

# Mediations

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## The Importance of Being Autonomous: Toward a Marxist Defense of Art for Art's Sake

Jackson Petsche

In a letter to Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno once wrote, "*l'art pour l'art* is...in need of a defense."<sup>1</sup> This strange and somewhat cryptic remark is interesting coming from a Marxist critic who made several criticisms of "*l'art pour l'art*" or art for art's sake. What did Adorno mean by a defense, and what kind of defense could he have had in mind? Art for art's sake, with its insistence on art's autonomy and its disavowal of art's social function or role, would seem to be patently and indelibly at odds with a Marxist aesthetic. For the Marxist aesthetic follows Marx's claim that art is a mode of production within social relations.<sup>2</sup> However, a defense is not an endorsement. Adorno was suggesting an alternative, or a challenge, to the reaction against autonomous art in favor of committed art. Adorno realized that such a simplistic binary was a fallacy. The defense, then, of art for art's sake consists of the realization of the dialectic of art's unavoidable autonomous status with art's position within social relations and modes of production.

A realization of the dialectical position of the work of art is especially relevant in the cultural climate of late capitalism wherein both subjects and objects appear to have lost their autonomy in the realm of the aesthetic. Adorno's comment regarding *l'art pour l'art* remains intriguing precisely because it underscores the importance of the autonomy of art, and it is to the autonomous status of art that one needs to return in contemplating the postmodern, and the commodification of the aesthetic inherent in late capitalism. Fredric Jameson argues that what he views as a "return of the aesthetic" in the postmodern has coincided with "the end of the political," and Jameson explains this dialectically as being the result of "the end of artistic autonomy, of the work of art and its frame."<sup>3</sup> More recently, Nicholas Brown has asserted that "what differentiates Adorno's culture industry from the self-representation of our own contemporary moment is that the art-commodity now has no other."<sup>4</sup> As Brown notes, "[f]or Adorno, the art-commodity had a plausible other or negative horizon, namely modernism."<sup>5</sup> Brown is right — the notion of art as a "plausible other" has disappeared in our current climate of capitalism. And this disappearance of a "plausible other or negative horizon" can be linked with Jameson's notion of "the end of the political" in that subjects — the spectators of art, the readers of literary texts — no longer appear to expect, or look for, such a "plausible other."

Thus, I would argue that the end of art's autonomy in postmodernism has resulted

in the end of the individual subject's ability to differentiate the form of art from the commodity form. The notion of the end of art's autonomy is interconnected with the postmodern notion of the "death of the subject." Jameson astutely recognizes that the postmodern discourse regarding the "death of the subject," wherein the centered subject or unique, autonomous individual is recognized to have been a fiction, posits "an aesthetic dilemma."<sup>6</sup> For, as Jameson suggests, "if the experience and ideology of the unique self...is over and done with, then it is no longer clear what the artists and writers of the present period are supposed to be doing."<sup>7</sup> Jameson is right to point to the ambiguity regarding individual artistic expression, but what seems just as important is what would seem to be the loss of individual subjective appreciation in the postmodern aesthetic.

Leon Trotsky realized that the subject does not merely appreciate the form of art, that the experience of art — while the result of specific modes of production — is not the same as the experience of the commodity form. In *Literature and Revolution* Trotsky points out, "The form of art is to a certain and very large degree independent, but the artist who creates this form, and the spectator who is enjoying it, are not empty machines, one for creating form and the other for appreciating it."<sup>8</sup> What Trotsky helps to illustrate is that art's autonomy is interdependent with social relations and conditions; for art to have its autonomy, its independence, it must be dependent upon subjects of society who both create and participate with its form. With the end of art's autonomy in postmodernism, a reduction of the subject (both as creator and appreciator) to an "empty machine" seems, indeed, to have taken place.

If Jameson is correct that the postmodern has seen a "return of the aesthetic," then it is important to consider Jameson's claim that "aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally."<sup>9</sup> In a culture that is bombarded and inundated with images, "aesthetic experience is now," Jameson states, "everywhere and saturates social and daily life in general."<sup>10</sup> The "return of the aesthetic" in the postmodern thus represents the antithesis of the notions of art for art's sake which sought, with what can be seen as elitist claims, to separate art from bourgeois norms and the sordid, ugly, and mundane reality of urban, industrial existence. Paradoxically, this postmodern "return of the aesthetic," for Jameson, represents "in a strict philosophical sense...the end of the aesthetic itself, or of aesthetics in general."<sup>11</sup> With the oversaturation of the aesthetic, and of cultural production in general, wherein everything, in effect, becomes culture, the "'specificity' of the aesthetic (and even of culture as such) is necessarily blurred or lost altogether."<sup>12</sup> It would seem, then, that notions of the uniqueness and the autonomy of the work of art, not to mention its beauty, may be worth revisiting no matter how limiting those notions sound to postmodern ears. For the "'specificity' of the aesthetic" demands an attention to the work of art.

To understand any possible defense of art for art's sake one must understand what art for art's sake truly is. Adorno was discussing in the 1930s a theory of art that began

a hundred years before in France. Théophile Gautier was the first to use the term *l'art pour l'art*, proclaiming that it was antithetical to art's true purpose to serve any moral or social function.<sup>13</sup> The aesthetic idea of *l'art pour l'art* gained momentum in England where it was viewed as a way to combat the moral didacticism which permeated Victorian art and literature. In England, the most famous endorsement of art for art's sake, as it was translated into English, was found in the aesthetic criticism of Walter Pater. The term "art for art's sake" was referred to in the concluding sentence of his notorious work *The Renaissance*, written in 1873, wherein Pater claimed art's most important aim was to give pleasure and "to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass."<sup>14</sup> By the 1890s, *The Renaissance* was something of a bible among the Decadent writers of the time.<sup>15</sup> Oscar Wilde once referred to it as his "golden book."<sup>16</sup> The Decadent writers, following Pater's lead, insisted even more emphatically on art's autonomy.

The aesthetic of art for art's sake was from its inception a revolt against bourgeois existence. However, as the Russian Marxist Gyorgii Plekhanov once pointed out in an essay on art for art's sake (published just twelve years after the turn of the century), "Gautier hated the 'bourgeois' but at the same time he denounced the idea that the hour was at hand to eradicate bourgeois social relations."<sup>17</sup> Plekhanov posits an essential criticism of art for art's sake insofar as art for art's sake, while condemning bourgeois morality, was not in actuality condemning bourgeois social relations. The difference is, obviously, of the utmost importance. To advocate for art's autonomy against the limitations of bourgeois morality without recognizing the processes of reification, ideology, and hegemony, which brought such morality into being, is problematic. Such a lack of vision could quickly deteriorate into what Frantz Fanon once called "aesthetic expressions of respect for the established order."<sup>18</sup> In other words, the Decadent writers and artists of the *fin de siècle*, for example, despite all their aesthetic rebellion could in fact be seen to be respecting aspects of the established order due to their avoidance of the reality of social relations.

One possible exception is Oscar Wilde, whose "The Soul of Man under Socialism" represents a lengthy treatise on how art, the artist, and the individual cannot truly thrive under "the institution of private property."<sup>19</sup> In his own unique Wildean fashion, Wilde depicts a socialism that would incorporate the Marxian notion of use-value with the autonomy of art and the artist: "*The State is to make what is useful. The individual is to make what is beautiful.*"<sup>20</sup> The commodity does not seem to exist in such a scenario; however, Wilde never explains whether or not this art — these beautiful objects — will be sold or how they will be consumed. Perhaps Wilde's ambiguity can be discerned in the fact that, as Marion Thain has pointed out in her essay on *fin de siècle* poetry, "aestheticism became prominent just as economic and consumerist issues began to impinge on art through the rise of mass culture at the end of the nineteenth century."<sup>21</sup> What Thain refers to as the "aesthetic/economic paradox" of the *fin de siècle* is in fact not a paradox but the dialectic of art's autonomous status within social

relations and modes of production.<sup>22</sup> Moreover, it is not a paradox limited to the *fin de siècle* but one that is prominent in the eras of modernism and postmodernism as Jameson has pointed out.

Adorno perhaps came closest to making the defense of *l'art pour l'art* when he claimed in *Aesthetic Theory* that “art becomes social by its opposition to society, and it occupies this position only as autonomous art...it criticizes society by merely existing.”<sup>23</sup> Adorno seems to be taking a similar position to that of the art for art's sake movement which opposed society, particularly Victorian society, in its very insistence on art's autonomy. However, Adorno clearly departs from Wilde's notion that “Art never expresses anything but itself.”<sup>24</sup> Adorno emphasizes that art, by virtue of its very autonomy, expresses opposition to the society from which it cannot be separated. It is this notion of art's autonomy that establishes a Marxist defense of art for art's sake, suggesting, as it does, the dialectical nature of such a defense; for art at once both opposes society and exists as a product of society. The question is whether or not art can more specifically oppose social relations while simultaneously being a commodity of social relations. The autonomy of art is thus a lie that art tells itself, which paradoxically contains a truth. Art, according to Adorno, can never be truly autonomous and yet it must take on that status in order to criticize society.

Adorno's claims to the social role of art's autonomy relate to Jameson's observations regarding the “return of the aesthetic” and the “end of the political” in the postmodern being the result of the end of art's autonomy. For the aesthetic, in one sense, in the postmodern no longer contains the subversive realization of the autonomy of art. Art metamorphosed into, as Herbert Marcuse put it, “anti-art,” or the notion of the end of art — all categorical designations claiming an end of the aesthetic.<sup>25</sup> Paradoxically, however, the postmodern has seen, as Jameson has continued to point out, a saturation of the aesthetic in commodity production. Thus advertisements might contain more “beauty” than what Adorno and Marcuse would call “authentic works of art.” Moreover, contemporary works of art have often lost the ability to shock or disturb the status quo. As Jameson states, “even the most offensive forms of this art...are all taken in stride by society, and they are commercially successful unlike the productions of older high modernism.”<sup>26</sup> The most salient feature of Jameson's criticism is the realization of the commercial, and thus financial, success of these newer forms of art in the postmodern; the alienating effects of art have become marketable. Marcuse predicted such an outcome when he observed the acculturation of the art of high modernism into the “one-dimensional society” of the 1950s and early 1960s: “The alien and alienating oeuvres of intellectual culture become familiar goods and services.”<sup>27</sup>

If the oppositional stance to society that is inherent within the autonomous work of art has become neatly packaged and consumed, then how can art still oppose society merely by existing? Is art still capable of being autonomous? It would seem that art would have to be autonomous, whether or not it still can be, in order to return to the political. The dialectic would follow that in order for art to be political, it has to be less

political in its content, as Adorno once argued: “In all art that is still possible, social critique must be raised to the level of form, to the point that it wipes out all manifestly social content.”<sup>28</sup> Yet, such an idea perhaps needs to be taken further now; for Adorno was speaking of modernist works of art at a time when the debates about committed art were taking place. Now, it would seem that the notion of committed art remains as antiquated as art for art’s sake in the postmodern. Roberto Schwarz illustrates the commodification of committed art in his discussion of the Brechtian aesthetic:

It is easy to note the use advertising has made of the most sensational discoveries of avant-garde art, among them the resources of the Brechtian actor. The gain in intelligence represented by the estrangement effect, formerly conceived as a means of stimulating criticism and liberating social choice, changes meaning against the new background of consumerism, helping, say, to promote a new brand of cleaning product.<sup>29</sup>

Not only have the alienating effects of avant-garde art become marketable, but even the most overtly political avant-garde aesthetic can be commodified and thus rendered politically obsolete against, what Schwarz rightly refers to as “the new background of consumerism.” Adorno’s famous essay, “Commitment,” offered a critique of the Brechtian aesthetic in favor of the notion of autonomy. But in order to determine the importance of the autonomous work of art in the postmodern one needs to recognize that modernist avant-garde art and committed art alike have been embraced by the market.

The problem in postmodernism is not so much how the work of art was created — whether from the standpoint of committed art or from autonomous art — but rather how the work of art is perceived and received. Thus, the aesthetic problem now, in our contemporary or postmodern society, is a problem of the subject; the problem becomes one of the consumption as much as the production of art. Jameson sees the end of the autonomous work of art resulting in a direction that moves away from true perception of the art object “and returning into subjectivity.”<sup>30</sup> Yet, the particular form of subjectivity which Jameson limns — perhaps a postmodern subjectivity? — is limited in scope; for Jameson posits a subjective aesthetic experience of “a wide ranging sampling of sensations, affectabilities, and irritations of sense data” that at first sounds akin to Pater’s impressionist criticism with its emphasis on “experience itself.”<sup>31</sup> A closer look reveals that contrary to the Paterian aesthetic experience, the “new life of postmodern sensation” is closer to the sensory experience of the contemporary urban environment with its billboards, bright lights, and colorful advertisements.<sup>32</sup> Jameson astutely posits that the postmodern “return of the aesthetic” is based not on “specific aesthetic modalities” but rather upon “accidents in the continuum of postcontemporary life, breaks and gaps in the perceptual system of late capitalism.”<sup>33</sup> In the postmodern, the aesthetic experience is all too often not

based on perception, but on a flow (to borrow a term from Jameson) with the spatial environments of late capitalism. Jameson gives the interesting analogy of walking through a museum in which one does not heed individual works but rather catches glimpses of colors and shades “in passing.”<sup>34</sup>

Pater seemed aware of the danger of sensory overload when he wrote, “At first sight experience seems to bury us under a flood of external objects.”<sup>35</sup> Pater’s illustrious solution was to “burn always with...[a] hard gem-like flame,” experiencing these impressions to their fullest.<sup>36</sup> Pater’s question — “How shall we pass most swiftly from point to point, and be present always at the focus where the greatest number of vital forces unite in their purest energy?” — seems a vital force itself to interrogate “the new life of postmodern sensation.”<sup>37</sup> Pater’s insight of being “buried under a flood of external objects” is all the more pertinent now in the commodity culture of late capitalism wherein the objects (and images) which surround us almost always signify the commodity form. To return, then, to Pater’s impressionist criticism, with its emphasis on art for art’s sake, can resuscitate sensory awareness and aesthetic experience in the postmodern from sensations dictated and manipulated by the market. It is not simply a question of the museum, but of the street; Pater’s question needs to be emphasized, and placed against the commodification of the aesthetic (and of culture): how can we be “present always at the focus?”

The “shudder” was Adorno’s solution to what he saw, like Jameson, as the limitations of the subjective experience of art; the “shudder” defied “the conventional idea of experience” because it resulted in a “liquidation of the I, which shaken, perceives its own limitedness and finitude.” For Adorno, the individual experience of art ultimately was an experience that went beyond the individual, that negated the individual as something separate from society and objective reality. However, as Adorno points out, “the I requires not distraction but rather the utmost tension” for this “shudder” to take effect.<sup>38</sup> Such an effect, which seems akin to the notion of the Sublime, would seem almost impossible in the postmodern.<sup>39</sup> Paradoxically, individuals are not only too distracted by the culture of the image but simultaneously exist in too high a state of tension with their surroundings for anything like Adorno’s “shudder” to function as an aesthetic experience. The postmodern decentered subject is decentered in a world of objects. Terry Eagleton illustrates the nature of this decentering process: “Capitalism continually centres the subject in the sphere of values, only to decentre it in the realm of things.”<sup>40</sup> Late capitalism has particularly decentered the subject within the realm of things of culture as culture itself becomes the commodity. The experience of the city space, or just as easily the suburban shopping mall, is carried over into the museum. There is simply too much to see, which causes distraction, but which, perhaps more importantly, causes tension.

The lack of individual space in the postmodern experience is the locus for this tension: there is a lack of individual space in which to truly experience a subjective impression; it is as if every space, even so-called “private” space, is dominated by the

image. Public spaces — the city streets — while ostensibly public are experienced as private property; the streets are inundated with advertisements, becoming like veins running through the commodity structure. And all “private” spaces become invaded the moment one engages with any form of media.<sup>41</sup> The tension, thus, is one of anxiety. It is not a return of the repressed; on the contrary, this tension ultimately represses what Marcuse calls “aspects of liberation” in “the aesthetic form.”<sup>42</sup> The inundation of images and textual messages which tell one how to look, how to act, and how to be — ultimately how to become a commodity oneself — forces a tightening, an attempt to tighten one’s grip on reality. Staving off the objective reality forces a loss of subjective reality, and any liberating aspects of works of art become lost as well. What I am delineating as “tension,” Jameson describes as “the omnipresent symbiosis in late capitalism between the destructive or negative stimulus and the cultural transformation of it into ‘pleasure’ or ‘thrill.’”<sup>43</sup> The transformation from tension into “pleasure” or “thrill” explicates the reason for the shallow sensory experiences of art, which Jameson finds in postmodern subjectivity. Any “aspects of liberation” that may exist in a work of art can easily become repressed and sublimated into a form of “thrill” amidst the aestheticization of the commodity.

It becomes increasingly difficult, then, to experience Adorno’s “shudder” among the myriad examples of what Benjamin called “the shock experience.”<sup>44</sup> Adorno’s “shock” or “shudder” was caused by the experience of “important works” of art.<sup>45</sup> Benjamin, however, was aware of the shock produced by the experience of the modern city space. For Benjamin, “The greater the share of the shock factor in particular impressions, the more constantly consciousness has to be alert as a screen against stimuli.”<sup>46</sup> This sharpening of focus and of consciousness is precisely what is needed and what is so hard to achieve in postmodernity. Indeed, as Jameson suggests, the “omnipresent symbiosis” which he discusses needs to be seen as the outgrowth of Benjamin’s notion of the shock factor.<sup>47</sup>

This tension, furthermore, is a symptom of alienation, a symptom of art’s being estranged from what Marcuse delineates as art’s “*estranging form*.”<sup>48</sup> When advertisements utilize the aesthetic of former modes of artistic production, when mass reproduction of artistic images has deteriorated into the worst commodity fetishism in a way that Benjamin could not have foreseen, then the aesthetic becomes empty, superficial. The subject thus has nothing to grasp. And as Marx understood, the subject is created by production as much as the object: “The object of art — like every other product — creates a public which is sensitive to art and enjoys beauty. Production thus not only creates an object for the subject but also a subject for the object.”<sup>49</sup>

In juxtaposing Marx’s view of production with Jameson’s notion that the end of art’s autonomy results in a loss of objectivity in favor of a form of subjectivity based on shallow sensation, it becomes clear that the end of art’s autonomy results in the loss of a subject. For the subjectivity which Jameson finds as replacing objectivity is

in fact no subjectivity at all. Such subjectivity is as depthless as the “depthlessness” which Jameson perceives in postmodern art wherein “a new kind of superficiality” replaces the older “aesthetic of expression.”<sup>50</sup> The end of art’s autonomy has created a situation devoid of both object and subject. Both the subject and the object, according to postmodern theory, become cultural signifiers, but in the realm of the aesthetic (and perhaps the political) they become productions of consumption as well as products of production. Art is a product of production, and it is a product for consumption. In this “new life of postmodern sensation” the subject has become a product of consumption; the subject has been created not so much by the production of art but rather by its consumption. Marcuse would claim in *One-Dimensional Man* that “people recognize themselves in their commodities.”<sup>51</sup> Now, in the postmodern, this has been taken further; the individual’s inwardness is defined by the inexorable consumption of culture as a commodity. Artworks, as Jameson suggests, are not experienced as objects but as subjective sensations. And these subjective sensations are culturally determined by the image culture and the commodity form.

Subjectivity and the Beautiful are thus, paradoxically, more important now than when art for art’s sake took subjectivity and the Beautiful as its creed. For Adorno’s “shudder,” with its semblance to the Sublime, can no longer function the way in which it once did. The alienating effects of the Sublime in high modernism have become commodified in late capitalism. Subjectivity, moreover, is dictated by the aesthetic production of late capitalism which has been, as Jameson points out, “integrated with commodity production.”<sup>52</sup> The subject once simply reified by objects — by what Georg Lukács aptly referred to as the “commodity-structure” — is now reified by objects which are, in the postmodern, reified themselves.<sup>53</sup> The art object is reified as an object without its objective status — its autonomy.

In *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse establishes art’s autonomy arguing that the “political potential” of art resides specifically within the very form of art itself.<sup>54</sup> Art does not need to contain an overt political or social message; art’s message exists within the form itself because art by its very nature, its aesthetic form, opposes reality. As Adorno pointed out, art opposes society in its very existence. For Marcuse, every “authentic work of art” is potentially revolutionary because it is “an indictment of the established reality.”<sup>55</sup> And Marcuse juxtaposes this reality with art’s own reality: “The truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality (i.e., of those who established it) to *define* what is real. In this rupture, which is the achievement of the aesthetic form, the fictitious world of art appears as true reality.”<sup>56</sup> Although indebted to Freud, Marcuse makes it clear in this passage — by emphasizing “those who established” reality — that his definition of reality is based as much on social relations as it is upon the Freudian reality principle. Art thus contains the power to cause a change not in social relations directly but a change in consciousness due to its negation of the “established reality.” For Adorno, autonomous art was inherently socially productive because of this ability to change consciousness; any possible praxis

or social change caused by art results not from didacticism or polemics, or, as Adorno puts it, “haranguing,” but from an almost intangible shift in consciousness.<sup>57</sup>

It is this notion of a shift in consciousness in the aesthetic experience which leads Marcuse to claim that art is art for art’s sake: “art is ‘art for art’s sake’ inasmuch as the aesthetic form reveals tabooed and repressed dimensions of reality: aspects of liberation.”<sup>58</sup> Marcuse cites Mallarmé’s poetry as an example of this liberation: “his poems conjure up modes of perception, imagination, gestures — a feast of sensuousness which shatters everyday experience and anticipates a different reality principle.”<sup>59</sup> The importance of art’s condemnation of the established reality has already been illustrated, but what is most revealing about this passage is Marcuse’s emphasis on “sensuousness.” Mallarmé’s poetry as a “feast of sensuousness” capable of altering our perceptions and consciousness evokes the Paterian emphasis on the sensual, aesthetic impression.

In the “Conclusion” to *The Renaissance*, Pater advises one to “grasp at any exquisite passion, or any contribution to knowledge that seems by a lifted horizon to set the spirit free for a moment, or any stirring of the senses.”<sup>60</sup> In Pater, as well as Marcuse, sensuousness is concatenated with liberation. Pater calls for the grasping of anything that stirs the senses, of any knowledge that might set one free. Marcuse finds the potential for liberation in Mallarmé’s use of the aesthetic form, which evokes a sensual experience that tears asunder everyday experience, the dominant consciousness. Both Pater and Marcuse, then, see the pleasurable experience of art as being an impetus for some form of liberation.

The liberation which Pater suggests is, arguably, apolitical. The illustrious concluding line to Pater’s *The Renaissance* reads: “Of this wisdom, the poetic passion, the desire of beauty, the love of art for its own sake has most, for art comes to you, proposing frankly to give nothing but the highest quality to your moments as they pass, and simply for those moments’ sake.”<sup>61</sup> While it is not the point of this essay to argue in favor or against any political commitment on Pater’s part, it is clear that his notion of art in this passage begins and ends with the subjective experience. There is no mention of art contributing to a collective liberation. The freedom evoked in his earlier suggestion to seek for any knowledge that would set one free is now revealed to be an individual freedom based primarily on beauty and pleasure, a beauty and pleasure of the “highest quality.” The Paterian aesthetic would, then, seem to be at odds with Marcuse’s notions of political potential.

However, Marcuse does not reject the subjective experience. On the contrary, Marcuse sees the subjective experience as “an antagonistic force in capitalist society.”<sup>62</sup> At the outset of *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Marcuse opposes what he views as the more orthodox Marxist “interpretation of subjectivity as a ‘bourgeois’ notion,” finding it to be historically “questionable.”<sup>63</sup> Marcuse states:

But even in bourgeois society, insistence on the truth and right of

inwardness is not really a bourgeois value. With the affirmation of the inwardness of subjectivity, the individual steps out of the network of exchange relationships and exchange values, withdraws from the reality of bourgeois society, and enters another dimension of existence. Indeed, this escape from reality led to an experience which could (and did) become a powerful force *invalidating* the actual prevailing bourgeois values, namely by shifting the locus of the individual's realization from the domain of the performance principle and the profit motive to that of the inner resources of the human being: passion, imagination, conscience.<sup>64</sup>

Marcuse places the subjective inner experience within the realm of liberation. He inverts the notion that inwardness is somehow connected with the notion of success and individual achievement within the division of labor. On the contrary, an escape from bourgeois values in the form of the affirmation of one's own subjectivity can actually cause one to discard such values. The type of inwardness which Marcuse describes in this passage — in which the subject can actually step outside of exchange relationships — could help the individual subject to differentiate the aesthetic from the commodity form.

Art in its connection to the subjective both as a mode of experience and a mode of creation is what allows art to transform the established order of reality through a shift in consciousness. Is this not the very nature of the subjectivity which Pater writes of in *The Renaissance* when he discusses the subjective impression of a work of art, asking, "How is my nature modified by its presence, and under its influence"?<sup>67</sup> Pater recognized art's ability to change consciousness. However, Pater's belief in the verity of the subjective impression — epitomized in his directive "to know one's own impression as it really is" — inevitably raises the question of how this impression, and, moreover, this subjectivity itself is created.<sup>66</sup> Is there such a thing as "one's own impression," or is such an impression the product of ideology? Marcuse's notion of "inwardness," then, similarly needs to be interrogated. If capitalism, and capitalist social relations, constructs the subject, then the notion of "inwardness" itself is always liable to reification. Moreover, can such a state of "inwardness" exist in a culture dominated by the commodity? Such questions are vital to any placement of the individual in cultural analysis; however, Pater's incentive seems more salient now in a society dominated by the image. The attempt to know "one's impression as it really is," in a culture wherein everything becomes culture is, perhaps, an act of praxis in and of itself.

Adorno, much more critical of the individual subjective response to art, goes so far as to claim that the "sensations of Wilde...served as preludes to the culture industry."<sup>67</sup> For Adorno claims, possibly prophesying the postmodern cultural condition, that "the expansion of the sphere of aesthetic stimuli, made these stimuli manipulable; they were able to be produced for the cultural marketplace."<sup>68</sup> Adorno's view of

the manipulation of aesthetic stimuli for the purpose of the ultimate exchange of these stimuli in commodified form is indeed what has taken place in our image and commodity culture. And yet, Adorno's derision for the art for art's sake aesthetic which lauded the individual sensation in both its art and criticism — while on one level apt — is not as relevant to a consideration of postmodern aesthetic production.

Claiming that the “attunement of art to the most fleeting individual reactions was bound up with the reification of these reactions,” Adorno clearly lays the blame on writers like Wilde for seeking to provoke sensual responses in their readers.<sup>69</sup> Such an emphasis upon the subjective in art (and in individual responses to art) distanced the work of art from its own objectivity: “to this extent the watchword of *l'art pour l'art* was the mask of its opposite.”<sup>70</sup> On one level, Adorno's claims seem to support Jameson's notions of the loss of objectivity in favor of a subjectivity imbued with “a random and yet wide-ranging sampling of sensations.”<sup>71</sup> However, as Jameson has pointed out, the loss of objectivity in the postmodern is the result of the end of art's autonomy in the sphere of aesthetic experience and production. Adorno, it must be remembered, despite all his criticisms of *l'art pour l'art*, also suggested a defense of *l'art pour l'art*; Adorno was perhaps the greatest theorist of art's autonomy. Adorno rightly understood that art's autonomy was its objectivity, which is why he suggested that art for art's sake became the “mask of its opposite” when it sought to propitiate the individual sensual experience to such a high degree. The fact that aesthetic stimuli have become manipulated to such a great extent in the way that Adorno describes, creating a shallow subjectivity, while the autonomous work of art has simultaneously received its death blow, appears paradoxical to say the least.

Adorno's criticisms of the “sensations of Wilde,” will not refute the “new life of postmodern sensation,” for the “sensations of Wilde” cannot be compared with the randomness of postmodern sensations. The art object for *fin de siècle* aesthetes was not perceived “in passing” but rather gazed at, studied, appreciated in depth and detail. If anything, art for art's sake fetishized not only the work of art but the sensation of art; and art for art's sake fetishized itself, ignoring its own unavoidable connection to social relations and cultural production. But despite such criticisms, Wilde's and Pater's notions of an art for art's sake aesthetic cannot be said to have the shallow randomness which Jameson finds in the postmodern. Furthermore, the notion of the Beautiful, and the experience of the Beautiful, during the *fin de siècle* was, perhaps, subversive in its own right. Jameson illustrates this when he claims, “The *fin de siècle*, from Morris to Wilde, deployed beauty as a political weapon against a complacent materialist Victorian bourgeois society and dramatized its negative power as what rebukes power and money, and what generates personal and social transformation in the heart of an ugly industrial society.”<sup>72</sup> However, it must be noted, as Plekhanov pointed out, that art for art's sake did not rebuke capitalist social relations no matter how much it might have “rebuked power and money.” Art for art's sake use of the Beautiful may have been subversive, but it could never have been transformative.

And yet, the subversive elements of art for art's sake — no matter how limited — now present a radical possibility, as any such subversion appears to have disappeared from the postmodern aesthetic.

Adorno once claimed, "Art is not a matter of pointing up alternatives but rather resisting, solely through artistic form, the course of the world, which continues to hold a pistol to the heads of human beings."<sup>73</sup> In his insistence that art resists "solely through artistic form," Adorno obviously underscores the importance of the autonomy of art to fend off the pistol of the world. However, in the postmodern it would appear that culture is a pistol, among many, that is held to the heads of human beings. When a society is bombarded with culture in the forms of images, advertisements, and objects, the freedom to choose culture, to in effect experience culture, becomes dubious. Therefore, the question becomes one of how much autonomy we, in fact, have over our experience of culture, and of our own sensory perceptions, in the commodity culture.

Moreover, what creates the social and cultural conditions which enable art to resist "solely through artistic form"? For Adorno, the promise of art's resistance was based on works of art that we now recognize as works of high modernism (e.g., Kafka, Proust, etc.). Modernism, for Adorno, contained the conditions for art's ability to resist because of its insistence upon the autonomy of the work of art. As Nicholas Brown suggests, "In the modernist period...the convincing assertion of autonomy produced, as it does now, a peculiar non-market space within the capitalist social field."<sup>74</sup> However, as Marcuse pointed out, before the postmodern cultural moment — as it came to be defined — existed, modernist works of art became subsumed into the culture industry itself; they became "familiar goods and services."<sup>75</sup> Can such works of art in a postmodern context contain the liberatory promise that Adorno once conceived? For, as Brown also rightly asserts, "there is no natural political valence to modernism's distance from the market, since modernism does not make its way under anything like the dominance of market ideology that we experience today."<sup>76</sup> The autonomous work of art, as Adorno understood it, then, needs to be reconsidered specifically in relation to the postmodern capitalist market.

Bill Martin points out that Adorno's vision of the "autonomous artwork" as pointing "toward a better world...becomes 'merely utopian' if it lacks the element of negativity... if it is taken as a utopia in which we can loll around for relief from the ugliness of the existing world."<sup>77</sup> As Martin suggests, it is the notion of "radical negativity" which keeps the autonomous work of art from being "mere escape or catharsis."<sup>78</sup> But, again, I want to ask if such "radical negativity" is still possible because it does not necessarily help the subject to combat the barrage of commodity images nor does it necessarily allow for the subject to differentiate between the form of art and the commodity form.

I want to suggest that Pater's notion of being "present always at the focus" becomes crucial in this regard because it posits a way to delineate the work of art from the various commodity forms and images. Pater's "focus" negates the distraction, the tension, and brings us back to the possibility of an aesthetic experience reminiscent of

Adorno's "shudder" — a subjective experience that can negate the shallow subjectivity constructed by capitalism itself. Pater, of all theorists — the theorist of art for art's sake — can perhaps pave the way for a Marxist aesthetic which has some sense of liberatory and transformative potential in sight.

As I have illustrated, the aestheticism of art for art's sake was not merely concerned with the creation of art but also with the appreciation of art. It valued, and thus calls attention to, the subject's relation to the art object. If it is culture — and with it the very idea of art and the aesthetic — that is now "hold[ing] a pistol to the heads of human beings" in the sheer force of its ubiquity, it will take an incredible amount of work to follow Pater's lead and be "present always at the focus." To do so would mean to establish some sense of autonomy on the part of the subject (and collective subjects) over and against the consortium of images in late capitalism. Thus, whatever Adorno may have had in mind as a defense of art for art sake, it is clear now that such a defense can be predicated on the claim to autonomy; for in the consortium of commodity images (and commodity forms) it becomes increasingly necessary to differentiate the work of art from the commodity if art is to have any promise for the future at all.<sup>79</sup>

### Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, "Letters to Walter Benjamin," in *Aesthetics and Politics*, trans. Harry Zohn (London: Verso, 1977) 122.
2. In Marx's *Economic and Philosophic Manuscripts of 1844* in *The Marx-Engels Reader Second Edition*, edited by Robert Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978), Marx had already outlined "production and consumption" to be "the movement" of private property (85). And Marx listed "art" among several "particular modes of production" that "fall under its general law" (85). Art therefore is inseparable from the domain of private property, its modes of production, and thus the social relations which exist and result from capitalist modes of production.
3. Fredric Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern: 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) 111.
4. Nicholas Brown, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Real Subsumption under Capital," *nonsite.org*.
5. Brown, "The Work of Art."
6. Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society," in *The Cultural Turn: Selected Writings on the Postmodern, 1983-1998* (London: Verso, 1998) 6.
7. Jameson, "Postmodernism and the Consumer Society" 6-7.
8. Leon Trotsky, *Literature and Revolution*, ed. William Keach (Chicago: Haymarket, 2005) 144.
9. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111, and *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke UP, 1991) 4.
10. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 100.
11. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111.
12. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 111.
13. Karl Beckson, *London in the 1890s: A Cultural History* (New York: Norton, 1992) 32-33.
14. Walter Pater, *The Renaissance* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 1986) 153.

15. Aside from Wilde, some poets influenced by Pater and Pater's aesthetic criticism were Arthur Symonds, "Michael Field" (Katherine Bradley and Edith Cooper), W.B. Yeats, and Ernest Dowson.
16. Beckson, *London in the 1890s* 41.
17. Gyorgii Plekhanov, "On Art for Art's Sake," in *Marxism and Art: Writings in Aesthetics and Criticism*, eds. Berel Lang and Forrest Williams (New York: Longman, 1972) 91.
18. Frantz Fanon, *The Wretched of the Earth*, trans. Constance Farrington (New York: Grove, 1963) 38.
19. Oscar Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism," in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968) 256.
20. Wilde, "The Soul of Man under Socialism" 268.
21. Marion Thain, "Poetry," in *The Cambridge Companion to the Fin de Siècle*, ed. Gail Marshall (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2007) 229.
22. Thain, "Poetry" 229.
23. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: U Minnesota P, 1997) 225-26.
24. Oscar Wilde, "The Decay of Lying" in *The Artist as Critic: Critical Writings of Oscar Wilde*, ed. Richard Ellmann (Chicago: U Chicago P, 1968) 319.
25. Herbert Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension: Toward a Critique of Marxist Aesthetics* (Boston: Beacon, 1978) 49.
26. Jameson, "Postmodernism and Consumer Society" 19.
27. Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* (Boston: Beacon, 1964) 61.
28. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 250.
29. Roberto Schwarz, "The Relevance of Brecht: High Points and Low," trans. Emilio Sauri. *Mediations* 23:1 (2007): 42.
30. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
31. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
32. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
33. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
34. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
35. Pater, *The Renaissance* 151.
36. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152.
37. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152, and Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112. Adorno,
38. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 245.
39. It is perhaps important to consider the Kantian notion of the Sublime, and Terry Eagleton gives an apt definition of the Kantian Sublime and its relation to the subject in his *Ideology of the Aesthetic* (Malden: Blackwell, 1990), which bears great resemblance to Adorno's "shudder": "The sublime...decentres the subject into an awesome awareness of its finitude" (90).
40. Eagleton, *The Ideology of the Aesthetic* 92.
41. Henri Lefebvre's theorization of space is useful in this regard. Indeed, in his work *The Production of Space*, translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith (Malden: Blackwell, 1984, 1991), Lefebvre speaks of "fetishized abstract space" creating "users' who cannot recognize themselves within it" (93), which, I would argue, relates to the subject's inability to differentiate between the commodity form and the art form within the city space itself. If Lefebvre is correct that a "cultured art-lover looking at a painting" experiences

what he/she experiences “on the plane of (pictorial) space,” then the very notion of “space” itself becomes crucial (114). Jameson, of course, famously theorized the postmodern, and historicized the transition from modernism to postmodernism, in terms of “spatialization” (*Postmodernism* 154). Moreover, Jameson refers to the “new space that...involves the suppression of distance...and the relentless saturation of any remaining voids and empty places” and cites Lefebvre’s notion of “abstract space” in relation to this “new space” or the “spatial peculiarities of postmodernism” (*Postmodernism* 413).

42. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
43. Fredric Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson: Conversations on Cultural Marxism*, ed. Ian Buchanan (Durham: Duke UP, 2007) 34.
44. Walter Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” in *Illuminations*, ed. Hannah Arendt (New York: Schocken, 1968) 162.
45. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 244-45. Adorno’s emphasis on “important works” (244) is perhaps another reason why the “shudder” can no longer take effect. For we have rightly come to see that categorizations such as “important” are problematic. However, the attempt at leveling elitist claims to culture has not bypassed the dialectic of Adorno’s “important works” versus the “culture industry.” Indeed, there is a certain tendency to fetishize popular culture within the realm of cultural studies which can become just as problematic. This dialectic perhaps needs to be reevaluated and revisited as well as the dialectic of art’s autonomy.
46. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire” 163.
47. Jameson, *Jameson on Jameson* 34.
48. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 10.
49. Karl Marx, *The Grundrisse*, in *The Marx-Engels Reader, Second Edition*, ed. Robert C. Tucker (New York: Norton, 1978) 230.
50. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 9, 11.
51. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 9.
52. Jameson, *Postmodernism* 4.
53. Georg Lukács, *History and Class Consciousness: Studies in Marxist Dialectics*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (Cambridge: MIT P, 1971) 83.
54. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* ix.
55. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* xi.
56. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 9.
57. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 243.
58. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
59. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 19.
60. Pater, *The Renaissance* 152.
61. Pater, *The Renaissance* 153.
62. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 38.
63. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 4.
64. Marcuse, *The Aesthetic Dimension* 4-5.
65. Pater, *The Renaissance* xxix.
66. Pater, *The Renaissance* xxix.

67. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
68. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
69. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239
70. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory* 239.
71. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 112.
72. Jameson, "Transformations of the Image in Postmodernity" 134.
73. Theodor W. Adorno, "Commitment," in *Notes to Literature, Volume Two*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1974) 80.
74. Brown, "The Work of Art."
75. Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man* 61.
76. Brown, "The Work of Art."
77. Bill Martin, *Ethical Marxism: The Categorical Imperative of Liberation* (Chicago: Open Court, 2008) 373.
78. Martin, *Ethical Marxism* 373.
79. Nicholas Brown makes a similar claim when he states, "Under contemporary conditions, the assertion of aesthetic autonomy is, in itself, a political claim. (A minimal one to be sure)" ("The Work of Art").