

In *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, Richard Murphy mobilizes theories of the postmodern to challenge our understanding of the avant-garde. He assesses the importance of the avant-garde for contemporary culture and for the debates among theorists of postmodernism such as Jameson, Eagleton, Lyotard and Habermas. Murphy reconsiders the classic formulation of the avant-garde in Lukács, Bloch and Bürger, especially their discussion of aesthetic autonomy, and investigates the relationship between art and politics via a discussion of Marcuse, Adorno and Benjamin. Combining close textual readings of a wide range of works of literature as well as films, it draws on a rich array of critical theories, such as those of Bakhtin, Todorov, MacCabe, Belsey and Raymond Williams. This interdisciplinary project will appeal to all those interested in modernist and avant-garde movements of the early twentieth century, and provides a critical rethinking of the present-day controversy regarding postmodernity.

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## **Theorizing the Avant-Garde**

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# Theorizing the Avant-Garde

Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem  
of Postmodernity



RICHARD MURPHY



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might, within certain limitations, discover a number of essential avant-garde features in expressionism, such as its critique of the institutionalized character of art and its characteristic rejection not simply of previous movements but of the tradition of art in its entirety.<sup>3</sup> Yet having noted that these similarities remain to be worked out concretely in future analyses Bürger himself skirts the central problem of expressionism and its relationship to the avant-garde.

In the light of the current debates on postmodernism there has been renewed interest both in modernism and the avant-garde and, more particularly, in the nature of their mutual relationship. Postmodernism has frequently been seen for example as a phenomenon which is neither totally new nor a movement constituting a radically innovative stylistic breakthrough, but rather as the attempt to reconfigure in contemporary terms some of the questions already faced by modernism and the avant-garde.<sup>4</sup> In this sense, any definition of postmodernism must inevitably depend upon a prior understanding of those earlier phenomena. Postmodernism might then be thought of as a change of “dominant” within modernism,<sup>5</sup> or as a realignment of a constellation of meaning mapped out in the shifting relations between the reference-points denoted by modernism, the contemporary and the avant-garde.

Given this configuration of terms, the issues dealt with by Bürger’s book become especially important in helping to establish the various distinctions and interdependencies operating between modernism and the avant-garde. The omission of expressionism from Bürger’s discussion is then all the more surprising in view of its importance as a crucial space in which the avant-garde confronts modernism and in which the differences between the

<sup>3</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 109, note 4.

<sup>4</sup> See for example Andreas Huyssen, *After the Great Divide: Modernism, Mass Culture, Postmodernism* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1986) 168.

<sup>5</sup> Brian McHale employs the Formalist concept of the “dominant” (derived from Tynjanov and Jakobson) in order to describe the transition from modernism to postmodernism. McHale sees a shift from a period dominated by epistemological issues to one concerned more with ontological matters (such as the confrontation between different realities). See McHale’s article “Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing,” *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 53–78, and also his book *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987) where this idea forms the central thesis.

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two are negotiated. For although expressionism has been labeled the “historical modernist movement par excellence,”<sup>6</sup> besides its modernist characteristics – such as its shift from transparent, realist representations of a common world, towards abstraction, obscurity, and the investigation of subjectivity and the unconscious<sup>7</sup> – it also shares many of those key features, in particular the revolutionary, counter-discursive and anti-institutional functions, by which Bürger defines the historical avant-garde.

This overlap is itself significant. For the various contradictory impulses within expressionism illustrate that the avant-garde is a much more ambiguous and heterogeneous phenomenon than Bürger – with his narrow focus on dada and surrealism – would sometimes have us believe. More typically the avant-garde serves as the political and revolutionary cutting-edge of the broader movement of modernism, from which it frequently appears to be trying with difficulty to free itself. Modernism and the avant-garde often seem to be locked into a dialectical relationship in which the avant-garde questions the blind spots and unreflected presuppositions of modernism, while modernism itself reacts to this critique, at least in its later stages, by attempting to take into account its own poetics some of the spectacular failures and successes of the historical avant-garde.

The current debates on postmodernism and its relation to modernism and the avant-garde have not only renewed interest in early twentieth-century art then, but have provided both fresh perspectives with which to re-read the texts of this period, as well as new questions and theoretical strategies with which to approach their characteristic problematics. The goal in re-reading expressionism through Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde* and in the light of the recent discussion on the modern (and postmodern) period is thus twofold.

Firstly, it is important to interrogate Bürger’s influential work and to develop his argumentation by testing it against a broader range of avant-garde and modernist phenomena than Bürger’s own examples provide in order to discover the extent to which the

<sup>6</sup> For example by David Bathrick and Andreas Huyssen, “Modernism and the Experience of Modernity,” *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism*, ed. Huyssen and Bathrick (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 8.

<sup>7</sup> See Walter Sokel’s definition of expressionism in terms of modernism in his book *The Writer in Extremis* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1959), 18.

various methodological categories which make up his theory are capable of distinguishing between the contemporaneous phenomena within the modernist period. For example, to what degree does expressionism fulfill the avant-garde's role of producing a fundamental re-thinking of the artist's social practice, together with a full-scale interrogation of the social and institutional conditions of art? To what extent does it remain caught within modernism's predilection for aesthetic autonomy and its drive for purely technical and formal progress?

Secondly, by re-reading the texts of expressionism in the context of some of the new questions which have been thrown up recently by the postmodernism debate as well as by the related discussion surrounding Bürger's theoretical model, it is possible to observe the extent of the "epistemic" or "paradigmatic" shift which has taken place between the progressive movements of the early twentieth century and the contemporary culture of postmodernity. Re-examining expressionism in this light forces us to reconsider both the degree of real innovation brought about by postmodernism, as well as allowing us to appreciate the extent to which the expressionist avant-garde preempts postmodernism in deconstructing and re-writing the established images and constructions of the world – the anticipatory effect that Jochen Schulte-Sasse has called a "postmodern transformation of modernism."<sup>8</sup>

In this respect my investigation into expressionism and its relationship to modernism and the avant-garde is also intended as a contribution towards the ongoing debate on modernism and the postmodern by undertaking precisely the kind of concrete analysis of individual texts that has become rather rare in the discussion. It has become a pressing obligation to focus in detail again upon some of the important literary texts which subtend the theoretical categories employed in this discussion, since their specificity has frequently been lost from view at the level of generalization on which much of the theoretical debate has been conducted.

German expressionism is itself notoriously difficult to define, and one hesitates even to use the term "movement" in connection with this multi-faceted phenomenon, given that term's implica-

<sup>8</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse, "Carl Einstein; or, the Postmodern Transformation of Modernism," *Modernity and the Text*, ed. Huyssen and Bathrick.

tion of a cooperative endeavor or single-minded tendency. The expressionist generation was such a broad and varied group of writers and artists, that it is unlikely to yield to any single definition or generalization. Since conventional categorizations of such literary movements frequently have the tendency to obscure differences by reducing a diverse and varied phenomenon to the terms of a broad homogeneity, it would seem more appropriate to describe the position of expressionism by locating it instead through its relations to the reference-points of modernism and the avant-garde. The central principles and functions that these categories embody would then figure as the points between which is mapped out the area occupied by the art of expressionism.

Given that *Theory of the Avant-Garde* tends to confine the heterogeneity of the avant-garde within certain narrow limits, expressionism as a diverse and multidisciplinary cultural event is perhaps the ideal example with which to test Bürger's theses. At the same time Bürger's criteria concerning the avant-garde bring to the existing scholarship on expressionism important alternatives to those traditional approaches to the movement which have frequently obscured its radical and oppositional characteristics.

Let us now examine in detail some of the central categories of Bürger's model (in particular the notions of montage and aesthetic autonomy), and propose certain revisions to Bürger's theory which will be important in describing some of the essential features of German expressionism in the chapters ahead.

*Bürger's Theory of the Avant-Garde: ideology-critique, affirmative culture and the institution of art*

Previous studies of the avant-garde such as Matei Calinescu's *Faces of Modernity* have frequently defined it merely as a later, more radical and more "advanced" phase of modernism, distinguished by its ideological and overtly political orientation from the more formal, aesthetically purist and "subtly traditional" character of mainstream modernism.<sup>9</sup> Bürger's study is unique in trying to define the nature of the avant-garde not only by relating it to the literary-historical context but with regard to certain changes in the perception of the *social* functions of art.

<sup>9</sup> Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (1977; Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 96, 149.

Bürger sees the development of art within bourgeois society as characterized by its historical shift towards increasing aesthetic autonomy, a condition he defines with Habermas as the “independence of works of art from extra-aesthetic uses.”<sup>10</sup> This process of liberating art from all practical demands external to it culminates in the movement of aestheticism or “l’art pour l’art.” Nineteenth-century aestheticism figures as a radical attempt firstly to turn art in upon itself, and secondly – as with modernism’s characteristic interest in issues such as the poetics of silence and the crisis of language – to concern itself largely with the medium itself. It is consequently through the excesses of aestheticism, its extremes of hermeticism and aesthetic self-centeredness, that “the other side of autonomy, art’s lack of social impact also becomes recognizable.”<sup>11</sup> And it is in response to this recognition that the “historical avant-garde” emerges as a movement defined by its opposition to this shift towards hermeticism.

To extend Bürger’s argument, one could say that it is not the emergence of the phenomenon of aestheticism in itself that suddenly and miraculously reveals the practice of autonomy and which consequently calls down upon itself the wrath of the avant-garde. Art’s claim to autonomy had existed in bourgeois society in Germany for example at least since Kant and Schiller. If we look beyond the narrow confines of the immanent theory of the development of art – from which Bürger uncharacteristically appears to be arguing at this point – we can see that the crucial moment of change to which the avant-garde responds is not only the extremism of the aestheticist movement and its characteristic gesture of turning its back on the real world. Rather, it is the fact that the aestheticist movement should take this course at this particular *historical* juncture, in other words, at the beginning of twentieth-century “modernity,” and in a period of unprecedented and momentous economic and technological revolution in society. Aestheticism’s characteristic reaction of retreating into hibernation and hermeticism is all the more shocking since it contrasts with the kind of artistic response one *might* have expected, namely

<sup>10</sup> “(Die) Selbständigkeit der Kunstwerke gegenüber kunstexternen Verwendungsansprüchen.” Jürgen Habermas, “Bewußtmachende oder rettende Kritik,” *Zur Aktualität Walter Benjamins*, ed. Siegfried Unseld (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1972). Quoted by Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 46 note 13; *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 110, note 13. I have used my own translation in this case.

<sup>11</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

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a more socially oriented response in art, or at least the attempt to formulate these new socio-historical experiences in contemporary aesthetic terms. The historical significance of aestheticism for the emergence of the avant-garde lies then in the conjunction of historical factors: the extreme turmoil of contemporary society combined with the crassness of aestheticism's blank rejection of any need to react to it. It is this response that begins to raise doubts concerning the legitimacy of such autonomous art forms, and so ultimately mobilizes the avant-garde.

According to Bürger, it is the particular character of the avant-garde's response to aestheticism that is important. For with the historical avant-garde movements the social sub-system of art enters a new stage of development. Dada, the most radical movement within the European avant-garde no longer criticizes the individual aesthetic fashions and schools that preceded it, but criticizes art as an institution: in other words with the historical avant-garde art enters the stage of "self-criticism."<sup>12</sup> In order to

<sup>12</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22. Although dada's "self-criticism" of the institution of art is indeed very powerful, Bürger is quite wrong in assuming that dada is not equally concerned to attack its "rival" movements, including its most immediate predecessor, expressionism. Indeed, this onslaught on expressionism is an essential feature of much of the early writing of both the Zürich and Berlin phases of dada, and expressionist idealism forms a favorite target for dada's familiar vitriolic attacks. The first dada manifesto (1918) for example takes as its starting point its own distance from expressionism's "pretense of intensification" ("Vorwand der Verinnerlichung") which allegedly stifled any progressive tendencies and served merely to hide the expressionists' own bourgeois leanings. See Richard Huelsenbeck, ed., *Dada. Eine literarische Dokumentation* (Hamburg: Rowohlt, 1984), 31–33. Similarly, in Raoul Hausmann's text "The Return to Objectivity in Art" ("Rückkehr zur Gegenständlichkeit in der Kunst") Expressionism is described as "the culture of hypocritical stupidity" ("die Kultur der verlogener Dummheit," Huelsenbeck, *Dada*, 115). Meanwhile Richard Huelsenbeck's various ironic attacks in "En avant Dada" (1920) describe expressionism's critical response to modernity as merely "that sentimental resistance to the times" ("jener sentimentale Widerstand gegen die Zeit") and illustrate its alleged naivety – thereby tarring the entire movement with the same brush – by citing Leonhard Frank's "Der Mensch ist gut" (*dada*, 118–119). In the context of our discussion it is interesting to note that dada's proponents see themselves in an explicitly avant-garde role, "gathered together to provide propaganda for a form of art from which they look forward to the realization of new ideals" ("zur Propaganda einer Kunst gesammelt, von der sie die Verwirklichung neuer Ideale erwarten," *Dada*, 120). Consequently, dada sees itself as having given up any remnants of the "l'art pour l'art Charakter" and having changed its goal: "instead of continuing to create art, Dada has sought out an enemy . . . The movement, the struggle was uppermost" ("anstatt weiter Kunst zu machen, hat sich Dada einen Gegner gesucht . . . Die Bewegung, der Kampf wurde betont," *Dada*, 120).

appreciate the full significance for the avant-garde of this development towards "self-criticism" it is important to understand here exactly what Bürger means by the term and how it relates to other analytical approaches in progressive art, in particular to "ideology-critique."

Bürger takes as the starting point for his discussion of "self-criticism" firstly Marx's analysis of religion as ideology and of the twofold character of such ideology; and secondly Marcuse's application of this analysis to the field of art.<sup>13</sup> From Marx's analysis Bürger draws the following conclusions for his own model:

1. Religion is an illusion. Man projects into heaven what he would like to see realized on earth. To the extent that man believes in God who is no more than an objectification of human qualities, he succumbs to an illusion. 2. But religion also contains an element of truth. It is "an expression of real wretchedness" (for the realization of humanity in heaven is merely a creation of the mind and denounces the lack of real humanity in human society). And it is "a protest against real wretchedness" for even in their alienated form, religious ideals are a standard of what ought to be. (7)

The social function of religion, like art, is therefore characterized above all by its twofold character, that is, by what we can call its "duplicity": it permits the experience of an "illusory happiness" but to the extent that it alleviates misery through illusion, it makes less pressing (and thus less likely) the possibility of any *genuine* change leading to the establishment of "true happiness."

Herbert Marcuse's famous essay "On the Affirmative Character of Culture" (1937) precedes Bürger both in adopting Marx's method of analyzing the duplicitous character of religion and in reapplying it to the similarly ambiguous ideological function of art in society.<sup>14</sup> Marcuse maintains that, like religion, art has the positive function of preserving society's unfulfilled ideals and "forgotten truths."<sup>15</sup> It thus contains an important critical element: it protests against the deficiencies of a reality in which these ideals have disappeared. But on the other hand, in as far as art serves to compensate in the realm of aesthetic illusion

<sup>13</sup> Karl Marx, *Critique of Hegel's Philosophy of Right* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1970). Herbert Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," *Negations*, trans. J. Shapiro (Boston: Beacon, 1968), 88–133.

<sup>14</sup> Marcuse, "The Affirmative Character of Culture," 120–122.

<sup>15</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 11.



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("Schein") for these real-life deficiencies, it simultaneously sublimates and defuses this protest. Paradoxically then in preserving life's unfulfilled ideals art may take on a quietist and "affirmative character" in as far as it serves merely to stabilize and legitimize that reality against which it protests.

In both of these analytical models the practice of "ideology-critique" lays bare the grain of truth contained within the illusion created by religion and art, while simultaneously demonstrating the ideological constraints on implementing this truth which are imposed by these institutions themselves. If the emergence of the avant-garde marks art's entry into the "stage of self-criticism," it also signifies the beginning of a similar form of "ideology-critique" through which artistic practice is turned against art itself as an institutional formation. It means that art's critical power no longer operates merely in an "immanent" fashion, that is, as the kind of criticism that remains enclosed within the social institution (such as when one type of religion criticizes another) and within which it would consequently be blind to the institutional restraints operating upon it. In as far as it analyzes the overall functioning of the institution itself – and especially its social and ideological effects rather than the individual elements of the system – self-criticism operates as a form of ideology-critique performed from *within* the limits of the institution, yet directed *against* its institutional functions. What this self-criticism means in practical terms for the "historical" avant-garde of the early twentieth century is that, unlike previous avant-garde movements, its subversive or revolutionary character is demonstrated by the way that it turns its attention increasingly to the institutional framework through which art is produced and received, and to the "dominant social discourses" which emerge in art through these institutional mediations.

As we have seen, the institutionalization of art reaches a crucial stage where those seemingly perennial conditions of art, namely autonomy and the absence of social consequence, are valorized as goals in their own right, in particular by the movement of aestheticism. The "historical" avant-garde's critical response to this situation takes two forms.

Firstly, it deconstructs the claim that these "universal" principles of autonomy constitute the inevitable conditions of the possibility of art. Similar to the way in which the avant-garde

reveals that even realism or mimetic representation – long thought of as perennial and unchanging criteria of value in the Aristotelian tradition – are actually merely a set of culturally-privileged codes which have simply attained a special institutional status, so it also exposes the notion of autonomy as an arbitrary value which is *institutionally* imposed upon art.

Secondly, the self-critical response of the avant-garde leads to an awareness of the fact that with the progressive detachment of the “sub-system” of art from the practice of life – a separation that is part of a more general process of what Max Weber calls the differentiation or “rationalization” in modern society – art’s duplicitous or “affirmative” function is reinforced. Although autonomy offers a degree of independence and critical distance from society, art simultaneously suffers from this isolation. For any social or political content is instantly neutralized when the work of art is received as a purely “imaginative” product, an aesthetic illusion that need not be taken seriously.

In connection with this self-critical impulse of the avant-garde the concept of the “institution of art” becomes one of the key notions used by Bürger to analyze the social administration of the aesthetic sphere. He uses this term to refer both to the “productive and distributive apparatus” of art but also more particularly to the “ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.”<sup>16</sup> Bürger further defines the institution of art in a later article as that set of social conditions which determine the particular functions of art in a given historical period, and he emphasizes further that although alternative conceptions of art may exist, the institution of art at any given time is always predisposed towards the dominance of one conception of art in particular.<sup>17</sup> Thus, the term describes both the attitudes taken up towards art in society as well as the ideological and institutional limitations imposed upon art’s possible effects.

The importance of the institution of art may be measured by the vehemence of the avant-garde’s attacks upon it. These attacks also illustrate the degree to which the more progressive artists and

<sup>16</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 22.

<sup>17</sup> Peter Bürger, “Institution Kunst als literatursoziologische Kategorie. Skizze einer Theorie des historischen Wandels der gesellschaftlichen Funktion der Literatur,” *Vermittlung – Rezeption – Funktion* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), 173–174; 177.

writers of the early twentieth century had become aware of the significance of general institutional conditions on the reception of their art, and as we shall see later, it also indicates their growing awareness of the institution's ideological influence and of its dominant social discourses in determining the extent of each work's *social* effect. Consequently the central goal of the avant-garde's attack according to Bürger is not only to explode the institution of art but to lead aesthetic experience out of its isolation – imprisoned by autonomy – in order to drive it back into the real world, where it can play its part in the transformation of everyday life.

In its opposition to an institution of art characterized by its detachment from everyday experience, the avant-garde consequently champions a form of art whose central goal becomes the reintegration and "sublation" of art and life. With this "reintegration of art into life" ("Rückführung der Kunst in Lebenspraxis") the avant-gardists aim at a more practical kind of art with a clear social significance.<sup>18</sup> However, this does not mean that the art of the avant-garde was simply to integrate itself neatly into the existing, goal-oriented and rationally organized world of modernity. On the contrary, the intention was to create a new art, from within which it would become possible to conceive of an entirely new basis for social practice (49).

As Bürger concedes, the avant-gardists failed to achieve their ultimate goal of dissolving the borders between art and life. Yet in their critique of the institution of art they were more successful. For despite the fact that they did not manage to dismantle the cultural apparatus as a whole, the various forms of protest which they employed succeeded both in making the general categories of the work of art recognizable, and in revealing the extent to which these categories needed constantly to be underwritten by the institution of art. Thus without destroying the institution of art the avant-garde did succeed in raising important questions concerning the validity of "conventional" artistic norms and criteria, both with respect to the way they are held in place by the institution and the way that the work of art in turn fulfills an affirmative or legitimizing function within the society from which it emerges. As proof of this success of the avant-garde in

<sup>18</sup> Bürger, *Theorie der Avantgarde*, 121.

revealing the institutionalized character of art Bürger points to the subsequent impossibility of any particular form or movement claiming universal validity (87). In the light of the debate on the postmodern, one might now add that the lasting achievement of the avant-garde is also borne out by the heterogeneous or pluralistic character of the contemporary art of postmodernism which makes a virtue out of the absence of any such binding norms and universal criteria.

### Benjamin, Lukacs and Bloch: the “expressionism debates” and the problem of montage

With the avant-garde’s insights into the institutional constraints upon art’s reception comes a corresponding awareness of the ways in which the institution of art conditions the very form and techniques employed in the work of art. In this regard Walter Benjamin’s important article “The Author as Producer” (1934), although not discussed by Bürger, clearly forms a central point of reference throughout the book for his thinking on the avant-garde’s formal revolution and for the very notion of the “institution of art.”

In the article Benjamin warns against the danger of writers merely producing works for what he terms the “apparatus” of art without their being prepared to exert direct influence upon this apparatus. He points to the way in which this bourgeois “publication apparatus” is capable of assimilating all manner of revolutionary material in its search for ever more spectacular effects with which to entertain its insatiable public.<sup>19</sup> He maintains that, as a consequence artists should generate their aesthetic techniques and formal strategies with an awareness both of their work’s relation to the conditions of its production and of its implication within the wider institutional networks of power.

Benjamin offers as an example of the way this institutional recuperation operates an image which also serves as a reminder of the importance for art of finding the appropriate “Technik” (“technique”) of ideological resistance. He explains how even a socially-engaged work, a photograph of a slum for example, if produced without regard for the appropriate technical and formal

<sup>19</sup> Walter Benjamin, “Der Autor als Produzent,” *Gesammelte Schriften*, II, 2, ed. R. Tiedemann and H. Schweppenhäuser (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1980), 692.

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strategies needed to accompany its critical intentions, risks being transformed unthinkingly through the artistic gloss of technical perfection solely into an object of aesthetic enjoyment.<sup>20</sup> Consequently he maintains that the artist should pay attention not just to the political “tendency” or “Tendenz,” that is, to the *social* goals of the work, but also to the “Technik,” the technical and formal means he or she employs in it – the implication being that the artist needs to maintain a heightened awareness of the broader institutional and ideological factors affecting the reception of the work. Recommending that the artist choose only such formal means as are ideologically appropriate to the task, Benjamin cites as a specific example the technique of montage and the progressive uses to which such discontinuous forms are put in Brecht’s “epic theater.”<sup>21</sup> In his view such strategies of fragmentation counter any false reconciliations at the level of form that might threaten to neutralize the work’s progressive intentions at the level of content.<sup>22</sup>

Himself an early commentator on the avant-garde (in particular with regard to surrealism as well as to Brecht’s theater) Benjamin clearly provides the inspiration here for Bürger’s analysis of the centrality of montage for the poetics of the avant-garde. For Bürger the central feature linking together the various formal and technical strategies of the avant-garde is their common opposition to the convention of the *organic* work of art. The various component parts of the organic work form a rounded and continuous whole, and in imitating the appearance of a natural phenomenon or “work of nature” the organic work covers up the traces of its own construction, producing artificially the appearance of the “givenness” of nature. The danger with this attempt to produce a harmonious appearance by covering over the traces of discontinuity is that it produces the “false reconciliations” that Benjamin also warns against: the creation of an imaginary sense of social unity. Bürger too is aware of this danger and warns that, “instead of baring the contradictions of society in our time, the organic work promotes, by its very form, the illusion of a world that is whole, even though the explicit contents may show a wholly different intent” (86).

<sup>20</sup> Benjamin, “Der Autor,” 693.

<sup>21</sup> Brecht’s use of montage is discussed in detail below, 21.

<sup>22</sup> Benjamin, “Der Autor,” 697.

Given these potential pitfalls one of the clearest examples in the avant-garde of a progressive poetics focusing on a fragmentary, non-organic notion of form may be found in expressionism. The expressionists showed a definite preference for non-organic forms, as in the paratactically-listed one-line images of the "Simultangedicht" or "simultaneous poem," in the anti-linear "epic" structure, or in the disjointed and discontinuous montage style, as well as in their widespread practice of a multitude of related strategies of abstraction, interruption and fragmentation. Yet it is important to note that it is not just their formal strategies which clearly link them to the avant-garde. For this formal vanguardism is also underpinned in the poetics of expressionism by ideological conviction. In all but the most "naive" of the expressionists the principle of non-organic form has two important (and highly contentious) avant-garde functions: the abjuration of conventionally harmonious formal structures and the disruption of any artificial sense of unity which might offer the subject a sense of reconciliation within the social imaginary.

Interestingly, it was precisely the avant-garde quality of expressionism's use of such progressive strategies, and particularly of montage, which became a defining issue and a central bone of contention during the famous "expressionism debates" of the thirties – a series of discussions which have had a lasting influence upon twentieth-century thinking regarding the problem of ideology, realism and representation.<sup>23</sup> Although two of the main protagonists in the debate, Georg Lukacs and Ernst Bloch, were united for example in arguing in favor of the principle of progressive and committed forms of art, their views on how this should be achieved in terms of literary strategies were diametrically opposed. This conflict was articulated precisely in terms of their differing attitudes towards the avant-garde, and in particular towards Expressionism's use of montage and of other non-organic forms.

Lukacs for example supports a particular tradition of realism which attempts to penetrate the chaos of the world and open it up

<sup>23</sup> Most of the essays which made up these debates have been collected in *Die Expressionismusdebatte. Materialien zu einer marxistischen Realismuskonzeption*, ed. Hans-Jürgen Schmitt (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973). Translations of some of these essays, together with commentaries (and an essay by Fredric Jameson on the Brecht-Lukacs debate) appear in the volume *Aesthetics and Politics*, ed. Ronald Taylor et al. (London: New Left Books, 1979).

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("Aufdecken")<sup>24</sup> in order to "grasp reality as it really is" (198). Having exposed the essence of "reality," Lukacs' version of realism would construct a rounded version of the real by reworking this material in such a way that, through an act of artificial "closure" or "covering over" ("Zudecken") (205), it would synthetically give to the image the appearance of a smooth and natural surface. In other words, Lukacs demands a form of realism that would reconstitute the unified appearance of nature and create what would amount to an *organic* work. He is consequently highly critical of the expressionists – and of their technique of montage in particular – for "abandoning the objective representation of reality" (211). He maintains that the avant-garde's central tendency is towards "an ever more pronounced *distancing from realism*, an ever more energetic *liquidation* of realism" (193, Lukacs' emphasis) and he criticizes the expressionists' use of montage forms as the "high-point of this development" (210).

However, expressionism's attempt to "distance" itself from conventional forms of realism constitutes only one of its many avant-garde characteristics. Also important are the strategies to which Bloch points, for example the way in which expressionism refines and develops a whole range of non-organic and ambiguous forms alongside montage, whose function is not only to destabilize realistic representation, but more to the point, to subvert the *epistemological and ideological assumptions* which underpin it.<sup>25</sup> For it is in this manner that expressionism pursues the avant-garde's broader goal of critiquing the institution of art: it exposes realism as an institutionally-supported code which serves to legitimize only a certain concept of reality, and which leaves out of account large areas of human experience that fall outside of this sanctioned category.

If Lukacs' position in the debate is defined by his valorization of an archaic form of classic realism, Bloch's position by contrast demonstrates a much more progressive understanding of the avant-garde (and of expressionism's role within it) as a critical movement characterized by this fundamental ideological and epistemological skepticism. For example, his interpretation of the avant-garde overlaps at many points both with Bürger's later

<sup>24</sup> Lukacs, "Es geht um den Realismus," *Expressionismusdebatte*, 205.

<sup>25</sup> I will show this in the later chapters on Kafka, expressionist poetics, melodrama and on the anti-mimetic structure of *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*.

description of the non-organic work, as well as with Benjamin's demand that the avant-garde's progressive "Tendenz" be matched by an appropriate and corresponding "Technik." And whereas Lukacs criticizes the expressionists for reproducing the chaotic quality of modern reality with similarly fragmented and discontinuous forms (211), Bloch welcomes these destructive (or "deconstructive") forms of "decomposition" and "disintegration" ("Zerfall" and "Zersetzung") precisely because they avoid the kind of organic representationalism which risks covering up the real discontinuities in the world. Consequently he asks Lukacs ironically, "would it have been better if [the expressionists] had served as doctors at the sick-bed of capitalism? If they had stitched together the surface of 'reality' rather than ripping it open even further?"<sup>26</sup>

### The avant-garde vs. affirmative culture: the aesthetic construction of subjectivity

The expressionist movement's exploration of these destructive, non-organic procedures involves the creation of many different progressive artistic forms, some of which would not be immediately recognizable under the concept of "montage." Before returning to the discussion of the theories of the avant-garde, it is worth looking briefly at some of these alternative forms of purposeful aesthetic discontinuity in order to understand the variety of critical functions they take on within expressionism's avant-garde poetics.

As we have seen, the convention of organic artistic form is associated with the affirmative function of culture, and the creation of "false reconciliations" by producing the aesthetic illusion of a harmonious world. According to Bürger, this affirmative and compensatory function of conventional art is also crucial with regard to the aesthetic construction of subjectivity: "The individual who in the rationalized and means-oriented everyday world has been reduced to a partial function re-experiences himself in art as a human being. Here he can develop the full range of his abilities . . ." <sup>27</sup> As Bürger points out in his essay on the "Institution of Art," it

<sup>26</sup> Ernst Bloch, "Diskussionen über Expressionismus," *Expressionismusdebatte*, 187 (my translation).

<sup>27</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 48–49. Translation modified.



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is for this reason that art played an essential role in Schiller's classical conception of "Bildung" (the education and formation of the personality). For it helped to "recover the lost totality of the human being after the harmony of the human personality had been destroyed by the rigidly rational organization of everyday life and by the division of labor prevalent in developing bourgeois society."<sup>28</sup> Through its very form the organic work may serve as a means of socialization, presenting the illusion of a harmonious world into which the individual can be integrated effortlessly. At the same time it offers compensatory images in which for example the decentered modern subject – victim of what Benjamin calls the "Erfahrungsverlust" or "atrophy of experience" typical of modernity – can discover an artificial sense of unity.

To extend Bürger's argument here we might say that the avant-garde's opposition to the conventional organic work is directed then not only against its ideologically affirmative function but also against its reconciliatory use as an instrument of social integration or "subject-positioning." For if the traditional organic text allows the subject to experience an "ideal" and harmonious realization of centered selfhood within a unified world, expressionism's goal – one which again fulfills a central premise of the avant-garde – is purposefully to disrupt this harmony.<sup>29</sup>

It can be argued that the modern individual's alienated and decentered position in the anomic social structure of the early twentieth century produces an intensified need for a compensatory staging of the self as a unified entity.<sup>30</sup> If this is so then the expressionist text may be characterized by its denial of such needs and by its tendency to forestall precisely such reconciliatory functions in the text. Instead, expressionism takes up this experiential complex of alienation and decentering not as an abstraction, a

<sup>28</sup> Bürger, "Institution Kunst," 178. My translation.

<sup>29</sup> As we shall see (especially in the chapter below on Döblin, Benn and expressionist poetics) expressionism develops various narratological strategies which "decenter" the reader, either by denying him or her the conventional privilege of a clear and well-defined position as "implied reader," or alternatively by undermining the text's narrative continuity in such a manner that the possibility of easy identification with the comfortable perspective of a knowledgeable narrator is withheld. Instead the reader is stretched between contradictory perspectives and irreconcilable subject-positions which preclude any illusory sense of integration within the fictional world presented by the text.

<sup>30</sup> On this point see Wolfgang Iser, *Prospecting: From Reader Response to Literary Anthropology* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1989), 244.

literary topos or describable "content" – such as the way that the "theme" of "dehumanization" is frequently treated in modernism – but as an unavoidable *effect* of the literary text which the reader is made to experience at first hand.<sup>31</sup>

It is in this regard that the various forms of montage and discontinuity occurring throughout the prose and drama of expressionism are important. These non-organic textual structures dramatize subjectivity not by channeling it into the traditional format, namely a combination of plot and characterization based on the notion of the individual as a single, unified and unique Cartesian entity – in other words not into the form which Bürger sees as providing an aesthetic compensation for the "lost totality of the human being." Instead, the avant-garde text stages subjectivity as fragmented and discontinuous, for example as a constellation of personae, a series of mutually conflicting and contradictory roles played out by seemingly separate figures in the texts. The world which the central figure encounters is frequently the realm of reflected selfhood, the other figures becoming mere refractions of the ego – as can be seen most obviously in works as varied as Kafka's "A Country Doctor" and "Description of a Struggle," Einstein's *Bebuquin*, or the expressionist "dramas of selfhood" ("Ich-Dramen") such as Sorge's *The Beggar* and Becker's *The Last Judgment*.

Whereas the reader could previously discover in the organic text a sense of self as a knowable entity which could be embraced, the conventional understanding of self gives way in the avant-garde to the experience of subjectivity as an ongoing process, fundamentally ungraspable. The reader who brings to the expressionist text the expectation of finding the illusion of unity, or a sense of harmony between self and world, will be disappointed to discover instead discontinuity and decenteredness.

This association between the development of non-organic structures and the attempt to deconstruct the notion of subjectivity as fundamentally decentered can be seen in two areas of expressionist prose and drama. Firstly, at the level of *characteriz-*

<sup>31</sup> An example of this would be Benn's expressionist text *Gehirne* which suppresses the traditional "realist" signposts orienting the reader and so effaces the temporal and spatial boundaries not just for the protagonist, but also for the reader. This produces a sense of disorientation in the latter analogous to that described by the text in the case of the former. See chapter 3 on Benn and Döblin.

ation the individual figure frequently becomes a mere montage of separate characteristics or an amalgam of roles, rather than a complete individual with whom the audience might identify (a strategy which Brecht's drama later adopts with its various "alienation effects" and strategies of discontinuity). At the same time the other dramatis personae frequently become mere functions of the distorted central subjective standpoint from which the protagonist sees them. This "anti-objective" bias occurs for example in Hasenclever's play *The Son (Der Sohn)*, where according to a contemporary review by Kurt Pinthus, the three secondary figures of the father, the friend and the governess are correspondingly exaggerated and "not depicted objectively by the writer, according to convention, but rather as the son sees them."<sup>32</sup>

Secondly, besides its effect on characterization, the avant-garde model of fragmented form also affects the text's *dramatic* structure in a similar way. In the same review of *Der Sohn* Pinthus goes on to describe the "undramatic" plot-structure in precisely the terms we have employed in our discussion of the avant-garde, namely as "non-organic": "The conflict does not develop, but is threateningly present from the first scene to the last, without being connected or resolved. It is *inorganic*, since the figures are sometimes realistic persons, sometimes abstract types, at one moment frantically discussing in dialectics, then indulging in lyrical monologs."<sup>33</sup> Pinthus' use of the term "inorganic" is significant here, not least since this formulation demonstrates the play's rootedness in the avant-garde and in its typical strategy of using certain radical forms of discontinuity to promote a sense of *representational instability*: firstly, instead of the conventional organic presentation of character the depiction of the figures is anything but "holistic" and alternates between realism and abstraction; sec-

<sup>32</sup> "nicht nach bisherigem Brauch, vom Dichter objektiv umrissen, sondern so, wie der Sohn sie sieht." Kurt Pinthus, "Versuch eines zukünftigen Dramas," *Schaubühne* 10.14 (April 2, 1914): 391–394. Rpt. *Expressionismus. Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur 1910–1920*, ed. Thomas Anz and Michael Stark (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1982), 681.

<sup>33</sup> "Der Konflikt entwickle sich nicht, sondern sei von der ersten Szene bis zur letzten drohend vorhanden, ohne geknüpft, ohne gelöst zu werden. Auch *unorganisch* sei es, da die Darsteller bald realistische Menschen, bald abstrahierte Typen seien, jetzt in rasender Dialektik diskutierten, dann in lyrisierenden Monologen einherschwelgten." Pinthus, "Versuch." *Manifeste und Dokumente*, 680, my emphasis.

only it ignores the conventions of linear plot development by refusing either to define or resolve the dramatic conflict.

The characteristically dissonant expressionist structure described by Pinthus clearly hinders any possibility that the text might serve in Schiller's sense as a means by which the fragmented modern subject might recover the lost sense of a totality in human existence through an aesthetic reconstruction of subjectivity. Firstly, rather than presenting an integrating and unified perspective on reality, such expressionist texts offer a "monoperspective," a skewed and idiosyncratic view, in which the spectator is unlikely to find either an accommodating "subject-position" or any other source of compensation within a unified imaginary.<sup>34</sup> Secondly, the reduction of plot to a series of shifting scenes without a vital and dramatic relation to a central conflict reinforces the idea that any sense of a harmonious world has also vanished, along with the conventional orienting notions of time, space and causality.

### Montage and the epic form: Brecht and Döblin

Besides the destabilizing effects of expressionism's progressive poetics upon the aesthetic construction of subjectivity the avant-garde is important in many other aspects of the movement's oppositional discourses. In both the drama and the prose of expressionism one of the paradigms of the non-organic or montage form is the "epic." Here the text's various component parts begin to take on a degree of structural and semantic autonomy, rather than being subordinated to the meaning of the whole. Similarly, the work may even adopt a loose or "open" structure in which individual components are entirely indispensable and can be discarded without loss to the sense of the whole.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>34</sup> In the case of *Der Sohn* the dominant point of view is "das Abbild der Realität im Geiste des Sohnes" ("the reflection of reality in the mind of the son," Pinthus, "Versuch." *Manifeste und Dokumente*, 682). This perspective embodies the marginalized and alienated point of view of the isolated intellectual in patriarchal society – corresponding to the general position of the expressionist intellectual in the bourgeois social order of the Wilhemine period.

<sup>35</sup> The paradigmatic forms of expressionist theater here are the "Ich-Dramen" ("dramas of the self") and "Stationen drama," (those plays patterned after the Strindberg's *To Damascus* and its movement through various 'stations of the cross'). These are structured according to the montage-principle and are clearly related to avant-garde thought in this respect. They either present a causally

Probably the best known examples of such an open or "non-organic" structure are to be found in the "epic" work associated with Brecht and Döblin.<sup>36</sup> With both of these writers a central goal of the epic is to problematize the status of the traditional organic structure: firstly by defusing the dramatic tension produced by the convention of a tight linear organization and secondly by loosening the sense of causality that in the organic work gives each aspect of the plot the aura of indispensability.

Both Brecht and Döblin aim to release individual scenes and images from their subordination to the organic whole. Brecht for example believes that, "in contrast to classical drama the structure of the epic should allow one to cut it into separate pieces which nevertheless remain individually viable."<sup>37</sup> Similarly Döblin remarks that, "If a novel cannot be cut up like a worm into ten pieces so that each bit moves independently, then it is no good."<sup>38</sup> In the case of Döblin the conception of the "epic" as an accumulative or aggregate form problematizes plot and suppresses dramatic tension, producing instead a more "difficult" structure that demands of the audience a more considered and reflective approach towards each individual component of the text, rather than the kind of reading that treats each segment merely as the subsidiary means to an ending.

To the extent that this epic structure makes the avant-garde work less accessible, it appears to be linked with one of the most pronounced features of modernism, namely its alleged "elitism,"

unconnected group of scenes representing the various stations passed through by the protagonist on the path towards a vaguely defined state of enlightenment, or juxtapose a series of scenarios each of which dramatizes one aspect of the central figure's experience and defining relationship with others.

<sup>36</sup> Brecht's close relations with expressionism early on in his career are fruitfully explored in Walter Sokel's "Brecht und der Expressionismus," *Die sogenannten zwanziger Jahre*, ed. R. Grimm and J. Hermand (Bad Homburg: Gehlen Verlag, 1970), 47–74. On the relationship between the work of Brecht and Döblin and the links between their conceptions of the "epic," see Viktor Zmegac's essential article "Alfred Döblins Poetik des Romans," *Deutsche Romantheorien*, ed. R. Grimm (Frankfurt: Fischer-Athenäum, 1968), 341–364.

<sup>37</sup> "zur Struktur der Epik gehöre es, daß man sie, im Gegensatz zur (klassischen) Dramatik, gleichsam mit der Schere in einzelne Stücke schneiden könne, die trotzdem lebensfähig bleiben." Brecht, *Schriften zum Theater*, vol. 3 (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1963), 53. See also Viktor Zmegac, "Alfred Döblin's Poetik des Romans," 349.

<sup>38</sup> "Wenn ein Roman nicht wie ein Regenwurm in zehn Stücke geschnitten werden kann und jeder Teil bewegt sich selbst, dann taugt er nichts." Alfred Döblin, "Bemerkungen zum Roman," *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, ed. Walter Muschg (Olten and Freiburg: Walter Verlag, 1963), 21.

most visible in modernism's attempt to define itself as "high culture" and so distance itself from the encroachments of popular culture. Yet in the case of the avant-garde one can also understand this shift away from the more accessible organic structures more readily as the attempt to resist what the Frankfurt School would later call the "culture industry" and the commodification of the work of art without pitching its appeal exclusively towards an elitist or aestheticist reception. Assuming for example that the typical work of mass culture is geared to a more "consumerist" approach – a mode of reception frequently oriented exclusively towards the final outcome of the plot – then the effect is that the rest of the text is merely "consumed" as a means to this end.<sup>39</sup> In the epic work by contrast, this tension is defused in advance, so that the reader or spectator is forced to reflect instead on the individual scenes as they develop. As Döblin explains,

Characters and events in the epic work attract our sympathy in themselves and quite apart from any suspense. They grip us on their own account. In a good epic work individual characters and individual events live a life independently, whereas the novelistic work ["Schriftstellereiroman"] rushes past us with the greatest suspense, yet after a couple of days one can remember nothing and the whole thing was a deception.<sup>40</sup>

Instead of building dramatic tension and subordinating individual scenes and images to the plot in its entirety, the epic promotes the metonymic accumulation or aggregation of scenes and images. As a result each of these may be interpreted in its own right, rather than gaining significance merely to the extent that it contributes to the overall image, or to the text's general sense of closure.

With its montage-like construction the epic thus corresponds both formally and functionally to the avant-garde's demand that art enter into a new relationship with reality, "the sublation of art

<sup>39</sup> Fredric Jameson describes this commodified reading process as oriented towards "an end and a consumption-satisfaction around which the rest of the work is then 'degraded' to the status of sheer means." See "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture," *Social Text* (Winter 1979): 132.

<sup>40</sup> "Figuren und Vorgänge des epischen Werks erwecken an sich und außerhalb jeder Spannung unsere innere Teilnahme. Sie fesseln an sich. Im guten epischen Werk haben auch die einzelnen Figuren oder einzelnen Vorgänge herausgenommen ihr Leben, während der Schriftstellereiroman vorüberrauscht mit der schärfsten Spannung, und man kann sich nach ein paar Tagen auf nichts besinnen und das Ganze war ein Betrug." Döblin, "Bemerkungen zum Roman," *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, 96.

and life." For whereas organic work tends to subordinate its individual components and to seal them into its closed referential structure, the non-organic text – and in particular the epic work – opens them up and confronts them directly and individually with the real.<sup>41</sup> This is significant both for the aesthetics of representation and for the ontology of the work of art. It means that the representation of the real undergoes a radical change, since the new, discontinuous mode of depiction is no longer in danger of transmitting automatically – through its very form – a sense of reality's immovable solidity or of the unchangeable quality of "nature." At the same time the previously sacrosanct space of the work of art is now transgressed more frequently in the avant-garde as unreconstructed fragments of the real find their way directly into the body of the non-organic text. Consequently, as Bürger says, "the work no longer seals itself off from (the world)" but is brought into closer proximity with reality, relating to the social context with a new immediacy (91–92).

### The avant-garde poetics of negation and meaninglessness

This mutual interpenetration of art and reality occurs in other areas besides the montage. According to Bürger, one of the most extreme realizations of this principle of sublation occurs in the "objet trouvé" or real-life object, and he cites the example of Marcel Duchamp's "fountain," a urinal which the artist signed and presented to museums as an ironic work of art (51–52). Like the montage, the avant-garde's "ready-mades" and other related forms (such as the Surrealists' "automatic writing" and their mechanical "recipes" for creating literary texts) function according to a poetics of negation and meaninglessness.

These "meaningless" objects confront the conventions and expectations pertaining to the institution of art in a variety of ways. Firstly, they brazenly contradict the principle that the "work" should be an original and inspired creation, crafted in its entirety by the genius of the artist. Secondly, in frustrating expectations and conventions they shift attention away from the search for the work's self-contained meaning. Thus whereas the enigmatic texts of modernism tend, according to Terry Eagleton, to promote this

<sup>41</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 91–92.

autotelic and self-absorbed attitude to meaning,<sup>42</sup> the avant-garde redirects the search towards the external, “institutional” criteria by which meaning is created within the “sub-system” of art.

Examples of the kind of institutional conditions targeted by the avant-garde include the conventions of the artistic context (for example, the fact that the work is exhibited in a museum may lead automatically to its being pre-defined as a “work of art,” and so viewed correspondingly); the notion of authenticity and originality (customarily indicated by the signature of the artist); and the “Werkbegriff” (the concept of the “work” as a definable entity or frameable “thing” with a definite set of limits – as opposed to an avant-garde event or abstract “happening”).

As with the avant-garde’s use of montage, its poetics of negation aims to question and ultimately to realign the relationship between art and life. By reducing art to its minimal conditions the avant-garde succeeds in pointing up the limits of art, as well as indicating those factors not intrinsic to the work itself – the social and ideological context.<sup>43</sup> The avant-garde’s interrogation of the institutional definition and function of art reveals the pervasive influence of the institution upon the work’s reception, upon its meaning and upon its production. And in revealing the arbitrariness of both of these institutionally imposed definitions and of the generally accepted aesthetic values, the avant-garde points to the institution’s tendency to legitimize only *certain* meanings, truths and codes to the exclusion of other possible values: in short the avant-garde demonstrates the institution’s use of convention to privilege a particular set of dominant social discourses.<sup>44</sup>

The apparent “meaninglessness” of art-objects such as Duchamp’s “fountain” is linked to the similarly enigmatic quality of the montage (which also frequently lacks any obvious “intention” or explicit unifying meaning as a mode of joining its individual components). Clearly the goal of such meaninglessness is to negate *specific* expectations and so reveal the presence of the

<sup>42</sup> See Terry Eagleton, “Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism,” *New Left Review* 152 (1985), 60–79.

<sup>43</sup> This play with the institutionally-produced limits and conventions of art has the effect not only of critiquing but also of *expanding* the prevailing concept of art. Arguably, Duchamp’s avant-garde principle of the “ready-made” has long since been recuperated by the institution of art and has become one of its staples – as in Warhol’s work.

<sup>44</sup> The concept of the “dominant social discourse” will be explored in detail in chapter 3.



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institution of art as its hidden context and as the pre-condition for its unsettling effect.<sup>45</sup> These avant-garde forms are consequently revealed to be entirely meaningful at another level, namely at the meta-aesthetic level, where art practices self-criticism and reflects upon the conditions of its own possibility.

Bürger suggests that with the *objet trouvé* and other “meaningless” works, it is the act of provocation itself which takes the place of the “work.” If this is so then this displacement of conventional signification can have any impact only on the basis of all of those unspoken criteria that the work’s meaninglessness calls up and negates, but which it nevertheless continues to depend upon for its effect. Through this shift, the avant-garde enforces a major reorientation in the interpretational approaches towards its art. For whereas in the organic work individual components harmonize with the whole, in the case of the montage or non-organic work the contradiction or disjuncture between parts not only provokes the impression of “meaninglessness” but frequently introduces ambiguity and – in some of the instances I will examine in later chapters – epistemological doubt. This uncertainty calls for a corresponding shift in interpretative strategies. For instead of attempting to discover the meaning from the interrelation of the parts and the whole, according to Bürger the interpreter will suspend this search and concentrate instead upon the constitution of the work and the principles of construction underlying it: interpretation shifts to the meta-aesthetic or meta-interpretational level.<sup>46</sup>

Again we can extend Bürger’s argument here by observing that where the contradictions in the work take the form of a series of conflicting perspectives or levels of narration (as we shall see in chapter 6 on the expressionist film *The Cabinet of Dr. Caligari*), the recipient will frequently find it difficult to continue to believe in the possibility of a single, unambiguous and “intended” meaning arising out of the whole, and will turn his or her attention away from the search for such a meaning and instead take up as the new theme the problem of interpretation, or of epistemological uncertainty, or of the production of meaning itself. In other cases, the

<sup>45</sup> Frank Kermode makes the point that a certain intentionality is always present, and that even Duchamp obviously did not simply pick up any object arbitrarily and sign it. See “The Modern,” *Modern Essays* (London: Routledge, 1971), 57–58.

<sup>46</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the avant-garde*, 81.

process of interpreting the non-organic work will tend to displace its focus onto the fact of the work's decentering, onto its denial of meaning and its sabotaging of the conventional means of producing such meaning. Interpretation will be forced to take a step back, and rather than merely searching for a traditional "implied" or "hidden" meaning – a "figure in the carpet" – it will also consider the conventions by which meaning is produced in general and the ways in which the avant-garde work subverts them.<sup>47</sup>

### Revisions of Bürger's theory

#### Aesthetic autonomy in modernism and the avant-garde

Where Bürger discusses the avant-garde's dismantling of the concept of the "work" and its creation instead of a poetics of shock, provocation and meaninglessness a key problem of the *Theory of the Avant-Garde* comes into focus, which is of central importance for any discussion of expressionism. This is the avant-garde's central principle of undermining aesthetic autonomy and

<sup>47</sup> In important respects this shift already occurs for example in many of Kafka's texts of the expressionist period, where the theme becomes the interpretation itself and the impossibility of discovering stable meanings in a world in which the conventional guides to interpretation have been called into question. In Kafka's work this occurs through a very specific form of ambiguity: through the contradiction between different possible perspectives on the real; through the clash between the "inhabited worlds" corresponding to them (for example, those very different realities inhabited by the father and son in "The Judgement"); or through the conflict between juxtaposed orders of reality (such as the interpenetration of the real and the fantastic in *The Metamorphosis* discussed in chapter 5). The resulting "meaninglessness" parallels the effects of shock and provocation described by Bürger as ensuing from the violation of institutional conventions by the avant-garde's strategies of discontinuity. With Kafka however, it is a most carefully delineated form of meaninglessness that is constructed, one which cries out to be interpreted. For those indeterminacies and "semantic vacuums" occupying the center of Kafka's texts (for example, the meaning of the "trial," of the "judgement" or of the peculiar "metamorphosis") are at the same time polysemous symbolic constructions, created in such a way that they appear to articulate and organize a vast number and variety of unspecified anxieties in the minds of Kafka's readers and hence to invite a multitude of interpretations. It is precisely on account of the personal character of the response they call forth that they tend also to encourage a particular kind of interpretation and analysis which almost invariably wants to bring about a final and absolute resolution of the problems and thus a resolution of the anxieties these semantic constructions appear to formulate. Yet it is the text's simultaneous undercutting of any such harmonious illusion of interpretational closure and its resolute refusal to sanction any such hermeneutical consolations which clearly places Kafka's work in close proximity to the avant-garde, and to its characteristic projection of epistemological uncertainty.

reintegrating art and reality ("das Prinzip der Aufhebung der Kunst in der Lebenspraxis," 69). One commentator, Richard Wolin, has complained that Bürger's use of the latter concept "remains precipitate and overly simplistic" and it is true that its use is indeed surrounded by ambiguities throughout the book.<sup>48</sup>

For example, if we understand this principle of sublation in its most obvious sense, namely as the attempt to instrumentalize art for social and revolutionary causes, it would fail to distinguish the "historical" avant-garde from previous avant-gardes as well as from other forms of "engagement" in art. Not surprisingly, Bürger himself is clearly against such a connotation of the term.<sup>49</sup> Yet if alternatively this central tenet is to be understood in the way Bürger suggests, namely to indicate art's function as an important free space in which reality and social practice may be theorized and reconceptualized,<sup>50</sup> then, as we shall see later, the avant-garde would appear merely to be sharing a critical function common to many different forms and movements throughout the history of art, a function in other words which is certainly not the prerogative of the historical avant-garde.

This brings us to the blind spot at the heart of Bürger's model, namely his fundamental ambiguity with regard to the category of aesthetic autonomy. For surely the possibility of reconceptualizing social practice is itself predicated upon the privilege of attaining a certain independence from the real (rather than being merged with it) and upon a sense of *critical distance* from the object to be criticized. In other words, the possibility for criticism and social change appears to be predicated upon precisely that aesthetic autonomy which the avant-garde according to Bürger is supposed to overcome. It is as a result of Bürger's ambiguity in this regard that his treatment of the avant-garde's central principle, its goal of "overcoming art in the realm of life-praxis," remains rather vague. Bürger is well aware of the duplicity or double-edged quality that is associated with aesthetic autonomy, and he himself points out that "the detachment of art as a special

<sup>48</sup> Richard Wolin, "Modernism vs. Postmodernism," *Telos* 62 (1984–85): 14.

<sup>49</sup> For as Bürger himself says, "[w]hen the avantgardists demand that art become practical again, they do not mean that the contents of works of art should be socially significant." *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49.

<sup>50</sup> See the quotation discussed below: "An art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize it, along with its distance." See Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 50.

sphere of human activity from the nexus of the praxis of life" (36), that is, the differentiation of art as a seemingly autonomous subsystem, not only has a positive effect, namely the development of "art's independence from society" (35), but also contributes towards the dangerous illusion that art is in some manner both free from determination by social and historical forces while also remaining free from social responsibility. Nevertheless, despite his awareness of the contradiction, it is this ambiguity which undermines his central thesis that the avant-garde intended to destroy art's autonomous status and reintegrate it with life. For as Bürger himself concedes, in as far as aesthetic autonomy shares that ambivalent status linked with affirmative culture, namely the function of both promoting criticism and hindering its implementation, this avant-garde attack on autonomy remains a "profoundly contradictory endeavor. For the (relative) freedom of art vis à vis the praxis of life is at the same time the condition that must be fulfilled if there is to be a critical cognition of reality. And art no longer distinct from the praxis of life but wholly absorbed in it will lose the capacity to criticize, along with its distance" (50). One should consider too the various failures resulting from the abandonment of autonomy, such as the false reconciliations of art and life exemplified by the "aestheticized politics" of fascism, by Soviet and socialist realism, by the culture industry and by the aesthetics of consumerism ("Warenästhetik"). In this light the advantages offered by autonomy (in terms of providing art with a degree of independence and critical distance) seem to outweigh the disadvantages. Having based his theory then on the idea that the historical avant-garde sets out to criticize aesthetic autonomy Bürger himself then ends up questioning "whether a sublation of the autonomy-status can be desirable at all, whether the distance between art and the practice of life is not requisite for that free space within which alternatives to what exists become conceivable" (54).

Bürger's own ambiguity in attempting to distinguish the avant-garde's position on autonomy is thus the central weakness that affects the main concepts throughout his analysis. The vagueness of some of his explanations of the central avant-garde tenet concerning art's sublation with life stems precisely from this unresolved problem. At another level however Bürger's theoretical ambiguity here is itself significant since it directly reflects a similar

contradiction within the avant-garde. For where Bürger would maintain that the failure of the avant-garde lies in its vain attempt to integrate art and life, it seems clear that the reason for this failure lies at a prior stage: within the avant-garde there is an ongoing and unresolved negotiation between the desire to create a new form of art with a direct bearing upon life, and the need to retain for art a degree of autonomy in order to preserve a distance to reality and thus a vantage point from which art might formulate its social critique. Clearly Bürger's model stands in need of a substantial revision on this point.

Before outlining the direction such a revision might take however, there is a further difficulty to be taken into account with regard to this same question of autonomy. Bürger maintains that "the separation of art from the praxis of life becomes the decisive characteristic of the autonomy of *bourgeois art*" (49, my emphasis). But if, as Adorno pointed out, a truly oppositional aesthetics can exist only where art is autonomous and "an entity unto itself," then aesthetic autonomy also becomes the last guarantee that art's critical capacity is safe from recuperation by bourgeois society. As a result Adorno sees art's separation from life-praxis in a much more positive light, for it means that "rather than obeying existing social norms and thus proving itself to be 'socially useful' – art criticizes society just by being there."<sup>51</sup> Consequently aesthetic autonomy appears to be just as crucial as a precondition of critical distance for the avant-garde as it is for the heirs to the tradition of *l'art pour l'art* in modernism. And in as far as Bürger is forced to concede that the avant-garde like modernism also relies on a degree of aesthetic autonomy, his definition of the avant-garde – in this respect, at least – must then admit an overlap with modernism.

This is not to say that there are not important differences between modernism and the avant-garde with regard to the question of aesthetic autonomy, and I will presently examine an important category for distinguishing the two. For the moment, however, one should note one simple distinguishing feature: unlike the avant-garde, modernism tends to embrace aesthetic autonomy. Consequently in modernism – as in aestheticism – autonomy frequently takes on a vastly different and questionable character as a goal or value in its own right. For as Terry Eagleton

<sup>51</sup> Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1984), 321.

argues, "by removing itself from society into its own impermeable space, the modernist work paradoxically reproduces – indeed intensifies – the very illusion of aesthetic autonomy which marks the bourgeois humanist order it also protests against."<sup>52</sup> In modernism aesthetic autonomy – the condition of the progressive work's critical possibilities – is itself made an important term of dominant cultural discourse and becomes instrumental in substantiating affirmative culture.

According to Eagleton's way of thinking autonomy would also have a different value in the modernist work since, as with aestheticism, it typically demonstrates a "chronic failure to engage the real" and becomes instead an end in itself (66). In modernism the emphasis lies on the work as a signifier, rather than as the medium pointing to a referent in the real world. For as Eagleton observes: "Modernist works are after all 'works,' discrete and bounded entities for all the free play within them, which is just what the bourgeois art institution understands" (68). Rather than the real it is thus the modernist text itself which becomes the enigma demanding interpretation: rather than providing a degree of critical distance, in modernism aesthetic autonomy frequently becomes a means of supporting and enhancing this enigmatic status.

Modernism's conservative relationship to autonomy is thus deeply ingrained in the ideological make-up of its works in a variety of ways. The modernist work is wary firstly of that sense of ideological commitment characteristic of the avant-garde, since instrumentalization by a political cause or annexation by any particular interpretation of reality or "Weltbild" would risk encroaching upon its ambiguity and limiting its semantic horizons. For modernism political solutions appear merely to be part of the problem rather than part of the cure.<sup>53</sup> Instead, it clings to various autotelic forms of aesthetic autonomy and hermeticism in order to resist any kind of co-option which would limit the work's meaning. As a result it frequently becomes a bastion of high-culture: elitist, arcane and inaccessible.

Secondly, modernism becomes particularly protective of its

<sup>52</sup> Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," 68.

<sup>53</sup> In this respect postmodernism's adoption of a similar skepticism regarding the political realm is a throwback to modernism's general wariness of direct ideological allegiances and concrete political strategies.

autonomous status because it is constantly obliged to resist the encroachments of mass culture.<sup>54</sup> Its forms may be inaccessible and elitist, but in separating itself off with a self-enclosed, enigmatic meaning which invites but resists decipherment, it not only excludes itself from the historical world, but more importantly, it resists commodification. Thus, according to Eagleton, it "forestalls [that] instant consumability" associated with the products of the culture industry which develops rapidly throughout modernity and which poses a direct threat to modernist "high" culture (67).

In this respect modernism's relationship to autonomy, unlike that of the avant-garde, becomes a defining feature which keeps even its more progressive tendencies squarely within the sphere of affirmative culture. For example, its search for innovation and technical perfection, and its attempt to refine art to its very essence becomes such a self-sufficient and entirely self-absorbing aesthetic practice that it always risks devolving merely into a formal correlative of bourgeois society's myth of progress. Similarly modernism's formal revolts seem to suggest a sanitized revolution, often lacking that sense – central to the avant-garde by contrast – that behind the struggle in the secluded realm of the aesthetic lies the much more important goal: the struggle for a fundamental transformation in society.

### "De-aestheticized autonomous art"

From this discussion it is clear that although modernism and the avant-garde appear to overlap in sharing a reliance on aesthetic autonomy, they differ in one major respect, namely the ideology-

<sup>54</sup> Fredric Jameson has described the genesis of modernism in relation to mass culture in his article "Reification and Utopia in Mass Culture." Similarly Andreas Huyssen's central thesis in his book *After the Great Divide* is that whereas modernism with its "anxiety of contamination" always "insisted on the inherent hostility between high and low [culture]," the avant-garde aimed at developing an alternative relationship between the two. Although it is clear that the avant-garde did indeed support a vastly expanded concept of art, which would also embrace many mass-cultural forms, it must also be said that this by no means implies that the historical avant-garde was willing to embrace mass culture "tout court," including the commodified forms, and the affirmative and legitimizing functions of the culture industry within society. In contrast to Huyssen, I would maintain that it is this awareness of the social and institutional functioning of art that always defines the cultural politics of the avant-garde, even to the exclusion, in many cases, of its recourse to mass culture. See *After the Great Divide*, viii.

critical uses to which they put autonomy. For the central principle which divides the avant-garde from modernism is its concern always for the "way art functions *in society*, a process that does as much to determine the effects that works have as does the particular content."<sup>55</sup> In other words what distinguishes the avant-garde is always its awareness of the social and institutional constraints which influence the form and content of the work of art, and which limit its possible effects.

It is this crucial component which Benjamin points to so forcefully in his essay on "The Author as Producer" where, as we have seen, he places the emphasis not so much on the work's political orientation – for "political tendency alone is not sufficient"<sup>56</sup> – as firstly on the author's awareness of the apparatus and conditions of artistic production, and secondly on the need for an appropriate formal response or "Technik" taking this situation into account. For even where the avant-garde shares with modernism the benefits of autonomy, it always distinguishes itself in precisely this aspect: it takes up a certain critical distance in order to see through the duplicities and hidden social functions of affirmative culture, and in order to articulate an awareness of the social and historical conditions of art.

Since both modernism and, to a large extent, the avant-garde share a dependency upon aesthetic autonomy, Richard Wolin has proposed a new formulation in order to make this crucial distinction explicit. He suggests that Bürger's "theoretical framework would be in need of a [further] term: de-aestheticized autonomous art." This category would refer to those movements such as surrealism (and, I would maintain, expressionism too) which have "simultaneously negated the aura of affirmation, characteristic of art for art's sake, while remaining consistent with the 'modern' requirement of aesthetic autonomy." The category of "de-aestheticized autonomous art" describes that essential characteristic of avant-garde art through which it "self-consciously divests itself of the beautiful illusion, the aura of reconciliation, projected by art for art's sake, while at the same time refusing to overstep the boundaries of aesthetic autonomy, beyond which art degenerates to the status of merely a 'thing among things'."<sup>57</sup>

<sup>55</sup> Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 49. My emphasis.

<sup>56</sup> "[D]ie Tendenz allein tut es nicht." Benjamin, "Der Autor," 696.

<sup>57</sup> Richard Wolin, "Modernism vs. Postmodernism," *Telos* 62 (1984–85), 16.



Wolin's term "de-aestheticized autonomous art" describes the way in which the avant-garde articulates its self-criticism of art: it sets out not only to disrupt aesthetic convention but – acknowledging the balance between "Tendenz" and "Technik" – also to dismantle any lingering consolations of "aestheticized" form. Yet in doing so it nevertheless retains its critical distance within the sphere of aesthetic autonomy.<sup>58</sup>

Peter Uwe Hohendahl has proposed a similar revision of Bürger's model which explains in more detail the rationale for this retention of the category of aesthetic autonomy. He observes that we need "to reexamine the theory of the avant-garde by de-emphasizing the negation of aesthetic autonomy and stressing the ideologically charged continuation of this problematical category."<sup>59</sup> With Wolin he shares the view then that the category of autonomy in itself need not be inconsistent with the aims of the avant-garde. However, he cautions that autonomy must first be freed from its traditionally "affirmative" functions which mask real social contradictions by aestheticizing or sublimating them. In this way, rather than becoming a goal in its own right (as in the more autotelic and hermetic movements, such as aestheticism and, as we have seen, modernism) and rather than providing an aesthetic refuge, this "ideologically charged" notion of autonomy gives art the distance to society necessary to produce its critical and ideological force while its "de-aestheticizing" edge ensures that art does not merely degenerate into affirmative culture or another version of "aestheticized politics."

### From the sublime to the historical avant-garde: the cynical sublation of art and life

This issue of "de-aestheticized" art points to a crucial distinction between two central and defining conceptions of the avant-garde.

<sup>58</sup> In a commentary on Marcuse's theories of art and revolution, Jürgen Habermas largely prefigures Richard Wolin's modification of the theory of the avant-garde. He describes a variety of progressive and experimental artistic strategies in terms of a "de-aestheticization of art" (349). These cultural-revolutionary activities have the goal of a "removing of the differences" ("Entdifferenzierung") between art and life (349). See Habermas, "Herbert Marcuse über Kunst und Revolution," *Kultur und Kritik. Verstreute Aufsätze* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1973), 345–351.

<sup>59</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Loss of Reality: Gottfried Benn's Early Prose," *Modernity and the Text*, 92.

For if as Bürger maintains, all avant-garde art intends in some manner to bring together art and life, or at least to coordinate artistic and social progress,<sup>60</sup> then I would propose that two major options present themselves. Art may serve as an *ideal* model for life: it can offer a prototype of harmony and order, a utopian pattern for the way in which the chaotic, violent or tragic aspects of life may be “mastered” by the form of the work of art, so that in this way the mundane world is “sublimated” or raised up to the sublime and ideal level of the aesthetic sphere. This is the goal characterizing the “idealist” wing of the avant-garde. Alternatively art and life can be brought together by a shift in the *opposite* direction: by what I would call a “cynical” sublation of art and life bringing art down to the banal level of reality, fragmenting artistic form, dismantling the syntax of poetic language and destroying any lingering sense of aesthetic harmony and of organic structuring, so that the work of art leaves the realm of ideal and harmonious forms, and descends to the disjointed world of modernity. And I would suggest that it is this that characterizes the “historical” avant-garde.<sup>61</sup>

Richard Wolin does not offer any concrete examples of what his “de-aestheticized” avant-garde art would look like. Yet this “cynical” sublation of art and life, as a strategy of “desublimation,” of bringing art down from the sublime to the mundane, responds to a set of concerns similar to those that Wolin’s concept is intended to counter: the danger involved in creating utopian works which end up producing a self-sufficient form of aesthetic autonomy issuing in further works of “affirmative culture.” The notion of “desublimation,” as Marcuse describes it for example, involves creating a form of “anti-art” which aims firstly at “undoing the aesthetic form” that is, “the total of qualities (harmony, rhythm, contrast) which make an oeuvre a self-contained whole . . .”<sup>62</sup> In other

<sup>60</sup> Edgar Lohner describes this goal as the “Gleichsetzung von politischem und künstlerischem Fortschritt.” See his article, “Die Problematik des Begriffes der Avantgarde,” *Literarische Avantgarden*, ed. Manfred Hardt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 116.

<sup>61</sup> My description of the opposition between the “idealist” and the “historical” avant-garde is indebted to two pathbreaking articles: Edgar Lohner, “Die Problematik des Begriffes der Avantgarde,” and Manfred Hardt, “Zu Begriff, Geschichte und Theorie der literarischen Avantgarde,” both reprinted in the excellent collection *Literarische Avantgarden*, ed. Manfred Hardt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 113–127, 145–71.

<sup>62</sup> Herbert Marcuse, *Counterrevolution and Revolt* (Boston: Beacon, 1972), 81.

words, it involves overcoming precisely that illusionistic quality of harmony and order which is always present in the very form of the conventional organic work of art, and even in previous idealist versions of the avant-garde. Secondly, desublimated art involves reappropriating those sublime images and concepts of Western culture whose critical potential has been neutralized as cliché in affirmative culture and then re-writing them in such a way that their radical sense can resurface.<sup>63</sup>

### The "Romantic avant-garde" and the "Aktivisten"

In order to appreciate the way in which the tension between these two diametrically opposed conceptions of the avant-garde continues to define the expressionists' understanding of progressive art we must look briefly at the history of the term.

The earliest use of the term "avant-garde" as applied to a progressive artistic group occurs around 1825, toward the later phase of the European Romantic movements, and is associated with the followers of the proto-socialists Saint-Simon and Fourier.<sup>64</sup> The Saint-Simonist Olinde Rodrigues, for example, expressly calls upon artists "to serve as an avant-garde" for social change and for a "glorious future," arguing that it is above all art, with its unique qualities, that has the power through "fantasy and emotion" to affect its audience most directly, vitally and decisively. It is art which "supports reason" and produces in humankind both those sensations conducive to "noble thoughts"<sup>65</sup> as well as the energy needed to change the direction of society for the good of all.<sup>66</sup>

<sup>63</sup> One should note that Marcuse is also sceptical regarding the prospects for "anti-art." He fears that in undermining artistic form, the new works will simultaneously destroy the very basis for art's effect. See Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon, 1969), 34–35.

<sup>64</sup> On the early history of the avant-garde, see D. D. Egbert, *Social Radicalism and the Arts* (New York: Knopf, 1970); also Matei Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity: Avant-Garde, Decadence, Kitsch* (1977: Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987), 100–104.

<sup>65</sup> See Olinde Rodrigues "L'artiste, le savant et l'industriel," *Oeuvres de Saint-Simon et d'Enfantin* (Aalen: Otto Zeller, 1964), 207–213.

<sup>66</sup> This "avant-gardist" conviction is shared, for example, by many of the progressive English writers of the Romantic period, who similarly hold the belief that the central social goal of poetry is less the propagation of concrete political goals or social policies, than the more general ideal of a moral and spiritual "elevation" through art. With Wordsworth, for example, the work of art is to

Both the early progressive social movements of the first half of the nineteenth century and many of the Romantic writers clearly share the same concern both to purify the individual's sensations and refine his or her processing of experience by looking towards art and the instructive example of the aesthetic sphere.<sup>67</sup> Artistic and social practice are thus coordinated to the extent that art is to serve life both as the repository of eternal virtues and as the guide and the model of experience, thereby elevating mundane reality to the sublime level of art while preserving its own distance as a transcendent and autonomous realm. Where art takes on this leadership function, the image of the artist too begins to change and comes to be linked to that of the seer or priest.<sup>68</sup> Indeed, the role of art is viewed by many as so important, and the elite character of the artistic avant-garde becomes so pronounced that in some instances its original goals of meliorism and the stimulation of a social conscience are abandoned in favor of more self-seeking forms of art, such as aestheticism and *l'art pour l'art*.<sup>69</sup>

generate those civilizing and enlightening emotions which bind people together, strengthening and purifying the affections and so enlarging the individual's capacity to resist early modernity's negative effects – most notably those of alienation – which occur with the “increasing accumulation of men in cities” and the “uniformity of occupations.” (See Wordsworth, “Observations Prefixed to the Second Edition,” *Lyrical Ballads*). Shelley echoes this humanitarianism and “passion for reforming the world.” He maintains that his “purpose has hitherto been simply to familiarise the highly refined imagination of the more select classes of poetical readers with beautiful idealisms of moral excellence . . .” However, the goal of “refining” the human imagination through art's “idealisms” should not mean dedicating “poetical compositions solely to the direct enforcement of reform . . .” For Shelley also stoutly defends aesthetic autonomy and attempts to relieve art both of the danger of political or pedagogical instrumentalization (“Didactic poetry is my abhorrence”), and of entanglement within concrete historical situations and material circumstances: “For my part I had rather be damned with Plato and Lord Bacon than go to heaven with Paley and Malthus.” See Shelley, “Preface to Prometheus Unbound,” *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, ed. D. Reiman and S. Powers (New York: Norton, 1977), 135. This autonomy ensures that art's crucial separation from everyday reality and its elevation to autonomous status also turns it into a transcendent repository of moral and spiritual values: “A Poet participates in the eternal, the infinite, and the one” rather than in “time and place and number.” See Shelley, “A Defence of Poetry,” *Shelley's Poetry and Prose*, 483.

<sup>67</sup> D. D. Egbert describes the relationship between these two early avant-garde movements in his history *Social Radicalism and the Arts*.

<sup>68</sup> See D. D. Egbert, “The Idea of ‘Avant-Garde’ in Art and Politics,” *Literarische Avantgarden*, ed. Manfred Hardt (Darmstadt: Wissenschaftliche Buchgesellschaft, 1989), 49; also Calinescu, *Faces of Modernity*, 105.

<sup>69</sup> On this point see D. D. Egbert “The Idea of ‘Avant-Garde’ in Art and Politics,” 50. This fundamental historical link between aestheticism and the avant-garde provides an interesting alternative viewpoint to that offered by Bürger on the

Now if the "idealist" avant-garde of the early nineteenth century is characterized by the goal of reducing the distance between art and life, and by the elevation of the worldly to the ideal sphere of art, I would maintain, in contrast to Bürger, that the historical avant-garde of the early twentieth century is defined precisely by its attack on this previously progressive function of sublimation and by its attempt to reverse the direction by which art and life are brought together. For, as we saw earlier in this chapter, although idealist art has the critical function of preserving in the aesthetic sphere those ideals which have not been realized in life, as Marcuse notes, such sublimated art also constitutes a form of "affirmative culture" which simultaneously postpones their fulfillment, since it offers on an aesthetic level a false reconciliation of real contradictions and conflicts, in other words, a purely illusory or "aesthetic" satisfaction of real needs.

Consequently far from "sublimating" or idealizing life through art, the historical avant-garde's attempt to reconcile art and life takes the opposite tack, as we have seen. It responds to the idealizing conventions of artistic form, and in particular to previous utopian versions of the avant-garde, by desublimating art and bringing it sharply down to earth, to the level of the banal and the everyday. It responds by destroying art's beautifying structures, and with them the illusory sense of mastery and closure that artistic form can bring. By rummaging through the debris of modernity for its new forms, and by seeking out the marginalized, the grotesque, the deformed and the discarded, the avant-garde creates instead a program of de-aestheticization. Through its de-aestheticized forms it produces a new aesthetics (or "anti-aesthetics") of the ugly, the fragmentary and the chaotic in order to subvert precisely this illusory sense of mastery,

question of aestheticism's role in the genesis of the historical avant-garde. It allows us to reassess a similar contradiction among many expressionists concerning their leadership role in society. For their self-appointed position as the intellectual and cultural leaders of the public is frequently colored by an odd mixture of concern for the spiritual welfare of their fellow man and disgust for his bourgeois philistinism. Rudolf Leonhard owns up to this ambivalence, saying that the poet has "despite his love for humanity in general a good degree of contempt for each individual among the masses . . ." ("bei aller etwaiger Liebe zum allgemeinen Menschen ein gut Teil Verachtung gegen jeden einzelnen aus der Masse . . ."). See Rudolf Leonhard, "Die Politik der Dichter," *Die weißen Blätter*, 2 (1915), Heft 6 (June): 814-816. Rpt. *Manifeste und Dokumente*, 364.

artificial closure and aesthetic control which clings to the traditional, organic notion of form, and not least to those sublimating forms employed by the idealist avant-garde.

Expressionism is clearly caught between these diametrically opposed conceptions of the avant-garde. Indeed, one of the difficulties for the literary historian in attempting to define the expressionist movement derives precisely from the fact that its various groupings frequently follow completely contradictory notions of what constitutes "progressive" art. Consequently in many of their manifestos and theoretical statements the expressionists are primarily engaged in the attempt to sort out these major differences in their approach towards oppositional forms of aesthetic discourse.<sup>70</sup>

The "activists" for example (writers such as Hiller, Rubiner, Pinthus, Wolfenstein and Heinrich Mann) tended to take their lead from the older, Romantic-utopian and socially engaged versions of avant-garde art. The activists were characterized by a "fervid revolutionary optimism"<sup>71</sup> and by the strong conviction that art needed to become an instrument of social meliorism.<sup>72</sup> Although they refused to adopt specific dogmas and orthodoxies, they did hold certain progressive, cherished values in common with some of the early utopian avant-gardes, such as a belief in fraternity (conceiving of themselves as "comrades of humanity") and in a "community of the spirit," while at the same time privileging a form of benevolent dictatorship by an intellectual and cultural elite that was to be "a leadership by the best."<sup>73</sup> This particular role for the writer was the one which Ludwig Rubiner famously endorsed in his polemic "The Writer Engages in Politics": "The writer's effect is a thousand times more powerful than that of the politician . . . The writer is the only one who possesses that which really shakes us: intensity . . . He speaks of the catas-

<sup>70</sup> For an interesting description of the various attitudes of the expressionists towards the relationship between art and society, see Augustinus Dierick, *German Expressionist Prose* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1987), 74-93.

<sup>71</sup> See H. Maclean, "Expressionism," *Periods in German Literature*, ed. J. M. Richie (London: Wolff, 1966), 264.

<sup>72</sup> See Wolfgang Paulsen, *Expressionismus und Aktivismus. Eine typologische Untersuchung* (Bern und Leipzig: Gotthelf, 1935), 14.

<sup>73</sup> "Führung durch die Besten". See the manifesto of the "Council of Spiritual Workers" ["Rat geistiger Arbeiter"] *Die Weltbühne* 14 (November 21, 1918), no. 47. Rpt. *Manifeste und Dokumente* 291.

trophes that he has taught us to see."<sup>74</sup> As with the utopianists of the early nineteenth century this leadership was to be spear-headed by the visionary poet, as the foremost representative of the category of the so-called "spiritual type" ("geistigen Typus").<sup>75</sup>

Similarly indicative of the close connection between the activists' thought and the early avant-garde's idealist aesthetics of sublimation is the activists' utopian belief in their cultural politics as a means of reconciling society. The omnipresence of the activists' central watchword "Geist" (spirit, mind) is symptomatic of this attitude. For this mystical force was seen by the activists as having the power to achieve exactly what their avant-garde predecessors had hoped for with their progressive cultural project: the power to purify ("läutern") individuals, harmonize society, and so raise reality up to the level of sublime perfection.<sup>76</sup>

On the other side of the expressionist movement to the activists are those who completely reject this utopian mode of thought and who, instead of raising up society to the level of art, pursue an iconoclastic poetics of "cynical sublation": deformation, de-aestheticization and desublimation with the goal of moving art down into realms it had not previously occupied. These are the expressionists whom I describe as the "expressionist avant-garde" throughout this book, and in the chapters that follow I want to explore in particular their creation of various oppositional discourses aimed at the disruption of convention, of form, of mimesis and of representational stability in general.

The expressionist avant-garde's various modes of de-aestheticization preempt any sense in which poetic form might serve as an illusory consolation at the level of the aesthetic for that which is missing in the real. Clearly with this form of avant-garde practice,

<sup>74</sup> "Der Dichter wirkt tausendmal stärker als der Politiker . . . Der Dichter ist der einzige, der hat, was uns erschüttert, Intensität . . . Er spreche von den Katastrophen, die er zu sehen uns gelehrt hat." Ludwig Rubiner "Der Dichter Greift in die Politik" *Die Aktion* 21, 22 (May, 1912): 713–714.

<sup>75</sup> See *Der Aktivismus*, ed. Wolfgang Rothe (Munich: DTV, 1969), 13.

<sup>76</sup> An example of this progressive vision of art – and of the role of "Geist" within it – may be seen in Heinrich Mann's famous polemic "Geist und Tat" ("Spirit and Action"). Here he regrets that, unlike the French who looked to art for the goals and ideals which supported their revolution, the Germans are "not gifted with enough imagination to pattern life according to the spirit" ("nicht bildnerisch genug begabt, um durchaus das Leben formen zu müssen nach dem Geist"). *Manifeste und Dokumente*, 269, 271.

there can be no flight for the reader of expressionism into forgetful admiration of the poets' formal techniques – Benjamin's fear in his "Producer"-essay – at the expense of acknowledging the critical thrust of their explicit and shocking content.<sup>77</sup>

Although not a "revolutionary" art in the political and pragmatic sense of the term, by re-writing the dominant discursive constructions of the real in a de-aestheticized or desublimated form, the expressionist avant-garde brings about what Marcuse calls a "revolution in perception."<sup>78</sup> In other words it uses the cognitive power of art to defamiliarize a very specific set of institutional conventions: those modes of seeing that have been canonized by the power of dominant social discourse and the pervasive institution of art.<sup>79</sup> Thus the program of de-aestheticization produces an art form whose central function involves questioning both the "affirmative" function of traditional culture, and the inherent, institutionally-conditioned ideological effects associated with it.

The expressionist avant-garde thus goes a long way to fulfilling Hohendahl's demand<sup>80</sup> for an "ideologically-charged continuation of this problematical category (aesthetic autonomy)."<sup>81</sup> It also fulfills the definition of a critical, autonomous form of art outlined by Wolin, since it negates the "aura of affirmation" while

<sup>77</sup> Similarly since the "metaphors" the expressionist poets employ are distorted and forced, they can clearly no longer derive their power from the individual "genius" of the artist's metaphorical imagination, nor rest on the intuition – conventionally accessible only to the poet's finer sensibilities – of an ordered cosmos in which part relates to part, just as tenor relates to vehicle (as was still the case, for example, with Baudelaire's "correspondences" or even with Hofmannsthal's "interconnecting world" or "Welt der Bezüge").

<sup>78</sup> Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 37.

<sup>79</sup> Marcuse's conception of progressive art is similarly constituted in terms of this art's ability to oppose a restrictive or hegemonic ideological formation, such as the dominant social discourses: "The senses must learn not to see things anymore in the medium of that law and order which has formed them; the bad functionalism which organizes our sensibility must be smashed." See Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 39.

<sup>80</sup> Peter Uwe Hohendahl, "The Loss of Reality: Gottfried Benn's Early Prose," *Modernity and the Text*, 92.

<sup>81</sup> In this respect I would maintain – despite Marcuse's cautions regarding "anti-art" – that although this avant-garde art is destructive with regard to artistic form, it nevertheless remains within the boundaries of his definition of art since its radical or "progressive" effect still depends upon its ability to defamiliarize established aesthetic forms. At the same time this art "insists on its radical autonomy" and so preserves a critical and "ideologically charged" distance to life.



simultaneously remaining largely free of the kind of direct political or pedagogical interventions which would jeopardize its autonomy and its critical capacity for negation. For like the progressive art which Marcuse envisages, this avant-garde is "alien to the revolutionary practice by virtue of the artist's commitment to Form: Form as art's own reality, as *die Sache selbst*."<sup>82</sup> And precisely on account of this commitment it remains an autonomous and yet entirely critical form of oppositional discourse.

These modifications of Bürger's theory not only help to establish expressionism's close relationship to the general thinking behind the avant-garde, they help at the same time to differentiate between the different factions within the expressionist movement. For example the preservation of aesthetic autonomy as a critical and ideologically oriented category rather than as a privileged shelter for art would allow us to distinguish the expressionist avant-garde from those other formations associated with the movement whose progressiveness, as with modernism, lies primarily in their self-sufficient, formal experimentation.

As I will argue later, some of the most challenging expressionist writers are those, such as Döblin, Benn and Kafka, who clearly distance themselves from the bandwagon of "revolutionary" excesses in Expressionism (such as those practiced by the activist, the utopian or the "O Mensch" ["Oh Man"] groups). Like many of their modernist counterparts they scarcely question the necessity for aesthetic autonomy in their individualist search for style. Nevertheless, they are clearly linked primarily to the historical avant-garde rather than to modernism as a whole by their fundamental questioning of the "dominant social discourses," the ideological and epistemological premises of conventional concepts of rationality and subjectivity which the institution of art supports. They are "avant-garde" not only in their interrogation of the way that these conventions support the idea of the "normalcy" of the bourgeois world, but in their creation of a set of "oppositional discourses" intended to overhaul the institutionalized artistic means through which certain values are privileged.

Consequently, it is no coincidence that the expressionist works which have had the most lasting and profound impact come from precisely those writers who avoided nailing their colors directly to

<sup>82</sup> Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation*, 39. Emphasis in original.

the mast of a determinate and historical social program and who avoided associating themselves wholly with a clearly definable *collective* "style" and rhetoric. The writers of the expressionist avant-garde differ for example from those "epigonal" or "naive"<sup>83</sup> expressionists, who merely take up the *spirit* of the "expressionist revolution," but who are not interested in creating the kind of vital and progressive new forms through which their innovative ideological orientation might be conveyed. The latter lack that crucial understanding of the need to balance "Tendenz" and "Technik," in other words, the need to match their progressive social goals with a correspondingly progressive set of formal strategies created with an historical awareness of the social and institutional constraints within which art functions.<sup>84</sup> Lacking this institutional insight they are often content instead simply to reproduce tiredly expressionism's characteristic rhetorical gestures and outward flourishes – and as a result they risk being recuperated by the institution of art, or ending up as forgotten cultural fashion victims.

On the other hand, the expressionist avant-garde differs from those whose commitment was *exclusively* to extra-aesthetic goals (such as the political merging of art and life-praxis) and who consequently suffered from their abandonment of aesthetic autonomy. Their works have consequently taken on that "ephemeral quality," which according to Adorno, is the fate of those works that "merely assimilate themselves sedulously to the brute existence against which they protest" so that "from the very first day they belong to the seminars in which they inevitably end."<sup>85</sup>

<sup>83</sup> See Walter Sokel's definition of "naive" or "rhetorical" expressionism in his book *The Writer in Extremis* 18–20.

<sup>84</sup> Against other politically engaged expressionists the "expressionist avant-garde" would then be distinguished from those expressionist writers, whose "commitment" at the level of content (or "Tendenz") is not matched by "Technik" and by a corresponding rejection of the institution of art and its conventions. An example would be the plays of Carl Sternheim, whose radical satires on the conventions of bourgeois life largely preserve the inherited codes of bourgeois theater as well as the conventions of organic form. In this sense the avant-garde antithesis of Sternheim would be Brecht's theater.

<sup>85</sup> Adorno, "Commitment," *The Essential Frankfurt School Reader*, ed. A. Arato and E. Gebhardt (New York, 1978), 30. Also quoted by Wolin, "Modernism vs. Postmodernism," 15.

Prospectus.

The reaction against realism: counter-discourse and the avant-garde

In the chapters that follow my intention is not to debate the various definitions of expressionism nor to discuss which texts are to be considered "expressionist" and which are not. As I have already indicated, the most challenging writers of the expressionist generation were those who were not content merely to follow a predetermined set of stylistic or thematic criteria – as did the more epigonal and "naive" expressionists – but who tended rather to break all the rules, not least their own.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, the search for an all-inclusive definition is problematic to the extent that the most challenging expressionists such as Kafka, Benn and Döblin were simultaneously the most vociferous "anti-expressionists."

It is also not my goal here to offer an exhaustive account of the entire expressionist movement in all its complexities and variations, or to cite a series of expressionist texts that can be matched point by point to the precise theoretical categories which have been elucidated in this discussion of the avant-garde. This would be to efface the heterogeneity of the expressionist movement<sup>87</sup> and at the same time to reduce the scope of my working definition of the avant-garde. Instead I shall focus on a group of texts that seem to embody the primary avant-garde functions of expressionism that I have discussed here.

For example, one of the central means by which expressionism identifies itself as an avant-garde movement, and by which it marks its distance to tradition and the cultural institution as a whole is through its relationship to realism and the dominant conventions of representation. The discussion of this relationship to realism will constitute one of the means by which I will show in

<sup>86</sup> This is the case for example with Döblin, who rejects other practices and other "-isms" in favor of his own "Döblinismus." His theories of "cinematic style" in prose ("Kinostil") and "logical naturalism" ("konsequenter Naturalismus") and the rules that he sets up are observed only where he breaches them or subverts their obvious meaning. See Alfred Döblin, "Futuristische Worttechnik," *Aufsätze zur Literatur*, ed. Walter Muschg (Freiburg: Walter, 1963), 15. See also chapter 3 below.

<sup>87</sup> Gerhard Knapp's warnings in this regard are very much to the point, in particular his observation that with the term "expressionism" there is the suggestion of "a unified epochal style which, in reality never existed." See Gerhard Knapp, *Die Literatur des Expressionismus* (Munich: Beck, 1979), 13–16.

the following chapters that the expressionist texts examined here have a common basis in the thinking of the avant-garde. Since modernism too has an iconoclastic relationship to this tradition – even though as I have indicated, it often remains subtly conservative – it is worth making some preliminary distinctions between these two cultural formations with regard to realism.

In various analogous ways, both modernism and the avant-garde oppose realism's characteristic gesture of pretending to offer a comprehensive survey and rational explanation of the world. Both challenge the narrative structures and conventional rationalist constructions through which reality is interpreted, in order that they can make the inherited realist models of the world less self-evident or "natural." Through their emphasis on the disclosure of a new multiplicity of consciousness and perspective they present an awareness of areas previously excluded from that view of the world which is ideologically sanctioned by the dominant social discourses, and they offer instead the sense of an underlying disorder, anarchy and the instability of conventional values. In place of realism's claim to present an abiding truth, modernism and the historical avant-garde both offer mere perspectives, conjectures and provisional meanings which are foregrounded as ambiguous, unstable and open to doubt. It is this "epistemological uncertainty" and anomic doubt that characterize the modernist period as a whole and set it off from the nineteenth century.<sup>88</sup>

However, despite the similarities in their response to modernity, there is a fundamental difference between the two. In the case of modernism, there is the sense that the inherited models and artistic forms are rejected largely because of the outdatedness and inadequacy of nineteenth-century realism in accounting for the new areas of experience being explored. In its technical development of new methods and aesthetic forms with the function of assisting the intellectual adjustment to social changes, Modernism thus reflects the confident faith of the bourgeois in technology and

<sup>88</sup> Douwe Fokkema and Elrud Ibsch have described "epistemological doubt" as the central characteristic of modernism in their *Modernist Conjectures* (London: Hurst, 1987), 38–39. See also Brian McHale, "Change of Dominant from Modernist to Postmodernist Writing," *Approaching Postmodernism*, ed. Hans Bertens and Douwe Fokkema (Philadelphia and Amsterdam: John Benjamins, 1986), 53–78; see also his *Postmodernist Fiction* (London: Methuen, 1987).

social progress, and the belief that, as the world of modernity becomes more complex, so updated means will be developed for its accurate representation. In this regard, modernism clearly takes on an affirmative or legitimizing function as the cultural complement of bourgeois social practices.<sup>89</sup>

By contrast, where the expressionist avant-garde takes up similar issues connected to modernity, and adopts similar experimental artistic techniques in order to respond to them, it appears to cast off conventional realism not because the formal limitations or conventionality of its methods per se are repugnant to it (as in high modernism's reaction), but rather because of the ideological connotations of realism. For the expressionists, the goal is not only to account for the experience of modernity but more importantly to *deconstruct* this experience by exposing those seemingly self-evident epistemological categories and rational criteria through which modernity is organized – the dominant social discourses – and to do so without lapsing into sheer stylistic and technical fetishism.

In chapter 3 (on the expressionist poetics of Döblin and Benn) I will examine in detail two expressionist texts demonstrating a similar set of concerns and strategies to those of the “high” modernists, namely Döblin's “The Murder of a Buttercup” and Benn's “Rönne-Novellas.” As in modernism both of these texts deal with multiple perspectives and states of consciousness, and both similarly suppress the reader's conventional points of orientation within the reality of the text (for example the causality and the time-sequence of the story, the generic rules of the “novella”

<sup>89</sup> To draw on a concrete example from chapter 3 (on the poetics of expressionism), although modernism actively rejects the mimetic tradition as exemplified by nineteenth-century realism and naturalism, its drive for technical sophistication and progress on a purely formal level leads it into the position of developing its own techniques, such as the “stream-of-consciousness” and those other strategies intended to reflect the drastic changes which had taken place in the sense of time and space in modernity. These are refined and perfected to such an extent that they could be seen as the ultimate culmination and *fulfillment* – rather than the subversion – of the realistic tendencies of the nineteenth century, whereby the “stream-of-consciousness” technique becomes the logical continuation of naturalism's “Sekundenstil” (or detailed recording of minutiae) and in a sense its extension into the realm of human thought, emotion and the unconscious. The lack of ideological and institutional awareness in modernism, as with Benjamin's example of the technically perfect photograph of a slum (see below, p. 12–13), means that in its drive for stylistic and representational refinement it risks missing the point.

and so on).<sup>90</sup> However, these texts adopt two important characteristics which clearly place them at center of the avant-garde, as we have described it here.

Firstly, there is a clear attack upon the "normality" of the bourgeois world, a questioning of its self-evident character or the givenness of its structure. Both Döblin and Benn satirize the "burgher's" conventionalized and normalizing reactions to an encounter with alien realms of experience. But more than this they reveal that this set of ordered and rationalist responses is merely an attempt to hold in place one of the essential epistemological premises of the bourgeois world-view: the implicit belief in an unshakable and "organic" relationship between a clearly delineated Cartesian ego and a distinct and rationally constructed world.<sup>91</sup> Secondly, through the suppression of those narrative conventions and markers which in realism serve as signposts orienting the reader within the world of the text, the reader is made to experience at first hand a sense of disorientation (or "decentering") analogous to that described as affecting the protagonist in the text.<sup>92</sup>

The two features are related. For in this way the reader is both immersed in disparate impressions and made to experience at first hand the artificiality of those conventional discursive means of orientation and order which not only organize the realist text but also organize experience in modernity.<sup>93</sup> In this way the texts

<sup>90</sup> Hohendahl makes a similar point in discussing this strategy of disorienting the reader, stating that "[t]he reader finds only the fragments of a story, kept together by a narrator who moves from factual report to the articulation of consciousness with great ease." See "The Loss of Reality," *Modernity and the Text*, 84–5.

<sup>91</sup> In place of this rationalist construction of the real both texts reveal glimpses of a dialectical and discontinuous reality, seemingly inaccessible to conventional forms of rationality and meaning.

<sup>92</sup> Benn's protagonist "Rönne" experiences the world as a montage of discontinuous phenomena that cannot be assembled into a meaningful whole, while Döblin's figure "Fischer" experiences his relation to the world via a set of reified linguistic formulae and moral injunctions, and his selfhood as a mere collection of discontinuous bourgeois characteristics mediated through clichéd phrases and attitudes. See Benn, *Gehirne* (Stuttgart: Reclam, 1974), 3.

<sup>93</sup> For example through the text's rapid narrational shifts between perspectives and levels of consciousness in the two texts, the boundaries between subject and object are effaced, thereby destabilizing the positivistic convention of a rationally ordered conception of life based on a clear dichotomy between subject and object, and exposing it as a false and reified construction of realism. In the article to which I am indebted here Hohendahl makes a similar point ("The Loss of Reality," *Modernity and the Text*, 81–94). However I would go further than

do not merely attack the signifying convention of realism but simultaneously deconstruct the *ideology* of classical representational systems such as realism by calling into question those epistemological criteria which underpin it as a dominant social discourse.<sup>94</sup> Thus the avant-garde text becomes a kind of "oppositional discourse" which defamiliarizes the values and conventions projected by the institution of art, and which exposes the epistemological and ideological bases beneath the construction of both the bourgeois world and the realist text. As we shall see in the later chapters, it is this attempt to deconstruct not only realism itself but the particular codes and interpretations of reality on which that realism is based, that illustrates the institutional or ideological awareness defining the avant-garde and its oppositional capacity for "self-criticism." By these analogous means the more progressive expressionist texts demonstrate that their concern is not only to produce the fullest possible account of human consciousness under the impact of modernity – as is the case with the typically modernist treatment of time and space (such as with the stream-of-consciousness technique) – but that they are also tied inextricably to the fundamental critical and institutional assumptions that define the avant-garde: the critique of epistemology and ideology.

The underlying differences between the two movements can be traced back to the fact that unlike the avant-garde, modernism fails to reflect upon its own institutionalized position, or upon the possible recuperation of its iconoclastic and innovative impulses by the institution of art. Modernism assumes that its aesthetic autonomy guarantees it a position free from historical and institutional constraints, and it is consequently vulnerable to the fallacy that a social transformation can be brought about by

Hohendahl however in placing Benn's text very firmly within the overall area of concerns mapped out by the avant-garde. The deconstruction in Benn's experimental prose of the conventions both of bourgeois realism and of a corresponding set of discourses for interpreting reality that are associated with it goes beyond the mere "use of new techniques" (88) and has a very clear ideology-critical function not shared by the ironic and critical modernist works of, say Thomas Mann.

<sup>94</sup> This overburdening not only confounds the expectations of the reader (to the extent that these expectations are geared to interpreting a norm of realism oriented on nineteenth-century prose) thereby exposing them as being constructed by convention and the institution of art. It also assaults the rationalist attitude towards epistemology and the interpretation of reality associated with these institutionally determined horizons of expectation.

formal innovations and a revolutionary poetics alone. It is for this reason that modernism often remains covertly traditional, with its rebelliousness always locked securely into affirmative culture and its critical potential always already defused as mere aesthetic compensation.<sup>95</sup>

With the avant-garde by contrast, it is the awareness of the institutional constraints and social functioning of its texts which is uppermost in its concerns. The avant-garde does not presume that its autonomous status offers the basis on which it might lay claim to an ahistorical perspective, nor does it assume that it can bring about social change through formal and linguistic transformations. It is skeptical of realism's assumption of an epistemologically secure and autonomous point-of-view, and its counter-discourses are correspondingly geared to undermining this false objectivism.

The avant-garde's standpoint rests upon a form of ideology-critique that, as a mode of "self-criticism," is aware above all of its own epistemological limits and institutional conditioning. It engages the ideological and institutional status of art by attempting to deconstruct the dominant social discourses (that is, the implicit epistemology, reality-principle and social value-system) mediated by the institution, and it dismantles those representational conventions and social signifying practices through which social experience is organized and given meaning in the discursively "constructed" image of the world.

<sup>95</sup> Jochen Schulte-Sasse makes a similar point in "Carl Einstein," 42.