Chapter 4

The Non-Contemporaneity of Lukács and Lukács: Cold War Contradictions and the Aesthetics of Visual Art

There is something paradoxical in speaking about Lukács's visual aesthetic, insofar as Lukács was strongly rooted in literary culture and in fact had relatively little to say explicitly about visual art or, for that matter, any of the other arts. It is indicative that in his early project for a comprehensive aesthetics, he intended to engage Bloch to write the section on music, recognizing his own very limited knowledge. While in his late aesthetics he considers the separate genesis of the different arts and thus discusses other arts such as music and architecture, his own library reflects the overwhelming attention he gave to literature, represented by shelf after shelf of complete works by classic authors in their original language, on the one hand, and on the other, rather meager shelves of books on other arts to which he dutifully made recourse.

As a commentator on visual art, especially today, Lukács seems "non-contemporary": profoundly out of step with contemporary art and aesthetics. His aesthetic theory, justifying a canon of works opposed even to the mainstream of twentieth-century modernism, was deployed in the service of a now historically obsolete, discredited cultural politics of East Bloc socialism. Lukács is non-contemporaneous in a more profound sense as well, through the dispersed reception of his work, particularly across the former East–West divide, in which different moments of Lukács's oeuvre were picked up and developed in divergent ways. In a sense, given these multiple contexts of reception, "György/Georg Lukács" could never be wholly contemporary with himself, but always signified a variable complex of current writing along with reiterations of earlier phases of his work in new contexts. Finally, I also allude to an additional sense of "non-contemporaneity" associated especially with Bloch, for whom being non-identical with one's time implied a reserve of potentiality unrealized but latent within the inheritance of culture. In this case, I circle back to our contemporary moment, in which the

"non-contemporaneity" of the unfashionable Lukács may yet have something to offer.

Modern Art and the Problematic

Though still relatively sparse, writings and observations on visual art are more prevalent in the work of the young Lukács than in his mature works, and it is with a few key early points of reference that I will begin. I leave aside the fascinating article that Lukács published in September of 1913 in the *Frankfurter Zeitung* concerning the aesthetics of cinema, because in fact his interest in film derives less from the point of view of cinema as a medium of "visual culture" than from the relationship of film to drama as representational and narrative media that Lukács wants fundamentally to distinguish from one another. It is, however, of interest to note that while Lukács did not separately treat painting in his mature systematic aesthetics, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen* (The Specificity of the Aesthetic, 1963), in the second volume of this work he devoted a lengthy discussion to the aesthetics of film, in his chapter on "boundary-questions of mimesis" in media including music, architecture, applied arts, gardens, and film.[1]

Lukács, as J. Hoberman points out, had explicitly come to see film in 1960s Hungary in the role of the avant-garde, which in this rare case was not a pejorative designation for him. In connection with Lukács's positive response to Miklós Janscó's 1965 film *The Round-Up*, for example, Hoberman notes the apparent contradiction—or at least an unusual moment of openness—in Lukács's judgment of the film: "*The Round-Up* synthesized all that Lukács repressed. One could find here the 'decadent modernism' of Franz Kafka, Samuel Beckett, Eugène Ionesco, and Michelangelo Antonioni—but even more intriguingly, an imaginative representation of the circumstances under which the philosopher had led his life."[2] A less restrictive stance towards modernist techniques is also at least suggested by Lukács's comment on modern drama in his late interviews with Eörsi: "In modern drama there are undoubtedly traces of an incipient revival of the tragic. I have watched these developments with great care, because in my opinion it is important to point out that these things still exist today. [Mikhail] Lifshitz entirely rejected such phenomena."[3] It is likely, again, that Lukács viewed film as closer to drama than to visual arts, and hence his openness to new developments in drama may have extended to his reception of new Hungarian cinema.

The interview continues, however, to explicitly raise the question of

visual arts as well, in connection to Lifshitz, Lukács's friend and former collaborator in Moscow:

> *Int.*: Were there also disagreements between Lifshitz and yourself on the plastic arts?
> *G.L.*: We disagreed to the extent that I regarded Cézanne and Van Gogh as pinnacles of modern art, whereas he placed the high points much further back in the past. (88)

A few years before Lukács's interview, Lifshitz had published his anti-modernist screed *The Crisis of Ugliness*, in which he damned all modern art and literature in a single judgment: "To me, modernism is the greatest possible treachery of those who serve the department of spiritual affairs."[4] Even for the aesthetically conservative Lukács, this was a sign that his friend had lost any compass in the actual life of the arts. Lifshitz's thought, Lukács believed, had stalled out at the crossroads of an academicized past and bureaucratized present in the Soviet Union. Lukács lamented: "Poor old Lifshitz stayed behind in Russia. I don't mean that as a criticism, but after all, what could he achieve in Russia? His ideas became conservative through and through. I will not say that this put an end to our friendship, but the fact is that Lifshitz is still brooding over ideas that I have long since left behind" (*Record of a Life*, 87).[5]

The key points of reference to the visual arts in Lukács's early writings include his essay on Gauguin, which appeared in *Huszadik Század* (Twentieth Century) in June 1907; his essay "The Parting of the Ways"; his essay "Aesthetic Culture"; and lastly, his "Lecture on Painting" (*Formproblemen in der Malerei*) dating from his doctoral studies in Heidelberg. What the first three of these essays have in common—and this would remain fundamental to Lukács's understanding of art throughout his long career—is his analysis of modern art as a *problematic* phenomenon with an increasingly uncertain place in the broader culture and society of his time. Art's problematic status in modernity derives, in the early Lukács's view, from the disintegration of culture as a unifying, binding force that incorporates art into the spaces of daily practice, ritual, and belief, thus also guaranteeing that the artist can draw upon a stable set of themes and topoi that will be communicable to and comprehensible by a determinate public. As culture disintegrates under the corrosive pressures of modernity, art is increasingly emancipated from its functional and symbolic roles in everyday life, and develops as a specialized practice whose significance is staked on its technical liberation from convention on the one hand and its functional liberation as autonomous aesthetic experience. However, this emancipation from

convention and function comes at a considerable cost: the increasingly difficulty of discovering and legitimating artistic form, the increasing isolation and sense of uselessness of the artist as a social agent, and the evaporation of art's ethically formative power. Moreover, as Lukács already suggests in his early essay on Gauguin, the loss of socially conventional, readymade themes places a heavy intellectual burden on the artist to reflexively generate the worldview within which his or her artistic creation could be meaningful:

> Good painters were seldom original thinkers. Because creating ideas is hardly their role and ideas were no longer given them readymade as earlier, the subject matter (*tema*) came to lose all significance in painting. For the medieval painter, the Madonna was not a conceptual problem for she was already conceptualized and therefore presented only an artistic problem. But any artist who wanted to paint the Madonna today would have to conceptualize—for himself—his own relationship with the Bible; and this relationship would constitute the substance of his artistic process.[6]

It was typical of Lukács's early work—most notably, *Theory of the Novel*—to posit an earlier period of "integral civilization" when the artist or writer spontaneously drew from a cultural background and gave representative, "epic" voice to its values in a clarified, shapely, and communally understandable form. In the early works of Lukács's career, such as in his "Aesthetic Culture" essay, the medieval unity of Giotto's paintings or Dante's poetry with the theological worldview and Christian society modeled this epic spontaneity. Yet even as late as 1948, in an opening speech for the "Hungarian Reality" exhibition at the Fővárosi Képtár (Capital Gallery), the communist cultural pundit Lukács still appealed to such spontaneously communicable, unified cultural complexes, now situated by him in the masterpieces of early modern painting and implicitly available, at least as ideal and aspiration, to the coming age of popular-democratic and socialist culture. It is remarkable how closely in this speech he still echoes his thinking about the problematization of "subject matter" (*tema*) that forty years earlier he had advanced in relation to Gauguin. Lukács stated:

> As for Leonardo, Michelangelo, or Rembrandt, the spiritual, moral, social, even philosophical depiction of the world by painterly or sculpture means was not a "thematic" question, a question of "content." In their eyes the visible world still signified that the highest manifestations of spirituality and morality so to speak immediately and out of themselves were transformed into immediately sensual—painterly, sculptural—problems and purely artistic solutions to these.[7]

In another important programmatic essay from the People's Democracy period—his April 1947 essay "Free or Directed Art?"—Lukács provided

yet another view of this question of "theme," again drawing on earlier examples in which the problematic modern division of form and content had not yet occurred. "Theme" implied an indivisible complex that was at once form-governing and rich with social and conceptual content:

> A superficial view might incline one to conceive of thematic constraints as merely related to content, yet in so far as no theme is simply raw material, but may become fully thematic in the first place only in relation to a determinate world-view, the possibilities grasped in this transformation of the theme are dialectically turned into forces that govern the most profound questions of formation and structure. (The Orestes theme; the Last Supper in Giotto, Leonardo, Tintoretto, and such like.)[8]

Lukács's diagnosis of art's predicament in modernity thus preceded his Marxist aesthetics, in which, however, he refashioned his earlier analysis through historical materialist categories.

As his critique of impressionism in "The Parting of the Ways" indicates, Lukács was in search of an ethical teleology for art well before Marxism provided it for him and before later forms of artistic modernism—such as surrealism and abstract art—would come to fill the negative role that impressionism played early on in his thinking:

> Impressionism always stopped at the discovery of possibilities of expression; it always realized its directions in the discovery and disappearance of new means of expression, which constantly rigidified them into mannerisms. Impressionism always merely provided points of view, which would help it to get somewhere. But it didn't want to get anywhere. . . . The new art is the art of creating the whole, that of going the whole way, of profundity.[9]

We have here a set of elements that would also characterize Lukács's later critical thought, though he would give it a very different conceptual underpinning. He insists on the importance of the artist's worldview as embodied in the artwork; he evokes "totality" ("the creation of the whole") and penetration beyond immediacy ("profundity"); and he connects aesthetics to the sphere of ethics ("tasks and duties"). Socialism, among other things it provided Lukács, also offered him a solution to the problems he perceived—and regretted—in modern art. The socialist worldview and ideal allowed him to believe that modern art's problematic status might be transcended if a unified socialist culture were established and a new role for art as an ethically formative element of that new culture emerged.

Lukács developed these ideas essayistically, and his interest is less specifically in modern painting as an aesthetic medium and mode than in its status as a symptom of what, following the example of Simmel, he would define as the "tragedy of modern life," traced out in the metaphysical

conflict of "soul" (or "life") and "form." However, as I have previously discussed, we know that during Lukács's study in Heidelberg during World War I, he attempted and abandoned a systematic philosophy of art, only rediscovered after his death. Because here he was engaging with the most important formalist aesthetic philosophies of the time, especially the work of Konrad Fiedler, Adolf Hildebrand, Gottfried Semper, and Alois Riegl, painting served as something more than just an example for essayistic treatment. Anticipating later formalist modern critics such as Roger Fry, Clive Bell, Clement Greenberg, and Michael Fried, Fiedler in particular argued against the primacy of language and literary "subject matter" in favor of a notion of pure visuality that was, he claimed, at the basis of the aesthetic experience of visual art. He also argued that the "content" of works referred back to the creative process of the artist, and that the reception process was a matter of the spectator retracing in his or her mind the feelings and technical dispositions the artist experienced in creating the work. Throughout his Heidelberg aesthetic writings, Lukács firmly rejects any appeal to a special, "creative" psychology of the artist or the idea of artistic reception as involving access, reconstructively or projectively, to the inner experiences of the artist. Instead, he emphasizes the problem of artistic form, which ensures the autonomy of the artwork's communicative content, distinct from either the artist's inner experience or the spectator's. Artworks, in Lukács's view, initiate artistic communication as what we might now call a performative speech act, which depends on the work's formedness. But form, for Lukács, does not speak, as in Fiedler, only about the creative process by which the work came into being. It also expresses the work's intrinsic intentional relation towards meaningful objects, actions, bodies, and ideas in the world. In other words, form points beyond itself, towards a meaningful world, and the formed work is thus necessarily "about"—intentional of—worldly states of affairs.

Lukács attempted to develop this general aesthetic theory into a specific treatment of the categories of painting, in a lecture he wrote probably around 1916. Influenced by neo-Kantian philosophies, he sought to establish correlations between particular cognitive-emotional states of the subject and generic form-content complexes of works of painting. The subjective dispositions were, so to speak, a priori structures within which the objects of painting were constituted, and those transcendental conditions of constitution lent the empirical genres of painting their phenomenological underpinnings. Accordingly, Lukács distinguishes between three states of the subject: "mood" (*Gemüt*) "soul" (*Seele*), and "spirit" (*Geist*). Mood, in Lukács's view, involved withdrawal from the outer world in order to give free rein, by means of this initial

withdrawal, to a pure curiosity that yields a colorful world of feelings, sensations, and intensities. Soul, in contrast, is a deepening of this withdrawal into an interiority in which the object has no self-subsistence, but rather serves only as a mirror for deep subjective states. Lastly, spirit, for Lukács, implies a return to objectivity, but an objectivity enriched and redeemed by its intensive incorporation into the form-world of the painted work. "The world [of spirit] may only be the fully redeemed world," Lukács writes, "that is, things no longer remain in their ordinary thingliness with only the subjectivity of life woven around them, but also as things they develop to the absolutely highest degree possible and as such, without contradiction and dissonance, find their place in a new, appropriate world, the world of the artwork."[10] Although this lecture precedes his Marxist analysis of "reification," already in these early aesthetic writings Lukács is claiming, as he would in his late aesthetics, that the work of art breaks through reification and fetishism in order to reveal—with deep "realism"—the true objectivity of things and actions.

Lukács goes on to map these dispositions onto genres of painting. Mood, he argues, corresponds to the "still life," and he argues, in line with his early essayistic critique of impressionism, that the better part of impressionist art can be understood to have this underlying phenomenological structure of "still life." To soul, in contrast, Lukács connects the genre of portrait and especially the self-portrait. Spirit, he suggests, relates to two possible genres: the landscape, which exposes space and the object of nature in the light of a philosophy of nature that lets their essences appear, and "composition," or the "heroic composition." By composition, he means the composition of movements of human bodies in their tensions and relations to one another, as in the paintings of Rubens or Caravaggio, "such that a world comes into existence in which humanity striving intensively and expressively to the highest degree becomes perfectly calm and harmonious" (241).

Lukács and Visual Art in the "People's Democracy"

Lukács would abandon his aspirations to write a systematic aesthetic at this time, yet as already noted, a trace of his earlier thinking comes back in his occasional speech for the "Hungarian Reality" exhibition in 1948. There, expressing his typical disapproval of autonomous form-problems, he sketches a development in which the representational genres lose their connection to a priori form-content complexes and tend towards the reified, superficial play of forms, colors, and sensations that Lukács saw as characteristic of still life. We should furthermore note that "still

life" remained one of his favored metaphors for discussing, in a wide variety of contexts, the immediate appearance of the reified world:

> On the other hand so-called "pure" art came into being, first necessarily and spontaneously, later with programmatic intention: an art without subject-matter. In this light—artistically as well—painting and sculpture was impoverished. Contentless composition became ever poorer and self-centered, it more and more lacked within itself the self-evident, calm necessity of earlier great art; the more that portraits, landscapes, etc., turned into pure formal problems, the further they developed in the direction of a sort of deadened still-lifeness. ("Művészet és valóság," 184)

For nearly three decades, following his early writings on visual arts, however, Lukács would occupy himself primarily with literary and philosophical study, along with practical political activity. Although in the late twenties and thirties he might, for example, in arguing against "tendency literature," have taken up questions of visual and cinematic documentary culture, or photomontage, which were hotly debated in the 1930s, he really concentrated only on the "*literature* of facts." Similarly, though his writings on realism during the 1930s can be understood as participating in a climate of debate in the Soviet Union around notions of typicality in artistic representation that also extended to visual arts, again Lukács's focus was almost exclusively on narrative fiction and drama. Some of his most important literary study dates from his exile years in the Soviet Union, including his writings on the historical novel, his studies of nineteenth-century German literature, and his reconstruction with Mikhail Lifshitz of Marx's and Engels's writings on literature. He also researched and composed the work that would be published after World War II as *The Destruction of Reason*, a Marxist critique of the decadence of German philosophy that would strongly inflect Lukács's rejection of the irrationalistic worldviews he discerned in modernist literature and art and especially in criticism—like Adorno's—that sought to justify modernist art forms and practices. But there is little evidence that Lukács engaged in any significant way with the visual art of either the Soviet Union or the West during the 1930s, which, we should recall, saw the imposition of an official socialist realist aesthetic in visual as well as literary arts, the flourishing of mural art in Mexico, the state support of documentary and public art in the United States, the dissemination of surrealist ideas and practices in visual art, the engagement of left artists in the anti-fascist struggle in Spain, the establishment of fascist and Stalinist neoclassical styles of monuments and architecture, and many other developments to which a more visually attuned philosopher and critic might have paid attention. Lukács seems literally to have kept his head down during this period in

the USSR, in books, and given little heed to the rapidly transforming iconosphere around him.

When Lukács returned from Moscow to Budapest after 1945, however, he suddenly found himself Hungary's most famous left-wing intellectual, and he was drawn actively into public life as a university professor, literary authority, public speaker, and publisher of an astonishing number of books, including several that dated back to work in the Soviet Union and others, like *Literature and Democracy*,[11] that collect commentaries on various current cultural tendencies and occasions. In the fluid situation between 1945 and 1948, with the Communist Party tightening its grip on political and cultural institutions, but with the possibility that the Soviet Army, per diplomatic agreement, would pull out of occupied East–Central Europe, Lukács counted on a long road to socialism with political pluralism lasting perhaps for decades. In that context, he sought to think through what he believed should be the orientations in culture most likely to resist the restoration of fascism and to encourage populist democracy and eventually the transition to socialism. Once again, his writings of this time are overwhelmingly concerned with literature and literary history, which he saw as the most efficacious means of cultivating progressive attitudes and worldviews. Yet his broad public activities also included exceptional interventions into the visual arts, such as his opening speeches at an exhibition of Noémi Ferenczy in 1947 (published in *Forum*) and the 1948 "Hungarian Reality" exhibition, the text of which was published in the May issue of the journal edited by the ex-avant-gardist Sándor Bortnyik, *Szabad Művészet* (Free Art). He also served on a committee in 1947 to select the winner of a competition for a new sculpture of the leftist poet Attila József, probably because of its clear literary content. By far, however, his most extended and influential text on visual arts was his polemic against "Hungarian Theories of Abstract Art," published in *Forum* in 1947, which focused on recent texts by Ernő Kállai (*Nature's Hidden Face*) and Béla Hamvas and Katalin Kemény (*Revolution in the Arts*),[12] which paralleled the formation of two post–World War II artist groups, the surrealist-influenced "European School" and the "Abstract Art Group."

The indirection of Lukács's attack on abstract art is revealing: he chooses not to discuss a single actual work of surrealist or abstract art, but rather what he saw as the theoretical discourse that served to legitimate abstractionist and surrealist practice and that supplied, in his view, the dangerous worldview of this art's seemingly incommunicable, ultraformalistic, or vacuous subject matter. Though one can regret Lukács's implicit dismissal (and role in the eventual suppression) of some of the most important Hungarian painting of his time, it must be said that he

saw at least one question at stake in abstract art with surprising acuteness. Just as Charles Harrison, a critic close to the Art and Language group, would argue in his 1980 essay "The Ratification of Abstract Art" that abstract art was parasitic on language for its meaning and that linguistic interpretations of abstract art were institutionally posited,[13] Lukács already in 1947 argued along analogous lines that abstract art depended on a discursive supplement furnished by questionable philosophies such as Kállai's eclectic "bioromantic" appropriation of scientific concepts or Hamvas's new-age pastiche of non-Euclidian geometry, relativistic physics, theories of the unconscious, and myth theory:

> If we are here considering the theoretical works of Ernő Kállai and Béla Hamvas, it is in order to seek the principles that motivate and justify abstract art philosophically. . . . This, however, is far from deciding the following question: whether there is an essential relation between such theoretical argumentation and abstract art's artistic principles and practice. For the antagonism with several centuries of European artistic tradition which is manifested in the artistic practice of abstract art, it requires a completely different theoretical legitimation from normal style-changes in the different traditions. In order to see the justification of abstract art, we would have to re-evaluate all the basic concepts of previous aesthetics. Indeed—in so far as genuine aesthetics stand in the closest relation with a number of problems in our world-views—all the questions of world-view would have to be re-examined as well. It is the value of these books by Kállai and by Hamvas and Katalin Kemény that they attempt this re-evaluation. . . . If these theories—quite divergent from each other—do not cover precisely and at every point the practice of abstract art and the convictions of some of its adherents, there is, nonetheless, something indicative and symptomatic in the fact that they attempt to justify abstract art theoretically, today, in 1947, in this way.[14]

Lukács's diagnosis of this "symptomatic" justification measures it against the social tendencies of "progress" that he sees in the present moment in Hungary. In this diagnosis, he draws strongly upon his philosophical critique of irrationalism, which he would also deploy in other topical cultural debates, including in his criticisms of the political psychology of the liberal theorist István Bibó, his opposition to existentialist tendencies, and his arguments for realist literature in reconstruction Hungary. Dogmatically persuaded by his own study that any compromise with irrationalistic worldviews would contribute to the restoration of fascism—or at least discourage the intelligentsia from resisting this restoration—Lukács waged a many-sided polemical battle, of which his argument against theories of abstract art was, seen at our historical distance, little more than a minor and occasional skirmish.

Indeed, although he openly declares his desire to influence "some artists [to] reject these theories, if they consider what, thought through to

their conclusions, they entail and where they lead" (225), Lukács probably did not anticipate how successful this essay would be in torpedoing emergent abstract tendencies nor the repressive means by which their marginalization would take place. Pataki and György note the influence of Lukács's essay: "György Lukács's article was taken [by the modernistic painters] to be a declarative pronouncement of cultural politics, and it was felt from reading it that new times were coming, rendering their activity impossible and not just in an aesthetic sense."[15] Elsewhere, Pataki summarizes this sense of a decisive turn following the publication of Lukács's article, which was, of course, not so much the "cause" of abstract art's suppression as rather the willing instrument in the larger political, ideological, institutional, and geopolitical changes that were in train, driven by a Communist Party leadership that sought the full-scale Sovietization of Hungary like the rest of occupied East–Central Europe. Pataki usefully surveys the variable rhythm of these events in Hungary, Poland, Czechoslovakia, Bulgaria, and Romania, and notes with regard to Hungary that the imposition of socialist realism took place gradually, with tactical alliances between communist cultural politics and prestigious artistic leftists of an earlier generation, including Aurél Bernáth, Róbert Berény, and Bertalan Pór. But from the beginning of 1948, Pataki argues, to the end of the year, there was a decisive change: "already only those efforts judged useful to the public and society could make it through the [narrowing path], and beneath the articulations of the different groups themselves, in case of divergences of view, a crushing, unitary, centrally directed artistic consciousness."[16]

Lukács's article was not singularly responsible for this development, but it provided effective theoretical ammunition against the tendencies that the Hungarian Communist Party's cultural leadership wanted to sideline and surpress. Pataki and György note affirmative reference to Lukács's article in Márton Horváth's essay "An Evaluation of the Literary Life in the Hungarian Democracy," published in *Csillag* in March of 1948. Already a year earlier, in an article in *Magyarok*, Máriusz Rabinovszky deployed Lukács's language of social decay to characterize abstract and other modernist manifestation in the visual arts: "Insofar as today we are building a new society and a reality worth living in, the turn in the arts that were still legitimate in the recent past are today already obsolete, reactionary orientations. From now on every honorable can breathe a sigh of relief: relief from modern society having to occupy itself further with these manifestations smelling of decay."[17] A forum on abstract art in the October 1947 *Szabad Művészet* that included contributions by Iván Hevesy, Gábor O. Pogány, Máriusz Rabinovszky, and Balázs Vargha was followed by a note that refers

their readers to Lukács's essay, which "condemns this style's theoretical foundations" (186). In this subsequent feeding frenzy of communist culture-sharks, Lukács's essay may stand out for a higher degree of intellectual seriousness and for its consistency with his other long-established theoretical and historical analyses, which makes it more, I believe, than just a cynical tactical document positioning cultural life in Hungary for full Sovietization. All the more fatal was it, then, that this respected scholar drew the first blood in the debate around abstract art, which, unbiased historical and theoretical reflection suggests, is anything but intrinsically hostile to socialism.

Lukács vs. Lukács: Cold War Divergences

I now turn from this historical account of Lukács's engagements with visual arts to reflect further on his significance for artistic developments beyond his limited direct contacts and yet of greater pertinence for understanding Lukács's place, if any, in theories and practices of contemporary art. First, in light of the theme of Cold War non-contemporaneity, I would observe a paradox of Lukács's "eastern" and "western" reception. This is a complicated issue, especially when one looks at Lukács's role in Germany and Italy, and in the New Left in Great Britain and the United States. But simplifying, we can note that throughout the later 1950s and 1960s, while Lukács was ever more doggedly advocating "great realism" and rejecting nearly the whole of twentieth-century modernist and avant-garde art and literature, his early writings, especially his theory of "reification" and action in his 1923 work *History and Class Consciousness*, were being taken up by the German- and English-speaking New Left and influencing artistic as well as political activism.[18] Through a reading of Lukács, or through an absorption of his critique of reification secondhand through the work of Lukács-influenced Frankfurt School thinkers such as Benjamin, Adorno, and Marcuse, it became possible for artists and critics to challenge the status of the artwork as fixed object and to refocus art on "art-work" (labor) and action (process). For example, Marcuse, whose critique of one-dimensional experience is essentially an application of Lukács's conception of reification to the post-war Fordist, consumerist society of the United States, took up the question of realist and anti-realist art in his now largely forgotten book on *Soviet Marxism* from 1959 (a book which, however, the German radical student leader Rudi Dutschke notes was important for youth like him growing up in East Germany in developing a revolutionary outlook independent

of official communism). If at this time Lukács was looking for more breathing room for the arts in the tradition of great nineteenth-century realism, which he contrasted to the shallow schematism of official socialist realism, Marcuse in his chapter on socialist art argued for an art that imaginatively transgressed the bounds of representing actually existing society. He thus praised the modernist innovations of abstract and surrealist art, because they offered resources of critical negativity and free subjectivity in the one-dimensional administered societies of the Soviet bloc, but in different ways also exerted pressure on the consolidating one-dimensional Western societies of affluence. Yet where Marcuse and Lukács agree—opposing what we might see as the defining element of many avant-garde and neo-avant-garde artistic tendencies—is that the principle of form is definitive of art, and any challenge to the centrality of form to art is a negation of art itself, to the detriment of art's positive social and ethical effects.

I have written in my book on *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* about the irony of Marcuse's role during the 1960s in providing philosophical legitimation to avant-garde practices such as happening, early performance art, and Living Theatre, when he himself, whose aesthetic tastes ranged more towards Goethe and Beethoven than Carolee Schneemann and John Cage, explicitly repudiated these artistic tendencies.[19] For example, in *An Essay on Liberation*, Marcuse's most utopian book of the 1960s, he defends the autonomy of art against neo-avant-garde experimentation:

> Transforming the intent of art is self-defeating—a self-defeat built into the very structure of art. . . . The very Form of art contradicts the effort to do away with the segregation of art to a "second reality," to translate the truth of the productive imagination into the first reality.[20]

Art, for Marcuse, is defined by its separation from life—its ontological status as "appearance" and "illusion" (*Schein*), which Lukács's analyses suggest give art a certain affinity with or even necessary entanglement in socioeconomic processes of reification. Yet he did not advocate an avant-garde breaking out of this space of aesthetic illusion through actionism, but rather the intensification of the imaginative difference that the *Schein-Welt* of art preserved. Art, for Marcuse, has sufficient means in itself for the critique of its own limits, and any attempt to exit the circle of art would make for both bad politics and the negation of art. Radical artists and New Left thinkers, however, drew different conclusions. They believed that the arts could and should aspire to bring about Marcuse's "new sensibility" more directly, in intentionally designed situations, spaces, and happenings—thus adumbrating a world

of heightened sensual intensity, bodily enjoyment, and personal freedom. Lukács would have certainly rejected being put in the same bed with Marcuse, whom he considered little more than Western culture's most fashionable romantic anti-capitalist; and he would have been utterly horrified to know that his Marxist theories might be contributing to such decadent, avant-garde artistic phenomena as Andy Warhol's multimedia Factory, Robert Morris's and Carolee Schneemann's performance *Site* (which meditates on the relations of construction labor, the artwork, and gender), or Vienna Actionist rituals and actions. But it happened that the critical armature of his critique of reification offered powerful legitimation and even political motivation for a range of conceptual, process-oriented, and performance-based art practices that shared a common aim of dissolving the reified object-nature of the artwork and exposing art's roots in the exertions and passions of human actors.

Second, during the thaw leading up to the 1956 uprising in Hungary, Lukács's arguments for realism underwent a subtle shift. He argued, as I have discussed, that in the new context opened by the death of Stalin and the relative liberalization that he anticipated under Khrushchev, the primary contradiction in the world context was no longer the political struggle for socialism against capitalism, but rather the struggle, through democratic popular action, for peace. Realism in this context now meant for Lukács the representational basis for a shared vision of a civic activism—the ability of human beings to change their world through conscious action—bridging the differences between the socialist and capitalist world in the interest of "peaceful coexistence," as the rather over-optimistic slogan of the day would have it. As he writes: "Nobody can work effectively for peace unless he is firmly convinced that society is amenable to the processes of reason and that human effort—in terms of individual, as well as mass action—*can* influence historical events."[21] But as Heller has argued in relation to Lukács's late aesthetics,[22] the more Lukács detached the need for realism from a specific pathway to socialism, the less persuasive his dogmatic insistence on realist style and ressentiment against artistic modernism appeared. It seems entirely possible to believe that art can help cultivate, through both negative-critical and positive-educative modes, various progressive social and ethical values, without believing that good and bad ethics or peace and war align with realist and modernist artistic outlooks. Even if we accept the argument of Lukács's late aesthetics that art heightens our experience of objectivity by "de-anthropomorphizing" it through form and by peeling away the encrustations of social mystification, there is no reason to believe that these effects are the monopoly of a small set of nineteenth-century forms, genres, and media.

To take this argument a little further into speculative territory, I would like to refer briefly to a provocative set of works by the conceptual art group Art and Language from the late 1970s and early 1980s that challenged the idea that abstract-nonrepresentational and realist-representational styles were fundamentally distinct. These styles were rather, Art and Language implied in their Wittgenstein-influenced visual analyses, more a question of duck/rabbit-like "aspectual" modalities, a function of "seeing-as" by particular viewers with particular perspectives and competences. Their project started, as they have noted, as a joke, which appealed to them precisely because of what seemed to them its impossibility: to execute a socialist-realist-style painting in the abstract, all-over, dripped style of Jackson Pollock.[23] This artistic jape, however, gave rise to serious studies and works such as the various instantiations of *Portrait of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock*, *Portrait of V.I. Lenin in July 1917 Disguised by a Wig and Working Man's Clothes in the Style of Jackson Pollock*, and *Joseph Stalin Gazing Enigmatically at the Body of V.I. Lenin as It Lies in State in Moscow in the Style of Jackson Pollock*. These works are rich studies in Cold War critical and art-ideological oppositions; but they took on special resonance in the wake of scholarship in the 1970s and early 1980s from Max Kozloff to Serge Guilbaut and others who traced how abstract expressionism and the canonizing critical discourse surrounding it, especially Greenberg's formalism, were supported by the CIA and US State Department as a soft-power cultural weapon of the Cold War.[24] The deconstructive efforts of Art and Language suggest how much these apparently intuitive stylistic oppositions were discursively and institutionally imposed on the corpus of images, rather than being an essential feature of so-called realist or abstract styles. However, if this is true, the same critical arguments can be turned upon the "realist" side of the argument, such as the alignment by Lukács of realism with the outlook of human progress and modernism with fatalism, pessimism, and acquiescence in barbarism. Art and Language's point in the Lenin/Pollock works is not to advocate for either side, but to understand the opposition as a structural pivot of a whole system of twentieth-century art ideologies and critical discourses, with the implicit view that a genuinely critical art might involve contextually sensitive, singular constellations of abstract and realist elements that resist the large-scale binaries derived from Cold War ideologies and geopolitical divisions.

My George Lukács-Book: László Lakner

I conclude with a return to Hungary and more direct reference to Lukács, with a set of works by the artist László Lakner. Since I have discussed at length Lukács's early aesthetics, I begin with a work by Lakner that quotes—or visually presents a quote—from Lukács's early essay "Aesthetic Culture," the "Citation Piece."[25] The quote reads: "Form: the maximum expression of potential forces in a given situation." Two things are notable about Lakner's work. First is its engagement, typical of conceptual art, with language and the interplay between viewing and reading, between words as bearers of meaning and as desemanticized visual material in a painting or other visual genre. With Lakner, however, I would suggest, this general conceptualist interest is overdetermined by a specific contextual and thematic reference to the quotation's source: to the overwhelming dominance of literature and textuality in the aesthetics of Lukács specifically, and one might even say, in the broader media ecology within socialism that Lukács's authoritative writings helped to erect and support. Furthermore, Lakner's quotation ends on an incomplete note, with a semi-colon. Lukács's text continues: "this constitutes the true ethic of forms. The form sets the outward boundary, and inwardly it creates infinity" ("Aesthetic Culture," 156). Lakner performatively stages the failure to give his work intensive, closed form of the sort that Lukács advocated, choosing the quotation mark as a kind of arbitrary, conventionalized boundary. Lakner deconstructs the essential difference between language and visuality as formative principles, seeing both as governed by both convention and the constrained but still not unsubstantial freedom of the artist's choice.

Lakner takes this work further with a series of book-objects of which the paradigmatic instance was his *My George Lukács-Book* of 1970 (Figure 4.1). As he tells it, this work originated in his acquisition in the 1950s of a copy of the philosopher's book *A polgári filozófia válsága* (The Crisis of Bourgeois Philosophy), signed by Lukács. When Lakner got around to reading it, he says, he found it disappointing and tied it up with string and hung it up on the wall of his Kmetty Street studio. While that "original" was lost during a move in 1961, Lakner took up the tied-up book idea again with another Lukács work, *The Specificity of the Aesthetic*, Lukács's late aesthetics.

According to Tünde Topor, this work was accompanied by a renewed interest on Lakner's part in reading Lukács's work, especially his early writings, from which, for example, the Lukács quote from the "Aesthetic Culture" essay can be situated.[26] There are several layers of meaning that

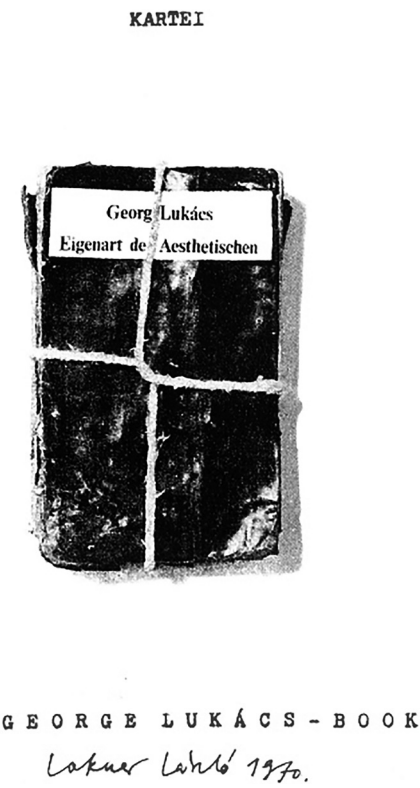

Figure 4.1 László Lakner, *My George Lukács-Book/Mein Georg-Lukács-Buch*, 1970. Foto/Siebdruck, 70 × 50. László Lakner. Permission for use by Creative Commons Attribution Share-Alike 3.0 License.

this work engages. David Fehér calls attention to the thematic subtleties of Lakner's choice of Lukács's late aesthetics for his book-work:

> Lakner fetishizes and alienates Lukács's aesthetics at the same time; it is presented as a monument for art theory, but on the other hand, it is made unreadable, bound and corrupted. . . . Lakner's photorealistic approach is generally different from the aesthetics of Lukács, which on the one hand finds realism a central question of Marxist aesthetics, but harshly criticizes every sort of naturalism. . . . Lakner reproduces his bound Lukács book in a silkscreen, and also paints it in the style of the classical *trompe l'oeil* in an eminently naturalistic way.[27]

As with the "Citation Work," we experience the paradox of a book that has been closed and rendered unable to communicate by its intended means—words—but which has, at the same time and as a function of its illegibility, become an autonomous visual object. However, this visual object is not simply mute or meaningless. It has its own means of

communicating, especially connotatively and indexically, about censorship, control of ideas, and the silencing of radical voices. It may also refer to Lukács's own biographical double binds, in which he played a role in keeping the power of his own ideas under wraps. Implicitly, with the striking metonymic image of Lukács's bound book, Lakner poignantly figures what Habermas would call "systematically distorted communication." Lakner at once acknowledges Lukács's role as one of Hungary's outstanding philosophical and literary thinkers, yet also his compromised relation to Stalinism and the imposition of the dictatorship, his official marginalization in the Lukács debate of 1949 and again after 1956, and his final ambiguous role in the 1960s as the elder statesman of Hungarian Marxism, who wavered between critique of actually existing socialism and professions of loyalty to the socialism putatively embodied by the regime.

I think there is another connotation of Lakner's work, however, that makes his artistic interpretation of Lukács deeper and, in its subtle intertwining of homage and critique, more moving. In his discussions of Tolstoy, Lukács argued that Tolstoy's realism lay not in his mimetic representation of events but rather in his evocation of possibilities, which one after another are explored by Tolstoy but which he then presents his characters as *failing* to realize. For Lukács, history had delivered any number of missed opportunities, failed attempts, disappointing half measures, and long-deferred realizations. For most of his career—the revolutionary period after the Bolshevik revolution and perhaps the early years of the 1930s excepted—Lukács believed the achievement of socialism would take a long time, perhaps many decades. In his last, unpublished major theoretical analysis written in response to the Soviet invasion of Czechoslovakia in 1968, Lukács noted that "the process of building a socialist democracy is an undertaking of long duration."[28] Referring to Marx's famous Latin citation "Hic Rhodus, hic salta" (Here is Rhodes, leap here), which Marx used in the *Eighteenth Brumaire* to indicate that socialism had to prove itself in the struggles of the situations of the present, Lukács concedes: "Today, Rhodus still lies in a distant future" (170).

Realism, I would argue, meant for Lukács understanding and accepting historical life as a rhythm of defeats, retreats, and disappointments in which one does not resign oneself to passivity but learns an active waiting. In his beloved Tolstoy, he had already diagnosed a realism that might be called a *realism of paralyzed action*:

> The world Tolstoy sees and depicts is to an increasing degree a world in which decent people can no longer find any opportunity for action. . . . When together with the strong and hopeful features of the approaching peasant

> revolt he also gives poetic expression to the half-heartedness, its backwardness, its hesitations and lack of courage, he leaves his characters no other possibility save the old dilemma of capitulation or flight.[29]

He expressed this most poignantly in his writings on another Russian writer, Alexander Solzhenitsyn, in whose writings Lukács detected the signs of a "radical transformation [that] has been going on for decades in men's inner lives." "In the art of today," Lukács writes,

> the accent falls on man's inward life and conscience, on his moral decisions, which cannot be expressed, it may be, in any external act. . . . [T]here may be a long chain of crises of conscience, most of which cannot, as things are, or can only in exceptional circumstances, crystallize into outward action, although the ways in which they disclose themselves may be dramatic, often bordering on the tragic.[30]

Or as his friend Bloch once aphorized: "The hindering element is also in the possible."[31]

I would like to end with Lakner's 1994 collaborative installation with the Fluxus artist Emmett Williams, *Aesthetics*, based on Lakner's 1971 plan. It consists of a wall full of bound and hung books, including Lukács's *Eigenart des Ästhetischen*. I would suggest we view this installation not merely pessimistically, as a monotonous tableau of censorship, a mass incarceration of radical thinkers in their individual, book-like prison cells. Rather, I want to suggest that Lakner is also presenting in this work a Tolstoy-like tableau of unrealized possibilities, what Jameson would call "seeds of time,"[32] that await a later moment of unbinding. In *The Process of Democratization*, drafted while he was already dying of cancer, Lukács evoked a posterity for socialism that resided, at present, solely in books, perhaps in a few of his own among them. In his evocation of a retreat to theory, after the closure of practice that the Soviet suppression of the Prague Spring once again forced him to confront, he came closer to Adorno than perhaps ever before in his long career: "The present task of Marxism, the revival of Marxism after its long petrification under Stalin, cannot be directly connected to any existing societal movement. . . . On the contrary, the attempt at renewal must be initiated on the basis of theory" (*Democratization*, 158–59). Yet perhaps, after their long suspension, the time has come to cut Lukács down from the wall and open his books again. And reading him again in a new light and in new times, we may finally also be able to reopen Lukács's closed canon of great realists—Tolstoyian realists of unrealized possibilities—to include, among others, László Lakner there.

Notes

1. See Georg Lukács, *Die Eigenart des Ästhetischen, Volume 2* (Neuwied am Rhein: Luchterhand, 1963), 489–521.
2. J. Hoberman, *The Red Atlantis: Communist Culture in the Absence of Communism* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1998), 48–49.
3. Georg Lukács, *Record of a Life: An Autobiographical Sketch*, ed. István Eörsi, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1983), 87.
4. Mikhail Lifshitz, *The Crisis of Ugliness: From Cubism to Pop-Art*, trans. David Riff (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2018), 135.
5. For further on Lifshitz, see Stanley Mitchell, "Mikhail Lifshits: A Marxist Conservative," in *Marxism and the History of Art: From William Morris to the New Left*, ed. Andrew Hemingway (London: Pluto Press, 2006), 28–44.
6. Georg Lukács, "Paul Gauguin," in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kardarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), 161.
7. György Lukács, "Művészet és valóság," *Szabad Művészet 5* (May 1948): 184.
8. György Lukács, "Free or Directed Art?" in *The Culture of People's Democracy: Hungarian Essays on Literature, Art, and Democratic Transition, 1945–1948*, ed. and trans. Tyrus Miller (Amsterdam: Brill, 2013), 138.
9. I have translated this from György Lukács, "Az Utak Elváltak," in *Ifjúkori Művek (1902–1918)*, ed. Árpád Tímar (Budapest: Magvető Kiadó, 1977), 285. The English translation in *The Lukács Reader*, ed. Arpad Kadarkay (Oxford: Blackwell, 1995), completely garbles the sense of the passage.
10. Georg Lukács, "Das Formproblem der Malerei," in *Heidelberger Ästhetik (1916–1918)*, eds. György Márkus and Frank Benseler (Darmstadt and Neuweid: Luchterhand, 1974), 236.
11. English translation in Lukács, *The Culture of People's Democracy*.
12. Ernő Kállai, *A természet rejtett arca* (Budapest: Misztótfalusi, 1947); and Béla Hamvas and Katalin Kemény, *Forradalom a művészetben* (Budapest: Misztótfalusi, 1946).
13. Charles Harrison, "The Ratification of Abstract Art," in *Towards a New Art: Essays on the Background to Abstract Art 1910–20* (London: Tate Gallery, 1980), 146–55.
14. György Lukács, "Hungarian Theories of Abstract Art," in *The Culture of People's Democracy*, 225.
15. Péter György and Gábor Pataki, *Az Európai Iskola és az elvont művészek csoportja* (Budapest: Corvina, 1990), 39.
16. Gábor Pataki, "'Van Alkonyat, Mely Olyan, Mint a Hajnal': Képzőművészeti Viták, 1948–1949", in *A fordulat évei, 1947–1949* (Budapest: 1956-os Intézet, 1998), 217.
17. Máriusz Rabinovszky, "Az absztrakt művészet körul," *Magyarok* 1947/4: 317.
18. For the German reception, see the discussions of *History and Class Consciousness* between Hans-Jürgen Krahl, Furio Cerruti, Detlev Claussen, Oskar Negt, and Alfred Schmidt in *Geschichte und Klassenbewusstsein*

Heute (Amsterdam: Verlag de Munter, 1971), online text at: http://www.krahl-briefe.de/ (accessed December 31, 2021); and Rüdiger Dannemann's collection of texts and interviews, *Georg Lukács und 1968: Ein Spurensuche* (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009).

19. Tyrus Miller, *Modernism and the Frankfurt School* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2014), 114–46.
20. Herbert Marcuse, *An Essay on Liberation* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1969), 142.
21. Georg Lukács, *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism* (London: Merlin Press, 1963), 15.
22. Agnes Heller, "Lukács' Later Philosophy," in *Lukács Reappraised*, ed. Agnes Heller (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), 177–90.
23. See Charles Harrison, "On 'A Portrait of V.I. Lenin in the Style of Jackson Pollock'," in Harrison, *Essays on Art and Language* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991), 129–49.
24. See Max Kozloff, "American Painting during the Cold War," *Artforum* 11 (May 1973): 43–54; Eva Cockcroft, "Abstract Expressionism: Weapon of the Cold War," *Artforum* (June 1974): 39–41; John Tagg, "American Power and American Painting: The Development of Vanguard Painting in the United States since 1945," *Praxis* 1/2 (1976): 59–79; David and Cecile Shapiro, "Abstract Expressionism: The Politics of Apolitical Painting," *Prospects* 3 (1977): 175–214; Serge Guilbault, *How New York Stole the Idea of Modern Art: Abstract Expressionism, Freedom, and the Cold War* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
25. The work is reproduced in David Féher, "*Consonants of Karl Marx*: Left versus Left in the Hungarian Neo-Avant-Garde: The Case of László Lakner," *Acta Historiae Artium* 56 (2015): 346, Fig. 4.
26. Tünde Topor, "Lakner László," *Artmagazin* 5 (2004): 28–31, http://www.artmagazin.hu/artmagazin_hirek/lakner_laszlo.144.html (accessed December 31, 2021).
27. Féher, "*Consonants of Karl Marx*," 347–48.
28. Georg Lukács, *The Process of Democratization*, trans. Susanne Bernhardt and Norman Levine (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1991), 159.
29. Georg Lukács, *Studies in European Realism* (New York: The Universal Library, 1964), 166–67.
30. Georg Lukács, "Solzhenitsyn and the New Realism," in *Marxism and Human Liberation*, ed. E. San Juan, Jr. (New York: Delta Books, 1973), 222–23.
31. "Something's Missing: A Discussion between Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno on the Contradictions of Utopian Longing," in Ernst Bloch, *The Utopian Function of Art and Literature: Selected Essays*, trans. Jack Zipes and Frank Mecklenburg (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1988), 17.
32. Fredric Jameson, *The Seeds of Time* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).