is not, by itself, sufficient to define modernity; rather, the point is that time itself is also insufficient.⁸⁶

What Osborne means here is that modernity is spatial as well as temporal. In his own words, modernity

sets up a differential between the character of its own time and that which precedes it. This differential forms the basis for the transformation, in the late eighteenth century, in the meaning of the concepts of 'progress' and 'development', that makes them the precursors of later, twentieth-century concepts of modernization. For it is the idea which thus develops, of the *non-contemporaneity of geographically diverse but chronologically simultaneous* times, that, in

⁸⁶ Ibid., 74.

the context of colonial experience, becomes the basis for 'universal histories with a cosmopolitan intent'.⁸⁷

This is an exceptionally fertile point, and one which repays a certain amount of elaboration. For it must be quite plain that the idea of modernity as it has been discussed in this chapter (whether as crisis of representation, or, latterly, temporal-spatial category) is, in the language of today's theory, considerably ethnocentric. It clearly represents the transcendence not just of an historical epoch over whatever came before it; but it also represents its own belief in the transcendence of a particularly Western conception of subjectivity over other cultures. What thus arises is a world in which modernity is geographically circumscribed, and differentiated from the pre-modern world which surrounds it. The sense of historical present that characterises modernity therefore exists only locally; it coexists not only with its own conception of what is past—that is, the cultures or civilisations which are excluded from a Western modernity—but also with those other cultures' conceptions of historical time. Thus, as Osborne state, chronologically simultaneous times are dispersed geographically and yet from within the Western modernity they are conceived of as non-contemporary, because 'our' historical present differs from 'their' historical past, even though 'their' historical past is actually occurring chronologically at the same time as our enlightened modernity. As Osborne puts it, 'Such histories are "modernizing" in the sense that the results of synchronic comparisons are ordered diachronically to produce a scale of development that defines "progress" in terms of the projection of certain people's presents as other people's futures.'⁸⁸

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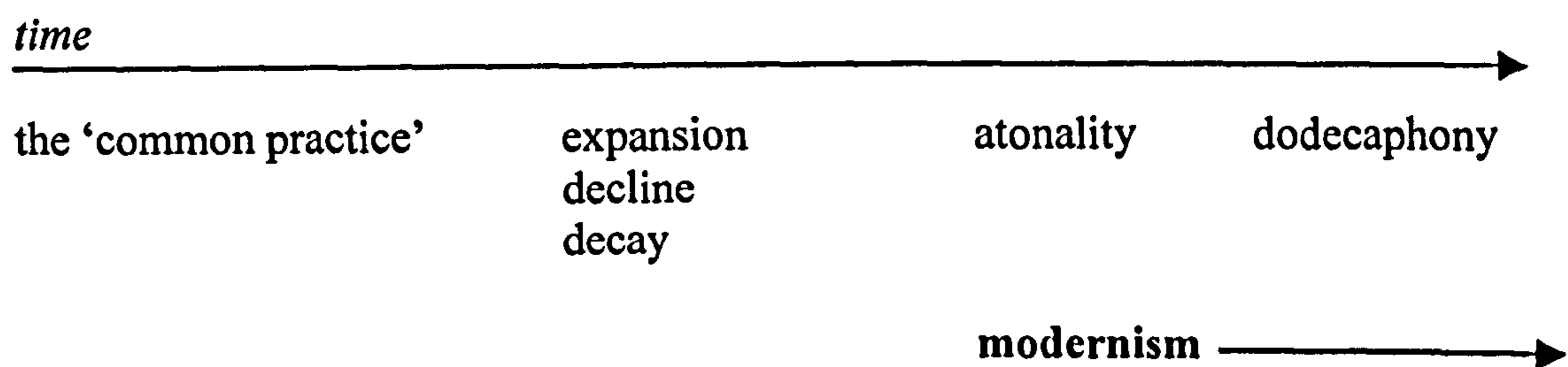
Here, too, a rather abstract model of modernity can be aligned with music. Whereas the Foucauldian crisis of representation signals a problem of meaning that is *captured* acutely by the difficulties of talking about music, the definition of modernity as a geopolitical concept is *exemplified* by what we call, very loosely, 'classical' or 'Western' music. One can see this historical scheme, for example, in conventional

⁸⁷ Ibid., 75.

⁸⁸ Ibid., 75.

stylistic historical accounts of musical modernism, which take as their focal point the gestation and development of atonality around the turn of the twentieth century. Atonality creates a kind of historical force-field which arranges other musical developments of the time—notably neoclassicism—like iron filings around a magnet. Such equations of musical modernism with atonality project a certain synchronic logic, one which arranges other styles around the mainstream; but they also contain an (often secret) diachronic scheme, one that serves to validate their own position at the vanguard of history. The theory of modernism that centres itself on atonality thus projects a model of history based on the ‘development’ of tonality:

Figure 5.11 A model of modern music?



Central to this reading of history is, of course, the trajectory that leads from tonality to atonality. Proponents of such readings establish a kind of tonal ‘moment of plenitude’⁸⁹—a period when tonality reached its historical completion and perfection—from which point onwards tonality decays or declines before reaching atonality. It is important to realise that this is an historical scheme rather than a narrow picture of cognitive development: it seems that exposure to atonal music does not suddenly render tonal music incomprehensible—consonance and dissonance remain perceptible to some degree—and, likewise, prolonged exposure to late Mahler does not necessarily prevent one from sensing the patterns of consonance and dissonance that underlie, for instance, the sacred choral music of Palestrina. As Brian Hyer points out:

⁸⁹ I borrow this phrase from Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1971), 38–9.

To insist on the dissolution of tonality as a historical fact is to confuse a historical phenomenon with a cognitive one. In the West and elsewhere, tonal music remains the music most people listen to, most if not all the time.⁹⁰

In fact, as we have seen in Chapter 4, developments of the postmodernist years already suggest that a linear narrative of increasing chromaticism and decaying tonality will not suffice as the background of such histories, but before turning to these recent developments it is worth paying greater attention to the accounts of modernism that focus on tonality's supposed eclipse.

One of the more interesting features of such typical readings of musical modernism is the metaphorical structure of the narrative around which the development of tonality is organised. It is already obvious that, on closer inspection, the simple facts of music history (for that is how they used to be presented in Anglo-American textbooks) can be seen to contain an organicist philosophy of history. As Hyer points out in a fine, succinct introduction to this issue,

Popular accounts of this musical evolution follow the familiar lines of biological evolution, with its concern for selection and adaptation. These stories assert, more or less explicitly, that there were forces at work within tonal music analogous to those that determine the form and development of an organism. Perhaps the most important of these were the energetic tendencies of the semitone, which accounted for the earlier mutation of modality into tonality [...] and also the later mutation of tonality into atonality.⁹¹

This excellent summary catches the tone of some stylistic histories very neatly: the agency of change is none other than the development of tonal music itself (namely, the 'energetic tendencies of the semitone'), and so what results is an almost entirely autonomous tale of evolution, one which need not be sullied by any socio-historical pollution. Furthermore, as Hyer states, the process of this evolution is 'unidirectional and irreversible': there can be no going back.

That this is metaphorically organicist will be obvious. Its limitations are neatly rehearsed by Hyer: as noted above, it downplays the agency of composers themselves as significant agents of historical change. But more questionably, the narrative results in what Hyer calls 'unilineal compression': once the parameters of tonal development are decided, what occurs is a gradual process of filtration in which a mainstream of

⁹⁰ Brian Hyer, 'Tonality', in Stanley Sadie & John Tyrrell, ed., *The New Grove Dictionary of Music and Musicians*, second edn, vol. 25 (London: Macmillan, 2001), 592.

⁹¹ *Ibid.*, 591.

music (to use Tovey's phrase)⁹² is identified as the most significant to the development of the art. The periphery of this mainstream is slighted, possibly ignored, and almost certainly poorly understood as a result. In a further twist, however, the directional model of evolution also privileges later music, judging it to be more complex, more developed than the earlier, simpler forms of tonality: 'This attitude lies at the root of the prejudice (common in academic music circles) that atonal music is somehow more complicated and more difficult, and therefore more worthy of sustained critical attention, than tonal music, which is believed to be simpler and easier.'⁹³

The demise of modernism has significantly problematised such readings. In an interesting study of the broader dimensions of music history Brian Etter senses the crisis in historicity that has affected music: 'the mainstream', Etter writes in his Preface, 'appears largely to have come to an end; what will take its place remains uncertain.'⁹⁴ Moreover, Etter writes from a perspective that grants particular significance to the divergence between modernism and mainstream: his starting-point, indeed, is this dichotomy, in which he claims that

although a purely academic knowledge of the history of music may point to an ever increasing fragmentation of styles and approaches in the twentieth century, the facts of musical life point rather to the continued centrality of the traditional orchestral and operatic repertoires. The tradition is still a vital presence, even if little is now written within its stylistic parameters.⁹⁵

What Etter is surely referring to is the continued presence in the concert hall of a canon that has been much critiqued in the academic world. However, his purpose is not to provide an ad hoc justification of this canon; instead, the argument of *From Classicism to Modernism* is much more far-reaching. Put simply, Etter makes bold claims of tonality and of what in particular he calls the classical understanding of tonality. His point here is to distinguish between two different understandings of the term: on one hand, naturalising conceptions of tonality, in which tonality is a natural phenomenon; and on the other hand, historicising conceptions of tonality, in which it is merely one way (amongst so many others) of ordering raw sonic material (Figure 5.12).

⁹² Donald Tovey, *The Main Stream of Music* (London: Milford, 1938).

⁹³ Hyer, 'Tonality', 592.

⁹⁴ Brian K. Etter, *From Classicism to Modernism: Western Musical Culture and the Metaphysics of Order* (Aldershot: Ashgate, 2001), xii.

⁹⁵ *Ibid.*, x.

Figure 5.12 Two understandings of tonality

Naturalistic	Historicist
Style essentially dependent on natural phenomena: overtone series	Tonality as an ordering of nature: expressive of mercantile society, and thus one historical phase amongst so many others

The urgency of the distinction is caused, of course, by the advent of atonal music, which immediately problematises or at least questions the naturalistic models, since atonality virtually by definition will eschew the supposedly natural phenomena on which tonality is thought to be based. In itself, this might not necessarily query the correlation of tonality with nature: it might merely suggest that atonal music is unnatural; but this then must be reconciled with the historical trajectories which have been read into the late nineteenth century. Put bluntly, if one understands tonality as natural, then how does this mesh with an understanding of music history in which tonality leads inevitably into atonality?

Etter rejects these alternatives: they are both inadequate, because neither accounts for what he sees as the most significant dimension of classical tonality, which is the way in which it can be aligned with conceptions of order and goodness borrowed from ethics. It is usual for classicism to be equated with notions of formal excellence, of course, but Etter's ethical reading is more normative: a period of music history in which tonality begins to function as a system which is capable of modulation as well as just tonicity—essentially, one presumes, from the late Renaissance through to the high Baroque. The importance of this stage of tonality's development was not its potential for subsequent decline, but rather its simplicity and purity.⁹⁶ The point of this deduction is to forge a link with classical philosophy, in which tranquillity and stability of the soul—a Stoic ideal—is opposed to the passion or emotivism of the modern world, much of it unstable and disturbing. The stability of tonality is thus used as a metaphor for Aristotle's goal of the life of virtue:

⁹⁶ Ibid., 26–7.

happiness.⁹⁷ Mention of the term ‘goal’ is significant here, because it allows Etter to make another important contention about tonality: the latter needs to be conceived teleologically in this scheme, because the movement of music towards consonance and repose—through resolution of tonal dissonances, for example, or melodic returns to tonic notes—is what mirrors the pursuit of happiness. This connection between the directed order of music and happiness, defended by Etter through reference to Plato, Boethius, and Cicero, makes tonality a metaphor of teleological order: it represents the nature of the cosmos and the goodness of existence in the world, all resolved into a unity.

Nowadays such contentions are most notable for their conservatism. Moreover, they espouse a worldview that many would view as pre-modern: the unity of the whole is guaranteed by transcendence, whether that of the Platonic ideal realm or a divine intelligence. Additionally, such views are explicitly thrown into counterpoint with what Etter contends are modern conceptions of time: modern time, in Etter’s scheme, is rootless and dynamic; that is, it has no end or purpose.⁹⁸ Yet it is precisely ends and purposes that are implied by a metaphysics which holds out the promise of a transcendent guarantee of prior order. To be modern is thus to be without grounding in both a metaphysical and temporal sense, and since Etter connects this lack of end and order to morality and goodness, to be modern is thus to deny such goodness. Indeed, for Etter, modernism marks the decline of a flourishing musical culture: atonality denies the goodness inherent in tonal order. A giant periodisation is thus effected:

Figure 5.13 Etter’s periodisation

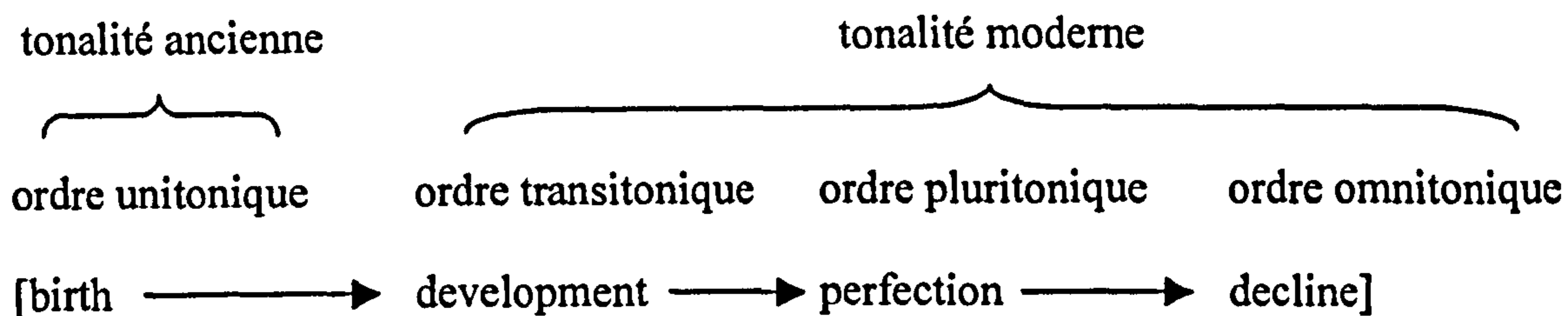
Nineteenth century	Twentieth century
The order and expressiveness of beauty is linked explicitly to Platonic ideas of the good and true	Beauty and sentimentality are rejected and life is left bereft of hope, love, and the perception of worth

⁹⁷ Ibid., 49–60.

⁹⁸ This is contrasted with Etter’s understanding of classical, post-Renaissance, and then idealist time.

Few musicologists would nowadays make similar claims in such openly normative terms. One has to look back some 160 years to encounter a theorist who advanced a similar type of narrative persuasively (and prophetically). That theorist is François Joseph Fétis, whose *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie* (1844) outlines an historical scheme with palpably organic characteristics.⁹⁹ Dividing the history of music up into several different *ordres*, culminating in the music of his contemporaries, he detailed the progression from plainchant to the nineteenth century:

Figure 5.14 Fétis's model of tonality



The *ordre unisonique* referred simply to the music of plainchant, and it constituted the *tonalité ancienne*, which was incapable of modulation. The *ordre transonique*, emerging around 1600, was introduced by Monteverdi, whose 'invention' of the dominant-seventh chord supposedly opened up the possibilities of modulation. With the birth of the *ordre transonique*, *tonalité moderne* had eclipsed *tonalité ancienne*; the new tonality's moment of historical perfection came with the music of Mozart and Rossini: an *ordre pluritonique*, whose tonality allowed for remote and complex modulations all governed by a clear and omnipotent tonic. With an inevitability that does not detract from this model's power, Fétis saw fit to prophesise the onset of an *ordre omnitonique*, in which the power of a governing tonic would weaken, and a more sensual, decadent music would result. Music would, therefore, decline.¹⁰⁰

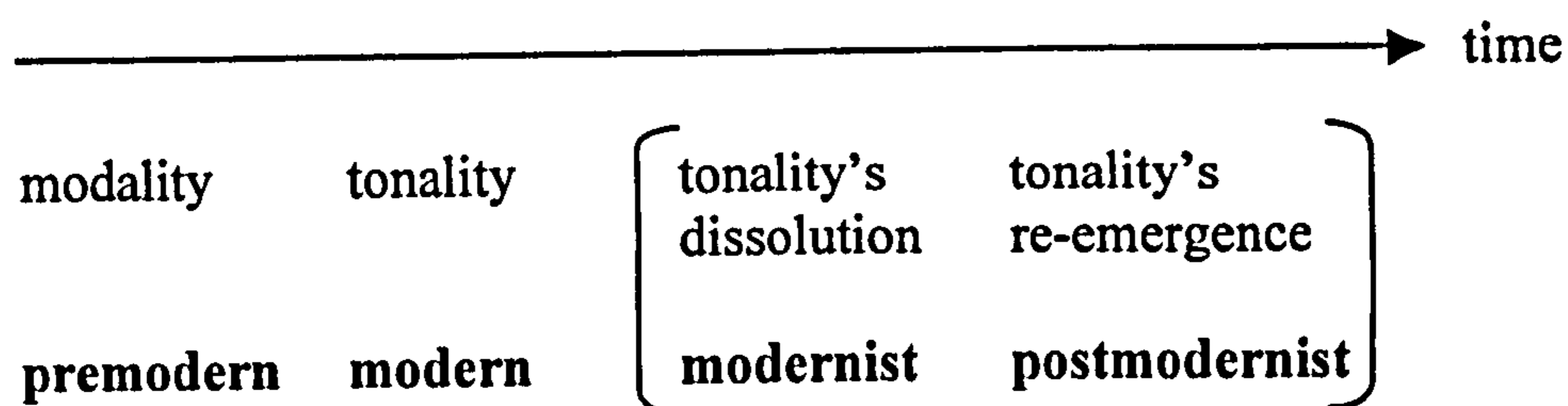
⁹⁹ François Joseph Fétis, *Traité complet de la théorie et de la pratique de l'harmonie* (Paris: n.p., 1844).

¹⁰⁰ See the discussion in Rosalie Schellhous, 'Fétis's "Tonality" as a Metaphysical Principle: Hypothesis for a New Science', *Music Theory Spectrum* 13/2 (1991), 219–40.

The temporal trajectory of this model is undeniable, but what the specifically musical aspects of this narrative shield is an entire philosophy of history—albeit a rather crude one. As Hyer remarks of both Fétis and the slightly earlier theorist Choron, nowadays one can easily extrapolate the presence of the following historical scheme behind their narratives, and, indeed, update the scheme for our own era:¹⁰¹

Figure 5.15

Fétis's history?



So this model equates tonality—which is the most highly valued characteristic of music—with modernity, which is read as a kind of culmination of the evolution of humanity. As Hyer puts it,

The current age was one of 'permanence', a plateau from which one could cast a sad glance at the future of music and its inevitable descent.¹⁰²

To which one might add: a plateau from which one could also cast a superior glance at the *past* of music and its slow ascent towards to the plenitude of the present.

As with modernity, whilst such narratives are certainly temporal, they also project a spatiality: non-Western music was not to be admitted to the glories of the present. Music of the past was thus viewed in relation to the present; but, as theorised earlier by Peter Osborne, the present was a geopolitical construct, one which marginalized supposedly inferior, 'primitive' music of non-Western societies. What this now unacceptable generalisation hints at is the extent to which the very concept of tonality 'serves to articulate and promote a far from disinterested view of the

¹⁰¹ Hyer calls modernity 'the age of Western modernism', explicitly denoting the 'great era of representation that stretches from [...] Descartes to the general crisis of representation in the arts around 1910.' (Hyer, 'Tonality', 592.) I have presented this model here using my own terminology—that is, using modernity in place of modernism.

¹⁰² Hyer, 'Tonality', 592.

historical past',¹⁰³ and similar charges can be laid at the door of those who rehearse a narrative similar to Hyer's extrapolated version of Fétis's history:

the rise and fall of tonality is far from a neutral account of music history, but serves, rather, to situate atonal and 12-note music as the focus of musicological (if not cultural) attention. The fierce commitment of music historians and music theorists to ultra-modernist narratives of evolution and progress buttresses the hegemonic position of a serialism long since on the wane.¹⁰⁴

This is in one sense correct, but it is striking that the criticism is directed towards the more recent part of the historical scheme. It is typical of the hostility provoked by modernism that insufficient attention is paid to the other stylistic implications of the model. For in stylistic terms, modernity is captured not just by a hegemonic serialism, although that has indubitably been considered the end-point of this model, but also by the historical starting-point of musical modernity. If modernity itself is held to be a break that comes at a moment when a certain tradition of thought feels itself to be qualitatively different (and better) from what it judges to be historically past, then that break presumably occurs at a moment of exceptional confidence. That is, the break must surely promise not just new problems, but also new solutions; and one of the consequences of this sort of theory is that, to use Fredric Jameson's term again, a moment of plenitude is theorised in which a certain (in this case) style is held up not just as something so significant as to inaugurate modernity, but also as a standard against which the subsequent progress of history can be measured.

In musical terms this moment of plenitude has been theorised in different ways, but, typically, writers have directed their attention towards the period around 1800. This is obviously a striking period for anyone interested in the connections between music history and modernity, for many would align modernity with the birth of liberal democracy and arising of the secular state. The range of alternative explanations, however, is particularly striking: Lydia Goehr, for instance, argues that a regulative work-concept came into force around this time.¹⁰⁵ Jim Samson, as we have already seen, bundles several changes together as 'the ideology of organicism', and he is echoed by Patrick McCreless, who similarly points to a 'conceptual shift

¹⁰³ Ibid., 593.

¹⁰⁴ Ibid., 593.

¹⁰⁵ Lydia Goehr, *The Imaginary Museum of Musical Works* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1992).

that took place [around the turn of the nineteenth century]'.¹⁰⁶ McCreless particularly highlights the turn from theoretical pedagogy to analytical explanation, and claims that the tension between, for example, strict and free composition, 'the aesthetic ideology of genius and [that] of organic and autonomous musical structure', and the 'notion of analysis as the explanation of the masterwork', were the issues fused in the work of Heinrich Schenker. Even the analytical aesthetician Peter Kivy makes grand claims for a change in attitude at this time. In a recent essay he argues that by the end of the eighteenth century 'one integrated package [...] essentially defined the experience, the institution, [and] the repertory of absolute music',¹⁰⁷ and it continued to define this experience until the beginning of the twentieth century, when it was challenged but not toppled as a dominant aesthetic. Kivy's point is to defend what he sees as a post-Kantian 'aesthetic attitude' in which, put simply, one paid close attention to the formal properties of music. But, importantly, the music that arose at the same time (1790) as the theory seemed 'made for the attitude, the attitude for the music':¹⁰⁸ 'the aesthetic attitude [...] became the prescriptive code for listening to a kind of music not only ideally suited to that code but hardly susceptible of full appreciation without it.'¹⁰⁹ He seems to mean instrumental music, but he sometimes lets this mutate into 'absolute' music, which he elsewhere defines as 'music for which only structural interpretations are appropriate', thus pointing, it would seem, towards formalism but without ever making a serious philosophical attempt to define it.¹¹⁰

Such theories tend to gather together a whole host of particulars, which will be familiar from Samson's analysis discussed earlier in this chapter, and assemble them in such a way as to suggest that they are either, at that historical point, new, or that they acquire a newly significant status around 1800. The result is the construction of a huge period paradigm that mirrors (or mimics) the size of modernity itself, and is indeed closely related to it. But it will be obvious that the shift that these commentators point towards is also conditioned by their understanding of the music they consider to have been prominent at the beginning of modernity; and it is equally obvious that this music so predisposed to reward the historically new analyst

¹⁰⁶ Patrick McCreless, 'Rethinking Contemporary Music Theory', in David Schwarz, Anahid Kassabian, and Lawrence Siegel, ed., *Keeping Score: Music, Disciplinarity, Culture* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia: 1997), 28.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Kivy, *New Essays on Musical Understanding* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), 57.

¹⁰⁸ *Ibid.*, 54.

¹⁰⁹ *Ibid.*, 55.

¹¹⁰ *Ibid.*, 157.

concerned to locate structure, so ideally suited to a disinterested, formalistic appreciation—this moment of plenitude of Western classical music itself is nothing other than a fanciful historical construction, ‘a style that has been anachronistically and erroneously named as “Classical”’.¹¹¹ For it is the classical style, Rose Subotnik claims, for which a structural model of logic suggests itself:¹¹² a model of structures which are autonomous, intelligible wholes (and thus semiotic structures). At the time when Kantian critical philosophy was beginning to be critiqued,

[t]he concreteness of the aesthetic was evoked, [...] and in a sense called into being, to shore up failing confidence in the indisputability of human access to general truth or knowledge; and of all the arts, music, with its lack of clear links to the outside world, seems least susceptible to widespread debasement, and hence most able to embody individual formulations of truth with precision. Music [...] separated itself from natural language in response to a division, now felt with unprecedented sharpness in European society, within the Western conception of humanity in its relation to the world.¹¹³

This implies that a rational formalism is far from inappropriate as a mode of analysis of classical music, because (apparently) ‘classical music, unlike baroque, lacks all semblance of the external object or *signifié* characteristic in cognitive discourse’,¹¹⁴ and,

within the bounds of its own structure, classical music seems to affirm as valid that pattern of cognitively necessary connections between the complementary sorts of structures—structures such as antecedent and consequent, cause and effect, and even subject and object—through which cognitive thought ordinarily seems to promise a verifiable connection between human conceptual structures and the external world.¹¹⁵

This is a very bold claim indeed, especially given that Subotnik is working in a post-Kantian framework in which there are strict limits on what can ultimately be known to be certain. The analogy between logical premises/deductions and antecedent-consequent phrases is far from precise, after all, and it thus appears a weak foundation on which to base a theory which hopes to use music to solve a fundamental philosophical problem. But this does not deter Subotnik from making an even grander claim:

¹¹¹ Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning*, 209.

¹¹² Rose Rosengard Subotnik, *Developing Variations: Style and Ideology in Western Music* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1992), 112.

¹¹³ *Ibid.*, 175.

¹¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 112.

¹¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 113.

Classical music, moreover, seems to project itself, at some level, as Everyman's art, an art that each of us can imagine ourselves creating as we hear it unfolding in time, paradoxically, because this music, in exposing its own premises, suggests that it can be generally verified as meeting exacting and exclusionary standards, the standards of rightness and wrongness. In other words, the style that has been taken for the very norm of musical art seems to have accepted as its own normative standard of judgment a criterion ordinarily associated with the objectivity or apparent autonomy of cognitive structures, the capacity to embody truth.¹¹⁶

Thus an important mutation occurs: the relatively well-codified stylistic particularities of classical tonality are, for some reason, read as normative; the expectations that we might derive from acquaintance with the classical style are held to be 'the very norm of musical art', and, boldly, these norms are so cognitively satisfying in a (yet) autonomous sense that they actually tend towards a formal demonstration of truth itself.

One of the reasons why Subotnik makes such sweeping (and unjustified) claims is because she is attempting to map the classical style onto Kantian philosophy, and, in particular, the failure of Kantian philosophy adequately to bridge the gap between the internal structures of our minds and the external world of (un)knowable objects. The most that Kant achieves in this respect is, as is widely acknowledged, that whilst he cannot establish the means by which we might ultimately have objective cognitive certainty, he can, by imagining that Enlightened mankind shares a universal mental structure, leave open the possibility that we can have subjective cognitive certainty. And when Subotnik acknowledges the frailty of such a solution—'Kant does not recognize concrete cultural limits on the "purely formal" cognitive categories he derives from culturally particular (Western) linguistic structures'¹¹⁷—she implicitly critiques her earlier characterisation of classical music as an 'Everyman's art', because—as she later admits—'classical music in fact falls considerably short of achieving implicit universal intelligibility'.¹¹⁸ Indeed:

Like most manifestations of the universalistic ideals of the Enlightenment, which turn out to be normative in an exclusionary sense, classical musical structure has in fact been found understandable by only a relatively small number of people, even within Western society[.]¹¹⁹

Subotnik thus would readily admit the failure of her own conception of classical structure, but the real power of her model comes into view when she writes

¹¹⁶ Ibid., 113.

¹¹⁷ Ibid., 115.

¹¹⁸ Ibid., 119.

¹¹⁹ Ibid., 119.

this failure into history. In the same way as much post-Kantian philosophy essentially dealt critically with Kant's claims, a similar process can be observed in music history, whereby the holistic intelligibility of a classical tonal structure, its perfect mediation between its universal sonata archetypes and its particular melodic components, is increasingly compromised. Thus, in what Subotnik calls 'romantic' music,

the temporally unified wholeness of tonal argument gives way to a pervasive individuation, which tends at every level of the musical structure to define semiotic units that cannot be rejoined in any immanent structural sense because, though incomplete as a source of meaning they are also, in a physical sense, self-contained or autonomous.¹²⁰

This has an important interpretative consequence: if the autonomous classical whole ruptures into romantic fragments, then, rather than quasi-logical structures which can be appreciated formalistically, what the listener is presented with is a series of units whose interpretation requires them to be connected by constructions of the listener's making.¹²¹ Thus, in Subotnik's terms, a temporal generation of a logically unified meaning (which she calls 'structural competence') is succeeded by a concept of stylistic meaning, in which a 'universe of meaning' is generated in a spatial way, since non-musical layers of interpretation sit (autonomously) above the musical layer.¹²²

It does not require a great deal of ingenuity to note the return here of the Foucauldian themes with which this survey of modernity began: indeed, Subotnik admits as much, referring specifically to the scheme outlined earlier in which an eighteenth-century conception of language as transparent correspondence was succeeded by a nineteenth-century scheme in which 'the mediating power of language was undermined'.¹²³ This provokes a turn inwards, in which language is scrutinised supposedly on its own terms through the investigation of sound and structure (that is, a realm directly connected in one sense to music). Here Subotnik characterises the music that ended and succeeded the classical style as individualistic: the tension between general and particular that is resolved so seamlessly in the classical style increasingly unbalances the structures of romantic works. Particularly in Beethoven,

¹²⁰ Ibid., 121.

¹²¹ This is reminiscent of the stylistic understandings of postmodernism surveyed in Chapter 4, section 1, in which, music history being complete, the composer simply pastes together bits of music whose original meanings have now been eclipsed.

¹²² Ibid., 124-5.

¹²³ Ibid., 176-7.

the sense of individuality, albeit a threatened individuality, is raised to the second power, and musical content is thus felt to be in need of concretisation (through the intercession of language, in titles and texts) as well as rhetorical emphasis,¹²⁴ both of which destroy the more classical autonomy of structure. The mediations of classicism collapse 'into an essentially private code or organization of symbols, thereby depriving music not only of the autonomy through which it had come to epitomize the uniqueness of art but also of the social viability it had once shared with eighteenth-century language.'¹²⁵ The latent historical trajectory of this theory is not hard to discern: eventually, this rupture becomes so acute (in Schoenbergian expressionism, one assumes) that extreme formalisms (for example, dodecaphony) are required to return a sense of verifiable formal objectivity to music.¹²⁶

This reading of music history appears in *Developing Variations*, a collection of Subotnik's essays that is substantially influenced by the work of Theodor Adorno. It is not particularly difficult to trace this influence, for the outlines of Adorno's philosophy of music history are now comparatively well established.¹²⁷ In the recently published fragments of his writings on Beethoven, for instance, Adorno outlines this scheme in a particularly clear and bold form. There are subtle differences between Adorno's scheme and Subotnik's, however: notably, he places greater historical weight onto Beethoven, rather than a conception of a logically perfect classical style. Indeed, in these fragments Beethoven's music is held to be virtually the embodiment of tonality ('To understand Beethoven means to understand *tonality*').¹²⁸ But tonality for Adorno here has a very particular social correlative:

It is the music's bourgeois bedrock. [...] Just as tonality coincides, historically, with the bourgeois era, it is, in terms of its meaning, the musical language of the bourgeoisie.¹²⁹

And in a gesture which is refreshingly (and untypically) bold in its economic resonance, Adorno associates tonality with central Marxist thematics. Claiming that

¹²⁴ Ibid., 180.

¹²⁵ Ibid., 183. See also Kofi Agawu's claim that in romanticism, signs become symbols: V. Kofi Agawu, *Playing with Signs: A Semiotic Interpretation of Classic Music* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1991), 137.

¹²⁶ Subotnik, *Developing Variations*, 187–8.

¹²⁷ For an informative and detailed overview, see Max Paddison, *Adorno's Aesthetics of Music* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), 218–62.

¹²⁸ As well as Hegelian philosophy! See Theodor Adorno, *Beethoven: The Philosophy of Music*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Cambridge: Polity, 1998), 49 and ch. 2.

¹²⁹ Ibid., 49–50.

the individual is now the principle of universality in the bourgeois era, Adorno contends that the 'harmonic event is always representative of the whole schema, as *Homo oeconomicus* is the agent of the law of value'.¹³⁰ Tonality, then, as a system that organises harmonies corresponds to the social system that organises production; leaving aside the rather fanciful suggestion that the logic of exchange underlies the form of the cadence,¹³¹ one can point to the way in which these underlying systems (tonality, capitalist production) are substituted for nature and presented as if they were second nature. Adorno thus develops an analogy between the establishment of equilibrium, by processes of rationalisation, and the cadential force of tonality; indeed, he claims that the latter, whilst enabling construction, actively inhibits it, since it compels composers to recapitulate material (think of the close of Beethoven's Fifth Symphony) which, in one sense, need only be stated once.¹³² Beethoven's musical shocks thus register in a very fundamental sense an alienation, as a subjectivity realises the objectification of its creative expression and tries in vain to fight against it.¹³³ But expression is mediated by the system which allows it; so in this case Beethovenian expression is achieved in spite of, but also through, tonality; and in an intriguing, pregnant passage, Adorno suggests that

The real difference between our music and that of Viennese classicism is that, in the latter, within a largely pre-given and bindingly structured material, each minimal nuance, through standing out against it, takes on decisive significance, whereas in our music the language itself is constantly the problem, and not the turn of phrase. [...] Romanticism is the history of the decay of musical language and its replacement by 'material'.¹³⁴

In this way is the gap between Beethoven and Schoenberg bridged: modernism critiques tonality itself, and becomes 'a negation of its untruth'.¹³⁵ We have thus returned to a conception of modernism that is reminiscent of the model proposed by Perry Anderson that was discussed in Chapter 1. Modernism is marked most notably by the prospect of a radically open future, one in which the bourgeois era will be superseded, and, musically, tonality will be seen to be a product of a certain socio-historical conjuncture. Adorno's philosophy of music history is surely some kind of derivative of this modernism. But this is precisely the point at which it becomes clear

¹³⁰ Ibid., 50.

¹³¹ Ibid., 50.

¹³² Ibid., 53.

¹³³ Ibid., 54.

¹³⁴ Ibid., 59.

¹³⁵ Ibid., 59.

that we need a larger periodising concept to make sense of modernism; we need, in other words, an understanding of that bourgeois era, however rudimentary, that allows us to understand that which modernism revolted against. That understanding, in turn, permits an understanding of postmodernism that captures its historical moment: it is a moment of regression, certainly, in which the force of modernism, the force of an artistic reaction against a mode of production, is spent, derided, neutralised; and instead of the limitless possibilities of a new social formation, we are returned instead to a palpably degraded recycling of an epoch, albeit one reduced to its lowest economic denominator and purged even of the class which originally seemed to define it. In seeming contradiction of Osborne's model of modernity, in which the future always threatened to relegate the present to a future past, we arrive back at the jaded triumphs of postmodernism which were the point of departure for this dissertation. The end of history, that is to say, is little other than the continuation of a modernity purged, almost by fiat, of the energies that might bring it to a close.

EPILOGUE: LATE MUSICOLOGY

This is the point at which, if we are to do justice to the spirit of modernism, it becomes necessary to grasp modernity dialectically. If we recall Fredric Jameson's theory of modernity, it is possible to take the most radical possibility of all and associate modernity not with the endless permanence of capitalism, but with the transition to a new mode of production. Postmodernism on this reading is thus an historical phenomenon to be reckoned with, and one to be accorded as much respect as the cultural correlatives of earlier nascent capitalisms, but it is the product of an epoch that must try to bring itself to a close. Modernity on this reading is thus unstable and desperately unhappy, and it is only by a return to the essence of the Marxist theory of modernity that we approach the logic that is at its heart.

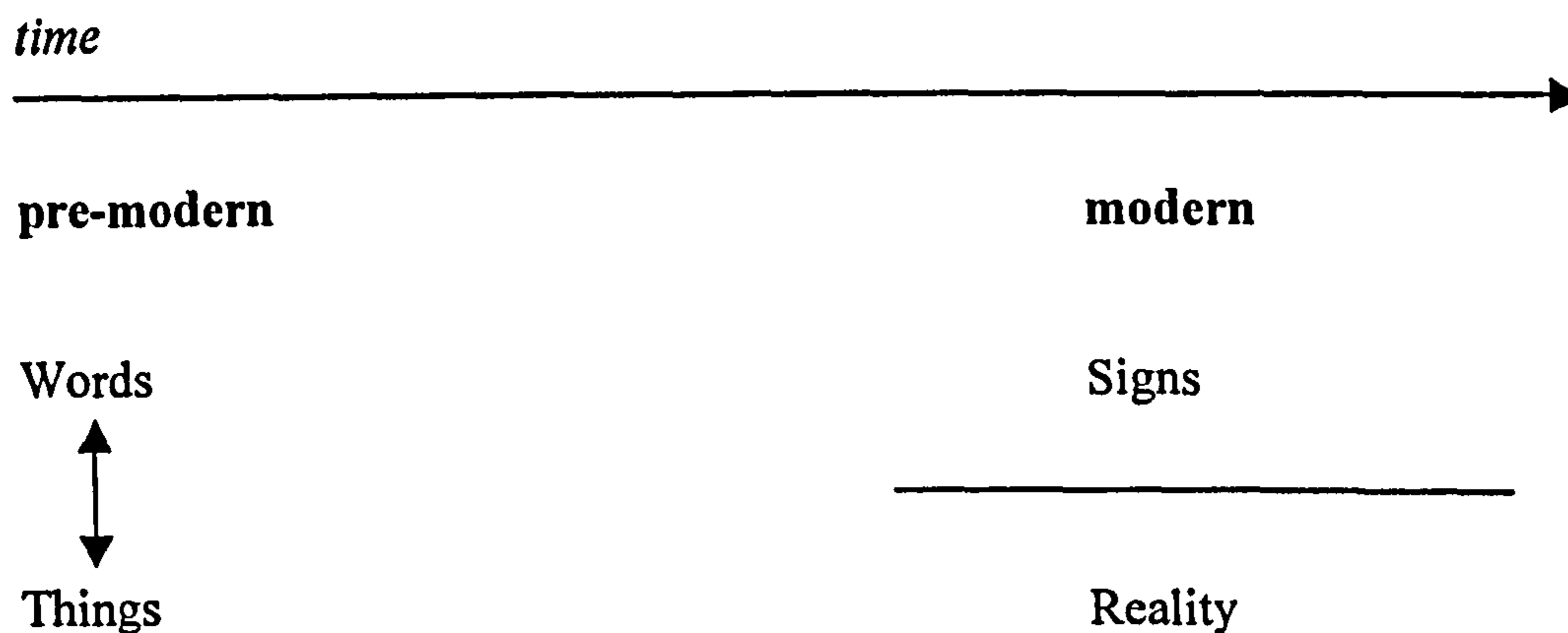
The rupture that produces modernity is an idealised moment of change, outlining a twofold transition: on the one hand, from an epoch of belief to one of knowledge; on the other hand, from an epoch blessed with a plenitude of meaning to one of uncertainty. This transition is valued positively, so that the move towards uncertainty is viewed ultimately as a marker of progress of an Enlightened West. In very broad socio-historical terms, modernity, it will be recalled, simply measures the waning (in the West, at least) of the regulative force of the idea that the universe is structured by a prior deity, whose work we then uncover. In musical terms, the situation is a little different: modernity can be read as a codeword for tonality, but tonality carries its moment of plenitude within itself, in the stylistic configuration of the classical style, which is, as many have pointed out, an historical construction (and abstraction) that is designed to serve our own needs far more than it is supposed to reveal a substantial historical tradition.¹

The common thread to both these models of modernity is a movement from a substantialist conception of language to a relational one. The Foucauldian aspects of

¹ See Daniel Chua, *Absolute Music and the Construction of Meaning* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 209.

this will be recalled from Chapter 5; the musical aspect lies in the change that is supposed to have occurred at some point towards the end of the eighteenth century, in which untexted music rises from its prior position of inferiority and becomes highly valued precisely because of its inability to represent specifically. From then on one can trace the growing attraction of models of language in which the totality of a system, and the relationship of its parts, is scrutinised for the production of meaning. This occurs at a time when aesthetic objects considered to be of high value are being scrutinised on precisely the same terms—that is, with concern only for their autonomous functioning, rather than the roots they send down towards the society from which they sprang.

Figure E.1 Substantialist vs relational conceptions of language

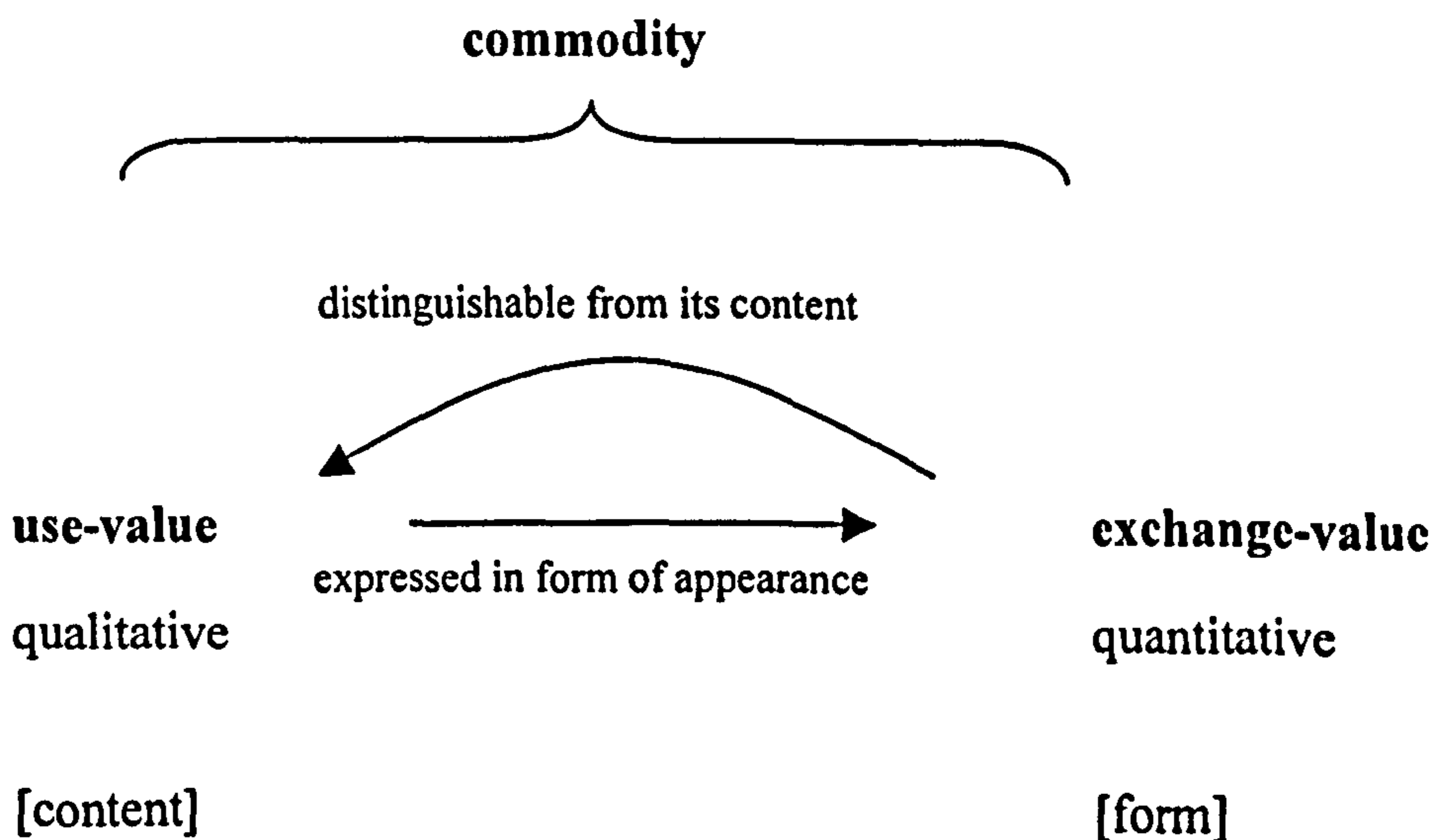


However, a Marxist theory of modernity might cast this in very different terms, for a central Marxist problematic might well be thought to lie at the heart of the representational problems as raised by both a Foucauldian modernity and that most autonomous of arts, music. Indeed, for a Marxist modernity the central issue will not be representation or the rise of the aesthetic, but something far more integral to the capitalist mode of production.

The concept that is of some use in this regard is that of reification. In classical Marxist theory—following the analysis of commodities that opens *Das Kapital*—reification is closely connected to the distinctive ways in which capitalist production obscures grim realities. This is a logic that is actually integral to the commodity itself.

For in Marx's analysis commodities have both abstract and particular properties: their use-value is what satisfies an actual need when the commodity is consumed, and it is thus qualitative—that is, its ability to satisfy needs depends on its own particular qualitative nature. However, it is obvious that in a real economy commodities are somehow exchanged in particular ratios when they are bought and sold via the use of money. If the concept of use-value captures only the qualitative specificity of the commodity (its ability to perform a particular function), it is necessary to assume that there must be a more abstract way of capturing the identity of the commodity, for the commodity must exist not only to satisfy certain qualitative needs, but also to be exchangeable with other commodities quite independently of those needs. This Marx calls the exchange-value of a commodity, the ratio in which it is exchanged with another commodity, and it is thus a quantitative measure of something that is actually quite distinct from the qualitative properties of the commodity: exchange-value is an abstracted form of expression of a content which is, in Marx's words, distinguishable from it,² and it is therefore not strictly a property of the commodity at all.

Figure E.2 Structure of the commodity I

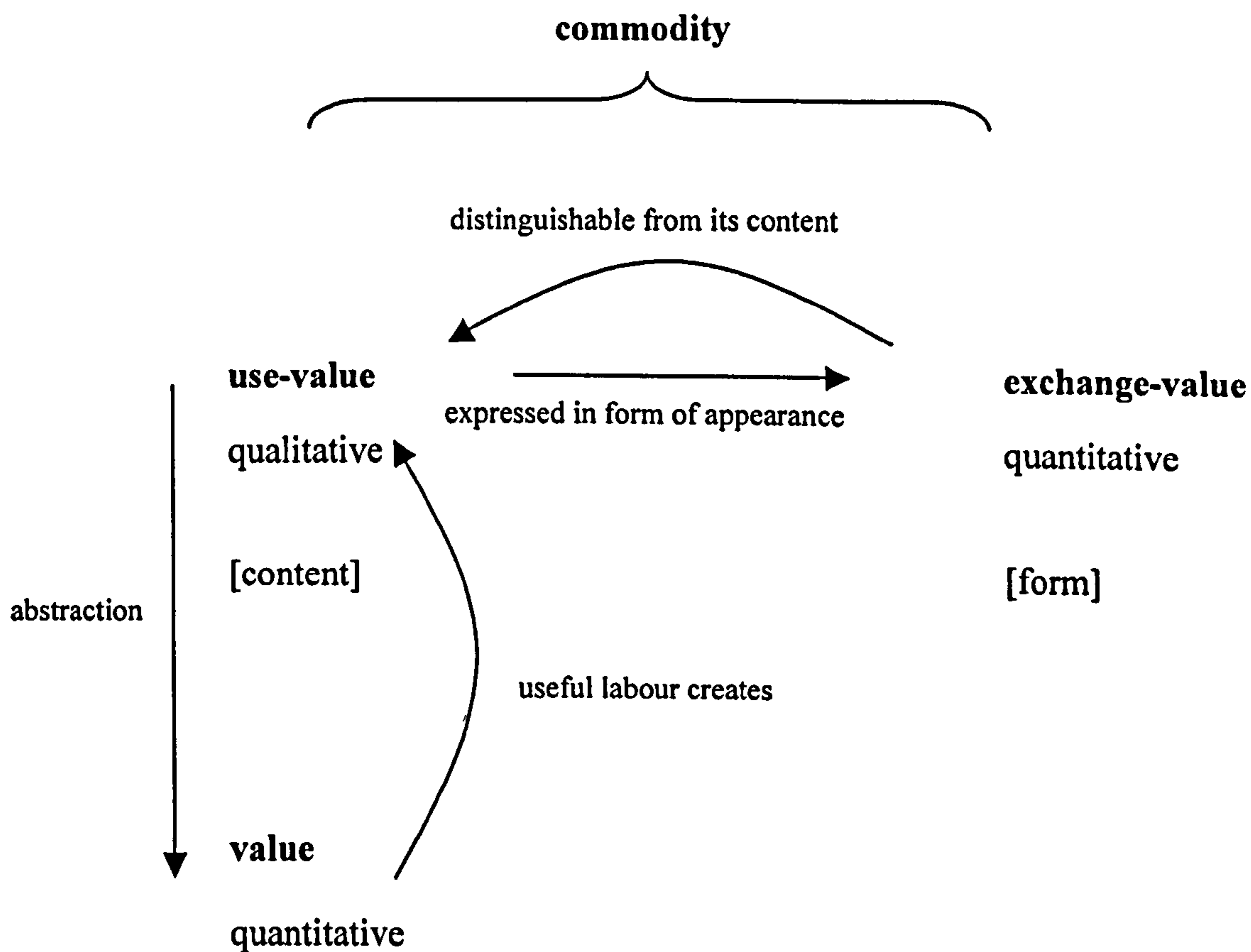


But since commodities are exchanged between producers of different commodities, Marx imagines that all commodities must contain, on some broader level, a common

² Karl Marx, *Capital*, trans. Ben Fowkes, vol. 1 (London: Penguin, 1990), 127.

factor which enables that exchange to take place. In other words, if we are to compare and exchange commodities in particular ratios of exchange, then there must surely be some factor common to commodities which enables that comparison to be made. Marx calls this more abstract thing value, and he claims that it is a quantitative measure; crucially, the thing that it measures is the labour-time necessary to produce a given use-value under normal conditions and with average skill. So whilst labour creates use-values—when a person bakes a loaf of bread, say—the value of this labour is expressed in terms of the labour-time needed to produce the use-value.

Figure E.3 Structure of the commodity II



Encoded in this theory of the commodity is thus a logic of twofold abstraction. Firstly commodities are considered in their exchange relations, which disregards the sensuous characteristics of the product of labour; secondly, this consideration of exchange relations forces us to look at the common feature of all commodities, which

is the fact that they are produced by human labour. This prepares the ground for one of Marx's most far-reaching claims: purged of their usefulness, the products of labour have only a phantom-like objectivity.³ All they tell us is that human labour is accumulated in them. This abstraction from the actual process of labour, the way in which a thing confronts us in all its thingliness without being considered as a product of grime and toil, is what Marx calls commodity fetishism, or, alternatively, reification.⁴

Reification thus embraces two of the critical aspects of modernity that have been surveyed interchangeably in Chapter 5: on the one hand, it is another way of encoding the problem by which the world slips out of view in modernity. In the Foucauldian schemes of modernity, reification plays a deafeningly silent role in the schism that opens up between words and things; such is Foucault's concern to distance himself from orthodox (humanist) Marxism, he grants to his epistemes a consequence that is actually that of the capitalist mode of production. The effacement of reality is an essential, structural prerequisite of capitalism, for the mode of production must hide its fundamental inequalities and exploitation; the system rests on delivering or promising enough of the good life to enough people (in fact, a tiny minority) for enough of the time. Marx's analysis of the structure of the commodity attempts to demonstrate this reification, of course, but it also points to a problem that is often theorised as one of epistemology. Indeed, Chapter 5 demonstrated how this problem is teased out in the course of modern aesthetics; music plays an important and much-neglected role here, because in the models of the classical style that sit beneath the philosophies of music history outlined here, music is the very paradigm of reification; it is a perfectly autonomous structure that can supposedly efface all traces of the world that produced it. **Music is modernity.**

On the other hand, reification encodes modernity because the concept is a geopolitical one. It is designed expressly to capture the industrial capitalist landscape in which Marx wrote *Kapital*; its relevance and pertinence to today's world are, of course, much contested. Yet, in the sense that postmodernism is now the glittering aesthetic of Anglo-America, it seems hard to deny that reification has extended itself

³ Ibid., 163–9.

⁴ Ibid., 163–77.

right the way through culture.⁵ Indeed, that, as one might recall, is virtually a definition of postmodernism itself. **So postmodernism, too, is modernity.**

But there is something else strange here. It will have escaped nobody's attention that the concept of modernity invoked here is both insufferably grand and infuriatingly unspecific. It is ridiculously formalistic and unscholarly, too, evaluating no primary sources and paying scant regard to the existential experiences that it comprises. That is not to say, of course, that modernity might not ultimately be usefully correlated with the rise of capitalism; but it is obvious that such a thesis has few immediate consequences for music and musicology, and is in fact a matter into which much academic energy has already been poured necessitating scarcely any mention of music. The problem with the notions of modernity formulated here is that they themselves effectively reify history itself, in the sense that they move away from any specific historical details concerning modernity, and concentrate instead on the logical coherence of a concept of modernity that is decided in advance to be relevant to the history from which it supposedly sprang. The circularity of this is unsettling, for it can seem that the very logic of modernity—if logic it is—is actually invoked in the theorisation of modernity that proceeds along precisely these lines. In other words, to theorise modernity along the Marxist lines toyed with here, in which it essentially marks the coming of capitalism and the penetration of its reifying logic through all levels of base and superstructure, is itself to reify history via a huge, formalistic mega-theory which shows little respect for history's content at all. Thus, the reification theory is itself reifying, and we reach the most unsettling formulation of all. **Modernity is modernity.**

*

Where does this leave us? Certainly this theory explains what modernism and postmodernism might be: respectively, the fight to transcend modernity, then the death of that fight. The circularity of modernity, though, is harder to explain; what it essentially interprets is the logic of a relationship to time that plays out the very thing that it theorises. Modernity becomes an all-embracing structure in which, to be

⁵ For a discussion, see Timothy Bewes, *Reification, or, The Anxiety of Late Capitalism* (London: Verso, 2002).

modern, one recognises modernity; the identification of modernity is itself modern. The theory completes its dizzying circles away from the world it was meant to explain. The theory is modern, that is, because it presupposes a separation that it relies upon but, in fact, never demonstrates. It is for this reason that some writers have suggested that we have never been modern, as if the problem could be solved by denying its existence in the first place. On this view the point is that the separation that guarantees modernity—the essential cleaving of space between subjects and objects, between workers and their products, between language and the world—has never in fact happened. So when we begin to doubt this separation, it melts away. Bruno Latour, for example, has developed an interesting model that tries to advance this argument; in latter-day moderns, he claims, ‘you can feel that the heart is gone. The will to be modern seems hesitant, sometimes even outmoded.’⁶ The attraction of this argument rests on a false premise. It is not sufficient to debate whether the rupture that produced modernity was ever real. The point is: was the rupture believed to be real, and what consequences did this belief, if held, have? Were they worthwhile consequences, in which we might continue to believe today; or were they finally shown to be incoherent and insidious?

Put this way matters are hardly less simple, but they are a little more closely focussed. Can we do without modernity? Can we really jettison the progress of the West that it supposedly incorporates? Can we refuse modern philosophy? Can we deny that reification is the cultural logic of an epoch? If it is hard not to answer these questions negatively, this is because we find it now so difficult to envisage something that would come after modernity; we fail to summon the imaginative powers necessary to conjure up a world in which the whole is both different from how it is today, and at the same time better: Fukuyama was right. This loss of vision effectively condemns us to an everlasting modernity, until the day when we can find again the foresight to envisage its transcendence—and that this transcendence must come is by no means assured.

Music flourished during modernity. If one accepts the tonality-centred history that is a correlative of musical modernity, one is forced to follow the loosely Hegelian schemes given in Chapter 5 whereby music ascended to the very pinnacle of the arts. Any yet, there is a certain circularity here, since if we define modernity in terms of a

⁶ Bruno Latour, *We have never been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (London: Harvester Wheatsheaf, 1993), 9.

crisis of representation and a geopolitical configuration, then we are already predetermined to come up with this narrative of musical history, and this tale of its rise in prestige. No other art quite captures modernity as does music; but, equally, no other art encodes the gulf, the loneliness we feel as moderns, as does music. When modernity ends, if modernity ends, music, in that sense, will end too. If modernity is beginning to end—as it nears its completion in postmodernism—then it is unsurprising that music and musicology should find themselves in such acute historical difficulties. And thus the paradox: we can only best theorise the specificity of music's modernity by theories which themselves seek to end that modernity and tell us why, in effect, music's history is over. We cannot therefore say much of use about music at all; we can only gesture towards the reasons why we now fail when confronted by music, or why music fails when confronted by us. Musicology is late, therefore, not just in the trivial sense that it has entered the world of postmodernist theory belatedly, not just in the sense that it now occurs in an era that some have labelled 'late' capitalist; no, musicology is late in the sense that, if it believes its own vision of modernity, it is condemned to the knowledge that its history is over. The choice presents itself like a fork in a road. An acceptance of this ridiculous mega-theory of modernity, this insufferable tale of Western music based around a narrative of tonality which does not cohere and (in any case) takes us to an endpoint? Or something else, something more dangerous—a sustained rereading of history itself that will take us back to the time when we started telling such implausible stories about ourselves?

Or are we condemned to indecision, not being able not to believe in the stories which leave us perched impotently on an historical precipice in Fukuyama's post-history? Is that the most plausible way of relating to these problems, if problems they are? That is: we find talk about modernity to be so much meaningless, formalistic chatter; and yet: is that precisely what we value most about modernity, the preponderance in it of the meaningless and formalistic, encapsulated most of all in its music, which must somehow continue to play even whilst the conditions of its emergence hurtle towards an inevitable oblivion?

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