

Event: Historical Materialism New York  
Title: "Against Marxist Aesthetics"

From Adorno to Zizek, the most influential Marxist aestheticians have tended to assume the legitimacy of an analytic outlook in which art shows up as noteworthy primarily as a bearer of sensuously informed cognitive or semantic significance--roughly, what Arthur Danto has called "embodied meaning." Disagreements among these theorists (which are numerous and often bitter) tend to center on whether this or that artwork has significance that is utopian, critical, revolutionary, reactionary, or whatever. But underlying these disagreements is the shared presupposition that art's meaning is what's centrally at issue, and that, moreover, this meaning is least partly latent or veiled, and thus awaits disclosure by a penetrating critic and due appreciation by a duly enlightened audience. Let "Marxist hermeneutics" serve as a label for this broad current.

Our aim is to demonstrate some of the inherent limitations of form-, content-, and reception-centered (broadly: meaning-based or "semanticist") Marxist hermeneutics by arguing against the importance, relative to Marxism's defining emancipatory aims, of *art-as-enformed-meaning*. Dethroning hermeneutics as the core of Marxist art theory is necessary if we are to attain a clearer understanding of both the role of art in revolutionary practice and the role of revolutionary practice in the development of humanity's artistic powers.

We focus here on music. In this sphere, Marxist hermeneutics is something of an exegetical carnival. Adorno demonstrates how serial music is an index of totalitarian rational administration; Bloch teaches us to hear utopia singing to us in the tonal masterworks of the western canon; Zizek defends the experience of the "Wagnerian Sublime," an experience in which, allegedly, "We BECOME (identify with) the OBJECT which we were deprived of, so that our subjective identity is a repository of the traces of our lost objects"; and practitioners of Cultural Studies have deciphered the manner which the sub-cultural politics of representation is operative on the sonic surface of punk rock. The sheer variety and inconsistency of widely-circulated claims about musical meanings (and, characteristically, about the impact these meanings have on something called our "subjectivity") is bewildering. Worries about meaning occasion much hand-wringing. Is jazz reactionary/regressive (as Adorno thinks) or progressive/liberatory (as many members of the Birmingham school of cultural studies think)? We are made to think that much hinges on the answer to this question.

Before rushing to take sides in these Marxist family feuds, we should pause to consider the commitment to which all the feuding parties subscribe: the view that the semiotic and referential relationships in which a given artwork participates are to be taken as the primary factors by which to situate the artwork in a normative framework that is authoritative in, and regulative of, the society that produced it. For example, to cite another of Adorno's celebrated theses, popular songs are enmeshed in the normative framework of commodity production

because and insofar as popular songs are preeminent *signifiers* of commodification. Popular songs signify commodification, so the story goes, because and to the extent that they exhibit audible markers of associated with commodification, such as palpably formulaic construction, homogenization, easy consumability, and so on. A typical theoretical maneuver is to appeal to structural parallelisms or homologies or formal similarities as the grounds for claims about the semiotic function, and concomitant social embedded-ness, of art. Thus Adorno makes the assertion that Schoenberg's fourth string quartet signifies totalitarianism because both the structure of the piece and the structure of totalitarian social arrangements involve a prioritization of the whole over the part. Tin Pan Alley tunes, similarly, are in a sense "about" commodification because, like the mass-produced objects issuing from Fordist factories, these songs analogously bear witness, in their very form, to processes of standardization.

For Adorno, society is "inscribed" in art-works. This means that artworks can be viewed as repositories of "sedimented Geist"--in other words, as sensuous embodiments of a worldview, or an institutional arrangement, or a conception of personhood. For Adorno, it is an unargued first principle that music faithfully bears the imprint of the deepest contours of the social arrangement in which it was created, even if it does so in a way that is esoteric and hard to decipher. Adorno wrote in 1932 that "because musical life registers inner-bourgeois structural changes so directly analysis must necessarily consider the immanent differences and contradictions of the bourgeoisie."

Without getting deep into the tangled weeds of Adorno interpretation, we can contest the basic assumption that homological association is an unproblematic means of generating theoretical observations about music and society. To begin to appreciate this, consider Robert Witkin's (apt, in our view) characterization of Adorno's method of socio-musicological analysis: "Adorno's very notion of truth in music derives from his claim that the structural 'drama' of part-whole relations in music should reflect the objective condition of the individual subject in society. The fate of the elements, the musical details, 'motives' and 'themes' within the totality of the work, becomes a kind of formal analogue of the condition of the individual subject in society." Anyone who wishes to defend a view of this sort faces the horns of the following dilemma: either she must think that (A) social phenomena of a certain determinant structure are what causally account for the music's possession of an analogous sonic structure, or that (B) there is no such explanatory/causal connection.

Suppose that (B) is the case. If it is acknowledged that no causal bond or explanatory tie is present, then it must also be conceded that the structural homology is arbitrarily selected. For example, if political totalitarianism and twelve-tone composition stand in no privileged relationship of causal determination to one another--if there is no sense in which twelve-tone composition is the way it is *because of* political totalitarianism--then the structural similarity between them, even if demonstrable, is no more or less significant than their structural similarity to a host of other structurally similar things. In this instance, anything at all that

exhibits the generic property prioritizing whole over part (any biological or hierarchical system whatsoever, in effect) is just as structurally similar to twelve-tone music as political totalitarianism is. Yet many of these things would be silly to affiliate with twelve-tone serialism, for example: hierarchical interpersonal structures that organize traditional tribal societies; or a wristwatch, in which the individual parts are present only for the sake of the functioning of the whole; or linguistic comprehension, since, as Davidson and other semantic holists have claimed, “a sentence (and therefore a word) has meaning only in the context of a (whole) language.” Without the constraints imposed by the requirement of explanatory/causal relevance, doing homological hermeneutics is, as Robert Frost said of writing free verse, like playing tennis without a net. In this spirit, Arnold Hauser devastatingly notes that “there is nothing easier than to construct striking connections between the various styles in art and the social patterns predominating at any particular time, which are based on nothing but metaphor, and there is nothing more tempting than to make a show of such daring analogies.” In response to this, the peddler of arbitrary homologies could try to argue that there are political benefits to be reaped from attending to some arbitrary relations of similarity rather than others when engaging in an act of aesthetic appreciation. Perhaps the aesthetic practice of listening to serial music with an ear to its similarity to totalitarianism is a potentially radical or counter-hegemonic or consciousness-building practice, even if it is not a practice that deserves to be thought of as *veridical*. This stance can be consistently held (it seems to have been Bloch’s position about the kind of utopian listening he favored), but only at the cost of endorsing a listening practice that has a tendency toward being practically or performatively self-obviating. That is: the only people who are likely to be moved to attempt to hear music as a social allegory about (the evils of) capitalism are those who already possess the political sympathies that would constitute the ideological payoff, and thus the legitimating grounds, for listening to music in such a way. The only people who could be motivated to listen to music this way are those who don’t stand to benefit (politically or ideologically) from listening to it this way.

Now take case (A), in which the theorist is committed to the idea that a basic social structure is somehow causally responsible for the fact that a (superstructural or epiphenomenal) artistic product is structurally homologous to it. This theorist really believes that political totalitarianism somehow caused twelve-tone music to be hierarchical. Here, the problem is that the structural similarity itself cannot be appealed to as the reason for adducing the presence of a causal connection. For, contrary to what Thomas Aquinas thought, effects do not in general need to resemble their causes. Smoke does not *resemble* (much less *structurally* resemble) fire. One must therefore have an independent reason to think that in any given case the structural parallelism is causal and non-coincidental. In those rare cases in the literature where a such a reason is explicitly given, there is usually an invocation of the deep psychology of the art’s creator(s), as when John Shepherd claims that “because people create music, they reproduce in the basic structure of their music the basic structure of their own thought processes. If it is accepted that people’s thought processes are socially mediated, then it could be said that the basic structures of different styles of music are likewise socially mediated and socially

significant” (Shepherd 1987: 57). Peter J. Martin notes that Shepherd uses this notion to motivate the (wildly over-ambitious) thesis that it “is not accidental that the conventions and procedures of functional tonality have achieved virtually hegemonic status in Western societies, since in them is encoded a representation of the dominant ideology of industrial capitalism.” Yet the underlying principle is just a *non sequitur*. The mere fact that something was created by people isn’t even a *prima facie* reason for thinking that the created thing will share the “structure” of their ideology (even assuming that there is such a thing as the “structure” of an ideology, or such a thing as *the* ideology of a very large population of people).

Even if these arguments don’t succeed in utterly vitiating homologism, they do indicate that this style of social hermeneutics is mostly orthogonal to historical materialism as described and pursued in the work of Marx and Engels. With respect to the wide sphere of the cultural (the “superstructure”), Marx and Engels are concerned with the possibility of offering robust, non-magical, non-speculative, empirically verifiable causal explanations (in a suitably capacious sense of “causal” and “explanation”) of why this sphere’s distinguishing features are as they are, given that still deeper features of society--its forces and relations of production (the “base”)--are as they are.

Marx formulates this project with clarity in *The German Ideology* (1845-7): “This conception of history [historical materialism] thus relies on expounding the real process of production--starting from the material production of life itself--and comprehending the form of intercourse connected with and created by this mode of production [...] describing it in its actions as the state, and also explaining how all the different theoretical products and forms of consciousness, religion, philosophy, morality, etc. arise from it, and tracing the process of their formation from that basis.”

Delineating the “real process of production” that goes on in and around the arts, and that is determinative of them, is simply a different theoretical enterprise from that of attempting to decode concealed meanings within artworks through the interposition of an interpretive lense--even when that lense has a recognizably Marxist tint to it (as in Adorno’s paradigm of commodification or Lukacs’s paradigm of reification). The basic question of Marx-inspired *hermeneutics* is: how is this artwork properly experienced or appreciated or regarded or consumed, given the ways in which it is reflective of a social matrix or ideology? On the other hand, the basic (and authentically Marxist) historical-materialist question about art can be put this way: why, given the way society conducts its metabolism with nature, are the manifest, publicly verifiable attributes of a given artistic practice such as they are? In going about answering this latter question, the historical materialist makes two wagers: 1) that the most essential such attributes are consequent upon, or simply directly pertain to, the distinctive ways in which artistic use-values are actually produced (brought into existence); and 2) that the explanations for such attributes are therefore to be formulated with reference a set of more basic

facts about how other things in society are produced, or facts about how a society conducts its production *in general*.

The production of art is not in principle different from other forms of production in human society. Like everything else we do, it arises in the context of human beings' metabolic relation with nature. And this implicates art in a Marxian story of human progress. An increasing scale and complexity of the metabolic relation arises from capitalism's innate impetus toward the development of its productive forces. This productive self-augmentation, in turn, puts in place the necessary conditions for the invention of new human needs and the modification of old ones, among which are *aesthetic* needs. And the nature of a given artistic practice, like the nature of any practice oriented toward the satisfaction of human preferences and desires through the production and consumption of use-values, is the result of historical transformations in both a society's productive powers (its *capacity* to produce) and the attendant development of what it takes to be its own requirements (its *need* to produce). To state the insultingly obvious: Plato's Athens had no tradition of auto-tuned vocal performances, and none of the tastes and values appropriate to it (e.g., for the artificial sound of the exactly equally-tempered human voice), but instead had a tradition of metered, intoned poetic recitation, and the tastes and values appropriate to *it* (and thus for intervals that sound noxiously out of tune to ears like ours). This is not a mere matter of cultural difference, but follows straightforwardly from the operative material conditions and level of technological development that distinguish Cher's historical moment from Plato's.

That observation is simplistic and is made at a very high altitude, but the insight it contains can also animate a more fine-grained inspection of the distinctive features of particular art making practices. Consider an aspect of music making that Bukharin noticed: "the distribution of the members of an orchestra is determined precisely as in the factory, by the instruments and the groups of instruments; in other words, the arrangement and organization of these members is here conditioned by musical technique [...] and, through it, based on the stage of social evolution, on the technique of material production as such." Over the course of the nineteenth century, the forces and relations that had hitherto prevailed among music makers underwent significant developments. In Europe and the Americas, new kinds of institutions devoted to the art (for example: the profit-seeking opera company, the ticket-selling public concert hall, the capitalist music publishing firm) came to substantially mediate music's production and consumption, and in so doing supplanted church and court as the pivotal sites of the reproduction of musical life. Again to generalize, the musician had previously stood as a tenured servant with respect to his lordly master, a liveried member of the aristocratic retinue who provided services that were consumed in-house, in exchange for food, lodging, and an allowance. Subsequently he is ushered into the role of a petty proprietor, a skilled hand-worker who could sell the products of his labors either to firms (such as publishing houses) that purchased his musical handiwork against capital as means of production, or directly to

individual consumers who purchased them against revenue as luxury goods for private consumption.

The development of industrial production and the consequent spread of capitalist social relations, as Bukharin suggests, essentially conditions this change. But this is not a fact about how music is directly reflective, at a structural level, of the configuration of human bodies on the factory floor. Rather, it is a fact about how new technologies and organizational forms brought into being by the exigencies of capitalist competition are a precondition for the emergence, on a socially significant scale, of certain musical use-values and techniques, and of correlative musical inclinations and desires. The story of the modern orchestra is the story of the development of the sciences of metallurgy and acoustics. The orchestra's division of labor is the one made necessary by the material nature of what can be called the *machinofacture* of pleasing sounds. And the kinds of consumable, desirable musical sounds a creative musical worker (a composer) brings into being when her conception of pitch space is shaped by the sonic capacities of this ensemble of machines is different from what it would be were she to have different resources at her disposal. It was remarked at the opening of Wagner's Bayreuth Festival that its theater reminded the onlooker of a factory. A more germane observation is that most of the Festspielhaus's modern marvels, including the instruments its musicians played, were *in fact made in a factory*, or were made possible by technologies emanating from factories.

While industrial capitalism was the context for these transformations, an explanation of the historical constitution of these practices would run aground if it overlooked the fact that musical production--unlike, say, textile production--was never fully brought into the circuit of capital. This is not mere happenstance. The kind of musical creation Wagner engaged it could not be the product of abstract labor done by a wage laborer at the behest of a capitalist. There is no socially necessary labor time for the writing of *Parsifal*. Owing to the fact that certain kinds of music making resist formal and real subsumption under capital, musically relevant technological developments do not tend to emanate from the sphere of musical production itself, as an attempt on the part of a musical capitalist to secure superprofits through innovation. An account of the mechanisms whereby exogenous technological innovation is brought into, and thereafter reconfigures, the sphere of largely non-capitalistic musical production, and an account of how this process determines *the way the world sounds*, is what is owed to us by a properly Marxist (and properly *wissenschaftlich*) *Musikwissenschaft*.

While a historical-materialist approach to the explanation of art practices can have many and various motivations, one stems from witnessing the pathologies that mar creative life in society, and from a wish to understand them in order to overcome them. A host of diminishment of human musical flourishing are traceable to the kinds processes outlined above. To return to the orchestral example: the instrumental specialist--the worker who spends her whole life perfecting her technique on the oboe, and slavishly whittling reeds for it by hand--is a victim of complex and expanded musical techniques, many (as was noted above) driven by technological advances

(spurred by the inherent impulses of value production in the economy at large) that require greater and greater specialization. Conservatory musicians spend countless hours in practice rooms, not freely expressing their creative potential, but obsessively perfecting orchestral excerpts in alienated solitude. And there is no time here to touch on the most integral malady of all: the yawning gap that now separates those who make art and those who consume it, a truly striking perversion of our necessarily communally-enacted species-being. Western Marxists have been fond of appealing to the concept of artistic decadence, a Marxian elaboration of a dominant theme in Hegel's aesthetics. A historical materialism of the arts can, at once, register the causes of infelicities and contradictions in musical life as it currently exists *and* point to the necessary conditions for overcoming the social relations that fetter the full development of our creative human selves. Mikhail Lifshits, referring to Hegel's End of Art thesis (although he could have had Adorno's in mind), writes: "This doctrine is a simplified and schematized form of the idealistic dogma of the final decay of art in the kingdom of pure reason, that is, in bourgeois society. But since history does not end with bourgeois society, the decadence of art under capitalism is not the last step in the evolution of creative art." Historical materialism can demonstrate what it would mean to secure the objective conditions for a revolution in the relations of production, and *a fortiori* of art production, a transformation that will fulfill the promise of our human productive capacities through a universalization of free association and of the kind of leisure that is the wellspring of untrammelled creativity. However, figuring out what this will be like, and figuring out what it will take for it to happen, is not a matter of properly interpreting how music "reflects" or "signifies" processes of production in its formal structure. It is a matter of correctly grasping how music is literally a product of such processes, and also a matter of grasping their current state of unfreedom and their potential for being liberated.

**[END]**

In spite of their apparent remoteness from brute economic realities, aesthetic concerns have always exerted a certain magnetism for Marxists. The impulse to develop a systematic aesthetics has perennially arisen within Marxist thought since the early days of the Second International. Then as now, the focus has overwhelmingly been on matters of form, content, and reception.

determine the extent to which the relevant forces and relations of art production are determined by the same developments seen in the the production of other use-values. As Bukharin writes, citing a musical example: “the distribution of the members of an orchestra is determined precisely as in the factory, by the instruments and the groups of instruments; in other words, the arrangement and organization of these members is here conditioned by musical technique [...] and, through it, based on the stage of social evolution, on the technique of material production as such.” The kind of orchestra Bukharin had in mind was one designed to produce concert performances for a paying audience. At this stage in history, the institutions that had hitherto required music making as part and parcel of their activities (paradigmatically, the church and court) no longer provided society’s musical powers with a context in which to realize themselves. Over the course of the nineteenth century, musical production in general became increasingly socialized and democratized as more and more segments of the population (including the working class) could consume music. As music making became socialized through mediation by exchange, the division of musical labor in European society became increasingly rigid. All this allowed the relations of musical production in an enterprise like the concert orchestra to take on features much like that of factory industry.

Additionally, factory industry, with its characteristic machinofacture, made possible developments in the production of the tools of musical production that were impossible before. The advances in keyboard instruments in particular are the result of this transformation, as relatively small, wooden instruments are replaced by instruments shot through with steel that could only be made on a factory floor and which require a host of professional piano technicians to maintain.

At the same time, however, there are ways in which the relations of arts production can fail to conform to those relations that characterize the production of other use-values. For example, while the labor-power of a songwriter in the music industry can, in principle, be traded like any other commodity in society, there is no socially necessary labor time to which this kind of labor can be reduced. The kind of labor that makes a song a use-value cannot be abstract labor. Therefore, songwriting remains to this day a handicraft, owned by its producer at the moment at which it is sold, for example, to another artist or a record company. Songwriting is not, therefore, part of the circuit of capital, even when it is ensconced in a capitalist music industry.

4.

Historical materialism, for all the explanatory insights in can generate, fails to fulfill its promise if it is not at the same time a tool of the self-organization of workers, the means of our concrete grasp on the social world and the basis for overcoming current social relations through our practice as a class. The Soviet poet Mayakovsky understood historical materialism’s relevance to art in just this way. In his 1926 treatise on poetry writing--simply titled, “How To Make Verses”--he enumerates what is indispensable to the poet of his moment: “First thing. The presence of a problem in society the solution of which is conceivable only in poetical terms. [...] Second thing. An exact knowledge [...] of the desires of your class. [...] Third thing. Materials.

Words. Fill your storehouse constantly, fill the granaries of your skull with all kinds of words, necessary, expressive, rare, invented, renovated and manufactured. [...] Fourth thing. Equipment for the plant and tools for the assembly line. A pen, a pencil, a typewriter. [...] Fifth thing. Skills and techniques of handling words, extremely personal things, which come only with years of daily work.” Written as they were after the Bolshevik victory, his instructions assume the need to carry into the realm of poetic production relevant innovations from the progressive transformation of other industries that sought to reproduce Soviet life on a new basis.

The goal of Marxist hermeneutics was to foster a privileged kind of art reception. The goal of historical materialism vis-a-vis the arts is to make plain the objective possibility of revolutionizing the practice of art making. Tracing the development of our society’s powers of artistic production and the maker-to-maker relations proper to them provides the theoretical means for understanding how they can be overcome in the context of generalized free association.

Take, for example, the above-mentioned tendential separation of music-productive forces from the religious and state institutions in which they had grown up. The much-touted “autonomy” of music from its original use contexts and the new division of music making labor that accompanied this change served as the conditions for the explosion of innovations in the technical capacities of musicians. The rise of the concertizing virtuoso, the ability of composers to have recourse to extended techniques and newly available instruments, and the openness (beginning in the nineteenth century and continuing in earnest throughout the twentieth) of musicians to techniques proper to other societies and times can be attributed to this transformation in musical productive relations. While great advances were made in the skills and abilities of music makers, both in quantitative and qualitative terms, the social relations of production systematically prevented these from playing a useful role in social life. The musician in this system was always an individual or subordinate to an individual (as in the orchestra). The musician by-and-large remained a handicraftsman. It can readily be intuited that a distaste for “decadence” in the art stems from this systematic fettering of the forces of musical production by the isolating relations musicians entered into without having consciously decided to.