The Social Significance of Autonomous Art: Adorno and Bürger

Theodor W. Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* carries the tradition of Marxist aesthetics to a new level of sophistication. The book develops a complex model of the social mediation of art, and it provides a sustained meditation on the social significance of autonomous art. Yet both Adorno’s model and his meditation have left some sympathetic critics unconvinced. Several important criticisms occur in Peter Bürger’s *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger claims that, by improperly assuming the validity of the principle of autonomy, Adorno skews his approach to art’s social significance. Unfortunately, some of Bürger’s criticisms are undermined by his own assumptions.

I shall argue that neither Adorno nor Bürger has given a satisfactory account of the social significance of autonomous art. In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno misreads the autonomy of art and systematically neglects heteronomous art. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, Bürger misreads the avant-garde’s attack on autonomy and neglects normative aesthetics. I shall first present Adorno’s approach, next summarize Bürger’s criticisms, and then examine both positions. In this examination an alternative account will begin to emerge.

Despite their differences, Bürger and Adorno have a shared position about the autonomy of art. This position involves six claims. (1) Art has become independent from other institutions in bourgeois society. (2) Art’s independence, and claims concerning its independence, depend on developments in other institutions, especially political and economic ones; the autonomy of art has always been relative to bourgeois society as a whole. (3) The relative independence of art has become increasingly tied to the production and reception of *art works* whose primary functions have not been the accomplishment of purposes directly served by other institutions, whether economic, political, religious, or academic. The primary functions of these works have been somewhat peculiar to art—maintaining an image of humanity, expressing “irrational” needs and desires, satisfying aesthetic contemplation, or undermining the autonomy of art. (4) Autonomous art both affirms and criticizes the society to which it belongs. This combination of affirmation and criticism is inextricable from its autonomy. (5) Because of external pressures and developments within art itself, the autonomy of art has become increasingly problematic in advanced capitalist societies. (6) Nevertheless, autonomy remains crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. Autonomous art, by virtue of its autonomy, has a special social significance. Although Bürger is less enthusiastic about this last claim, he too suggests that autonomy may be legitimate and necessary so long as advanced capitalist societies have not been fundamentally transformed.

Together these six claims make up a powerful and persuasive position. Yet the position has profoundly troubling aspects. These appear in the qualifications Adorno and Bürger introduce at strategic points in their arguments. Adorno defends the principle of autonomy, only to undermine it with his penetrating comments on the fetishism of art works. Bürger attacks the same principle, only to resign himself to its inescapability. In both cases the autonomy of art is viewed as an “evil” necessary for some greater good. Indeed, Adorno’s version sometimes resembles a theodicy of autonomous art.

Two other preliminary points need to be made. First, some twentieth century philosophers of art have either ignored the social mediation of
art or questioned the legitimacy of theories that emphasize social mediation. For this reason *Aesthetic Theory* cannot avoid being controversial, as are other versions of what Marcia Eaton calls “contextualism.”

Second, controversy about contextualism occurs within a common framework forged in the eighteenth century. This framework is the institution of autonomous art, to use Bürger’s terminology. Both aesthetics and the sociology of art have developed within the institution of autonomous art, and both have contributed to it. Conflicts between romanticism and realism, between aestheticism and moralism, and between formalism and contextualism occur within this institution. To reject Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* because it insists on social mediation would be to misunderstand the historical framework within which recent philosophies of art operate. A sociological aesthetic is no more an historical aberration than is a formalist aesthetic à la Clive Bell, although this says little about the philosophical validity of either approach.

I. ART WORK AS MONAD

Among philosophies that emphasize the social mediation of art, two types of theories have become dominant. In the first type tendencies within art provide the main locus for social mediation. Theories of this type try to show how such internal tendencies intersect nonartistic tendencies. This is the *internalist paradigm*. In the second type of theory, the *externalist paradigm*, agencies outside art are the dominant locus for social mediation. Theories of this type try to demonstrate how such external agencies make for a distinctive interaction between art and other regions of culture and society. Both paradigms are compatible with the Marxist tradition in aesthetics. Adorno’s model of social mediation can best be located on the internalist side of Marxist aesthetics.

**Marxist Aesthetics**

The Marxist model for art’s social mediation relies heavily on a more general theory of social formations. It is problematic to speak of “the Marxist model.” Marx and Engels never pronounced a comprehensive philosophy of art, and their scattered comments on art may imply more than one such model. To the extent that there is a Marxian model, it incorporates a distinction between base and superstructure from a general theory of social formations.

Marx’s Preface to *A Contribution to the Critique of Political Economy* summarizes his historical materialist model for understanding social revolutions. A social revolution transforms an entire social formation, he says. This transformation takes its dynamic from a growing conflict between forces of production and relations of production within the prevailing mode of production. At the same time, however, this dynamic pervades the society’s “legal and political superstructure” as well as its “forms of social consciousness.” Marx’s thesis is that the critical historian of social revolutions must always distinguish conflicts between productive forces and relations from ideological battles in which people become conscious of these conflicts and fight them out.

Marx distinguishes a society’s technological and economic mode of production not only from social institutions, such as governments, but also from cultural regions of conflict, such as philosophy, religion, and art. Translated into the familiar terms of base and superstructure, Marx’s distinction locates the forces and relations of production in the base. Other institutions and cultural regions make up the superstructure of a society. Marx’s historical materialism implies that conflicts within art must be examined in terms of conflicts within the technological and economic base.

Such examinations posit a connection between art and ideology. Marx’s writings leave the character of this connection as open-ended as his concept of ideology. Three construals of the connection seem plausible. The first equates ideology with forms of social consciousness. These are a “necessary illusion” allowing battles to be fought whose deep structure remains somewhat hidden to the combatants. On this construal, all art is ideological. A second version regards ideology as the expression and defense of dominant class interests. During revolutionary times such ideology is “false consciousness,” not because it is simply wrong-headed or illegitimate, but because it must suppress the class’s vulnerability in the struggle over the means of production. In this version, art is ideological only to the extent that it expresses...
and defends dominant class interests. On a third reading, “ideology” designates those dimensions within social consciousness which obscure the underlying tendencies and conflicts in a social formation. Ideology critique lets social consciousness disclose the underlying struggle and its likely outcome. On this reading, one can expect all art to have ideological as well as nonideological dimensions, regardless of its class interests and origins. This third construal is closest to Adorno’s conception of art and ideology.

All three construals are compatible with an internalist paradigm of art’s social mediation. Any one of them can encourage an examination of the ways in which tendencies within art intersect tendencies within other forms of social consciousness and within a society’s mode of production. Yet the categories and methods of this examination are topics for debate. There are several different ways to analyze tendencies within art and to demonstrate how these internal tendencies intersect nonartistic tendencies. Marxists who share an internalist paradigm have developed various accounts, all plausible readings of Marx.

Three versions of the internalist paradigm stand out in the history of Marxism. Jameson’s discussion of Althusser suggests labeling these as mechanical, expressive, and structural. Mechanical accounts attempt to show that artistic phenomena are decisively influenced by economic factors, even though these phenomena must also be understood on their own terms. The writings of Plekhanov provide clear examples of this approach. Expressive and structural accounts take distance from the economism that easily accompanies mechanical ones. Expressive accounts attempt to show that artistic phenomena express or reflect not simply the economic base but the inner principle or dynamic of an entire social formation. Such demonstrations characterize the writings of Georg Lukács. Structural accounts, which the Althusserians best exemplify, assume that the structure of the whole consists in the specific combination of its various elements. This structure has effects on all its elements, not in the sense of influencing them or coming to expression in them, but in the sense of existing and operating within them in their specific combination. To give a structural account of artistic phenomena is to find their unique and necessary location within what Jameson calls “the synchronic system of social relations as a whole.”

Adorno’s Model

Adorno’s model of social mediation is an internalist theory that encourages expressive accounts of artistic phenomena. His debate with Walter Benjamin in the 1930s occurs within the shared framework of expressive causality, even when he accuses Benjamin of paying insufficient attention to mediation. The main theoretical difference is not the absence or presence of mediation but the manner in which the artistic part expresses the societal whole.

In both “The Author as Producer” and the “Work of Art” essay, Benjamin posits a fundamental parallelism between an artistic mode of production and reception on the one hand and a more narrowly economic mode of production and consumption on the other. What happens in the artistic mode has analogues in the economic mode; transformations in the artistic mode can be expected to have their counterparts in the economic mode. Such parallelism helps explain Benjamin’s technological optimism toward mass media and his political enthusiasm for Brechtian theater. Benjamin expects that a transformation in “literary relations of production” will be accompanied by a transformation in economic relations of production. These two essays show Benjamin in his more Leibnizian moments. For authors who follow Benjamin’s lead, a central problem will be to give a systematic description of the relationship “between art as production and art as ideological.”

The passing reference to Leibniz is not accidental. The concept of a “monad” is central to Benjamin’s model of social mediation. Adorno inherits this Leibnizian concept from Walter Benjamin but replaces its parallelist connotations with an emphasis on contradictions. Whereas Benjamin posits an homology between artistic and economic modes of production and consumption, Adorno develops tensions within the work of art that give expression to tensions in society as a whole. This contrast needs to be qualified: Adorno does address the social position of art as a whole, and he does comment on the production and consumption of art.
Nevertheless his focus remains on tensions within the work of art.

The section in *Aesthetic Theory* titled “The mediation of art and society” signals this internalist and expressivist focus. The section’s main claim is that works of art express the social totality:

The process that occurs in art works and which is arrested in them has to be conceived as being the same as the social process surrounding them. In Leibnizian terminology, they represent this process in a windowless fashion. ... All that art works do or bring forth has its latent model in social production (350–351/335).

To ask about the structure of Adorno’s model of social mediation, then, is to ask about the structure of the art work as a social monad whose internal process brings forth the social process surrounding it. This structure contains several crisscrossing polarities: autonomy and social character, artifact and phenomenon, form and content, and import and function. The polarities are highly dialectical. Each pole contains and turns into its opposite. The summary that follows does not capture the dynamic character of Adorno’s model. Furthermore, to highlight questions of autonomy and social significance, we shall restrict our attention to the first and last polarities mentioned.

*Autonomy and Social Character*

The polarity of autonomy and social character marks the position of art works within advanced capitalist societies. Adorno holds that a work of art is both independent and dependent towards society. It is internally consistent as well as inconsistent. It both has and lacks its own identity. Furthermore, what makes for independence, consistency, and singularity is an art work’s social dependence, inconsistency, and universality, and what makes for the latter resides in the former. Thus the tension between autonomy and social character is such that the autonomy of the work has a social character and the social character of the work is itself autonomous.

This complex polarity comes together in the claim that autonomous works are fetishes (337–338/323–324). In the context of the entire book, this claim has three implications, each of them equally important for Adorno’s model of social mediation. The first stems from Adorno’s reception of Marx’s critique of commodity fetishism. The implication is that autonomous works of art do indeed belong to a society where the principle of exchange has become the dominant principle of social relationships. Autonomous works are produced and consumed in accordance with this principle. Like other products under capitalist conditions, they hide the labor that has gone into them and appear to have a life of their own. In the second place, the fetish character of autonomous works implies that they appear to be superior cultural entities somehow detached from the conditions of economic production. In this way they cover up the problematic division of labor that makes them possible. Autonomous works are also fetishes, in the third place, insofar as they seem to serve no use beyond their own existence. Products without uses would seem to be irrational objects, and respect for such products would seem to be a superstitious reverence.

At the same time, however, Adorno qualifies each of these implications. By appearing to have a life of their own, works of art call into question a society where nothing is allowed to be itself and everything is subject to the principle of exchange. By appearing to be detached from the conditions of economic production, works of art acquire an ability to suggest changed conditions. And by appearing to be useless, works of art recall the human purposes of production that instrumental rationality has forgotten. Thus their fetish character is not mere delusion; it is “a condition of their truth, including their social truth” (337/323). Autonomous works of art follow their own path in their own way, but the path itself and the impetus for traveling come from the surrounding society. The unique position of autonomous art works allows them to be monads whose internal process gives expression to the surrounding social process. Their independence, internal consistency, and singularity have not only social origins but also social significance.

*Import and Function*

Sociologists of art tend to talk about social significance in two different ways. In an interpretative approach, social significance will have
the connotations of meaning, whether as intended by the artist or as perceived by the public or as embodied in the work. In an explanatory approach, social significance will have the connotations of effect, whether intended and perceived or not. Adorno’s model is neither strictly interpretative nor strictly explanatory. Here too it displays a dialectical structure. The main poles are those of import (Gehalt) and function. Just as the polarity of autonomy and social character marks the art work’s social position, so the poles of import and function capture its social significance.

Adorno emphasizes the concept of import, however. His sociology of art claims that the import of an art work must be decoded if the work’s functions are to be accurately analyzed. His philosophy of art claims that “if any social function can be ascribed to [art works] at all, it is … to have no function” (336–337/322). The two claims are linked by an understanding of social functions as cognitive functions. To say that art’s social function is to be socially dysfunctional is to suggest that, through its autonomy, modern art makes its own contributions to society (335–337/321–323). These are primarily contributions to the formation of social consciousness (360–361/344–345). The cognitive character of art’s social functions comes through clearly in Adorno’s descriptions of modern art’s contributions: expression of suffering, broken promise of happiness, inexplicit knowledge of society, negative embodiment of utopia. Because adequate relations to autonomous works become ever more difficult in advanced capitalist societies, Adorno sometimes seems to regard the best modern works as bottles for messages that few of the shipwrecked can read.12

Adorno does not speak of messages, however. He strongly prefers the concept of import or content (Gehalt). His concept of artistic import seems to contain an inherent polarity between “social content” (gesellschaftlicher Gehalt) and “truth content” (Wahrheitsgehalt). Against student activists who desired the political actualization of artistic import, Adorno argues that they should not “ rashly equate” truth content with social content (373/356). Similarly, against the theory of socialist realism, Adorno argues that truth content transcends the social content with which it is mediated: Granted, art implies reality because it is a form of knowledge. Knowledge necessarily points to reality, which in turn necessarily points to society, there being no reality that is not social. Truth content and social content are therefore mediated, although the cognitive quality of art, i.e. its truth content, transcends knowledge of reality qua empirical existent. Art turns into [social] knowledge as it grasps the essence of reality, forcing it to reveal itself in appearance and at the same time putting itself in opposition to appearance. Art must not talk about reality’s essence directly, nor must it depict or in any way imitate it (383–384/366).

Just as the import of an art work consists of the poles of truth content and social content, so art as social knowledge (sociale Erkenntnis) consists of both a cognitive quality (Erkenntnischarakter) and a knowledge of empirical social reality (Erkenntnis der Realität).

Adorno’s concept of import and his emphasis on import have three implications for his approach to the social functions of a work of art. First, he does not think these functions can be fully captured by empirical methods. To the extent that social functions are informed by the work’s import, they will exceed the grasp of empirical techniques. Second, he tends to consider significant only those functions that stem from the import of a work. Third, his assessment of the significance of a work’s social functions is governed by more than an account of the work’s social content. In the final analysis, his assessment is governed by an interpretation of the work’s truth content. This becomes obvious in Adorno’s evaluation of the political impact of the Bertolt Brecht’s epic theater.13

To summarize: in Adorno’s account, autonomy and social character mark the position of the work of art within advanced capitalist societies. Art works are defetishizing fetishes. The autonomy of art works is conditioned by society as a whole, but their autonomy is itself a precondition for truth in art. The notions of autonomy and truth, in turn, provide the impetus for Adorno’s claims about social significance. Although Adorno locates the social significance of the art work in both its import and its social functions, he understands these social functions as primarily cognitive functions, and he regards their significance as directly dependent on the import of the work. Although import consists of
both social content and truth content, truth provides the ultimate criterion for the social significance of the work’s import and, by extension, for the social significance of the work’s social functions. Thus autonomy is a precondition for that which determines the social significance of the work of art.

II. ART AS INSTITUTION

Peter Bürger has challenged Adorno’s account of autonomy and social significance. Bürger uses some of Adorno’s own assumptions to criticize Adorno’s model and to propose an alternative. Bürger’s targets include Adorno’s emphases on autonomous works and on import. By implication, Adorno’s concept of truth content also falls under the critic’s scalpel. Whereas Adorno focuses on the import of autonomous works, Bürger emphasizes what he calls the institution of art.

He comes to this emphasis by historicizing Adorno’s aesthetic theory. Bürger explains that to historicize a theory is to grasp the connection between the unfolding of the theory’s subject matter and the elaboration of the theory’s categories. To historicize an aesthetic theory is to grasp the connection between the history of art and the history of philosophical reflections on art. Bürger’s historicizing thesis is this: Because “the avant-garde movements” first made recognizable “certain general categories of the work of art,” the aesthetician must understand the development of art in bourgeois society “from the standpoint of the avant-garde.”

The Avant-Garde

According to Bürger, Adorno is mistaken when he subsumes historical avant-garde movements such as Futurism, Constructivism, Dadaism, and early Surrealism under the concept of “modern art.” The avant-garde is a distinct historical phenomenon. It goes beyond the modernist assault on traditional genres and techniques to attack the entire bourgeois institution of art. Bürger interprets this attack as an institutional “self-criticism” whose aim is “to reintegrate art into the praxis of life.” The avant-garde exposes and challenges the principle of autonomy that operates not only in the history of bourgeois art but also in Adorno’s aesthetic theory.

The central category in Bürger’s own model is the “institution of art.” He thinks of this category as a historical category. The category is most directly applicable to phenomena in Western societies since the late 1700s, even though it can also be used to examine phenomena from other social formations. The category is made possible in part by the “self-criticism” of art carried out by the avant-garde. In its most general meaning, “the institution of art” or “art as an institution” refers to “the productive and distributive apparatus and also to the ideas about art that prevail at a given time and that determine the reception of works.” Bürger’s approach emphasizes governing ideas about the purpose of art, along with the aesthetic norms whereby such ideas become operative in production and reception. This general approach assumes a more specific meaning of “art as an institution.” The more specific meaning refers to those ideas which govern the production and reception of art works in bourgeois society and which compose the concept of autonomy.

Bürger construes “the autonomy of art” as an ideological category of bourgeois society. It is ideological in the sense that it “both reveals and obscures an actual historical development.” On the one hand it describes the real “detachment of art as a special sphere of human activity from the nexus of the praxis of life.” On the other hand, the category of autonomy simultaneously obscures the fact that this detachment is a socio-historical process. The category becomes a distortion when “the relative dissociation of the work of art from the praxis of life in bourgeois society … becomes transformed into the (erroneous) idea that the work of art is totally independent of society.”

According to Bürger, this ideological category originated with the rise of philosophical aesthetics at a time when an economically strong bourgeoisie was seizing political power. As consolidated in the writings of Kant and Schiller, the concept of autonomy indicates how the art of bourgeois society differs in purpose, production, and reception from “sacral art” of the High Middle Ages and “courtly art” during the reign of Louis XVI. Bourgeois art serves neither as a cult object within the life praxis of the faithful nor as a self-portrayal of courtly society. Instead it serves as a “portrayal of bourgeois self-understanding … in a sphere that lies outside the
praxis of life." Furthermore, whereas collective production characterizes sacral art, and collective reception characterizes both sacral and courtly art, both production and reception are individual acts in bourgeois art.

The detachment of art from life praxis became complete during the latter half of the nineteenth century. Aestheticism rejected bourgeois life praxis and gave up the claim that art interprets life. Distance from life praxis became the import of autonomous works. According to Bürger, aestheticism thereby set the stage for avant-garde self-criticism of the institution of autonomous art. Avant-garde movements rejected both bourgeois life praxis and aestheticism. The avant-garde tried both “to organize a new life praxis from a basis in art” and to eliminate autonomous art as an institution. “Avant-gardiste manifestations” undermined the notion of art’s intended purpose, negated the categories of individual creation and individual reception, and challenged the distinction between producer and recipient.

The avant-garde’s attack on autonomy has failed, however, only to be institutionalized as art by the more recent “neo-avant-garde.” These developments leave Bürger with two questions: first whether it is possible or even desirable to integrate art into the praxis of life within bourgeois society, and second whether the culture industry has not already provided a “false elimination of the distance between art and life” and a “false sublation of autonomous art.”

Bürger’s Criticisms

Such questions do not keep Bürger from criticizing Adorno’s model of social mediation. Bürger has three criticisms. The first pertains to Adorno’s emphasis on autonomous works, the second to his emphasis on import, and the third to his understanding of social significance. Concerning the emphasis on autonomous works, Bürger argues that Adorno is unable to criticize art as an institution because he takes this institution for granted. Adorno focuses on autonomous works without recognizing that his focus is itself governed by an institutional framework whose doctrine of autonomy the avant-garde has decisively challenged. Indeed, Adorno elevates one type of work to the norm while rejecting popular art and older styles of autonomous art such as literary realism. Even though the type elevated is what Bürger calls the “avant-gardiste” or “nonorganic” work, the historical avant-garde movements have undermined Adorno’s claim that this type of work is the only legitimate style in advanced capitalist society. They have destroyed the possibility that a given school can present itself with the claim to universal validity. … The meaning of the break in the history of art that the historical avant-garde movements provoked does not consist in the destruction of art as an institution, but in the destruction of the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones.

Bürger’s second criticism concerns Adorno’s emphasis on import. In nineteenth century aestheticism, according to Bürger, the relative independence of bourgeois art from other social subsystems became fused with the increasingly asocial and apolitical import of individual works. The anti-aestheticism of the avant-garde exposed bourgeois art as a social institution whose principle of autonomy meant the social impotence of autonomous works. Because Adorno thinks within this institution, he has little to say about the social functions of art works. Instead of analyzing the institutional framework that largely determines a work’s social functions, Adorno is led by the doctrine of autonomy to derive such functions from the import of works in themselves. Ideology critique comes at the expense of functional analysis. As a result Adorno tends to ignore the socio-historical context in which the work arises and the history of reception in which the work operates.

Once the theoretical implications of the avant-garde become clear, however, a normative focus on import will be replaced by a functional analysis, the object of whose investigation would be the social effect (function) of a work, which is the result of the coming together of stimuli inside the work and a sociologically definable public within an already existing institutional frame.

The work will undergo a functional analysis, not so much of the work’s supposed functions in society at large, but of the work’s changing functions within the evolving institution of art.

Bürger’s third criticism addresses Adorno’s
understanding of the social significance of individual works. We noted earlier that Adorno locates the social significance of the art work in both its import and its social functions, but that the work’s social significance ultimately hinges on the truth or falsity of the work’s import. The social significance of both social content and social functions depends on the truth content of the work. The problem with such an understanding of social significance, according to Bürger, is that it dehistoricizes the work. Adorno’s approach makes it difficult to distinguish between the historical meaning (Sinn) and the contemporary relevance (Deutung, Gehalt) of the work. For example, when Goethe’s Iphigenie is interpreted as prophesying the flip of enlightenment into mythology, Adorno is attributing experiences that Goethe could not have had. The result is what Gadamer would call a “fusion of horizons” between the past and the present.

Bürger thinks that such a fusion dissolves the historical specificity of a particular work. He calls for an “institution-sociological approach” that separates these horizons in order to place them in a dialectical relation. The sociologist would try to determine the position of Goethe’s drama within the institution of literature in Goethe’s day. This position would then be related to the work’s later acceptance into the literary canon and its potential significance today. The “interpretation” of individual works becomes a “production of significance” (Bedeutungsproduktion) that self-consciously proceeds from a different historical experience and a different conception of literature than those of Goethe and his contemporaries.

Bürger wishes to replace Adorno’s emphasis on the import of autonomous works with an emphasis on the changing function of the work within a changing institution of art. Whereas Adorno makes the social significance of the work of art depend on the truth of its import, Bürger seems to make it depend on the work’s potential contribution to the eventual integration of art and life. Bürger has rendered problematic Adorno’s monadic model of social mediation. At the same time, however, Bürger’s criticisms of Adorno raise questions about a claim both authors share. It is the sixth claim mentioned earlier, namely that autonomy is crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. This claim deserves further attention. I shall examine first the implications of Adorno’s stance for heteronomous art and then the implications of Bürger’s stance for normative aesthetics.

III. HETERONOMOUS ART AND NORMATIVE AESTHETICS

Several questions can be raised about the claim that autonomy is crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. One might wonder, for example, whether art can or does make contributions in any society. One might also examine the notion of “advanced capitalist society.” For present purposes such questions will be set aside in favor of a closer look at “autonomy” and the emphasis placed on this concept by both Adorno and Bürger.

We should note in passing that there are many different applications of the concept of autonomy. Göran Hermerén distinguishes no fewer than twelve theses about the autonomy of art. Some pertain to the history and characteristics of art as an institution, others concern the character, functions, and reception of works of art. Some theses are descriptive, others are prescriptive. Hermerén also asks that we “distinguish clearly between the autonomy of art and our ideas about the autonomy of art.”

If we were to apply all these distinctions rigorously, however, we would risk losing sight of what is most interesting in the debate between Bürger and Adorno. Both of them think that the autonomy of art and the autonomy of works are inextricable from each other. Neither author accepts a clear distinction between descriptive and prescriptive theses about autonomy. Each author claims that the actual autonomy of art and dominant ideas about autonomy belong together, and that we cannot adequately understand the one without understanding the other. Bürger and Adorno share the claim that the autonomy of art and of works, both actual and ideational, is crucial for art’s contributions within advanced capitalist society. They simply draw different conclusions from this claim.

Autonomy and Truth

In Adorno’s account, the claim in question implies a strong notion of truth. Unlike Bürger, who says little about truth, Adorno views au-
tonomy as a precondition for truth in art. To make sense of this view, one must assume with Adorno that the attainment of truth is a historical process whose precondition is also historical. Furthermore this historical precondition must be irreversible, at least until society as a whole undergoes a fundamental transformation.

Yet it is not clear why this assumption of irreversibility must be granted. Could it not be, for example, that in a so-called “information society” enough changes will occur, short of a fundamental transformation, that art’s relative independence from other social institutions will become a thing of the past? There are many indications that the institution of autonomous art is headed in such a direction. Would the completion of this process mean that truth could no longer be attained in art? We should notice that Adorno might not be claiming that autonomy is the precondition of truth in art. Yet it is a precondition, and a crucial one at that.

Another way to put our questions would be to ask whether truth has been attained in art prior to the development of autonomy. Here one is struck by how little Adorno has to say about art prior to the eighteenth century. This fact need not deter us, however, since either a yes or a no would be instructive. If Adorno granted that truth has been attained prior to the development of autonomy, then autonomy would seem less crucial for the attainment of truth. If Adorno denied that truth has been attained prior to the development of autonomy, then his idea of truth in art might appear as little more than a sophisticated justification for autonomous art, perhaps in the age of its demise.

The waters become even more muddy when we turn to heteronomous art in the twentieth century. By “heteronomous art” I mean art that has not become relatively independent from other institutions of bourgeois society and whose products are produced and received to accomplish purposes that are directly served by other institutions. The term covers both traditional folk art and contemporary popular art. Examples of heteronomous art would include everything from liturgical dance to tribal masks, from advertising jingles to commercial movies. If such art lacks autonomy, a crucial precondition for truth in art, then one begins to wonder about the legitimacy of measuring it according to the criterion of truth. Yet Adorno’s critique of the culture industry makes little sense apart from the criterion of truth. If heteronomous art does not lack this precondition, then the distinction between autonomy and heteronomy begins to fade. Yet the focus of Aesthetic Theory presupposes a clear distinction. The book focuses almost exclusively upon autonomous art.

The obvious fact that Aesthetic Theory has little to say about heteronomous art seems entirely consistent with Adorno’s claims about autonomous art. Adorno regards autonomy as a precondition for truth in art, and truth as the ultimate criterion for the social significance of any work of art. An aesthetics primed in this way toward social significance and truth can hardly be expected to pay much attention to heteronomous art. Such art lacks a precondition for truth. Thus it probably cannot meet Adorno’s ultimate criterion for social significance.

Adorno’s stance can prompt at least three responses from those who find his systematic neglect of heteronomous art dissatisfying. One would be to question whether the neglect of heteronomous art is truly in keeping with the deepest intentions of Adorno’s aesthetics. A second response would be to challenge his tight connections between autonomy, truth, and social significance. A third would be to surrender the pivotal notion of truth in art. Unlike the third response, which seems premature, the first and second responses look promising at this point.

**Purpose and Function**

One way to begin our response is to argue that Adorno’s concept of autonomy is misconceived. This is different from Burger’s claim that Adorno improperly assumes the principle of autonomy. I am arguing that Adorno confuses two aspects of autonomy that are both actually and ideationally distinct. The first aspect is one of purpose. The other is one of function. “Purpose” pertains to the fulfillment of human needs and desires within a society. “Function” pertains to the institutionalized operations whereby human purposes are met or denied. Although purposes and functions are connected, they are also distinct. Adorno’s concept of autonomy loses sight of this distinction. Consider, for example, the dual use of “function” (Funktion) in his provocative claim that “if any social function can be ascribed to [art works] at all, it is … to have no function”
(336–337/322). As an empirical claim about how art actually operates in society this would be patently incorrect. No one, and certainly not Adorno, would want to deny that even supposedly “autonomous” works operate as market commodities and find all sorts of uses in situations where economic transactions are taking place. As a claim about purposes Adorno’s formulation is also problematic. It suggests, contrary to his own intent, that works of (autonomous) art fail to fulfill human needs and desires. His paradoxical statement trades on an ambiguity in the term “function.” What he intends to say is that insofar as autonomous works fulfill human needs and desires within advanced capitalist society, they do so by refusing simply to operate in the manner dictated by other institutions. Autonomous works must be more or less useless within other institutions in order to serve the purpose of social critique and utopian memory.

Even such a construal of autonomy is too simple. Works of so-called autonomous art have many uses within other institutions. If they did not, they could not serve any purpose, not even that of social critique and utopian memory. Such works are used, for example, as agents of employment, socializing, corporate image-building, and civic pride. They function in many institutions, and they must function in some of these institutions in order to serve any purpose. How could we be overwhelmed by the onset of the reprise in Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony (363/347) if there were no musicians’ unions, concert halls, corporate foundations, or government grants? How could we critically reflect on the truth of this passage (364/347) if publishers and record companies did not produce scores and records, tapes, or compact discs? These questions might seem to take Adorno’s approach too lightly. Nevertheless apparent trifles can be instructive. By concentrating on the autonomous work of art, Adorno seems to discount the entwinement of autonomous art with other social institutions. Even if other institutions frustrate human purposes, this would not eliminate the entwinement that does in fact exist.

I am not suggesting that the concept of autonomy be abandoned. Instead I am proposing to refine the concept by distinguishing between purposes and functions. The fact that art has become a relatively independent institution in society does not mean that the products of this institution have shed all their functions within other institutions. The claim that “autonomous art” serves a purpose thwarted by other institutions need not entail the claim that art has no social functions. At best the concept of autonomy will imply that at least some of what is called art has come to serve certain human purposes more directly than have other institutions in society. Furthermore, the functions whereby this occurs, although entwined in other institutions, are not exhausted by the operations of those institutions.

Consider, for example, a concert performance of Beethoven’s Ninth Symphony. The performance may present a powerful gesture of human self-affirmation in ways that few nonartistic events can match. Although the performance helps provide employment, gives an occasion for socializing, or builds corporate images and civic pride, these facts do not exhaust the functions of this performance. The performance is also and simultaneously functioning as an object of attention and interpretation for both the performers and the audience, and is doing so at various levels of perception, technique, cultural memory, and social import. Yet, as Adorno would agree, it would be much too simple to say that this performance instantiates autonomy only to the extent that it functions as an aesthetic object for aesthetic purposes. Not only are the primary purposes for undertaking such a performance more than merely aesthetic, the functions of this performance also include much more than merely aesthetic functions.

This account of autonomy raises the question whether an illuminating distinction can still be drawn between autonomous and heteronomous art. Although the distinction seems to be fading, both in actuality and in thought, perhaps one contrast is worth pointing out. The processes and structures that have come to characterize autonomous art are such that the products in this institution tend to be self-referential. This self-referential tendency has become increasingly evident in the twentieth century. For products of autonomous art the primary means of serving this institution’s purposes are to affirm and criticize other products of autonomous art.36 The functions of these products in other institutions tend to be secondary means that are subservient to self-referential functions. One can see a rough parallel here with the institution of aca-
ademic scholarship, whose products also tend to be self-referential, unlike research and teaching outside the modern academy. By contrast, products of heteronomous art tend not to be self-referential.37 For products of heteronomous art the primary means for serving its purposes are functions within other institutions.

By way of illustration, think of the contrast between a piece of concert music, say Stravinsky’s Symphony of Psalms, and a piece of church music, say a contemporary setting of Psalm 39 for congregational singing. Stravinsky’s piece was written as a tour de force, one which tackles various compositional problems and deliberately inserts itself into a concert tradition. Performers approach the piece primarily in terms of its musical challenges. Audiences listen to it in terms of how well those challenges are met relative to other compositions and to other performances of the same composition. The piece of church music, by contrast, was written to meet a need for new liturgical actions, and it is sung as a way of carrying out such actions. Both pieces might very well fulfill similar purposes, such as the expression of suffering and hope, but the means to such an end are somewhat different, with a corresponding difference in the primacy of their functions within nonartistic institutions. It is no easier to imagine an event of public worship in which Stravinsky’s symphony would be liturgically appropriate than it is to imagine a concert in which the congregational singing of the psalm setting would be aesthetically appropriate.

The contrast between autonomous and heteronomous art is fluid, however, and it certainly is no longer so firm as to support Adorno’s strong preference for autonomous art. Yet the critical thrust of Adorno’s approach has not lost its relevance. Perhaps relative independence from other institutions would allow the work to present its challenge and disclosure in a more concentrated and sophisticated way, but the self-referential tendency of autonomous works could just as easily prevent this challenge and disclosure. Heteronomy might make truth possible in some works and make it impossible in others.

By the same token, heteronomy need not keep a work from challenging the status quo and disclosing human aspirations. The lack of relative independence could allow the work to present its challenge and disclosure in a more diffuse and accessible way, even though the absence of self-reference could derail this challenge and disclosure. Heteronomy might make truth possible in some works and make it impossible in others.

The reference to effectiveness introduces the second counterclaim, namely that truth in art is not an ultimate criterion for the social significance of art. There are two reasons for claiming this. One is that social significance depends just as much on institutions outside art as it does on the import of works within the institution of art. The second is that the reasons for finding a work or event socially significant are so varied that the question of truth or falsity can become relatively unimportant.

To illustrate the first reason, one could think of the social significance of political cartoons, whether those of Honore Daumier in the nineteenth century or those of Garry Trudeau in our own. Commentators of various political persuasions would probably agree that “Doonesbury”

Heteronomy and Social Significance

For present purposes, “truth in art” will be taken to mean the way in which the status quo is challenged and human aspirations are disclosed. Although Adorno might have found this description insufficiently negative, it does capture some of his idea of truth content. Now let us ask whether in an advanced capitalist society a work of art must be autonomous in order to challenge the status quo and to disclose human aspirations. It is hard to imagine why this would have to be so. Perhaps relative independence from other institutions would allow the work to present its challenge and disclosure in a more concentrated and sophisticated way, but the self-referential tendency of autonomous works could just as easily prevent this challenge and disclosure. Heteronomy might make truth possible in some works and make it impossible in others.

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To illustrate the first reason, one could think of the social significance of political cartoons, whether those of Honore Daumier in the nineteenth century or those of Garry Trudeau in our own. Commentators of various political persuasions would probably agree that “Doonesbury”
had greater social significance in the 1980s than "Blondie." The basis for such an assessment could hardly be restricted to the import of Trudeau's series. Crucial considerations would have to be the prominence given this series in the print media and the way in which it has become part of the American political landscape. If the series had not become syndicated and notorious, it would have much less social significance, regardless of its import. The social significance of "Doonesbury" is heavily dependent on the contemporary operations of the print media and of the American political system.

The second reason for denying that truth is an ultimate criterion for social significance is the variety of reasons for finding a work or event of art socially significant. The reasons for finding a television series such as "Dallas" socially significant probably have little in common with the reasons for finding a performance by Laurie Anderson socially significant. The first set of reasons would have to do with the power of public image-making; the second set of reasons would pertain to the erasure of boundaries between autonomous and heteronomous art. This illustration need not mean that "social significance" is a categorical chameleon whose content changes for each different phenomenon. Instead the point is that, given the great variety in reasons for finding artistic phenomena socially significant, it hardly makes sense to posit an ultimate criterion for social significance. Positing truth as an ultimate criterion usually assumes or implies that "major works" of "autonomous art" have greater social significance than lesser works of autonomous art and than any works of heteronomous art. Such an assumption or implication makes little sense, however, unless the reasons for assigning social significance are of the same kind. This homogeneity does not exist, not even in Adorno's own discussions of phenomena ranging from swing jazz to Beckett's Endgame.

If autonomy is not a precondition for truth in art, and if truth is not an ultimate criterion for the social significance of art, then the criteria of truth and social significance need not be restricted to autonomous art. To the extent that Adorno's own critique of the culture industry applies these criteria to heteronomous art, our counterclaims serve to honor his intentions without sharing his strong preference for autonomous art. Yet the arguments given for these counterclaims might seem to undercut the critique of any art, whether heteronomous or autonomous. For if the social significance of artistic phenomena depends on the operations of other institutions, and if the reasons for assigning social significance lack homogeneity, then how can we make coherent global judgments about art in contemporary society?

**History and Aesthetic Norms**

This potential problem surfaces in Bürger's stance toward normative aesthetics. Like Adorno, Bürger thinks that the social significance of artistic phenomena ultimately depends on their contribution to a utopian future. Unlike Adorno, however, Bürger holds that the historical avant-garde movements have destroyed "the possibility of positing aesthetic norms as valid ones." It is no longer possible for the theorist to elevate one type of work to a norm for evaluating all works of art. The post-avant-garde philosopher faces a vast array of materials, styles, and traditions, no one of which is preferable. Indeed, normative aesthetic theory might no longer be possible:

Whether this condition of the availability of all traditions still permits an aesthetic theory at all, in the sense in which aesthetic theory existed from Kant to Adorno, is questionable. Where the formal possibilities have become infinite, not only authentic creation but also its scholarly analysis become correspondingly difficult.39

The historicizing of Adorno's aesthetic theory seems to have ended in Bürger's abandoning normative aesthetics.

If normative aesthetics were indeed abandoned, this would have troubling implications for Bürger's own theory. In the first place, it would be difficult to establish the validity of his historicizing Adorno's aesthetics. Bürger historicizes from the standpoint of the avant-garde. If valid aesthetic norms can no longer be posited, it becomes hard to determine why Bürger's standpoint toward Adorno's norms is any more valid than any other. It also becomes unclear why one should even bother to take Adorno's aesthetics seriously enough to historicize it. In the second place, the abandoning of normative aesthetics would raise the question whether Bürger has
an adequate basis for a critique of autonomous art and autonomous works. Bürger’s “patient, dialectic critique” would risk becoming locked into its object. 41 In the third place, even if we granted the need to turn from normative aesthetics to functional analysis, the impossibility of normative aesthetics would raise methodological problems for the functional analysis of artistic phenomena. It would become difficult to decide which phenomena deserve analysis, and even more difficult to justify this decision in the face of criticisms.

These potential problems, to be explored in more detail, would be forestalled by Adorno’s aesthetics. For all its historicizing of traditional norms such as “beauty,” Aesthetic Theory does not abandon the normative character of traditional aesthetics. Instead Adorno abandons the pretense that such norms are eternal and immutable. The troubled genius of Adorno has been his refusal either to divorce aesthetic norms from the larger socio-historical process or to accept whatever aesthetic norms have taken shape in the socio-historical process.

One must say “troubled” because this double refusal has helped generate the difficulties that Burger has noted. Adorno tends to derive his aesthetic norms from modern nonorganic works within the institution of autonomous art. He tends to use such works as a standard for rejecting popular art as well as literary realism. And his interpretation of older works such as Goethe’s Iphigenie does tend to dissolve their historical specificity. Nevertheless Adorno’s aesthetics gives us a basis for accessing the legitimacy and validity of his own historicizing project. His approach enables us to ask whether he has indeed shed light on all art from a contemporary perspective and whether he has succeeded in releasing a new truth content in traditional aesthetic categories. 42 Furthermore Adorno’s idea of truth content provides both a definite basis for his critique of art and a criterion for making defensible decisions about which works deserve analysis.

Bürger, by contrast, seems to have dismissed the labor of normative aesthetics by radicalizing the connection between aesthetic norms and the socio-historical process. He seems to have given up the second half of Adorno’s refusal. This move is puzzling, however, for now there seems to be no normative basis within Bürger’s theory for assessing his own historicizing project. How should one commend or criticize the results of his critique of Adorno’s aesthetics? Bürger does not seem to be releasing the truth content of Adorno’s normative claims. Instead Bürger seems to be using the historical fact of avant-garde anti-autonomy to render Adorno’s claims invalid for post-avant-garde art. Indeed all positing of aesthetics norms seems to have become invalid in post-avant-garde aesthetics. If this were so, however, then what would be the point of criticizing Bürger’s historicizing critique? If he is not himself making normative claims about art, then his “theory” can only be treated as a more or less imaginative and illuminating historical narrative.

Yet Bürger is making normative claims. By implication, at least, he is positing as a valid norm the historical impact of artistic phenomena on aesthetic theory. This is what a critique of Bürger would have to address. One could question, for example, whether the historical avant-garde movements actually did destroy the possibility of theoretically positing valid norms for art. Furthermore, even if the avant-garde has had some such impact, there would be no obvious reason why the historical impact of specific historical movements should operate as the norm whereby normative aesthetics is invalidated.

Besides raising questions about the validity of historicizing Adorno’s aesthetics, Bürger’s implicit norm renders problematic his own critique of art. Whereas Adorno’s idea of truth content provides a definite basis for his critique of art, the appeal to historical impact leaves little room for critical evaluations of the phenomena said to have this impact. One of the few conceivable modes of evaluation along these lines would be to say which phenomena have had or can have greater impact than others. Perhaps Bürger has something like this in mind when he calls for interpretations that are a “production of significance” (Bedeutungsproduktion). Unless Bürger can posit some norms beyond historical impact, however, he will have no more basis for distinguishing between better and worse works than does Pierre Bourdieu, who considers such distinctions an arbitrary reinforcement of social status. 43

Given Bürger’s claim that the avant-garde has destroyed the possibility of positing valid norms for works of art, he can posit norms beyond
historical impact only at the price of inconsistency. To be consistent he would either have to soften his claim about the avant-garde’s impact or to give up the norm of historical impact. If Bürger insists on both the claim and the norm, then there will be little basis for deciding whether the impact of the avant-garde has been significant or worthwhile. The lack of such a basis would then raise the question why aesthetics should take the avant-garde as its own standpoint, especially when Bürger himself acknowledges that the avant-garde failed to destroy the institution of autonomous art. Silence on this question would indicate that there might be no reason for preferring Bürger’s critique of autonomous art rather than Adorno’s or Bourdieu’s.

The apparent abandonment of normative aesthetics also poses methodological problems for the functional analysis of artistic phenomena. As we have seen, Bürger wishes to replace Adorno’s emphasis on the import of autonomous works with an emphasis on the changing function of the work within a changing institution of art. Although this move holds considerable promise, two methodological problems arise.

The first concerns the justification for analyzing certain works rather than others. Functional analysis must decide which works deserve analysis and must justify this decision in the face of criticism. Why, for example, would one decide to do a functional analysis of Goethe’s Iphigenie? If one decided this for the reason that this work has been prominent within the institution of literature, one would be following whatever the institution dictates. If one decided this for the reason that Iphigenie has contemporary significance, one would be relying on judgments that go beyond the work and its functions. The criteria of such judgments could not simply be the norm of historical impact. This becomes especially evident in the case of works ignored in the past that might have contemporary significance. Feminist scholars have repeatedly discovered such works.

The second methodological problem concerns the interpretation of a work’s functions. It seems that Bürger wishes to place his interpretations in the horizon of a utopian future by updating the work’s function for the contemporary situation. The potential problem with this mode of interpretation is that it could easily become arbitrary. Unlike Adorno’s interpretations, Bürger’s functional analysis seems to lack ways to test the interpretation of a work’s functions against the work’s intrinsic merits. His functional analysis also seems to be locked into the bourgeois institution of autonomous art in its current form. The “theory of the avant-garde” has little to say about the culture industry or about indigenous and transitional art forms outside the immediate orbit of advanced capitalism. Because of this narrow focus, there are few ways to form comparative judgments in a larger socio-historical context. Both the reference to intrinsic merits and the comparison with phenomena outside bourgeois art require judgments for which Bürger has no normative criteria. It becomes difficult to avoid arbitrary interpretations.

It seems premature to abandon normative aesthetics. There are holes in Adorno’s theory, but the ship is still afloat. Bürger is on target when he criticizes Aesthetic Theory for elevating one type of work to an aesthetic norm, but he misses the mark when he concludes that it has become impossible to posit valid aesthetic norms. So long as one’s theory of art includes a critique of art, the positing of norms is unavoidable, even if the norm is one of historical impact. Bürger’s conclusion makes sense only if one assumes with Adorno that certain works are the source of aesthetic norms. If one drops this assumption, the impact of the avant-garde begins to look somewhat different. It could very well be that by attacking the institution of autonomous art the avant-garde has helped make possible a more complex normativity rather than simple anormativity.

**Complex Normativity**

“Complex normativity” means a network of norms, no one of which has preeminence, and some of which apply to phenomena outside the institution of autonomous art. Some of the norms could apply to the functions of works within an institution of art. Others could apply to the functions of works within other institutions. Still others could apply to what Adorno calls the import of the work. With suitable extensions and revisions these various norms could also be shown to hold for related actions, events (e.g., concerts), and processes (e.g., the reception of a novel). A partial list of such norms could include technical excellence, formal depth, originality,
popularity, social significance, political effectiveness, and historical truth. Rarely would one expect a particular work to meet all these norms, nor would very many works display exceptional merit with respect to every norm that they do meet. Philosophical aesthetics would have the task of spelling out the contents of such norms.

If this were done in the proper manner, we could circumvent some of the problems Bürger has noted in Adorno’s aesthetics. Certainly one style, tradition, or type of work could no longer be made the standard whereby all others are found deficient. A work with formal depth, for example, could be found politically ineffective. So too a work that is technically excellent could be found inappropriate to its situation and therefore lacking in popularity. Complex normativity would also counteract the tendency to dissolve the historical specificity of older works. Because the historical truth of a work would not be considered an ultimate criterion, there would be much less pressure to fuse its historical horizon with that of the interpreter. At the same time, in contrast to Bürger’s tendency, the actual or imputed historical impact of a work would not be decisive for determining its various merits.

Still, there is something dissatisfying about pursuing complex normativity in aesthetic theory. We seem to have surrendered the claim, shared by Adorno and Bürger, that the social significance of artistic phenomena ultimately depends on their contribution to a utopian future. On this topic much could be said. For now two points must suffice.

In the first place, the question of utopia is not a normative question. It is a question which puts all normative claims in question. No matter what norm one applies to artistic phenomena, the question of their contribution to utopia remains. The same question holds for one’s normative claims, including any claims on behalf of complex normativity.

In the second place, claiming that the social significance of artistic phenomena ultimately depends on their contribution to a utopian future is not the same thing as showing what this claim means for specific phenomena. It is in the showing that Aesthetic Theory retains the speculative dimension which Theory of the Avant-Garde sorely lacks. Without this dimension, this critical fantasy, if you will, a model of social mediation easily becomes just one more part of the status quo. There is no way to build critical fantasy into a theoretical model. Without it, however, our criticisms of Adorno will lose their point, and the employment of a different model will fail to result in a genuine critique of art.44

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5. This is how the opening pages of Marx’s Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte are construed by Eugene Lunn, Marxism and Modernism: An Historical Study of Lukács, Brecht, Benjamin, and Adorno (University of California Press, 1982), pp. 18-20.


7. Ibid., p. 36.

8. The Adorno-Benjamin debate has shaped much of the English language reception of Adorno’s aesthetics. I have discussed this debate at greater length in a book manuscript.


12. One can perceive this tendency more clearly in Adorno’s writings in the 1940s. For a humorous and biting criticism, see Karl Markus Michel, “Versuch, die ‘Aesthetische Theorie’ zu verstehen,” in Materialien zur Ästhetischen Theorie Theodor W. Adornos: Konstruktion der Moderne, eds. Burkhardt Lindner and W. Martin Lüdké (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1979), pp. 41–107.


15. Ibid., p. 19.


17. Peter Bürger, “The Institution of ‘Art’ as a Category in the Sociology of Literature,” Cultural Critique 2 (Winter 1986): 5–33. The last half of the essay contrasts the bourgeois institution of art with the “institutionalizations” of literature in the courtly and feudal society of seventeenth century France. This article is a translation of “Institution Kunst als Literatursoziologische Kategorie” in Vermittlung—Reception—Funktion, pp. 173–199.

18. Ibid., pp. 6–7.


21. Ibid., pp. 36, 46.

22. Ibid., p. 48.


25. Ibid., pp. 57–58.

26. Ibid., pp. 50, 54.

27. Ibid., p. lii.

28. Ibid., p. 87.


33. For related criticisms of Bürger, see Peter Uwe Hohendahl, “Autonomy of Art: Looking Back at Adorno’s Ästhetische Theorie,” German Quarterly 54 (1981): 133–148; W. Martin Lüdké, “Die Aporien der materialistischen Ästhetik—Kein Ausweg?” and Burkhardt Lindner’s “Aufhebung der Kunst in der Lebenspraxis? Über die Aktualität der Auseinandersetzung mit den historischen Avantgardebewegungen,” both in the anthology “Theorie der Avantgarde” (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1976); Richard Wolin, “Modernism vs. Postmodernism,” Telos 62 (Winter 1984–85): 9–29; and Jochen Schulte-Sasse, “Foreword” in Theory of the Avant-Garde, pp. vii–xlvi. Hohendahl suggests that Bürger’s concept of autonomous art is too constrictive as an historiographic category. Lüdké argues that Bürger has not done justice to Adorno’s concept of modernism (Moderne) and has not justified the application of Marxian political-economic categories to artistic phenomena. Lindner claims that the avant-garde represents a reversal (Umschlag) rather than a break (Bruch) in the bourgeois institution of art. Wolin exempts surrealism from Burger’s claim that the historical avant-garde movements aimed to reunite art and life, and Schulte-Sasse expresses his dissatisfaction with Bürger’s “refusal to reflect on future possibilities of an art integrated into social life” (p. xii).


35. Ibid., p. 36.

36. Aesthetic Theory describes this self-referential tendency as a type of “immanent critique” and considers it to be the key to continuity and tradition in art: “The truth content of works of art is part and parcel of their critical content. That is why … they criticize one another. Their continuity consists … in their critical relationship. ‘One work of art is the mortal enemy of another.’ This unity of art history is captured by the dialectical notion of determinate negation” (59–60/52).

37. The fact that commerical films and popular music have become increasingly self-referential in recent years is one reason for thinking that the distinction between autonomous and heteronomous art is fading. In this connection see the comments on “pastiche” and “the nostalgia mode” in Fredric Jameson, “Postmodernism, or The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism,” New Left Review 146 (July-August 1984): 53–92.

39. Ibid., p. 94.
40. Bürger acknowledges these problems but fails to address them in a satisfactory way. See Theory of the Avant-Garde, pp. xlix-lv, 15-20.
41. Ibid., p. 99.
42. In this connection see the “Draft Introduction” to Adorno’s Aesthetic Theory (pp. 493-533/456-492).
43. See Bürger, “Adorno, Bourdieu und die Literatursoziologie,” pp. 50-56.
44. I wish to thank Susan Buck-Morss, Ferenc Fehér, Gary Shapiro, and Nicholas Wolterstorff for their comments on earlier versions of this manuscript. Parts of it were presented at the International Association for Philosophy and Literature Conference on “Politics/Hermeneutics/Aesthetics” at the University of Notre Dame and at the XI International Congress in Aesthetics in Nottingham. The Nottingham paper, “Normative Aesthetics and Contemporary Art: Bürger’s Critique of Adorno,” will appear in a collection of congress papers edited by Richard Woodfield.