

**Chapter 8:
Negation and Consumption Within Culture**

“Do you really believe that these Germans will make a political revolution in our lifetime? My friend, that is just wishful thinking. . . . Let us judge Germany on the basis of its present history — and surely you are not going to object that all its history is falsified, or that all its present public life does not reflect the actual state of the people? Read whatever newspapers you please, and you cannot fail to be convinced that we never stop (and you must concede that the censorship prevents no one from stopping) celebrating the freedom and national happiness that we enjoy.”

—Ruge to Marx, March 1843

180

Culture is the general sphere of knowledge and of representations of lived experiences within historical societies divided into classes. It is a generalizing power which itself exists as a *separate entity*, as division of intellectual labor and as intellectual labor of division. Culture detached itself from the unity of myth-based society “when human life lost its unifying power and when opposites lost their living connections and interactions and became autonomous” (*The Difference Between the Systems of Fichte and Schelling*). In thus gaining its independence, culture embarked on an imperialistic career of self-enrichment that ultimately led to the decline of that independence. The history that gave rise to the relative autonomy of culture, and to the ideological illusions regarding that autonomy, is also expressed as the history of culture. And this whole triumphant history of culture can be understood as a progressive revelation of the inadequacy of culture, as a march toward culture’s self-abolition. Culture is the terrain of the quest for lost unity. In the course of this quest, culture as a separate sphere is obliged to negate itself.

181

In the struggle between tradition and innovation, which is the basic theme of internal cultural development in historical societies, innovation always wins. But cultural innovation is generated by nothing other than the total historical movement — a movement which, in becoming conscious of itself as a whole, tends to go beyond its

own cultural presuppositions and thus to move toward the suppression of all separations.

182

The rapid expansion of society’s knowledge, including the understanding that history is the underlying basis of culture, led to the irreversible self-knowledge reflected by the destruction of God. But this “first condition of any critique” is also the first task of a critique without end. When there are no longer any tenable rules of conduct, each *result* of culture pushes culture toward its own dissolution. Like philosophy the moment it achieved full independence, every discipline that becomes autonomous is bound to collapse — first as a credible pretension to give a coherent account of the social totality, and ultimately even as a fragmented methodology that might be workable within its own domain. Separate culture’s *lack of rationality* is what dooms it to disappear, because that culture already embodies a striving for the victory of the rational.

183

Culture grew out of a history that dissolved the previous way of life, but as a separate sphere within a *partially historical* society its understanding and sensory communication inevitably remain partial. It is the meaning of an insufficiently meaningful world.

184

The end of the history of culture manifests itself in two opposing forms: the project of culture’s self-transcendence within total history, and its preservation as a dead object for spectacular contemplation. The first tendency has linked its fate to social critique, the second to the defense of class power.

185

Each of these two forms of the end of culture has a unitary existence, both within all the aspects of knowledge and within all the aspects of sensory representation (that is, within what was formerly understood as *art* in the broadest sense of the word). In the case of knowledge, the accumulation of branches of fragmentary knowledge, which become unusable because *approval* of existing conditions ultimately requires

renouncing one's own knowledge, is opposed by the theory of praxis which alone has access to the truth of all these forms of knowledge since it alone knows the secret of their use. In the case of sensory representations, the critical self-destruction of society's former *common language* is opposed by its artificial reconstruction within the commodity spectacle, the illusory representation of nonlife.

186

Once society has lost its myth-based community, it loses all the reference points of truly common language until such time as the divisions within the inactive community can be overcome by the inauguration of a real historical community. When art, which was the common language of social inaction, develops into independent art in the modern sense, emerging from its original religious universe and becoming individual production of separate works, it too becomes subject to the movement governing the history of all separate culture. Its declaration of independence is the beginning of its end.

187

The *positive* significance of the modern decomposition and destruction of all art is that the language of communication has been lost. The *negative* implication of this development is that a common language can no longer take the form of the unilateral conclusions that characterized the art of historical societies — *belated* portrayals of *someone else's* dialogueless life which accepted this lack as inevitable — but must now be found in a praxis that unifies direct activity with its own appropriate language. The point is to actually participate in the community of dialogue and the game with time that up till now have merely been *represented* by poetic and artistic works.

188

When art becomes independent and paints its world in dazzling colors, a moment of life has grown old. Such a moment cannot be rejuvenated by dazzling colors, it can only be evoked in memory. The greatness of art only emerges at the dusk of life.

189

The historical time that invaded art was manifested first of all in the sphere of art itself, beginning with the *baroque*. Baroque was the art of a world that had lost its center with

the collapse of the last mythical order: the Medieval synthesis of a unified Christianity with the ghost of an Empire, which had harmonized heavenly and earthly government. The *art of change* inevitably embodied the same ephemerality that it discovered in the world. As Eugenio d'Ors put it, it chose "life instead of eternity." The outstanding achievements of baroque were in theater and festival, or in theatrical festivals, where the sole purpose of each particular artistic expression was to contribute to the composition of a scene, a scene which had to serve as its own center of unification; and that center was the *passage*, the expression of a threatened equilibrium within the overall dynamic disorder. The somewhat excessive emphasis on the concept of baroque in contemporary aesthetic discussions reflects the awareness that an artistic classicism is no longer possible. The attempts to establish a normative classicism or neoclassicism during the last three centuries have been nothing but short-lived artificial constructs speaking the official language of the state (whether of the absolute monarchy or of the revolutionary bourgeoisie draped in Roman togas). What eventually followed baroque, once it had run its course, was an ever more individualistic art of negation which, from romanticism to cubism, continually renewed its assaults until it had fragmented and destroyed the entire artistic sphere. The disappearance of historical art, which was linked to the internal communication of an elite and which had its semi-independent social basis in the partially playful conditions still experienced by the last aristocracies, also reflects the fact that capitalism is the first form of class power that acknowledges its own total lack of ontological quality — a power whose basis in the mere management of the economy is symptomatic of the loss of all human *mastery*. The comprehensive unity of the baroque ensemble, which has long been lacking in the world of artistic *creation*, has in a sense been revived in today's wholesale *consumption* of the totality of past art. As all the art of the past comes to be recognized and appreciated historically, and is retrospectively reclassified as phases of a single "world art," it is incorporated into a global disorder that can itself be seen as a sort of baroque structure at a higher level, a structure that absorbs baroque art itself along with all its possible revivals. For the first time in history the arts of all ages and civilizations can be known and accepted together, and the fact that it has become possible to collect and recollect all these art-historical memories marks the *end of the world of art*. In this age of museums in which artistic communication is no longer possible, all the previous expressions of art can be accepted equally, because whatever particular communication problems they may have had are eclipsed by all the present-day obstacles to communication *in general*.

190

Art in its period of dissolution — a movement of negation striving for its own transcendence within a historical society where history is not yet directly lived — is at once an art of change and the purest expression of the impossibility of change. The more grandiose its pretensions, the further from its grasp is its true fulfillment. This art is necessarily *avant-garde*, and at the same time it *does not really exist*. Its vanguard is its own disappearance.

191

Dadaism and surrealism were the two currents that marked the end of modern art. Though they were only partially conscious of it, they were contemporaries of the last great offensive of the revolutionary proletarian movement, and the defeat of that movement, which left them trapped within the very artistic sphere whose decrepitude they had denounced, was the fundamental reason for their immobilization. Dadaism and surrealism were historically linked yet also opposed to each other. This opposition involved the most important and radical contributions of the two movements, but it also revealed the internal inadequacy of their one-sided critiques. Dadaism sought to *abolish art without realizing it*; surrealism sought to *realize art without abolishing it*. The critical position since developed by the *situationists* has shown that the abolition and realization of art are inseparable aspects of a single *transcendence of art*.

192

The spectacular consumption that preserves past culture in congealed form, including coopted rehashes of its negative manifestations, gives overt expression in its cultural sector to what it implicitly is in its totality: the *communication of the incommunicable*. The most extreme destruction of language can be officially welcomed as a positive development because it amounts to yet one more way of flaunting one's acceptance of a status quo where all communication has been smugly declared absent. The critical truth of this destruction — the real life of modern poetry and art — is obviously concealed, since the spectacle, whose function is to *use culture to bury all historical memory*, applies its own essential strategy in its promotion of modernistic pseudoinnovations. Thus a school of neoliterature that baldly admits that it does nothing but contemplate the written word for its own sake can pass itself off as something new. Meanwhile, alongside the simple claim that the death of communication has a sufficient beauty of its own, the most modern tendency of spectacular culture — which is also the one most closely linked to the repressive practice of the general organization of society — seeks by means of “collective projects” to construct complex neoartistic environments out of decomposed elements, as can be seen in urbanism's attempts to incorporate scraps of art or hybrid aesthetico-technical forms. This is an expression, in the domain of spectacular pseudoculture, of advanced capitalism's general project of remolding the fragmented worker into a “socially integrated personality,” a tendency that has been described by recent American sociologists (Riesman, Whyte, etc.). In all these areas the goal remains the same: to *restructure society without community*.

193

As culture becomes completely commodified it tends to become the star commodity of spectacular society. Clark Kerr, one of the foremost ideologues of this tendency, has calculated that the complex process of production, distribution and consumption of *knowledge* already accounts for 29% of the gross national product of the United States; and he predicts that in the second half of this century the “knowledge industry” will become the driving force of the American economy, as was the automobile in the first half of this century and the railroad in the last half of the previous century.

194

The task of the various branches of knowledge that are in the process of developing *spectacular thought* is to justify an unjustifiable society and to establish a general science of false consciousness. This thought is totally conditioned by the fact that it cannot recognize, and does not want to recognize, its own material dependence on the spectacular system.

195

The official thought of the social organization of appearances is itself obscured by the generalized *subcommunication* that it has to defend. It cannot understand that conflict is at the origin of everything in its world. The specialists of spectacular power — a power that is absolute within its realm of one-way communication — are absolutely corrupted by their experience of contempt and by the success of that contempt, because they find their contempt confirmed by their awareness of how *truly contemptible* spectators really are.

196

As the very triumphs of the spectacular system pose new problems, a new division of tasks appears within the specialized thought of that system. On one hand, a *spectacular critique of the spectacle* is undertaken by modern sociology, which studies separation exclusively by means of the conceptual and material instruments of separation. On the other, the various disciplines where structuralism has become entrenched are developing an *apologetics of the spectacle* — a mindless thought that imposes an *official amnesia* regarding all historical practice. But the fake despair of nondialectical critique and the fake optimism of overt promotion of the system are equally submissive.

197

The sociologists who have begun to raise questions about the living conditions created by modern social developments (first of all in the United States) have gathered a great deal of empirical data, but they have failed to grasp the true nature of their object of study because they fail to recognize the critique that is inherent in that object. As a result, those among them who sincerely wish to reform these conditions can only appeal to ethical standards, common sense, moderation, and other measures that are equally inadequate for dealing with the problems in question. Because this method of criticism is unaware of the negativity at the heart of its world, it focuses on describing and deploring an excessive sort of negativity that seems to blight the surface of that world like some irrational parasitic infestation. This outraged good will, which even within its own moralizing framework ends up blaming only the external consequences of the system, can see itself as critical only by ignoring the essentially *apologetic* character of its assumptions and methods.

198

Those who denounce the affluent society's incitement to wastefulness as absurd or dangerous do not understand the purpose of this wastefulness. In the name of economic rationality, they ungratefully condemn the faithful irrational guardians that keep the power of this economic rationality from collapsing. Daniel Boorstin, for example, whose book *The Image* describes spectacle-commodity consumption in the United States, never arrives at the concept of the spectacle because he thinks he can treat private life and "honest commodities" as separate from the "excesses" he deplores. He fails to understand that the commodity itself made the laws whose "honest" application leads both to the distinct reality of private life and to its subsequent reconquest by the social consumption of images.

199

Boorstin describes the excesses of a world that has become foreign to us as if they were excesses foreign to our world. When, like a moral or psychological prophet, he denounces the superficial reign of images as a product of "our extravagant expectations," he is implicitly contrasting these excesses to a "normal" life that has no reality in either his book or his era. Because the real human life that Boorstin evokes is located for him in the past, including the past that was dominated by religious resignation, he has no way of comprehending the true extent of the present society's domination by images. We can truly understand this society only by *negating* it.

200

A sociology that believes that a separately functioning industrial rationality can be isolated from social life as a whole may go on to view the techniques of reproduction and communication as independent of general industrial development. Thus Boorstin concludes that the situation he describes is caused by an unfortunate but almost fortuitous encounter of an excessive technology of image-diffusion with an excessive appetite for sensationalism on the part of today's public. This amounts to blaming the spectacle on modern man's excessive inclination to be a spectator. Boorstin fails to see that the proliferation of the prefabricated "pseudo-events" he denounces flows from the simple fact that the overwhelming realities of present-day social existence prevent people from actually living events for themselves. Because history itself haunts modern society like a specter, pseudohistories have to be concocted at every level in order to preserve the threatened equilibrium of the present *frozen time*.

201

The current tendency toward *structuralist* systematization is based on the explicit or implicit assumption that this brief freezing of historical time will last forever. The antihistorical thought of structuralism believes in the eternal presence of a system that was never created and that will never come to an end. Its illusion that all social practice is unconsciously determined by preexisting structures is based on illegitimate analogies with structural models developed by linguistics and anthropology (or even on models used for analyzing the functioning of capitalism) — models that were *already inaccurate even in their original contexts*. This fallacious reasoning stems from the limited intellectual capacity of the *academic functionaries* hired to expound this thought, who are so thoroughly caught up in their awestruck celebration of the existing system that they can do nothing but reduce all reality to the existence of that system.

202

In order to understand "structuralist" categories, one must bear in mind that such categories, like those of any other historical social science, reflect forms and conditions of existence. Just as one does not judge an individual by what he thinks about himself, one cannot judge or admire this particular society by assuming that the language it speaks to itself is necessarily true. "We cannot judge such a period of transformation by its own consciousness; on the contrary, that consciousness must be explained in the light of the contradictions of material life..." Structures are the progeny of established powers. Structuralism is *thought underwritten by the state*, a form of thought that regards the present conditions of spectacular "communication" as an absolute. Its method of studying code in isolation from content is merely a reflection of a taken-for-granted society where communication takes the form of a cascade of hierarchical signals. Structuralism does not prove the transhistorical validity of the

society of the spectacle; on the contrary, it is the society of the spectacle, imposing itself in its overwhelming reality, that validates the frigid dream of structuralism.

203

The critical concept of “the spectacle” can also undoubtedly be turned into one more hollow formula of sociologico-political rhetoric used to explain and denounce everything *in the abstract*, thus serving to reinforce the spectacular system. It is obvious that ideas alone cannot lead beyond the existing spectacle; at most, they can only lead beyond existing ideas about the spectacle. To actually destroy the society of the spectacle, people must set a practical force into motion. A critical theory of the spectacle cannot be true unless it unites with the practical current of negation in society; and that negation, the resumption of revolutionary class struggle, can for its part only become conscious of itself by developing the critique of the spectacle, which is the theory of its real conditions — the concrete conditions of present-day oppression — and which also reveals its hidden potential. This theory does not expect miracles from the working class. It envisages the reformulation and fulfillment of proletarian demands as a long-term task. To make an artificial distinction between theoretical and practical struggle (for the formulation and communication of the type of theory envisaged here is already inconceivable without a *rigorous practice*), it is certain that the obscure and difficult path of critical theory must also be the fate of the practical movement acting on the scale of society.

204

Critical theory must *communicate itself* in its own language — the language of contradiction, which must be dialectical in both form and content. It must be an all-inclusive critique, and it must be grounded in history. It is not a “zero degree of writing,” but its reversal. It is not a negation of style, but the style of negation.

205

The very style of dialectical theory is a scandal and abomination to the prevailing standards of language and to the sensibilities molded by those standards, because while it makes concrete use of existing concepts it simultaneously recognizes their *fluidity* and their inevitable destruction.

206

This style, which includes a critique of itself, must express the domination of the present critique *over its entire past*. Dialectical theory’s mode of exposition reveals the negative spirit within it. “Truth is not like some finished product in which one can no longer find any trace of the tool that made it” (Hegel). This theoretical consciousness of a movement whose traces must remain visible within it is manifested by the *reversal* of established relationships between concepts and by the *détournement* of all the achievements of earlier critical efforts. Hegel’s practice of reversing the genitive was an expression of historical revolutions, though that expression was confined to the form of thought. The young Marx, inspired by Feuerbach’s systematic reversal of subject and predicate, achieved the most effective use of this *insurrectional style*, which answers “the philosophy of poverty” with “the poverty of philosophy.” *Détournement* reradicalizes previous critical conclusions that have been petrified into respectable truths and thus transformed into lies. Kierkegaard already used it deliberately, though he also denounced it: “But despite all your twists and turns, just as jam always returns to the pantry, you always end up introducing some little phrase which is not your own, and which awakens disturbing recollections” (*Philosophical Fragments*). As he acknowledged elsewhere in the same book, this use of *détournement* requires maintaining one’s *distance* from whatever has been turned into an official truth: “One further remark regarding your many complaints that I introduced borrowed expressions into my exposition. I do not deny that I did so. It was in fact done deliberately. In the next section of this work, if I ever write such a section, I intend to call this topic by its true name and to clothe the problem in its historical attire.”

207

Ideas improve. The meaning of words plays a role in that improvement. Plagiarism is necessary. Progress depends on it. It sticks close to an author’s phrasing, exploits his expressions, deletes a false idea, replaces it with the right one.

208

Détournement is the opposite of quotation, of appealing to a theoretical authority that is inevitably tainted by the very fact that it has become a quotation — a fragment torn from its own context and development, and ultimately from the general framework of its period and from the particular option (appropriate or erroneous) that it represented within that framework. *Détournement* is the flexible language of anti-ideology. It appears in communication that knows it cannot claim to embody any definitive certainty. It is language that cannot and need not be confirmed by any previous or supracritical reference. On the contrary, its own internal coherence and practical effectiveness are what validate the previous kernels of truth it has brought back into