Chapter 5

Adorno and/or Avant-Garde: Looking Back at Surrealism

In his *Aesthetic Theory*, the culmination of decades of critical writing on music, art, and literature, Adorno delineates several key developmental tendencies of modern art: its accelerated disintegration of artistic conventions, styles, and genres; its intensified reflexivity of artistic form; its extreme individualization of form and idiom at the cost of the communicability of experience; its diremption between raw materiality and extreme intellectualization; and its encompassing of artworks with few or no evident aesthetic qualities traditionally understood. Besides referring throughout the book to the aesthetic writings of Kant, Hegel, Schelling, Schiller, Nietzsche, Benjamin, and Lukács, Adorno also illustrates his arguments with allusions to a wide range of modern artists, writers, and musicians, including especially Baudelaire, Beckett, Brecht, Klee, Picasso, Schoenberg, Valéry, and Wagner. Not represented, in contrast, and somewhat surprisingly given Adorno's arguments about the disenchantment and deaestheticization of the artwork, are many key figures, tendencies, and media of the European and Anglo-American avant-gardes. Notably absent, for example, are major futurists such as Marinetti, Severini, Boccioni, Lewis, Larionov, Mayakovsky, and Kruchenykh; expressionists such as Stramm, Lasker-Schüler, Goll, Meidner, Marc, Kirchner, and Dix; dadaists such as Ball, Tzara, Janco, Grosz, Schwitters, Hoch, and Heartfield; abstract artists such as Malevich, Tatlin, Van Doesburg, Tauber-Arp, Albers, Pollock, Newman, Hantaï, Vasarely, or Stella; sculptors such as Brancusi, Gabo, Arp, Kobro, Giacometti, Moore, Arman, Tinguely, Schöffer, Beuys, Judd, and Morris; photographers such as Stieglitz, Ray, Rodchenko, Moholy-Nagy, Krull, Brassaï, and Abbott; filmmakers including Eisenstein, Epstein, Ivens, Richter, Buñuel, Antonioni, Bergman, Warhol, and Godard; non-serialist musicians such as Satie, Varèse, Bartok, Ives, Weill, Messiaen, Xenakis, or Ligeti; neo-avant-garde groups such as COBRA, Vienna Actionism, the Independent Group, Gruppo 63, the Zero Group, the Living Theatre, or Fluxus;

architectural modernists including Gaudi, Wright, Taut, Sant'Elia, Gropius, Mies van der Rohe, El Lissitzky, Corbusier, the Smithsons, and Friedman; and the list could go on. John Cage and Marcel Duchamp, arguably the two most influential figures in twentieth-century art, are respectively represented by one sentence referring to one work of Cage and of Duchamp nothing at all.

To be sure, in a work of aesthetic theory, even one so resolutely oriented towards the historicity of modern art as Adorno's, one need not expect comprehensive reference to the history of twentieth-century art, or to the histories of modern music and literature; more selective mention of key examples supporting the conceptual argumentation is no doubt a legitimate way to proceed. Nor is my point to cast aspersions upon Adorno's unquestionably rich knowledge of and refined taste in the modern and contemporary arts. Still, my far from exhaustive enumeration of notable absences from *Aesthetic Theory* does highlight how selective a swathe of the rich landscape of twentieth-century European and Anglo-American arts is actually in view in Adorno's theory. It also suggests, in turn, how problematic its critical diagnostic may be when applied to the empirical history of the arts of his age, and how much more so for the globalized art world fifty years hence.

The intensity of Adorno's critical focus was bought, I would suggest, at the price of a set of exclusions that, for all their evident differences, appear as restrictive and defensive as those of Lukács in his anti-modernist advocacy of "critical realism." By way of Adorno's exclusion of numerous important avant-garde figures, movements, tendencies, and media/genres—consigned to a penumbra of failed or non-art—Adorno sought to legitimate modern art's de-aestheticization and polemical negativity philosophically, while yet defending the autonomous work against the more disruptive effects of the avant-garde on the work-concept of art and, accordingly, on the developmental teleology of artistic progress. On this point Adorno was explicit. Artworks are the preserve of an "entelechy" embedded in their bounded singularity as objects-events, "monads": "It is possible that the more problematic the concept of teleology becomes in organic nature the more intensively it condensed itself in artworks."[1] The normative idea of art's monadic "windowlessness"—the artwork's internalization of historical, political, and discursive contexts as immanent formal tensions of singular works—is the foundational condition of the aesthetic theory Adorno proposes. He stretches his delicate dialectical tightrope tautly over the gap between "progressive" or "regressive" artworks, according to Adorno's canonizing judgments. Such judgments, however, I would suggest, depend on prior, mostly unthematized acts of exclusion—exclusions that touch as much upon the art of the Euro-

American avant-gardes as on Adorno's various instances of moderate modernisms, *rappels à l'ordre*, neo-traditionalisms, Culture Industry, and kitsch—embedded in the conceptual underpinnings of Adorno's aesthetic theory. Specifically with respect to surrealism, thus, Adorno could be as adamant about its supposedly regressive nature as was Lukács himself.[2]

These underpinnings not only preserve (however paradoxically and tenuously) an autonomous artistic work-concept in the midst of an increasingly extreme modernism. They also allow Adorno to continue to employ, appropriately dialecticized and de-positivized, much of the conceptual apparatus of classical German philosophy. Unlike other theorists—most prominently Benjamin and Georges Bataille—who derived critical models and methodological implications from the avant-garde arts for use in historical, theoretical, and ethnographic study, thus also disrupting the idiom and critical-conceptual repertoire of these investigations, Adorno remains firmly with the lexicon and conceptual framework of traditional philosophy. However problematic a stark opposition between Benjamin and Adorno might be in general, in his 1979 essay "Adorno, Benjamin und die Ästhetik," Helmut Heißenbüttel in my view correctly suggests that Adorno's early rejection of Benjamin's theoretical appropriation of surrealism decisively conditioned Adorno's aesthetic theory:

> Rather, the opposition of Adorno to Benjamin already in the response of the 1930s to Benjamin's drafts, now read from the perspective of *Negative Dialectics* and *Aesthetic Theory*, is recognizable as the expression of a conception of philosophy which, vis-à-vis Benjamin, still remains in the framework of traditional philosophy; or at least, cautiously put, always strove to make the argumentation of Kant and Hegel its own, rather than that of surrealism, to which Benjamin ascribed a key role in the matter of theory.[3]

Furthermore and analogously, I concur with Peter Bürger's general characterization of Adorno's aesthetics as "anti-avantgardist"— both in the art-historical sense and in Heißenbüttel's deeper epistemological-methodological sense—and seek to explore some of the implications of that stance for *Aesthetic Theory*.[4] More specifically, I will take Adorno's general lack of consideration of a wide range of avant-garde activity as relevant context for a more focused look at Adorno's blind spot around *surrealism*, which is highlighted by both Heißenbüttel and Bürger, who follow Benjamin in his controversies with Adorno about artistic autonomy, artistic function, and the methods of critique.

Surrealism, I argue, is particularly notable as an instance of Adorno's more general anti-avant-gardism, given its early significance in

Adorno's formative arguments with Benjamin; its return in Adorno's "Rückblick" of the 1950s as an instance of avant-garde "aging" and neutralization; and its subsequent importance for younger literary critics and theorists such as Bürger and Elisabeth Lenk, who sought to renew the utopian spark between surrealism and critical theory after its post-war eclipse under Adorno's theoretical shadow. By the time Adorno's posthumous *Aesthetic Theory* had appeared in 1970, the student movement's surrealist-influenced calls to put the imagination in power had, as Bürger notes, consigned Adorno's criticisms to inactuality—at least for some years. In my conclusion, however, I will consider Bürger's own return to the problem of surrealism after the waning of the aesthetico-political vanguardism of the 1960s and 1970s, in his revisionary "Gespräch" of 2004 entitled "Surrealism in the Thought of the Postmodern."[5] There, though he continues to value the intransigence of the avant-garde spirit, it is now put in the service of a radical pessimism, which, while not leaving Benjamin's surrealism interpretation behind, may be seen to offer closer rapprochement with the late Adorno than Bürger might have imagined in the wake of the student movement.

Surrealism received at least cursory discussion in *Aesthetic Theory* and elsewhere in Adorno's critical writings on music and literature. However, Adorno's specific relation to surrealism has garnered only limited attention in the otherwise voluminous criticism of his writings, in part because it would mean focusing more on lacunae in his critical corpus rather than positive content.[6] One of the first and few critics to discuss this relationship was the writer Roberto Calasso, who, in his 1961 essay "Th. W. Adorno, il surrealismo e il 'mana'," connects Adorno and Horkheimer's analysis of mana and magic in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to the surrealists' attempt to reenchant everyday life through the mobilization of the unconscious and the poetic advent of the marvelous.[7] Though Calasso was only able to draw upon a certain number of Adorno's essays (along with an impressive array of French theorists including Bataille, Leiris, Lévi-Strauss, Butor, Caillois, Sartre, Barthes, and Rosolato), he adumbrates with remarkable prescience Adorno's ambivalent conception of the avant-garde as it would emerge in the *Aesthetic Theory*, including his view of surrealism specifically. Most prominent in Calasso's diagnosis, as in Adorno's, are the motifs of the progressive neutralization of the scandal of the avant-garde as it is converted into culture; the dialectical seeds of demise in the surrealist movement's founding precepts; and the self-defeating antinomies of abstract subjective freedom that are embodied in surrealist techniques for the imaginative production of the marvelous:

> Paraphrasing the Adornian axiom about culture, one could say that to speak for surrealism means to speak against surrealism. Registering it with academic benevolence among the twentieth-century avant-gardes, tallying its pros and cons, would mean carrying to term that work of neutralization that the market has advanced for thirty years and that was already implicit in the premises of the movement along with its hatred of the market itself. (9)

As his correspondence with Lenk reveals, Adorno was himself aware of Calasso's text and mentions it to her as proof of his self-evident interest in surrealism as her dissertation topic. He also confesses, however, somewhat awkwardly, that he hasn't been able to read it, because it is in Italian. Lenk responds that an Italian friend is sending it to her and that she will be able "to find my way through it, more or less" (Adorno and Lenk, 71 and 125–27). But whether or not they eventually spoke further about Calasso's specific interpretation, there is a nuanced and telling exchange between Adorno and Lenk on the aging of surrealism and the putative obsolescence of the avant-garde—which is Calasso's interpretative crux as well in his discussion of Adorno and surrealism.

In 1969, Lenk published an afterword to the German translation of Louis Aragon's *Paris Peasant*, the work that had so excited Benjamin and that had inspired his historical investigations of the Paris arcades. In it, she concludes—echoing Aragon himself, in his essay "Introduction to 1930," published in the December 1929 issue of *La Révolution Surréaliste*[8]—with an argument about the waning of modernism's provocation and excitement. She writes: "The surprise effect of headlines, of 'readymade' and splendidly meaningless advertising slogans, is worn out. Things that were once expressions of protest are now savored as modern art by a public whose senses have become dulled" (Adorno and Lenk, 196). In his response to Lenk, in a letter of July 18, 1969, Adorno defends art and modernity against Aragon's (and, with a situationist-influenced inflection, Lenk's) attack, and at the same time suggests that the aging of surrealism must be sought in bases more particular to surrealism and not in modern art more generally:

> If I had anything critical to say, it would have to do with the somewhat dogmatic adoption of the theses about the obsolescence of modernity and, implicitly, of art itself. These things will be the subject of a whole chapter of my *work of progress* [*Aesthetic Theory*], whose second draft is now complete. . . . Perhaps a couple of sentences could be added in which the reason for the aging of surrealism itself is identified somewhat less summarily, and above all more sharply delineated from Aragon's own apologetic conversion to the Communist Party. I must confess to you that I am as little persuaded of the decline of the arts today as I was during the surrealist heyday. (Adorno and Lenk, 183)

Adorno, likely unfamiliar with Aragon's 1929 text, mistakenly conflates the position Aragon takes in this essay, solidly within the framework of surrealism, with his later apostasy and allegiance to socialist realism. "Introduction to 1930" was published in the movement's main journal (*La Révolution Surréaliste*) and is concurrent with the Second Manifesto of Surrealism (1930), of which Aragon is a signatory. In a draft response cut short by Adorno's death and never sent, Lenk answers to Adorno accordingly:

> By no means do I have a new manifesto to add to the already stereotypical ones on the decline of art; instead I wanted to defend the "obsolete" Aragon against the Communist one. Politics is not meant to be presented as the inheritor of art. What we have, rather, is a parallel, that corresponding to Aragon's surrealist phase there was an instinctive anarchism: the rejection of every police state, including the socialist one. . . . Moreover, in the new phase in which he sacrificed art to politics, in politics a rigid conservatism also makes itself felt. (Lenk to Adorno, undated draft from July–August 1969, in Adorno and Lenk, 184)

Both Lenk and Adorno seek to weave a fine dialectical line through the historical process ("aging," loss of tension) that affected surrealism following its first, noisy advent. Lenk, however, had experienced direct contact with Breton and the surrealist group in the 1960s, as well as *Internationale Situationniste* (she promised to send Adorno a copy: Adorno and Lenk, 128), the student movement (as an SDS activist), and the anti-psychiatric movement (she recounts a visit to the commune of Félix Guattari's FGÉRI: Adorno and Lenk, 172–75). She was thus more attuned to the possibility of neo-avant-garde retrieval and reanimation of avant-garde energies, including, in the case of surrealist currents, their radical reenvisioning of eroticism and sensual life. Adorno's context for understanding the neo-avant-garde afterlife of the original surrealist movement was, in contrast, strictly retrospective and museal. Although there is no reason to doubt his sincere interest and support of Lenk's work (he energetically sought to find her publication and other professional opportunities), his experience is limited to books and the occasional exhibition. In his correspondence with Lenk in 1964, Adorno mentions his work on a short essay on the "defense of Isms" (which was incorporated into *Aesthetic Theory*). He goes on in the same letter to reflect on the aging and reification of the avant-gardes by referring to his experience of a surrealism exhibit he saw in Vienna in 1962: "[T]he danger that the avant-garde will become rigid cannot be overlooked either—I became extremely conscious of it two years ago at the surrealist exhibition in Vienna. Everything depends on holding fast to the intent and not allowing it to be marketed, yet not becoming immured

within it but instead really moving it forward" (Adorno and Lenk, 88).[9] The convolutions of Adorno's *Aesthetic Theory* derive at least in part from the paradoxical imperative to hold to the intent of the avant-garde and drive it forward, without "becoming immured in it," as apparently surrealism and its successors had done.

Looking Back on Surrealism in Adorno's Aesthetics

As already noted, explicit references to surrealism in *Aesthetic Theory* are sparse, though not entirely absent. The first occurs in the "Art Beauty" chapter, in the passages on spiritualization and the chaotic, in which Adorno posits a continuity between Stéphane Mallarmé's symbolist constellations and the "dream-chaos of surrealism" of the early Breton (*Aesthetic Theory*, 94), and between Stefan George and the expressionists. Both these avant-garde manifestations and their symbolist precursors have in common, Adorno asserts, that each set their spiritualized, artificially constituted chaos against a spuriously ordered second nature. However, this trajectory is also a radicalization of the chaotic, which turns against art's semblance and thus "works against art" (94). The surrealist avant-garde, like the expressionist, is implicitly presented as a crisis-manifestation, unstably poised between artistic creation and the self-abolition of art. Yet in this respect surrealism is only an instance of the more general developmental trajectory of art in the twentieth century. Adorno focuses his more specific critique of surrealism on three additional interrelated motifs: *historical regression* in the selection and handling of its materials; the *aging and mortification* of its shock-effects; and the *formal insufficiency* of its montage to resist capitulating to a reified reality.

Adorno's articulation of this critique consistently takes Max Ernst's collages as its key example,[10] and through reference to Ernst sets surrealism and neoclassicism in relation to one another. Adorno centers his reading of both tendencies upon the theme of their regression to historically obsolete materials, their mobilization of what we might call a "bourgeois antiquity":

> Valéry so honed the concept of classicality that . . . he dubbed the successful romantic artwork classical. This strains the idea of classicality to the breaking point. . . . It is only in its relation to this, as to a disaster, that neoclassicism can be adequately understood. It is directly evident in surrealism. It toppled the images of antiquity from their Platonic heaven. In the paintings of Max Ernst they roam about as phantoms among the burghers of the late nineteenth century, for whom they have been neutralized as mere cultural goods and

> truly transformed into specters. . . . Antiquity's embodied epiphany in prosaic everyday life, which has a long prehistory, disenchants it. Formerly presented as an atemporal norm, antiquity now acquires a historical status, that of the bourgeois idea reduced to its bare contours and rendered powerless. Its form is deformation. (*Aesthetic Theory*, 298)

The roots of this analysis go all the way back to Adorno's musicological writings of the 1930s, in particular his 1932 essay "On the Social Situation of Music," in which he connects surrealism with the montage methods of Stravinsky and Weill, the latter of which he refers to as "the major representative of musical surrealism."[11] He writes:

> It is not without meaning that the style of Weill's *Three Penny Opera* and *Mahagonny* stand in greater proximity to *L'Histoire du Soldat* than does Hindemith; it is a style based upon montage, which abrogates the "organic" structure of neo-classicism and moves together rubble and fragment or constructs actual compositions out of falsehood and illusion, as which the harmony of the nineteenth century has today been revealed, through addition of intentionally false notes. The shock with which Weill's compositional practices overexposes common composition means [unmasks] them as ghosts. (409)

In his 1949 book *Philosophy of New Music* he redeployed this basic critical motif, in which through its montage of desemanticized fragments of the past, surrealism appeared as a relevant corollary to Stravinsky's montages of historical idioms in his neoclassical compositions of the 1920s and 1930s. Adorno writes:

> The final perversity of style is universal necrophilia. . . . Just as in Max Ernst's graphic montages, the image world of the parents—plush, buffets, and balloons—is meant to spark panic by seeming to belong already to the remote past, so Stravinsky's shock technique seizes upon the musical image world of the recent past.[12]

So too, in his 1956 essay "Looking Back on Surrealism," alluding here as well to Ernst's graphic collages, Adorno puts his accent on the backward-turned gaze of surrealism, fascinated by the aging image-stock of the recent past, rather than (in contrast to, for instance, Benjamin) surrealism's convulsive hermeneutic of desire and chance or its future-oriented, emancipatory aspirations to "transform life." Adorno suggests that surrealism exploded the objects of the precedent generation ("the world of the parents of Max Ernst's generation") in order to recover an original shock of childhood experience:

> What Surrealism adds to illustrations of the world of objects is the element of childhood we lost; when we were children, those illustrated papers, already obsolete even then, must have leaped out at us the way Surrealist images do

> now. The subjective aspect in this lies in the action of the montage, which attempts—perhaps in vain, but the intention is unmistakable—to produce perceptions as they must have been then.[13]

He adds in emphasis: "Obsoleteness contributes to this effect."

Adorno reiterates yet again this same critical motif of a dream-like explosion of obsolete fragments, with reference to Ernst's collages, in his 1962 essay on Stravinsky. There, he writes that in neoclassicism the classical ideal—

> appeared as if in dreams, not as a whole genre, but in the form of plaster busts on wardrobes in the houses of the older generation, individual pieces of bric-à-brac and remaindered goods. In this process of individualizing a whole style into a set of monstrosities, the style was destroyed. It was damaged and rendered impotent by dreams hastily cobbled together and arranged. The basic stratum of neo-Classicism is not far removed from Surrealism. Stravinsky's Baroque revenants duplicate the statues in Max Ernst's *Femme 100 Têtes* which tumble among the living beings and whose faces are frequently missing as if they had been erased by the dream censorship.[14]

In this respect, then, Adorno's judgment of surrealism, narrowly exemplified by the graphic works of Max Ernst and viewed through the lens of Stravinsky, of whom Adorno was deeply critical, was sustained for decades up to his final work with unwavering consistency. Both neoclassicism and surrealism, in Adorno's view, register the denaturing of tradition in a bourgeois society increasingly incapable of confronting its own historicity and eagerly consuming reified fetishes that conceal its obsolescence.

While his references to surrealism in these passages are highly selective—outside of Ernst and the early De Chirico, Adorno's characterizations are hardly applicable to most surrealist works—the importance of this conceptual constellation for Adorno's aesthetics should not be underestimated. It represents, first of all, Adorno's displacement of Benjamin's surrealist-influenced notion that advanced modernity cites archaic prehistory in ephemeral dialectical images that bear an explosive potential for illumination and collective awakening. In his interpretation of surrealism—driven especially by his tendentious reading of Ernst's collages in analogy to Stravinsky's neoclassical compositions—Adorno inverts the Benjaminian relation of modernity and antiquity. Instead of inviting an innervating spark between historical extremes, as did Benjamin, Adorno places primacy on the conjunction's anesthetizing power, which helps to preserve undisturbed the illusion of a substantive connection between the prosaic present and the classical past, hence too ideologically conjuring a present that would be founded on something more solid than the effervescence of business and media cycles.

Adorno's understanding of Ernst's collages, as works that cobble together the debris of bourgeois interiors to recapitulate the recent past in its spleen-inducing deadness (or, as in his 1956 "Rückblick," to recapture childhood experience deformed by historical distance), also deflates the moment of insurrectionary reversal that Ernst himself, as well as other champions of surrealism like Benjamin, believed were being prepared in these scenes. In an essay from 1934 entitled "Max Ernst and His Reversible Images," the poet Tristan Tzara wrote the following about Ernst's collages, like those from *Une Semaine de Bonté*:

> Ernst, in the glacial silence of a rigorous introspection, whether at the inert point or at the static point of dreaming or waking, has most vividly illustrated that poetic activity which is defined, from the viewpoint of knowledge, as an unsystematized delirium of interpretation or as a continuous relation between psychic simulation and mimetism on the one hand, and the obsessional and irrational personality the residue of which is to be decanted. This activity, when it is limited to reversible meanings, finds in their very mobility inventive resources sufficient to identify them as powerful means of subversion and sabotage towards the actual world and towards its reality.[15]

As Benjamin's analogous reading of surrealism suggests, surrealist concatenations of images are only in a *preparatory* way a backward-turned mirror returning an image of the recent past distorted by reification and decay, as Adorno's critique would suggest. More important is their moment of exteriorization and shock, in which they mobilize the static elements of the city's spaces—dwelling places, shops, factories, markets, objects, and infrastructures—and project them outward as *images* charged with virulent energies to disrupt the present:

> No one before these visionaries and augurs perceived how destitution—not only social, but architectonic, the poverty of interiors, enslaved and enslaving objects—can be suddenly transformed into revolutionary nihilism. . . . They bring the immense forces of "atmosphere" concealed in these things to the point of explosion.[16]

In the late 1920s and 1930s, Laurent Jenny has suggested, there was a shift of emphasis in the surrealist movement from the expressive, "passive" automatism of Breton's First Manifesto to the intentional production of provocative symbolic objects that might precipitate collective response, an "active" practice of automatism more closely associated with Dalí, Giacometti, Buñuel, Bataille, and Caillois.[17] This shift also coincided with the increasing politicization of the surrealist movement and its offshoots, leading various adherents towards the Communist Party, Trotskyism, aesthetico-political groupings such as Contre-Attaque and Acéphale, and the constitution of the Collège de

Sociologie by Bataille and his circle, with which both Benjamin and Adorno had contact.[18] Tzara and Benjamin are consistent with this surrealist avant-garde's emphasis on the actualization of art's potential for contagious propagation of shock and collective effect, bursting the artwork out of the containment of its autonomous form and function. Adorno's reading, in contrast, depends on heightening the perspective of obsolescence and depotentiation of surrealist shock, such that what once had seemed a ticking time bomb later proved to be nothing but a harmless, broken toy.

This argument leads directly to a second key topic of Adorno's presentation of surrealism in the *Aesthetic Theory*: as an exemplary case of the "aging" of the avant-garde and the reabsorption of its anti-art negativity back into the styles and techniques of art. Indeed, he had already identified this danger in connection to Kurt Weill's "musical surrealism" back in 1932. The negativity of surrealist montage, dependent on the shock value of its assemblage of reified fragments, is fleeting; in its paradoxical endurance as an artwork, however, it is prone to settle back into the conventions that it once disrupted or to normalize a new set of artistic conventions, a style:

> It is beyond question that Weill's music is today the only music of genuine social-polemic impact, which it will remain as long as it resides at the height of its negativity; furthermore, this music has recognized itself as such and has taken its position accordingly. Its problem is the impossibility of remaining at this height; as a musician, Weill must try to escape the responsibilities of a work method which, from the perspective of music, necessarily seems "literary," similar, in its way, to the pictures of the surrealists. ("On the Social Situation of Music," 409)

So too in *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno notes that in its persistence beyond its brief flourishing as an avant-garde movement, surrealism reincorporated its anti-art and socially polemical negativity as technical features of artistic style:

> [I]mportant surrealists such as Max Ernst and André Masson, who refused to collude with the market and initially protested against the sphere of art itself, gradually turned towards formal principles, and Masson largely abandoned representation, as the idea of shock, which dissipates quickly in the thematic material, was transformed into a technique of painting. (*Aesthetic Theory*, 256)

Lastly, as has already been indicated in the discussion above, Adorno's critical posture towards surrealism is connected with his doubts about montage as a method of artistic construction, a position that puts him at odds with a broad range of artistic manifestations of the avant-garde,

including surrealism, which he saw to be governed by the principle of montage. Thus, in his important discussion of montage in the section on "Coherence and Meaning," while Adorno does not explicitly mention surrealism, his judgment encompasses it along with constructivism. Indeed, we can hear echoes of Adorno's critique of Benjamin's surrealist-influenced montage method in the construction of the *Arcades Project* in this characterization of artistic montage in *Aesthetic Theory*:

> Montage is the inner-aesthetic capitulation of art to what stands heterogeneously opposed to it. The negation of synthesis becomes a principle of form. . . . The artwork wants to make the facts eloquent by letting them speak for themselves. Art thereby begins the process of destroying the artwork as a nexus of meaning. (155)

For Adorno, there are two problems with montage-construction that follow. First, in montage-practice, the semblance of meaning tends to be reimposed through an abstract structure that suppresses the particularity of the unprocessed material details: "Whatever is unintegrated is compressed by the subordinating authority of the whole so that the totality compels the failing coherence of the parts and thus however once again asserts the semblance of meaning" (155). And second, following from this, the shock value of the montage-construction's lack of unity of its elements is quickly dissipated, as the work falls apart into an abstract idea of its totality and the raw materiality of its components:

> The principle of montage was conceived as an act against a surreptitiously achieved organic unity; it was meant to shock. Once this shock is neutralized, the assemblage once more becomes merely indifferent material; the technique no longer suffices to trigger communication between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, and its interest dwindles into a cultural-historical curiosity. (155–56)

Adorno's concluding phrase sums up his damning judgment of the historical avant-gardes. The ability of the avant-garde to shock, he suggests, has dissipated, leaving behind a litter of radical attempts but little of genuine artistic worth—except, paradoxically, when previously avant-garde artists abjured their avant-garde principles and reincorporated anti-artistic comportments as the basis of new formal styles.

Surrealism after Adorno: Lenk and Bürger

In conclusion I would like to discuss briefly the presentation of surrealism, more or less concurrent, by two successors of Adorno: Lenk, whose correspondence with Adorno I have already referred to extensively; and

Bürger, whose work has sparked renewed attention to the historical avant-gardes and neo-avant-gardes since his influential *Theory of the Avant-Garde* appeared in German in 1974 and in English ten years later.

Both Lenk and Bürger published studies of surrealism at the beginning of the 1970s that took up the theoretical mantle of Frankfurt School critical theory but broke with the limited and ultimately dismissive interpretation of Adorno. Partly this was a matter of a deeper immersion in the original sources and theories of surrealism and its successors; partly too it involved renewed attention to Benjamin's theoretically productive engagement with surrealism. But a decisive factor for both was also the political context of the French and German student uprisings, which charged their studies of surrealism—with its critique of work, its refusal of the division of labor, and its striving to transform everyday life and liberate desire—with a fresh sense of topical urgency.[19] Bürger is explicit about the extra-literary horizon of his scholarly engagement with surrealism:

> With the May '68 events at the latest, the topicality of surrealism becomes evident. Not because at this time slogans of surrealism stood on the walls of public buildings, but rather because here aspirations declared by surrealism since the 1920s found mass expression. . . . [T]he May events throw a new light on Surrealism, whose political implications have only now become fully visible; on the other hand, the study of surrealism should contribute to a better grasp of the aspirations and aporias of the May movement as an element in the unresolved present. (*Die französische Surrealismus*, 7)

Lenk had the experience of an extended residence in Paris and direct contact with Breton and other surrealists, as well as political involvement with the German SDS, French Trotskyism, and the writings and activities of the situationists. She too notes the connection she made between her study of surrealism, her adherence to the Frankfurt School theoretical project, and the May student rebellion: "My book on André Breton was written under the fresh impressions of the events of May 1968, and while writing it I always envisioned Adorno as the ideal reader. At that time, the two movements seemed to be of great contemporary relevance. Was it not they, ultimately, that unleashed the May events?" (Adorno and Lenk, 37).

Adorno, as Todd Cronan points out in an insightful review of *The Challenge of Surrealism*, set as a standard for surrealism's success the normative criterion of proper mediation "between individual fantasy and social whole" and had, of course, found the surrealists wanting. "Lenk," Cronan writes, "offers alternate criteria for surrealist success," rooted in Fourier, Sade, and surrealists: the liberation of the passions of the body and the unleashing of radical difference.[20] (I explore this

liberationist tradition in greater depth in Chapter 8.) Lenk, Cronan concludes, interprets the Frankfurt School's project as "a renovation of the senses, an experiential model. It provided an 'alternative to politics' rather than a form of it." (52). This characterization of Lenk's revisionary stance resonates with her own statement of the conjunction of Frankfurt School theory and surrealism in her formation and subsequent thought:

> What links the Frankfurt School and surrealism is the protest against specialization, which, at the same time, is being played out at the highest level of the various specialized fields. They set the arts, disciplinary languages, and professional knowledge from the most diverse realms on a collision course, in order to force them, through the resulting shock, to set free a new way of thinking. . . . For their part, the surrealists . . . laid claim to a similarly broad social engagement as surreal practice. This they did with a vehemence that anticipated, in a nutshell, all the protest movements of the 1960s: antipsychiatry, prisoners' movement, antimilitarism, critique of fossilized university; however, the impulse was soon abandoned in favor of surrealism in the service of the Marxist revolution. (Adorno and Lenk, 49)

Lenk stresses, as Benjamin had decades earlier, the anarchist aspects of surrealism, but unlike her predecessor does not counter these with "methodical and disciplined preparation for revolution" (Benjamin, "Surrealism," 216). Rather, she sees surrealism's failure as that of having not sufficiently persisted in its all-sided insurrection against the paucity of reality, its too-rapid capitulation to a politics thought to be the necessary successor of its lyrical and eroticized demands for total freedom.

Bürger, by comparison to Lenk, is more sober in his assessment of the surrealist program. In many respects, he cleaves closely to Benjamin, both in his positive and his critical evaluation of the movement. On the one hand, surrealism is for him exemplary in its avant-garde attempt to destroy the autonomy of art and overcome its separation from life as a specialized activity. On the other hand, given the radicality with which it disrupted representation in language and image, it struggled with its own paradoxical demands for revolutionary efficacy, which depends on communication. In *Theory of the Avant-Garde,* Bürger summarizes (in very Benjaminian terms) surrealism's dilemma: "There is a danger here to which surrealism at least partly succumbed, and that is solipsism, the retreat to problems of the isolated subject. Breton himself saw this danger and envisaged different ways of dealing with it. One of them was the glorification of the spontaneity of the erotic relationship. Perhaps the strict group discipline was also an attempt to exorcise the danger of solipsism that surrealism harbors."[21] If Lenk envisions a redemptive retrieval of an original surrealism lent new social relevance by the

experimental forms of life unleashed by the May events, Bürger remains more ambivalent, understanding the same tensions that animated surrealism in the 1920s and 1930s to have recurred in the life- and political forms thrown up by the rebellions of the 1960s and remaining to work through in the early 1970s.

Of greatest interest in Bürger's surrealism book for our concerns, however, are the methodological conclusions that he draws from the study of surrealism for a sociological theory of modernist literature. He explicitly situates his work at a dialectical juncture of Lukács's and Adorno's aesthetics, which, as we know, they themselves set in polemical confrontation. Bürger's own research into surrealism, he argues, helped set in relief the complementary limitations of both Lukács's and Adorno's theories of artistic modernism and to disclose the larger stakes of their critical debate:

> Neither of the two theories of the avant-garde sketched here is adequate to grasp the phenomenon in its contradictoriness. . . . As the outcome of the preceding analysis, we can formulate that avant-garde literature, as we have investigated in the case of surrealism, should neither be seen as the sole possible form of protest against the existing social relations, nor rejected as decadent, but rather is to be understood as the most radical form of bourgeois protest against bourgeois society. (*Die französische Surrealismus*, 186)

In his essay for Dannemann's *Lukács und 68* volume, Bürger retrospectively sums this dialectical conclusion up with allusion to Adorno's own debates of the 1930s with Benjamin. Bürger writes that in his surrealism book, "I took up a constellation . . . that over two decades constituted a focus of my reflections on aesthetics. At its foundation was the intuition that Adorno's aesthetic theory and Lukács's theory of realism were two halves, torn from one another, of a concept of aesthetic modernity."[22]

I will close by mentioning a fascinating short text that Bürger published much later, in 2004, which once more takes up, from a retrospective horizon, the question of surrealism's relevance for the present: "Surrealism in the Thinking of the Postmodern." Confronted by a younger interlocutor about the historical reversal of the avant-garde from virulent challenge to harmless object of museum collection and academic study, Bürger reflects on how his perspective has shifted towards a more pessimistic view of the avant-garde. But in a surprising dialectical turn, he also suggests how precisely this reevaluation helped him to reappropriate a motif that also originally animated surrealism—its dark nihilism, or as Benjamin put it, following the formulation of Pierre Naville, its "organization of pessimism."[23] Bürger writes that he explained to his friend how in the 1990s, working towards a new

edition of his surrealism book, he had returned to the original sources and reread them with new eyes. He "discovered another surrealism than that which he had seen around 1970: a dark surrealism that circled around the motifs of despair, violence, and suicide and that contained almost nothing more of the overwhelming trust in a world of unlimited possibility that characterized the First Manifesto" ("Der Surrealismus im Denken der Postmoderne," 59–60).

Bürger goes on to expound how this retrospective look from a period shaped by the disappointment of the revolutionary hopes of his original engagement with the surrealists gave him insight into the resonances of this "dark" surrealism with the paradigm of postmodern theory, represented for Bürger by Bataille, Lacan, Derrida, and Foucault. This constellation, he argues, offers ways of approaching what is repressed and unthought within the present, of understanding how we are determined by the past not only through what has occurred, but also of what has failed to occur, what has gotten lost along the way. At this point, Bürger comes around to the analogous pessimism he sees in Adorno, who sought to come to terms with art and philosophy that persists beyond the moment of its projected overcoming, continuing in the wake of catastrophe. It is in this shadow tradition of radical pessimism, running from the surrealists to the postmodern, and theoretically articulated by thinkers ranging from Naville, Benjamin, Bataille, Lacan, and Adorno through Foucault, Derrida, and Bürger himself, that we may find the enduring actuality of the avant-garde, which can lend fresh impetus to our self-understanding and self-formation as heirs of the twentieth century. There is only one alternative, Bürger concludes, to the depressing implications of the avant-garde's failure to achieve its goals of transforming life, of its senescence and cooptation by the institutions of "culture" it rebelled against, its decline into, as Adorno put it, just another cultural-historical curiosity. That is "to rediscover the original impulse of the avant-garde: the energies of despair. . . . In the return to the avant-garde we commemorate a missed event, not in order retrospectively to realize it, rather to recognize in its absence that which determines our epoch like a fate" ("Der Surrealismus im Denken der Postmoderne," 67).

Notes

1. Theodor W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Greta Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 179.

2. For an example of Lukács's position, see his 1947 essay "Hungarian Theories of Abstract Art," discussed in Chapter 4.
3. Helmut Heißenbüttel, "Adorno, Benjamin und die Ästhetik," in *Über Benjamin*, ed. Thomas Combrink (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp Verlag), 143. In 1967, Heißenbüttel touched off a firestorm in a notorious polemic, "Vom Zeugnis des Fortlebens in Briefen," *Merkur* 21/3 (1967): 232–44, in which he accused the editors of Benjamin's work of distorting the materialist and militant aspects of Benjamin's conception of art. In his correspondence with his then-dissertation student Elisabeth Lenk, Adorno focused on Heißenbüttel's statements about Benjamin and surrealism: "That meanwhile in the *Merkur* there was an essay by Heissenbüttel on Benjamin that contained foolish things about him and me and above all about my relationship to surrealism, you are probably aware." See letter from Adorno to Lenk, March 10, 1967, in Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk, *The Challenge of Surrealism: The Correspondence of Theodor W. Adorno and Elisabeth Lenk*, ed. and trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2015), 133.
4. Peter Bürger, "Adorno's Anti-Avant-Gardism," *Telos* 86 (1990); Bürger, "Der Anti-Avantgardismus in der Ästhetik Adornos," in *Das Altern der Moderne: Schriften zur bildenden Kunst* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 2001), 31–47.
5. Peter Bürger, "Der Surrealismus im Denken der Postmoderne," in *Nach der Avantgarde* (Weilerswist: Velbrück Wissenschaft, 2014), 55–67.
6. Among the limited bibliography in English are: Richard Wolin, "Benjamin, Adorno, Surrealism," in *The Semblance of Subjectivity: Essays in Adorno's Aesthetic Theory*, eds. Tom Huhn and Lambert Zuidervaart (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 93–122, which suggests a far more affirmative view of surrealism on Adorno's part than I think is tenable; Darren Jorgensen, "Uses of the Dialectical Image: Adorno, Surrealism, Breton, Benjamin," *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies* 28/6 (2014): 876–84, which focuses on Adorno's critique of Benjamin's surrealist-influenced methodology in the *Arcades Project*; and the essays by Rita Bischof and Elisabeth Lenk in Adorno and Lenk, *The Challenge of Surrealism*.
7. Roberto Calasso, "Th. W. Adorno, il surrealismo e il 'mana'," *Paragone* 12/138 (1961): 9–24. My thanks to Stefano Marino for help in procuring this article.
8. Louis Aragon, "Introduction à 1930," *La Révolution Surréaliste* 12 (1929): 57–64.
9. The exhibition in question was the "Surrealismus, phantastische Malerei der Gegenwart" show at Vienna's Künstlerhaus, May 30–July 8 1962. It displayed 156 works, especially by artists of the Austrian school of "fantastic realism" and related neo-surrealist tendencies, such as Ernst Fuchs, Maria Lassnig, Rudolf Hausner, and Arnulf Rainer.
10. Adorno's familiarity with the breadth of surrealism's diverse artists, theories, and works appears to have been fairly limited. Max Ernst's work *The Lion of Belfort*, the first chapter of his 1934 collage-novel *Une Semaine de Bonté*, was in Adorno's possession, as Elisabeth Lenk reports.
11. Theodor W. Adorno, "On the Social Situation of Music," in *Essays on*

Music, ed. Richard Leppert, trans. Susan H. Gillespie (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2002), 409. Notably, too, a biographical detail links Weill and Max Ernst, through Lotte Lenya, who had a brief affair with Ernst in the mid-1930s, then returned to Weill. In a letter to Adorno of May 31, 1935, Benjamin asks Adorno to arrange a meeting with Ernst and Lenya, whom, he says, "he would very much like to see" See Walter Benjamin, *Selected Writings, Volume 3: 1935–1938*, trans. Edmund Jephcott, Howard Eiland et al., eds. Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2002), 53. This suggests Adorno had personal acquaintance not only with Lenya, which is well known, but also perhaps with Ernst.

12. Theodor W. Adorno, *Philosophy of New Music*, ed. and trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), 149.
13. Theodor W. Adorno, "Looking Back on Surrealism," in *Notes on Literature, Volume 1*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia University Press, 1991), 88.
14. Theodor W. Adorno, "Stravinsky: A Dialectical Portrait," in *Quasi Una Fantasia: Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso), 156.
15. Tristan Tzara, "Max Ernst and His Reversible Images," in Max Ernst, *Beyond Painting* (New York: Wittenborn, Schultz, Inc., 1948), 189.
16. Walter Benjamin, "Surrealism, the Last Snapshot of the European Intelligentsia," in *Selected Writings, Volume 2: 1927–1934*, eds. Michael W. Jennings, Howard Eiland, and Gary Smith, trans. Rodney Livingstone et al. (Cambridge, MA: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1999), 210.
17. Laurent Jenny, "From Breton to Dali: The Adventures of Automatism," trans. Thomas Tresize, *October* 51 (1989): 105–14.
18. Georges Bataille and André Breton, *Contre-Attaque: Union de lute des intellectuels révolutionnaires, 1935–1936* (Paris: Ypsilon Éditeur, 2013); *Acéphale: Religion, sociologie, philosophie* (Paris: Jean-Michel Placé, 1980); *The College of Sociology (1937–39)*, ed. Denis Hollier (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1988).
19. This connection of Benjamin, surrealism, and the student movement was evident to Jürgen Habermas in his 1972 essay "Walter Benjamin: Consciousness Raising or Rescuing Critique," in *Philosophical-Political Profiles*, trans. Frederick G. Lawrence (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1983), 132: "Benjamin's proximity to surrealism has again been brought to our attention with the second wave of Benjamin reception that took its impetus from the student revolt." Along with Karl Heinz Bohrer, *Die gefährdete Phantasie oder Surrealismus und Terror* (Munich: Carl Hanser Verlag, 1970), Habermas refers to Elisabeth Lenk, *Der springende Narziß: André Breton's poetischer Materialismus* (Munich: Rogner & Bernhard, 1971), and Peter Bürger, *Die Französische Surrealismus: Studien zum Problem der avantgardistichen Literatur* (Frankfurt am Main: Athenäum 1971).
20. Todd Cronan, "Operation Adorno," *Radical Philosophy* 194 (2015): 51.
21. Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 53.

22. Peter Bürger, "Lukács-Lektüren: Autobiographische Fragmente," in *Georg Lukács und 1968: Eine Spurensuche*, ed. Rüdiger Dannemann (Bielefeld: Aisthesis Verlag, 2009), 20.
23. Pierre Naville, *La Revolution et les intellectuels* (Paris: Gallimard, 1975), 116–17.