Critical Criticism's Critique: 13 Theses, or, It is All Rubbish

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1.

Critical Criticism was described by Marx and Engels as 'speculative construction' – that is to say, it describes what it thinks it sees, producing in the process a 'disguised theology', that is unable to penetrate through to the foundational mechanisms of what it condemns as wrong. It does not address the dynamic vested interests in the system of the world that produce antagonism. Critical criticism remains idealist, floating above what it analyses, however critical its stance might be. However, it is notable that Marx uses the term critique to describe what he and Engels do to critical criticism. Whether an ironic or polemical gesture, criticism is central to Marx – but as the subtitle suggests, there is a further dialectical twist to be made as criticism must itself be subjected to critique: Critique of Critical Criticism. Critique or Criticism (both words are the same in German - *Kritik*) also occurs in Marx's key work *Capital*, which has the subtitle 'a critique of political economy'. Critique has a force – even if it might be dismissed by some – vulgar Marxists amongst them - as an evasion of the command to act, a stalling action of analysis and reflection. Marx claims, famously, in the 'Theses on Feuerbach' (1845): 'Philosophers have interpreted the world in various ways, the point however is to change it'. Interpretation, in the philosophical sense, is not, then apparently identical with critique. Critique is prerequisite to changing the world – or, as later revolutionaries put it in the sloganistic language of dialectics: practice must be informed by theory. Critique has a real effect in the world – it is a prelude or product of action. Without critique, no revolution and so no 'ridding' of 'the world of all the muck of ages', as Marx and Engels put it in *The German Ideology*.

2.

Subsequent Marxists held on in various ways to Marx and Engels' sense of critique or criticism. Perhaps all the more so as prospects of revolution receded. Marx's *Capital* was written in a time of retrenchment, some twenty years after the turbulent days of 1848, when revolutionary fervour swept Europe and beyond. To write *Capital's* critique of political economy, Marx retreated in part from active political agitation into the British Museum Reading Room – a kind of holding operation of analysis in

order to forward the cause intellectually, logically, ideologically. In the years after the Russian revolution of 1917, the revolutionary wave began to spread and then faltered. In its wake, another period of critique in Marxism was inaugurated. Critique is often – as it must be, if it is not to dogmatise itself - as much about an examination of Marxism's own tenets as it is about the constituents of the surrounding world.

A work by Georg Lukács, which had an immense effect on a generation of European thinkers, disaffected bourgeois sons and daughters alike, set the scene for this turn towards critique in the Marxist tradition. After a study of Lenin, Lukács published *History and Class Consciousness* in 1923 and its most influential chapter was titled 'Reification and the Consciousness of the Proletariat'. Consciousness was forwarded as an entity worthy of analysis, of critique. The place where critique happens – the consciousness - becomes the site of critique, so to speak. Lukács attempted to explain the discrepancy between class position and class-consciousness - which might be otherwise phrased as the question: why is the working class not revolutionary if revolution is in its interests. The orthodox Marxist reply blamed institutions of ideological production, such as the media, schools and the church, which spread misinformation, illusions or fear and so impeded the development of revolutionary consciousness. This rests an Enlightenment notion of ideological manipulation, deception, delusion – a falsity need only be pointed out to be overcome. Lukács approached the question differently – drawing on Marx's concept of objective illusions, the notion that the false can be real, that the way things appear can be simultaneously true and false. Lukács examined the experience of workers under capitalism. He considered the ways in which labour power is turned into a commodity. Capitalists treat workers' wage labour as just another commodity to be bought and sold on the market. Workers experience themselves as individual atoms whose fate is dependent on a force, the market, over which they have no control. Their sense of their own powerlessness makes them susceptible to the muck - commands issued by hierarchies and bureaucracies and the misty illusions of religion. Their susceptibility generates a false perception, a delusion, but this delusion is based on a real experience. It is an objective illusion. The false appearance is woven into reality itself. The muck is real. The misapprehension of the world is a real misapprehension. It is socially produced. Criticism steps up to the task of penetrating through the mists of subjective misidentification to expose the deeper motive forces that make the surface sense of things appear to be true. But criticism is not enough –

and the notion of objective illusion renders critique – or philosophy – redundant, in much the way Marx argued. If illusions are not a matter of cognition, a misperception perpetrated by ideology, then the philosophical critique of falsity is useless. The false appearance can only be altered in transforming the essence that produces the appearance – anything else is mere analysis, moral denunciation or ethics. Lukács' other insistence concerned the way in which the worker is an object of capital, but comes, through political enlightenment to understand that they are also a subject, an agent, whose withdrawal of labour causes a collapse of the whole system of reproduction. The proletariat can adopt a point of view that sees the world from the perspective of an object of capital and a subject of history. This movement in and out of the true and the false, the appearance and the essence, the subject and the object: all this demands a dialectical approach.

3.

Amongst those disaffected bourgeois sons who discovered Lukács was Walter Benjamin, who read *History and Class Consciousness*, while in Ibiza in 1924. In the period following his encounter with Lukács, Benjamin defines his future career path as a critic. The combination of reading Lukács, discussions with communists such as Ernst Bloch and Alfred Sohn-Rethel and his experience of Germany's economic crisis and financial insecurities, pulled him towards what he called materialist criticism. In this period he begins to scrape together a living as a critic and journalist and radio presenter. His reviews and essays do not shy away from polemic, for he characterises his critical writing as sallies in an intellectual civil war. 'The Critic's Technique in Thirteen Theses from 1925 notes: 'The critic is the strategist in the literary struggle.'[1]

A spur to Benjamin's interest in strategic criticism comes in 1929 in his meeting with Brecht, which leads to intensive work on the Brechtian aesthetic. To seriously wage the intellectual civil war against the many reactionary or incompetent fellow critics, it was deemed necessary to edit and publish a journal. *Krisis und Kritik* [*Crisis and Criticism*] was planned by Brecht and Benjamin in the autumn of 1930, drawing in left-wing figures such as Lukács, Adorno, Marcuse and others. Its character was political, 'standing on the ground of class struggle', and 'its critical activity anchored in clear consciousness of the basic critical situation of contemporary

[1] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 1, Harvard, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA., 1996, p.460.

society'.[2] The many forms of crisis – social, economic, political – were ever more manifest and become part of the context of the act of criticism. The journal was not conceived as an 'organ of the proletariat', but rather it would 'occupy the hitherto empty place of a organ in which the bourgeois intelligentsia renders its account of the demands and insights, which alone allow it under current conditions to produce in an interventionist manner and with consequences, as opposed to the usual arbitrary and inconsequential modes.'[3] The journal never appeared. In that same period Benjamin writes a kind of manifesto titled 'Programme for Literary Criticism'. It contains forty theses. Number sixteen: 'The function of criticism, especially today: to lift *the mask of "pure art"* and show that there is no neutral ground for art. Materialist criticism as an instrument for this.' Benjamin treats artworks as bundles of symptoms and these are not just to be approached affirmatively, in statements such as 'this captures well', 'this expresses perfectly'– he talks of bringing out the importance of something seemingly peripheral through 'negative criticism' – which we might imagine as something like the phrase 'the insistence on this format indicates the anxiety about the coming of new technical and social modes of conveying culture'. Benjamin writes of more or less 'deeply hidden tendencies' served by artworks and how these must become points of exposure. Criticism is a revelation of what is in the artwork that is tendentious, partisan, just as the critic's interest in it is partisan.

The notion of strategy comes at various points: in the fragment 'The Task of the Critic' from 1931.[4] Benjamin recommends twice strategic criticism, and it appears to be concerned with a critic revealing not his or her own opinions about something, but the standpoint that they themselves possess. Benjamin emphasizes partisanship, taking a position and making that position explicit. The critic does something else to the text other than judging. Another fragment from 1931 reiterates that a critic is not there to 'pass judgment' or have an opinion, but rather to trace out something in the work itself, the work that, once explained by the critic, that is, in other words, revealed as what it already is, becomes a repository of what Benjamin terms 'truth contents' and 'social content'. This reiterates, in another way, that insight from Lukács and Marx:

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[2] Walter Benjamin, *Gesammelte Schriften* (GS)VI, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt, 1991, p. 619.
[3] Benjamin, GSV, 619.
[4] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, Harvard, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA., 2005, pp.548-9.

that the given is both true and not true. It is a real abstraction, an objective illusion. The text samples reality, its illusions as well as its motive forces. This is why Benjamin puts so much store by 'quotation' in book criticism, envisaging a review comprised entirely of quotation – it avoids the boredom of summary and gives over the matter of the text itself. The work contains the elements of its own critique. It is not extraneous matter, as such, that criticism introduces – it discovers the context in the text, the residues as artwork's substance. It is the critic's work of sifting through that is of interest. From this perspective, the artwork as such can be seen as just a temporary stage. He writes: 'On the point that criticism is internal to the work: in the case of great works, art is merely a transitional stage. They were something else (in the course of their gestation) and become something else again (in the state of criticism).'[5]

4.

In parallel to this, in the 1920s, in *One Way Street*, with its subheadings retrieved from urban detritus, street signage and advertisements, and its jacket, by Sasha Stone, a dynamic, chaotic urban array of street furniture, vehicles, crowds and advertisements, Benjamin insists that writing should

> nurture the inconspicuous forms that better fit its influence in active communities than does the pretentious universal gesture of the book – in leaflets, brochures, articles and placards. Only this prompt language shows itself actively equal to the moment.[6]

Benjamin proposed the urgent communication of the telegram, postcard, leaflet or the economically articulate photomontage. And quotation – a type of recycling - was at the core of this. In a letter to his friend Gershom Scholem in August 1935, Benjamin revealed how he set quoting - a salvaging of scraps - at the heart of his method. He described his efforts, in his researches for the *Arcades* project, 'to hold the image of

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[5] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.2, Harvard, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA., 2005, p.546.

[6] Benjamin, *One Way Street and Other Writings*, New Left Books, London 1979, p.45.

history in the most unprepossessing fixations of being, so to speak, the scraps of being'.[7] Here the word he uses for scrap is '*Abfall'*, something that falls off, garbage, a clipping, torn-off, a thrown away piece of urban detritus.

5.

Kurt Schwitters knew of scraps too, in many senses. Two of his Merzbaus were scrapped by circumstance, or at least 'unfinished out of principle', making them ultimately failed or incomplete works, Arguably, though, these were works, like Walter Benjamin's *Arcades* project perhaps, that were made never to be finished, but rather reasons for living. Scraps were also the matter of his collages and montages and these were captured and re-directed in order to expand and extend the vocabularies of art. He discussed this re-usage many times, perhaps most pointedly in 1920, in an essay titled 'Berliner BörsenKukukunst', which mocks the art critic of a Berlin financial paper, who 'does not have a clue about our times'[8] and insists he might even re-use the newspaper, the critic and some ladies' pantaloons as the abstracted material of his art. And he reiterated his practice in 'The Aim of My Merz Art', written in 1938, in a period when the vocabularies of art were being decidedly truncated in his homeland, in the Degenerate Art touring exhibition, stating that 'there does not appear to be a rule which prescribes that one can only make artworks from specific materials' and so rubbish from waste bins presented itself a fine enough material for the task of composition.[9] Schwitters also treated his own work as scraps, as remouldable, odds and ends, recycling postcard versions of his own works, such as or the more conventional *Still Life with Challice* or *The Pleasure Gallows* or *Revolving*, as collages for friends, obliterated partially by purloined bucolic scenes or other scraps. He scrapped his own image in promotional postcards too, merging himself Merzstyle with his creation Anna Blume, or women's ready-to-wear clothing or a wheel.

6.

It would be banal to undertake a criticism solely based on the positivistic approach that states that the author is of this class, therefore the work is a manifestation of that,

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[7] Benjamin, *Briefe 2*, Suhrkamp, Frankfurt/Main, 1978, p. 685.
[8] Kurt Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, Friedhelm Lach (ed.), Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981, p. 51.
[9] Schwitters, *Das Literarische Werk*, vol. 5, Friedhelm Lach (ed.), Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1981. p. 365.

simply. But this is what some of the orthodox Marxists and Stalinist thought passed for criticism. The Nazis, for their part, outlawed criticism in favour of 'art appreciation', but likewise their art appreciators also positivistically made the claim that ethnic origin or mental and political disposition of the author was the only key to understanding the meaning of the work. This approach, of course, excludes the idea of partisanship, of consciously adopting a stance, a standpoint. Benjamin is insistent that the old critical categories are no longer relevant – he names these later, in his essay on the work of art in the age of its technical reproducibility, as creativity, genius, eternal value and mystery. In contrast, he writes, 'what is required now is a detour through materialist aesthetics, which would situate books in the context of their age.[10] Artworks draw off the world and time of their being made and it is this relevance that brings them to the fore or not. And it is this that may make something strangely out of its own time and within another. Benjamin reflects on this in his 'Programme for Literary Criticism', noting how, in the case of the war memoirs, at the moment of their making, there was no appetite for them. They were too objective, documentary in style, and the taste of the time, the time of inflation, was for inflationary, excessive, meandering works, the works of Expressionism. But, notes Benjamin in an extraordinary feat of economic determinism of meaning, after Expression came New Objectivity. Benjamin posits Expressionism as the extended borrowings of metaphysics, cosmic claims, excessive overdraughts of reality and New Objectivity as the consolidation of the debt, the interest incurred and now paid back, locking the world into the Real of money, the adherence to the very worldly Dawes Plan. In this act of critical apprehension, Benjamin situates the work in the context of its age, but he also includes the possibility of an out-of-timeness, that is, of a work that anticipates what is to come or comes too late to be meaningful in the terms assumed by it.

7.

In 1949, just before Adorno returned from his exile home in the USA to Germany, he wrote an essay titled 'Cultural Criticism and Society'. Here criticism is discussed as something that had effectively disappeared, had become advertising or propaganda.

[10] Benjamin, *Selected Writings*, vol. 2.1, Harvard, Belknap Press, Cambridge, MA., 2005, p. 294.

Cultural criticism turns into a form of ideology brokering. The essay explains why and how to remedy the situation. The starting point is not that the critic has no feeling for culture, but rather the opposite. The critic believes in culture too much, in the sense of severing it off from the rest of life, making culture a specialism, a Very Good Thing, as opposed to the rest of life that is not culture. While such a procedure appears to be an overvaluation of culture, it turns out to allow more fully just the 'valuation' of culture – in the form of its commodification. Culture is a special uniqueness that is completely at odds with the rest of life, a luxury good, which can be bought. The critic is the broker of this specialty good, with the power to elect the successful – and as such has set himself or herself up as an expert, a cut above the mere punters, who the critic condemns as too enamoured of the mass commodity, undiscerning and in need of consumer advice. All of culture is segmented into market niches – high and low and each defines itself against the other, which becomes the main area of focus for the critic. High culture and popular culture, culture and non-culture are cut off from each other conceptually – or define themselves in opposition to each other. But, notes Adorno, all culture: 'ekes out its existence only by virtue of injustice already perpetrated in the sphere of production, much as does commerce'. [11] Culture relies on the division of labour.

Peculiar to high culture is that it presents itself as 'free', unlike mass culture that must be a slave to mass taste, and is openly bought and consumed. In being 'free' apparently – Adorno is thinking of radio concerts or artworks in galleries – it becomes a kind of advertisement for the system as is – which is so good that it provides culture for free. Moreover it serves up for free a culture that floats above such mucky concerns as economic accumulation and work (the base truths of the system). The semblance of freedom makes reflection on unfreedom more difficult. Apparent liberation of thought is a false emancipation (which is in slavery to economic exchange). Both artwork and critic appear to be placed outside society or above it - in order to judge. A motto from Adorno: 'Whenever cultural criticism complains of "materialism", it furthers the belief that the sin lies in man's desire for consumer goods, and not in the organisation of the whole which withholds these goods from man: for the cultural critic, the sin is satiety, not hunger'.[12] The critic has to

[11] T.W. Adorno, *Prisms*, Nevill Spearman, London, 1967, p. 26.

[12] Adorno, *Prisms*, Nevill Spearman, London, 1967, pp. 24-5.

understand his or her role as bound up in the needs and machinations of society. That is to say, that even a notion of having a spontaneous relationship to the object – to approach art without predetermination, and without motive - is impossible, because the critic is pressurised by the weight of the existing social world to judge in line with prevailing opinion. Where once feudal authority dictated, now the anonymous sway of the status quo compels. Adorno endeavours to establish a criticism worthy of the name. Transcendent criticism sees the critic adopting a stance outside society and looking down on culture through a specific lens, say Marxism, the position to which the critic ascribes. It smashes this position up against the cultural form that becomes, then, only another exemplar of the miserable system, which the transcendent critic rejects in its entirety. Culture becomes just an ideological fiction supporting society and the transcendent critic wishes only to abolish it. Adorno notes: 'In wishing to wipe away the whole as with a sponge, transcendent critique develops an affinity to barbarism'.[13] Immanent criticism, in contrast, pays close attention to the particularities of the object. It does not assume that the world of the object is untrue – only that it may present a truth to the world as if it were instantiated in reality. To this extent, Adorno sees that immanent criticism has merits. It can reveal the falsity of the world through culture's claims – most abstractly phrased claims – to freedom, autonomy. It shows the discrepancy between what the work says, in its meaning and structure, and what the world gives. The work of art is revealed through close analysis as contradictory parts. But neither of these critical strategies are sufficient. Both together must be mobilised in what Adorno calls 'dialectical criticism'. Each criticism becomes a critique of the other. The whole is perceived from the outside by a critic wielding a transcendent critical position. At the same time, the possibility of a 'pure' position outside is undermined. The work is considered closely in all its particularities, taken on its own terms as proposing a world, which may or may not bear resemblance to an external world from which it distances itself. Its internal articulation must be traced out to fully understand all its parts and how these parts express in relation to each other and to the context. This mimetic tracing echoes Benjamin's idea of the quotation – the artwork is its own critique. At the same time, this discrepancy between the work's and the world's promises is highlighted, read against a social whole that denies fulfilment of the promise. Reflective distance must

[13] Adorno, *Prisms*, Nevill Spearman, London, 1967, p. 32.

be taken from the work, in order to bring another set of principles, standpoints to bear on it. This too echoes Benjamin's sense that the perspective of the critic must be made obvious. In summary, there must be an outside to the artwork, but the outside is already inside the artwork. Dialectical criticism argues that there is no Archimedes point from which the whole can be surveyed – the dialectical moment means that he does not perceive existing reality as fixed, closed, a completely identical unity, but as a conflict between opposing forces – social, historical, natural ones - that marks itself on and in the artwork..

It is in this essay that the famous lines about the impossibility of writing poetry after Auschwitz first appear. In time, these have transmuted into this: 'all post-Auschwitz culture, including its urgent critique, is garbage.[14] But rubbish has uses, meanings, possibilities. Much as Adorno hates culture and criticism, a world without is unthinkable. So, culture, this rubbish, is double-marked: on the one hand, a product of unbearable division, On the other hand, it still holds open a promise of autonomy, of something other than labour and commerce. Its rubbish is its value. Its lie is also its truth.

8.

Modern life – speedy, technological, fragmented, alienating, transient - demanded new cultural forms. The metropolis, especially the one that is New York, incubates popular modern forms - illustrated magazines, radio, pulp crime fiction, movies and also the comic strip, included in every newspaper. American popular culture, in its very origins, is the critique of high culture, is satire, is polyglot absurdism, is dada or at least its ersatz, which makes the real thing redundant. That was the context of early animation, when New York exemplified modernity and anarchic and popular forms outbid dada. A few decades later and the geographical location of modern, popular culture had shifted westwards to California, to Los Angeles. Here was where cultural output was consolidating into the force that Adorno and Horkheimer would observe at close quarters, from 1941, and label the 'culture industry'. Perhaps it could be said that a home-grown challenger to dada emerged again, this time via LA, home of kitsch and drama queens, a gigantic factory for the re-circulation of the pseudo folklore of Aunt Jemina or Little Sprout. Dada was called upon to rip apart the

[14] Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Continuum, London, 1995, p.367.

perfectly sparkly stars and glossy strips of Studio output. But it came back under new conditions, and shorn of any traces of Old World disappointments in culture. Take for example the visual culture around the LA-based musician Frank Zappa. Zappa's covers stand firmly in this undada-dada tradition. They do not draw on dada as such, rather they are authentic products of US popular modernity, brash, chaotic, multi-layered, trashy and ambitious. It is dada *brut*. The album covers query the conventions of representation, specifically rock representation, as it had crystallized in the 1970s and onwards, in much the same way as dada visual practices query art conventions as they gelled in the late teens and 1920s. As well as collage and photomontage there are plenty of photographs on Zappa album covers. These are frequently distorted by photo-specific techniques, turned into drawings, solarised or treated in some way. The intervention into photographic immediacy is a way of criticizing photographic self-evidence, and is, like photomontage, a progressive visual practice, that uses aesthetic form to cast doubt upon the veracity and desirability of current conditions. The recuperated version of such visual culture is, of course, the solarised or psychedelically tinted image, which is an effort to emulate drug visions.

In addition to this refracted photographic visual field, there is also drawing on the album covers - unusually perhaps for the rock tradition. Caricaturish, comic-book derived drawings on the albums covers were produced by Cal Schenkel, John Williams, Tanino Liberatore and Neon Park. This is not the castles–in-the-sky fantasy drawing of a Roger Dean on Yes albums. It is drawing that emerges from the tradition of cartooning and comics. Caricature is its mainstay. Caricature takes an essential truth about a figure, an event, an object, and manipulates it to express more truth about itself while diverging from or distorting original surface appearance. It is not simply a comic technique. It is a form of expression that captures something painfully acute. Noses feature frequently in Zappa's caricatures. The nose is a small part of the whole human, but it is often the part that most defines them. Zappa knew this well, being defined by his nose. In the scale of things the differences in nasal architecture are fairly small, but these small differences are what form the basis of caricature. If one returns to the history of comic strip, one can find claims made for the Swiss experimenter Rodolphe Töpffer who is reputed to have invented the genre of *bandes dessinées* in the early-nineteenth century. Töpffer produced little albums of continuous strips, with characters in whimsical, nonsensical plots. Sometimes his strips plotted transformations of an object, for example, a face. The animators of

Disney's *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs* used Töpffer-like variations in the shot of the dwarfs at the end of Snow White's bed, their noses drooped over the bedstead, each face a little different from the others. The differences are small but significant. Disney's noses are grotesquely phallic, and they hint at a relationship between the dwarves and Snow White that is nowhere to be found on the saccharine surface of Disney's animated feature. The animators were of course much more worldly. Zappa and Schenkel made the same nose/phallus equation in their portrayal of Ruben and the Jets. These noses are primal forms that stick out or hang low, sexualized of course, primitive, and given their dog-likeness reminders of our animal cores, our origins and our selves once the veneer of civilization is scratched off

9.

Criticism today is fairly shabby. Much of it is either transcendent or immanent in the weak sense. Art journals and art journalism waste lots of ink on description – and, of course, it is easy to see where the business of promotion, censorship and marketing fits in with this. Even journals that might think themselves uninvolved in this type of work spend time on description – a kind of weak immanentism – elaborating in words what might be seen if a punter visits a gallery, or the critics recount plots of books and films, with no glimmer of what it might be like for the eyeball or brain to be exposed to experiential specificities. In academic criticism – and sometimes in press releases – the latest passing theory is flung at the artwork, in the hope it might stick, and contribute to hyping culture's value. In other places, on the Left, for example, all is simply transcendent, in the crassest sense. Just as the Orthodox Marxist have long done, judgment is made not of the work and the contradictions that it might embody in its form or in its content, but rather of the authors' class passport or the explicit manifest content on the surface. Prizes are awarded to the work or the art worker who affirms the transcendent set of values held by the reviewer. Art criticism is affirmation of art, including the affirmation of art that is negative, that is critique.

10.

Of the contemporary more or less celebrated cultural critics on the Left, Fredric Jameson is the one who most adopts Adorno's mantle of dialectical criticism, and quite self-consciously. Though he does it without any of the acid that Adorno's bitter

prose conveys, even if he did once make such claims, as in the 1971 essay 'Towards Dialectical Criticism':

> thought asphyxiates in our culture with its absolute inability to imagine anything other than what is. It therefore falls to literary criticism to continue to compare the inside and the outside, existence and history, to continue to pass judgment on the abstract quality of life in the present, and to keep alive the idea of a concrete future. May it prove equal to the task![15]

And he, in a sense, out-dialecticises Adorno to the extent that the criticism he exercises becomes quite diffuse, or even confused. Even that title 'towards dialectical criticism' is too much – dialectics is itself only a *towards*, a referring back and forth, an unfixed proposition, a momentary claim. Jameson's is more than most a dialectic without synthesis and has fallen more recently, in his *Archaeologies of the Future* and in *Valences of the Future*, into a 'utopology' in which, for example, the American superstore chain Walmart can be both dystopian and utopian, depending on how you look at it, just by an act of imagination, by a revealing of the wish that is manifest in the form. Jameson thinks 'the negative and the positive together at one and the same time'.[16] He writes: 'to apprehend it for a moment in positive or progressive terms is to open up the current system in the direction of something else'. [17] Failure can become success – but how, only if the critic says so, only if we want it to be?

But Jameson does present a useful outline of the movement of the dialectic, which returns to Marx and Lukács and is of the essence (literally) for comprehending 'dialectical criticism' in any and all of its forms. Jameson is describing the 'tripartite movement of the Hegelian dialectic', which is the one that all subsequent dialecticians adopt:

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[15] Fredric Jameson, *Marxism and Form: Twentieth-Century Dialectical Theories of Literature*, Princeton Univ. Press, Princeton, 1971, p. 416.
[16] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, 2009, p. 421.
[17] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, 2009, p. *.

> stupid first impression as the appearance, ingenious correction in the name of some underlying reality or 'essence'; but finally, after all, a return to the reality of the appearance. [18]

In relation to capitalism this might mean the following. A stupid first impression: capitalism is the product of all humans making efforts. The ingenious correction: capitalism escapes human agency, is a great machine of abstraction. The return to the reality of the appearance: capitalism is indeed made by humans, but specific humans, the workers, perform specific types of work that keeps the system reproducing itself in the way it has currently adopted historically. Should we recognise this we might then make efforts to change it. Art might be a place in which that recognition can crystallise. Only might.

11.

But what if Benjamin's dialectical criticism and Jameson's dialectical criticism are parsed through the lens of dialectical criticism in Adorno's sense. Considered transcendently, from the outside, dissolved into its context Benjamin's is work written for money, for he has no academic position, is insecure, precarious – despite this his work is not, in the main, hackish. This circumstance of instability determines its form and contents and both provokes and circumscribes the standpoints presented within. It is work in tension with the world and strains to find places to place its opinions. Seen immanently, we might notice how it is marked by the sharp stabs of the capitalist system, its rhythms and demands, its modern speediness and engagement with fashion and the popular. It takes up its exposure to capitalism into itself, by hardening its position against the system, condemning it polemically and totally and making divisions between its insights and those of conformist critics. Benjamin's short punctuated rhythms and polemical outbursts take up the confident mode of address of the media and its competition for distracted attention. It is timely, always valuing the contemporary and concerned with the precise moment into which a statement is uttered (which can include polemical returns of long forgotten materials, that flash back into his critical view in a certain moment). It utters something of Brecht's impatience with laborious analysis, epitomised in the dialogue Benjamin reports

[18] Fredric Jameson, *Valences of the Dialectic*, Verso, 2009, p. 57.

between a caption on a ceiling beam and a placard hanging around the neck of a toy donkey: 'Truth is concrete. I, too, must understand it'. Jameson produces a different type of criticism. It is leisurely, expansive, full of curlicues and endless twiddles. It is the work of someone with much time on their hands – lucky recipient of a tenured and well-remunerated position – who can reflect upon the complexities of the system, and is not pressed into selling words for money – despite the vast quantities of these produced. Its attitude is mournful, contemplative and sometimes resigned. It ranges over all the world's contents, looking at them this way and that, poking them over hundreds of pages to tease out their contradictions. Jameson appears to be writing a novel about capitalism, has the ambition to cover the whole world and all its contents in his endless books that include reprints of work now thirty years old, but not acknowledged as such, not updated. It leads to a peculiar timelessness for that work that would be about the urgent questions of our times. Jameson slips into science fiction styles at points, to press home his point about the death of imagination in mainstream literature and culture, high and low. It is now scuttled away to reside only in strange corners of genre fiction built on imagining probable impossibilities.

12.

Despite many who have wished it ill, art did not die - instead we have been condemned to endless re-runs of its impossibility, untenability or decomposition – and criticism maunders on. The post-war period saw first the emaciated practice of at after Auschwitz – bleak, dark stumps of negativity that found a space in galleries and museums, until social movements of the 1960s brought with them art as critical practice, as it turned to process, left the gallery, worked on, or more specifically against the commodity nature of art, to the point of its non-appearance as object or non-facture in the calls for an art strike, or, more graphically, its auto-destruction. Or they assailed it as in the most sublime détournements of the Situationists. Witness, for example, René Viénet's 1967 tabulation of forms of subversion. He calls for the development of Situationist cartoons, films, capturing or pirating of radio and TV stations, and experimentation in the détournement of photo-romances and pornographic photos. In describing this Viénet reveals how much such political aesthetics is convinced that future humankind is incipient, and so work on existing

conditions is a politics, for in meddling with the smooth images of the mass magazine:

> we bluntly impose their real truth by restoring real dialogues by adding or altering the speech bubbles. This operation will bring to the surface the subversive bubbles that are spontaneously, but only fleetingly and half-consciously, formed and then dissolved in the imaginations of those who look at these images.

This sets out from humans as they are, set within the politics of their conditions, in various ways a materialist and not an idealist procedure. But does it matter that the Situationists passed through highpoints of social struggle - and this is now, where everything is recuperated five minutes later in an imagescape that is hurry for innovation and sensation. And now, more than ever, the accord of art and politics is different to then, according to current disputes. Art and politics is a meeting made in endless debates on post-Kantian (dualist) (non-dialectical) categories batted backwards and forwards between the faithful interpreters of Alain Badiou, Jacques Rancière and Paulo Virno, adherents hopeful that these cryptic words justify an identification between a precarious freelance cultural worker (whose future success is as yet unguaranteed) and a displaced, flexibly labouring refugee. Or, in another register, art and politics is the winning combination for every city that renames itself 'creative city', with its new philharmonic or casino in a reclaimed docklands. The slogan 'audiences as producers' is now converted into audiences as resolute consumers: the entire economy depends on it. And as such the best that might be hoped for is not a political unmasking in and of art, but rather a purchase on the ethical: politics is 'the presence of others', which is to say ethics – and art's role is to encourage populaces to think about 'the other', to leave their comfort zone for a brief glimpse of suffering. Such was the approach at documenta 12, the art show in Kassel in 2007, which organised itself around three questions to which it did not expect answers in response, just more questions: is modernity our antiquity? what is bare life? what is to be done (brackets: education)?, lest anyone fear it might actually be the old question of political organisation posed by Lenin. documenta12 set out to educate its viewers, to use art as the occasion to enlighten audiences about inequity in the world, the horrors that happen to others, not its audience, of course, but those in

whose defence the art is made to speak and action for change is a future task once persuasion is done. Art is charged yet again with the role of civilising and humanising, a task that is also bestowed upon it, in other ways, by cultural policy and instrumentalisation of culture as social work in disadvantaged communities: otherwise known as the social exclusion or inclusion agenda, depending where you are.

13.

Sean Bonney's cycle of poems 'Baudelaire in English' transports a poem across time and language – brutally, but, in so doing, in breaking with the politesse of faithfulness, it manages to sample its original historical energy (as does any montage aesthetic that valorises the specificity and historical sedimentations of the fragments it deploys) and release it into the frenzy of the present.[19] Bonney's rendition of Baudelaire's spleeny thoughts transports them into a contemporary idiom releasing something from them something apt for the present. The poems cannot be rendered in the traditional format of lines and stanzas. They are graphic, concrete. Here is an attempt to lay out one version of his 'translation' of 'Spleen':

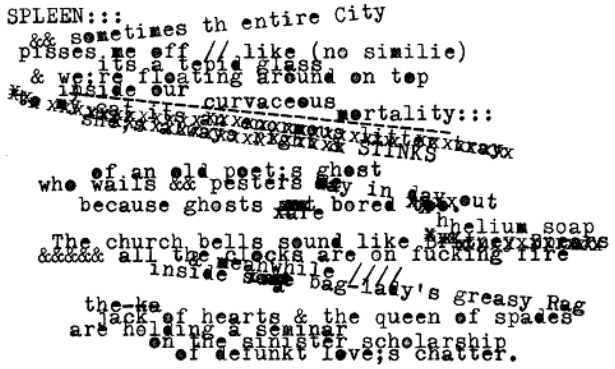
&& sometimes th entire City
pisses me off // like (no similie)
  it's a tepid glass
& we're floating around on top
inside our curvaceous mortality:::
STINKS

of an old poet's ghost
who wails && pesters in day out
because ghosts are bored
The church bells sound like helium soap
&&&&& all the clocks are on fucking fire
meanwhile inside bag-lady's greasy Rag
jack of hearts & the queen of spades
are holding a seminar
on the sinister scholarship

[19] Sean Bonney, *Baudelaire in English*, Veer Books, London, 2008.

of defunkt love;s chatter.

Here is the poem as it should be:



Any lingering languidity in Baudelaire's mournful glance across the city is expunged. The language is banalised. The sentiment, elsewhere rendered as 'When the low, heavy sky weighs like a lid/On the groaning spirit' (William Aggeler) or 'When the low, heavy sky weighs like the giant lid /Of a great pot upon the spirit crushed by care,' (Edna St. Vincent Millay), is reduced and de-poeticised: '&& sometimes th entire City/pisses me off'. Then, no simile is found to complete the image and the fact of this lack is made explicit: 'like (no similie)'. Language is severely doubted – a line is translated, but crossed out and only the word STINKS is legible. It is reduced but it is also stretched. Baudelaire's idea of bored ghosts emerges not where it is in his poem, in the second line, but rather in a new stanza. The poem has been dissected, cut apart and the insides tumble down the page. Then suddenly we are at the bells of Baudelaire's fourth stanza, and, after that moment of touching on the poem again, it takes off somewhere else, with only the slightest echo of Baudelaire's obstinately complaining bells in 'defunkt love;s chatter'.

One by one Bonney retranslates Baudelaire's poetry into splenetic anti-verse. The question of 'fidelity' is posed differently. There is no careful and scholarly

attention to meaning in the narrow sense. There is faithfulness to meaning in another sense – the viciousness of the original segues with the contingent urgency of the moment. Language is torn. French is mockingly translated and the English into which the poems are conveyed is one that can only splutter its senses out, on the edge of inarticulacy. The poem forms a dark inky splotch, against meaning, and yet also for a return of a viscerality, a materiality to language. A certain textual violence rips up something that has sedimented into unquestioned value. It is a language that hopes to have ingested terror, a terror that might once have been a component of art – even this art – but is now absent.

Like Punk and like Surrealism, the language of Bonney's bouleversed Baudelaire cannot shake off a simultaneous attraction and repulsion towards the streets, attraction and repulsion in relation to the vulgar commercial contents that line them, the violence that is more or less openly manifest on them, the rubbish that churns and churns on them. The graphic nature of Bonney's poems impedes their easy reading, their untrammelled communicative ability, because their so obvious truths find it hard to make a passage into the world. It is as if all is turned backwards or on its head, in order to be all the truer. Their visual and graphic form suggests something splattered on the pavement, words that rose up in advertising and avant garde poetry smashed back down to the ground, to the common ground, in order to rally the troops, our troops, to combat a terror that is outside us, but in every syllable of our language, every grain of our word and world. Shattering linguistic coherence allows at least a glimpse of parallel words and worlds that might be yet articulated.

A critic might get to see that, even rearticulate somewhere, make it better known to itself - but there ain't much – or even any - glory or cash in it.