

If only it were possible to limit this relapse into indifference for a few restorative hours at the movies.

—Christoph Türcke, *Philosophy of Dreams*

4 The Psyche in Late Capitalism I

Theodor Adorno, Max Horkheimer, and the Crisis of Internalization

For both Marx and Freud, one might say that the word *religion* was, above all else, an answer to the question: “Why do people accept a society grossly misaligned with their basic drives?” For the Marxists of the Second International who either believed in the evolutionary necessity of communism or else saw revolution on the immediate horizon, this question received a dismissive reply: “Well, they won’t for long.” For the social theorists of the Frankfurt school, on the other hand, who were charged with making sense of the triumphs of American consumerism, the failures of Russian communism, and the horrors of European fascism, the problem of “religion” gained considerably in urgency, and one could even say that it was *the* central problem of their collective work (there is perhaps no more confused assertion, for a critical theorist, than that capitalist society is becoming increasingly “secular”). Indeed, that the vast majority of people happily submit to such a highly irrational and devastatingly unstable mode of production was a fact so unsettling to the Frankfurters that they believed nothing less than an entirely different way of thinking was necessary to root out the insidious ways in which we have internalized social structure.

For the critical theorists, religion is more than just “false consciousness”: if we are really to understand how human beings actively and

energetically reproduce conditions that make them passive and depleted, then we must understand modern ideology as a committed *psychic investment* in late capitalist society. Turning to psychoanalysis for help with this task, the Frankfurt School found that some work had already been done to articulate what “highs” capitalism itself offers. There was, for instance, a significant psychoanalytic literature linking the drive to amass wealth with anal erotism.¹ In this view, just as the mastery needed for the retention of feces is a precondition for parental love (nothing makes children feel as aesthetically displeasing, and thus as unworthy of love, as the reaction of their parents to a failure of sphincter control), so too is the mastery needed for the acquisition of money a precondition for the pursuit of objects of desire. Money puts us in the position of getting what we want, with the added bonus that its retention allows us endlessly to defer the task of thinking about what it is, precisely, that we want—in that lies its very real gift.²

On its own, however, this psychic allure is not enough to overcome our repulsion to its pursuit, to pacify what Rousseau called “the mortal hatred of sustained work.”³ For that, capitalism needed to enlist the services of that which once signified a sphere wholly different from commodity production: *culture*. It is for aid in analyzing the “culture industry” that the Frankfurt School really looked to psychoanalysis, but, in so doing, they found that the culture industry was of just as much help in understanding psychoanalysis. It is Herbert Marcuse, perhaps, who is best known for his fusion of psychoanalytic and social theory in works like *Eros and Civilization* and *One-Dimensional Man*, but it is not his vision of the psyche in late capitalism with which I will begin.⁴ In this chapter I would like rather to look at the intriguingly underdeveloped and yet clearly essential psychoanalytic forays of Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, who found in the “structural” theory of id, ego, and super-ego aid in clarifying the nature of subjection in late capitalism and in particular the effects of the rise of a media industry devoted to the production of mass culture. Unfortunately, and like so many psychoanalysts, they took on a psychic model without trying to make sense of the drive theory that undergirded it. In brief, my hypothesis in this chapter is that integrating Freud’s mature drive theory into their work might strengthen their theses about the travails of the psyche in late capitalism and that, more generally, some of the grays in first-generation critical theory might appear green through a more polished version of the psychological lens that they themselves employed.⁵

My route to this end will be more circuitous than this opening implies, as a fair bit of preparatory work is needed to set up my intervention. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the appearance of the culture industry signified not just a new mechanism of power but a fundamental alteration in the psychic constitution of the capitalist subject. Providing a general framework within which to understand this transformation, first through a reading of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and then through an exposition of Jessica Benjamin's conception of this psychic reorganization, will be the aim of the first two sections of this chapter. With this problematic established, I will then set to work refashioning a concept that will serve as the key to unlocking a new interpretation of the crisis of internalization, one that is explicitly equated in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* with the death drive: *mimesis*.⁶ Having smuggled the drive theory developed in the first three chapters into their work, I will finally offer an account of the nature of the psychic gratification provided by the culture industry, how that gratification serves to limit critical capacities, and what there is left to do in the wake of this transformation. As should be clear by now, what follows is less an interpretation of Adorno and Horkheimer's crisis narrative than it is a reconstruction of it. I am interested here less in discovering their "true" intentions, or providing a comprehensive exegesis of their more psychoanalytic writings, than I am in employing their work toward a rethinking of the psyche in late capitalism.

Odyssean Fantasies: The Function of the Culture Industry

I want to begin with a discussion of a text that has come to be representative of the critical thrust of the Frankfurt school as a whole: *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Of its six sections, surely the most maddening and seemingly out of place is the chapter on Odysseus. Jarringly turned into a transhistorical phenomenon, Enlightenment begins here with a curious self-renunciation in the service of self-preservation: in naming himself "no one" for Polyphemus, or in his resistance to Circe's enchantment,⁷ Odysseus demonstrates the basic maneuver from which the subject emerges.⁸ As with Freud's living vesicle in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, the subject is born—or, rather, is able to survive as more than a temporary blip in the chaos of existence—by paradoxically submitting to a kind of self-deadening in order to live. Hegel had a very

good term for this capacity, which inaugurates Western subjectivity: the *cunning of reason*. It is through his cunning—that is, the counter-intuitive negation of himself in the service of his own mastery—that Odysseus triumphs, and it is for this reason that he embodies the dawn of Enlightenment.

The triumph of cunning receives, however, only brief celebration: once secured, survival very quickly becomes a source of great anxiety. Having duped the more powerful with a weapon as light as the word, the subject “is driven objectively by the fear that, if he does not constantly uphold the fragile advantage the word has over violence, this advantage will be withdrawn by violence.”⁹ Mastery, in short, becomes *preemptive* mastery. No longer content with the magic of survival by cunning, Enlightenment, for whom “the mere idea of the ‘outside’ is a real source of fear,” seeks to eliminate unexpected surprises by making of nature something manipulable, organizable, navigable.¹⁰ The cunning through which the subject emerged is made extraneous. Adventure has been left for routine. The subject has “matured”: “Everything—including the individual human being, not to mention the animal—becomes a repeatable, replaceable process, a mere example of the conceptual models of the system.”¹¹

Though his cunning has become obsolete, however, Odysseus is nonetheless clung to in the realm of ideology: “The lone voyager armed with cunning is already *homo oeconomicus*, whom all reasonable people will one day resemble: for this reason the *Odyssey* is already a Robinsonade.”¹² Long past the point of needing to submit to true risk, long past the time for true heroics, the subject nonetheless maintains this back-to-nature fantasy.¹³ Indeed, the less actual risk, the less the possibility of the return of a real “outside” of the subject’s world, the more that risk is embraced as the truth of subjectivity, the more subjects see themselves as bold adventurers blazing new trails through a dangerous world. In reality, they are, as Marx said, traveling well-trodden paths, being little more than physical embodiments of economic roles.¹⁴ Capitalists and workers alike thus have their lives drained of the significance attributed to them in fantasy.

I understand the birth of the culture industry, as it is imagined in the work of Adorno and Horkheimer, to be a response to this particular impasse: what the culture industry offers to subjects increasingly incapable of sustaining a fantasy opposed to their reality are new ways of satisfying the demand for the perils of Odysseus. The culture industry thus

makes accessible risk, danger, individual triumph, cunning, a dangerous “outside,” etc. Its capacity to convince individuals of the existence of the last of these Odyssean elements—that everything is *not* simply “repeatable, replaceable processes,” that there exists real *difference* in the world, that there is still a dangerous and exotic “outside” to be conquered—is, for Adorno and Horkheimer, perhaps the most important function of the culture industry. The problem here, to be clear, is not that that difference does not actually exist but that it is *created by* the culture industry, that differences are introduced in domesticated form: “Something is provided for everyone so no one can escape; differences are hammered home and propagated. The hierarchy of serial qualities purveyed to the public serves only to quantify it more completely. Everyone is supposed to behave spontaneously according to a ‘level’ determined by indices and to select the category of mass product manufactured for their type.”¹⁵ Unassimilable difference is thus foreclosed: yes, variety and distinction are produced, so as to convince ailing subjects that they are *still* adventurers in a heterogeneous world, but only within the industry’s own “classification, organization, and identification of consumers.”¹⁶ In short, difference within sameness, rather than *real* difference,¹⁷ and with material consequences: “The more all-embracing the culture industry has become, the more pitilessly it has forced the outsider into either bankruptcy or a syndicate.”¹⁸

Framed thus, I find it difficult to accept claims about the supposed outdatedness of the culture industry thesis. As Shane Gunster has persuasively argued, Adorno and Horkheimer’s once horrifying hybrid “culture industry” was formulated in response to the commodification of culture *in general* and not to the specific organizational structures and techniques of Fordist production.¹⁹ Most certainly the thesis needs *updating*: since their times, organized capitalism has given way to neoliberal capitalism, unionized labor to “flexible” labor, mass production to small-batch production, a culture industry producing mass media to one that actively cultivates niche markets, all meaning that the conditions that produced the transformation they theorized have changed. That being said, it is incorrect to conclude that their theory has been thereby made irrelevant, given that two things have remained steadfastly constant amidst the profound economic, political, and technological transformations since the “Fordist-Keynesian” era: a) the predication of economic growth on the exploitation of living labor and b) the “overcoming of spirit by commodity fetishism” definitive of the growth of the culture

industry.²⁰ Statements about the supposed outmodedness of the concepts of “late capitalism”²¹ and the “culture industry” will continue to be premature so long as commodity consumers are categorized and catered to by mass media institutions.²²

In brief, what distinguishes Adorno and Horkheimer’s present from other eras of Enlightenment is its cultivation of a domesticated “outside”—a “regression organized by total enlightenment”—as inoculation against the threat of a real outside.²³ Enlightenment thus comes to recognize that it must reintroduce, in innocuous form, that which it means to eliminate if it is not to exhaust itself.²⁴ It cannot do with routine alone; risk, the founding gesture of subjectivity, must be taken, albeit in a way that the status quo is not endangered. If capitalism harbors dreams it cannot fulfill, a great outdoors made inaccessible within its bounds, then late capitalism is born from the realization that it is more efficacious to the maintenance of capitalism partially to satisfy those dreams, to provide access to a domesticated “outside,” than it is to attempt to stamp them out completely.

These partial satisfactions are not, however, “distractions” or “ersatz satisfactions” that merely cover up the continuation of business as usual. The satisfactions made possible by the Odyssean fantasies engineered in the twentieth century are so real, in fact, that they have *fundamentally altered the psyche*. Like the owl of Minerva, Freud theorized the psychic dynamics of the bourgeois subject at a time when it was already beginning to disintegrate. Under the spell of the culture industry, the tensions that held together the bourgeois psyche begin to unravel and a new form of maintaining psychic stability is established. For this reason, late capitalism is defined not only by a reorganization of production, radically heightened capacities of distribution, and a new ideology of consumption but also by a sea change in what Judith Butler calls “the psychic life of power.”²⁵

The End of Internalization Revisited

In this section I want to examine the interpretation of this psychic transformation proposed by Jessica Benjamin. In a pair of influential articles published in the late seventies, Benjamin attributes to Adorno, Horkheimer, and Marcuse what she calls the “end of internalization” thesis. It goes something like this: in Freud’s times the bourgeois individual’s psyche was primarily formed through struggles within the family.

When the child finally concedes oedipal defeat, the “moral-paternal law” is internalized in the form of the superego. This ego double then acts throughout the subject’s life as an executor of repression, but also as the seat of self-reflection: only by internalizing an external perspective does the subject gain the capacity for real psychic conflict and thus for critical self-evaluation.

With the “rational” dissolution of family authority and the “objective administration” of the individual within a variety of educational and marketing apparatuses, this process of internalization is curbed.²⁶ Failing to reach the proper oedipal pitch, the child no longer internalizes the father’s authority; while thus happily free from the repressive mechanisms of the superego, the subject also now lacks the capacity for self-reflective reason. It thus becomes difficult to say that children become individuals at all,²⁷ lacking as they are in any mediating authority between themselves and the long tentacles of the culture industry, which has made it possible to avoid oedipal defeat but only by submitting to a more direct domination: “As a result, the possibility for the formation of a revolutionary subject is foreclosed. In the face of this situation the critical theorists look backward to the form of instinctual control which was the basis for ego development and reason in the past—individual internalization—and argued that only it contained a potential for the formation of a critique of domination. This is the impasse which I refer to as the ‘end of internalization.’”²⁸

In Benjamin’s low opinion, the narrative presented here is, in fact, a regressive one, representing a “nostalgic romanticization of paternal authority”: if the problem is a failure to reach the proper oedipal conflict that ushers in internalization, then what we need again, to put it bluntly, are strong fathers.²⁹ By linking “the identification with the *father*, internalization, and the independent conscience,” Adorno and Horkheimer imply “that the child has no spontaneous desire to individuate, to become independent, nor the mother to encourage independence—therefore the father’s intervention is required to save civilization from regression.”³⁰ She opts for an alternate psychoanalytic framework (the intersubjective) that obviates the need for such a drastic conclusion in according more weight to the child’s need to individuate and the mother’s role in encouraging independence.³¹

Benjamin also accuses Adorno and Horkheimer of failing to distinguish between preoedipal and oedipal processes of self-formation. As a result of this failure, they “use the concept of internalization confusingly to signify two different but related phenomena, the development of the

ego and the super-ego. The identification with parental *authority* as super-ego is collapsed into the identification with parental *competence* or the reality of childhood *autonomy* as ego formation,” when “in fact, the claims of the ego and super-ego are more likely to be opposed to one another.”³² One is left to wonder, then, within the bounds of their own work, if it is truly a “decline of paternal *imagoes*” leading to a weakened superego that is the problem or whether some more basic failure of mutuality is at work in the transformation they theorize.

I should first point out the essentially reifying thrust of this critique, which draws attention away from the object of their theory—namely, the impact of the transformations of late capitalism on the psyche—by faulting the theory itself. The effect is to make it seem as if there was never any problem there to begin with, only bad psychoanalytic theorists bending the Freudian framework in order to reaffirm and thereby propagate its untruths. Countering the entire psychoanalytic dimension of critical theory with intersubjective theory covers over the problem of the historical situation of the psyche that Adorno and Horkheimer attempt to formulate. Critical theory thereby reverts to traditional theory. That being said, Benjamin’s critique also lays the basis for a different conclusion than she herself makes. Her objections could be taken as strategic moves in the struggle to win favor for the intersubjective framework over the Freudian, but they could also be employed as cues in refashioning a coherent and nonpatrocentric theory of a crisis of internalization.

The first thing to notice in this effort is that her two objections—first, that their theory is patrocentric and, second, that it confuses ego and superego—while warranted and convincing on their own, sit *together* rather uneasily. On one level, the accusation of patrocentrism only holds if it is the superego, the heir of the oedipal struggle, that is weakened in late capitalism, but, as she herself points out, Adorno and Horkheimer are far from clear that it alone is the victim of this psychic transformation. On another level, however, the patrocentrism claim must cede the truth of the idea that our internalized authorities are solely sublimates of the *father*, again a bias that Benjamin calls out. I believe she would be in sympathy with Loewald’s view, the one adopted here, that the superego is not a father sublimata but rather that which allows successful navigation of the conflict between tendencies traditionally associated with mother (union) and father (differentiation). The particulars of her critique thus add up to cause not for rejection but for a reconception of the psychoanalytic basis of their narrative.

Before getting to the “internalization” part of the “end of internalization” thesis, however, I would like to spend a bit of time investigating the supposed “end” it proclaims. As Gillian Rose has persuasively argued, Adorno’s claim that society and consciousness have become “completely reified,” taken literally, would imply that “no critical consciousness or theory is possible.”³³ The trick, as she points out, is that this thesis is inexpressible, for, if it were true, there would be no vantage point from which to understand it as true. Adorno’s statement must thus be read as intending to “induce in his reader the development of the latent capacity for non-identity thought,” and thus as an “attempt to prevent the complete reification which is imminent.”³⁴

The end of internalization thesis must be of a similarly paradoxical nature: if it were true that the process of internalization that leads to the capacity for critical self-reflection had been decisively and definitively interrupted by the imposition of the culture industry on the family, it would not be possible to state it. The supposed “end” of internalization can thus really be only a dangerous *diminution* of internalization. Much as I am taken in by the rhetoric of finality, I think it is important to formulate the thesis in these more straightforward and admittedly more boring terms, especially as Benjamin most certainly does not understand the “end of internalization” thesis in the same way that Rose understands Adorno’s claim of “complete reification.”³⁵

I am not, however, out simply to tidy up: for in addition to inviting the all too common charge of philosophical nihilism and generating the kind of confusion that naturally attends hyperbole,³⁶ declaring an “end” forecloses lines of inquiry that should be relevant to critical theory. Take, for instance, the claim that the family has been *totally* divested of authority. No doubt mass media and state institutions have penetrated the family structure in such a way as to change its dynamics, but this does not mean, to state the obvious, that parents have become helpless patsies in child-rearing. Indeed, it is of the utmost importance for critical theorists to make sense of this altered mediation, and, not coincidentally, this is precisely what Horkheimer attempts to do in “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” through his analysis of the “modern model mother” and “socially conditioned weakness of the father.”³⁷ Benjamin sees Horkheimer there spelling out the demise of the traditional family, but he is crystal clear about the continued importance of the family to present structures of authority.³⁸

Even more problematically, the assertion of a real and definitive *end* of internalization would preclude “subjectification,” at least as it has

traditionally been conceived. In other words, if we have truly become incapable of internalizing structures of authority, then the whole problematic of “subjectification” must be abandoned for one of “direct domination,” which, according to Benjamin, is precisely the move one finds in the work of the Frankfurt school. She claims, for instance, that between “Authority and the Family” (1936) and “Authoritarianism and the Family Today” (1949), Horkheimer rejects the idea that instrumental reason is internalized in the form of “subjective reason” for the view that domination has come to work through a direct manipulation of the subject. Adorno similarly speaks of an all-out “replacement” of old forms of internalization for a seizure of the individual by “immediate social power.”³⁹

In both cases, once again, the accusation is unfair. Nowhere does Horkheimer renounce his earlier claim that “naked coercion” cannot by itself explain power dynamics.⁴⁰ If, in “Authoritarianism and the Family Today,” he is less concerned with the nature of family mediation, it is because he is more focused there on the nostalgic return to “family values” as a compensatory public fantasy: “The more the family as an essential economic unit loses ground in Western civilization, the more society emphasizes its conventional forms.”⁴¹ Adorno, of course, was much more willing than Horkheimer to entertain the possibility of a final “replacement” of old forms of domination, but statements of this nature must, as I have just argued, be understood in the same sense as his claim of “complete reification.” In any event, he is insistent in his many confrontations with the culture industry that “it is not enough to consider how mass-media institutions betoken alienation and reification; one must also consider how they preserve the subject, if only through its destruction.”⁴²

In the end, then, Benjamin’s narrative, while laying the framework for a rigorous psychoanalytic interpretation of this transformation, can only be a parody of Adorno and Horkheimer’s real position. It is a simple procedure, however, to reframe her thesis as one of diminution: while internalization has not ceased to be an important process of psychic formation, the drama of the family romance has abated with its penetration by the culture industry, resulting in a different, weakened, stunted, etc. form of psychic development. Rounding out this list of adjectives, I believe, is the best way in which to interpret the claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “in late-industrial society there is a regression to judgment without judging.”⁴³ The capacity to judge is not completely eliminated, but it has been diminished in some way yet to be specified. So in what ways and by what means has the psyche been weakened?

Pre- and Postoedipal Mimesis

To answer this question, it is necessary first to examine a notoriously difficult term employed by Adorno and Horkheimer to a variety of ends: *mimesis*. Simon Jarvis defines *mimesis* as a “cognitive attempt to be like the object,” to which he opposes “thought’s attempt to subsume and classify the object.”⁴⁴ In the first, “primitive” form of thinking, the object is respected as object; in the second, “enlightened” form, it is “violated” in being made to conform to the categories of the subject.

Civilization replaced the organic adaptation to otherness, mimetic behavior proper, firstly, in the magical phase, with the organized manipulation of *mimesis*, and finally, in the historical phase, with rational praxis, work. Uncontrolled *mimesis* is proscribed. . . . The severity with which, over the centuries, the rulers have prevented both their own successors and the subjugated masses from relapsing into mimetic behavior—from the religious ban on graven images through the social ostracizing of actors and gypsies to the education which “cures” children of childishness—is the condition of civilization. Social and individual education reinforces the objectifying behavior required by work and prevents people from submerging themselves once more in the ebb and flow of surrounding nature. All distraction, indeed, all devotion has an element of mimicry. The ego has been forged by hardening itself against such behavior.⁴⁵

While *mimesis* is here what is progressively left behind with the advance of Enlightenment, elsewhere it serves as a kind of regulative ideal: in *Negative Dialectics*, for instance, Adorno asserts that the possibility of a reconciliation of subject and object lies in peeling back the layers subjectivity—by assessing the “‘insufficiency’ of a conceptual determination with regard to the object to be grasped . . . not as a deficit that can be overcome but as a real result”—so that the object can be freed of the subject’s projections and finally experienced as object.⁴⁶ This kind of experience, the end point of Adorno’s dialectic, what Gerhard Schweppenhäuser calls his “concrete conceptual utopia,” is *mimetic*: no longer absorbing the object into its own categories, “Adorno’s subject lets the object take the lead.”⁴⁷

For all his rage against “ontological returns,” then, does Adorno also hope for the recovery of a kind of primitive mentality, for a return “to the things themselves?”⁴⁸ I believe that this is the conclusion we are forced to make unless mimesis as “organic adaptation to otherness” is distinguished from mimesis as end point of negative dialectics. To resume the conversation begun in the first three chapters, I propose that primitive, “uncontrolled” mimesis be conceived as the fantasied death drive gratification of what Loewald calls “identification.” For Loewald, as I explained in chapter 2, identification precedes and makes possible the work of ego-building internalization: by “being the ‘other’” in fantasy so as to cope with the “other’s” occasional absence in reality, the preoedipal child directly “attempts to be like the object.” Although this immature form of imitative hallucination is an attempt to erase difference, Loewald contends that it leads, by a strange twist of fate not unlike the emergence of a drive to mastery in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle*, to the creation and reinforcement of the psychic structures of the child’s own internal world.

Mimesis as a mature experience of the object *qua* object would then involve, by contrast, a postoedipal, nonprojective relationship: as opposed to preoedipal mimesis, this secondary form is achieved not by a regression to the “primordial density,” by lapsing back into self/other confusion (as Habermas and Honneth both contend),⁴⁹ but rather by cultivating a strong tension between ego and superego, by curbing narcissism with a strong, critical “I”-overseer. Postoedipal mimesis is thus another name for what I called postoedipal *mastery* in chapter 2: an achievement made possible by the “sublation” of the conflict between id and ego into the ego-superego tension. When this tension is acquired, the subject approaches the object “as it is”⁵⁰ not by eliminating its distinction—for “the captivating spell of the old undifferentiatedness should be obliterated”—but rather by curbing its conceptual projections onto the object through self-criticality.⁵¹ The experience (*Erfahrung*) of which Adorno bemoaned the loss thus does not *precede* alienation but follows from its critique: “knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object.”⁵² Only a psyche at odds with itself, a product of “thinking against itself,” can begin to approach “a state of differentiation without domination.”⁵³ What I want to make clear in this distinction between pre- and postoedipal mimesis is that Adorno hoped to recover not “emphatic childlike experience” but rather reflective, *adult* experience.⁵⁴

In the passage I have just quoted, Enlightenment works against the first form of mimesis—"the childishness of children"—by "hardening the ego against such behavior," and it is an overarching theme of the work of the Frankfurt school as a whole that it works against the second by replacing self-reflective reason, "Reason" in the broad sense as it is understood in Horkheimer's *Eclipse of Reason*, with instrumental reason.⁵⁵ Even a hardened instrumentalism, however, is a kind of mimesis, a mimesis "of death. The subjective mind which disintegrates the spiritualization of nature masters spiritless nature only by imitating its rigidity."⁵⁶ In other words, the subject mimics the deadening imposed on the world by its own struggle for survival. Since, however, it is imitating its own projection, this "mimesis of death" is an antimimetic mimesis, an expression of mimesis that generates narcissism, insulating the subject further and further from any real encounter with the object.

Although Adorno spoke throughout his work of "ego-weakness," he would have done better with a slightly different term for the product of this mimesis of death: passages where he describes a "hardening within the individual" or a "spiritual death by freezing" are very similar in concern and tone to those where Loewald laments a "brittle rigidity" within the ego, a function, for Loewald, of an impoverished secondary process (or, for Lacan, of an uncurbed aggressivity).⁵⁷ I thus much prefer Loewald's concept of *ego rigidity* over ego weakness to describe the "coldness" that is the "fundamental principle of bourgeois subjectivity."⁵⁸ The problem, in this reformulation, is not how to strengthen the ego, which has today actually become *too* strong, but how to remedy the "loss of inner tension" between ego and superego in order to interrupt the "practice of reifying every feature of an aborted, unformed self, withdrawing it from the process of experience and asserting it as the ultimate That's-the-way-I-am."⁵⁹

Is a mimesis of death, however, the only kind of mimesis allowed by Enlightenment? As I have claimed earlier, late capitalism can be distinguished by its cultivation of a domesticated "outside" as inoculation against the threat of a real outside. Enlightenment comes to realize, in other words, that ego rigidity is not only an utterly miserable condition but also an inherently unstable state, as the mimetic forces that drive toward an erasure of self/other distinction dictate that the psyche is not an inherently defensive and insulated one; thus the necessity of finding some form of gratification for them. The culture industry clearly provides some kind of relief from ego rigidity: as Adorno argues, "mimesis explains the enigmatically empty ecstasy of the fans in mass culture."⁶⁰

But again, relief of what kind? Is it a postoeidial form of limited criticality, a superego manufactured to “judge without judging,” or is it rather a preoeidial erasure of self/other distinction, a direct administration of the “bliss and pain of consuming oneself in the intensity of being lived by the id?”⁶¹ In other words, does the culture industry soften the ego hardened by Enlightenment through the id or the superego? In what manner, finally, does it tame the modern subject through its deployment of a domesticated mimesis?

Losing Oneself; or, “A Pure Culture [Industry] of the Death Drive”

“Who can say,” wonders Bernard Stiegler, “they have never felt the modest desire, in a dark and listless mood on one of those wistful Sunday afternoons of autumn, to take in a good movie?”⁶² Why do we so readily turn to the moving image, that specific technology that coemerged with and defines the culture industry? In most of the essays collected in *The Culture Industry*, Adorno focuses not on the appeal of the products of the culture industry but on their effects: conformity, conventionalism, sameness, normality, immediacy, nonspontaneity, etc. The exception to this rule is “Freudian Theory and the Pattern of Fascist Propaganda,” which does the most to articulate how precisely fascist propaganda—equated, for better or worse, with the media of the culture industry—elicits the drives.⁶³

Like Lacan, Adorno argues that the image is a powerful vehicle for identification, especially, we might add, when coordinated in motion with sound to create an unprecedented capacity to establish reality. In identifying with the “leader image,” in recreating “the *earliest* expression of an emotional tie with another person,” the follower gratifies, we are told, “the twofold wish to submit to authority and to be the authority himself.”⁶⁴ With Loewald, we might expand this claim as follows: by identifying with that which it would like to be, the subject is gratifying (or attempting to gratify) the primal wish to *be* the “other,” to fabricate a presence in the other’s absence, and thereby to be in a longed-for environment in fantasy. The identification with doctors or criminals on television dramas, for instance, allows viewers to have exciting occupations and to be immersed in environments of supposed life-and-death significance. The identification with action heroes and leads of romantic comedies

allows moviegoers to occupy roles of stereotyped masculinity and femininity and participate in fantasied gendered worlds. The fascist leader is only a specific case of this general principle: the identification with the “leader image” allows followers to be powerful in a way they are not and also to feel a security that they do not have.⁶⁵

In brief, then, the moving sound image allows coordinated identification, a kind of “pseudo-revolutionary blurring” in which the subject is “carried along in the current,” that plays on the *preoedipal mimetic desire to recreate a confusion of subject and object*.⁶⁶ As Stiegler convincingly argues, the specific medium of film and television lends itself to making these identifications: any director with a “minimum amount of know-how in the exploitation of video-cinematographic techniques will be able to [make us] adhere to the time of this flowing away [where] we forget ourselves in it.”⁶⁷ In other words, the capacity made possible by the moving sound image is to give ourselves over to the time of the other, to “lose ourselves” in the narrative for a few “restorative hours”: “During the 90 or 52 minutes of this pastime, the time of our consciousness will have entirely passed over into the time of these moving images, linked to one another by noise, sounds, words and voices. 90 or 52 minutes of our life will have passed outside of our real life.”⁶⁸

One might say then that the distinguishing appeal of what were for Adorno and Horkheimer the quintessential products of the culture industry—film and television—is the provision of a forum for “giving myself up to the time of the other” and thereby “losing myself” through identificatory fantasy.⁶⁹ One does not, of course, actually *escape* anything in temporarily “losing oneself”: given the “growing concordance” between the fantasy produced by the culture industry and the reality of everyday life, consumers are not escaping anything but the wish to escape in the first place.⁷⁰ “The dreams have no dream,” as Adorno says.⁷¹ At the same time, this concordance should not be understood as definitive: indeed, a large part of the reason people so readily imbibe the products of mass culture is their utter boredom and exhaustion in work. The culture industry can only do so much to make over reality. The language of escape is thus perfectly apposite here: in the act of “losing oneself” there is at work a real yearning for “escape from the boredom of mechanized labor,” even if what is settled on is only a form of temporary relief that undermines the possibility of actual escape.⁷²

While Adorno and Horkheimer could have followed me up to this point, they might have been troubled by the idea that the form of immediate

gratification found in this “losing oneself” is truly gratification, though for two related reasons that must be held apart, as they lead to very different consequences. The first is that what is experienced by the subject as *immediate* is anything but: the rhythmic head nodding to a pop song veils the homogenizing process that produced it. In this updated commodity fetishism thesis, the subject’s *experience* of gratification is not denied, only that this experience lacks mediating preconditions. But Adorno, in particular, goes much further than this: not only are our experiences mediated, but they are in fact not at all what we think they are. The concertgoer is not, in his view, gaining any independent pleasure from the music or the atmosphere but is rather only “worshipping the money that he himself has paid for the ticket.”⁷³ This is because, as Gunster bluntly puts it, exchange-value has wholly replaced use-value; or, in Adorno’s words, “the more inexorably the principle of exchange-value destroys use-values for human beings, the more deeply does exchange-value disguise itself as the object of enjoyment.”⁷⁴

We could admit a complete engulfment of use-value by exchange-value, however, without having then to assert, with Gunster, that mass culture “fails to ‘deliver the goods,’ [i.e., that] hallucinatory pleasures are false agents for gratification” and thus that the “blockbuster film” and the “latest hit CD” “rarely, if ever, do satisfy.”⁷⁵ The psychoanalytic frame that Adorno employs bristles at the notion of false gratification as it has been conceived here by Gunster (admittedly, as it is often conceived by Adorno himself): is not hallucinated satisfaction still satisfaction? From a psychoanalytic point of view, a form of satisfaction that masks its own mediation, and even that diminishes the possibility of attaining a deeper and more lasting gratification, is *still* satisfaction; to deny that the culture industry “delivers the goods” is both to possess an overly narrow conception of what “the goods” are but also to depose one’s opponent in fantasy instead of reality.

It is for this reason that I find it misleading, though not wrong per se, to say that the culture industry provides “ersatz satisfaction” or caters to “false needs.” When invoking these phrases, the Frankfurt school thinkers generally emphasize the transience of the gratification and the use of that gratification in ameliorating alienated labor.⁷⁶ In other words, the opportunity to “lose oneself” is ultimately only temporary relief from ego rigidity, an anxiety-filled lapse back into the “bliss and pain of being lived by the id” in a world otherwise defined by “spiritual death by freezing”; in the end “the rigidity is not dissolved but hardened even more.”⁷⁷ This

claim that the satisfaction here is impermanent and subjectifying is quite different, however, from the claim that it is *false*, that “goods” are not being delivered. Indeed, the latter claim imperils the grounds for critique laid by the former: to reject the idea that the culture industry provides real satisfaction is to make subjection in late capitalism not condemnable but unintelligible.⁷⁸

Since my proposal involves an atypical understanding of the death drive—in my view, neither an aggressive nor a pathological drive—as well as one of the culture industry—an industry whose efficacy lies in the fulfillment of real psychic needs, I want to be clear about my basic claim in this section, which is twofold: first, that it is the defining task of the culture industry to satisfy our primary drive *not to be ourselves* and, second, that the historically specific individuals “hardened” by economic rationalism and dissatisfying work are especially desirous of its gratifications, and willing to accept them even while admitting to themselves that they are being manipulated, because they are desperate for relief from the stifling rigidity of their own egos.⁷⁹ Thus, if “the culture industry is taken more seriously than it might itself wish to be,” it is because it fulfills a need that is manipulated under modern social conditions⁸⁰—or, again, because it “answers the psycho-dynamic question of how the subject is able to persevere in the face of a rationality which has itself become irrational.”⁸¹

I have so far discussed only the kind of drive gratification made possible by the moving sound image—the “vanguard” of the culture industry, according to Adorno.⁸² It would not be untoward, however, to see this phenomenon of “losing oneself” in all of the various leisure vehicles for Odyssean fantasies,⁸³ which span the gamut from the “medicinal bath” of “fun” and the “light art” of entertainment to “the bliss induced by narcotics”: traveling to exotic lands to lose oneself in native culture, attending rock concerts and going to clubs to lose oneself in the music, drinking and smoking of various kinds to lose oneself in the stupor, sports to lose oneself in the game, or “extreme sports” to lose oneself in the rush.⁸⁴ I would even suggest that activities unimagined in Adorno and Horkheimer’s time can be made sense of in this way: Internet browsing to lose oneself in a free associationsque “flow” or Internet browsing while also watching television so as to maintain peak levels of self-absence. One might object that the culture industry is only a loose configuration of media apparatuses and that it is a mistake to attribute to it a unified function. One of my aims, however, in recounting the Odysseus section of *Dialectic*

of *Enlightenment* was to demonstrate that, for Adorno and Horkheimer, the culture industry is more than just a new character in the unfolding drama of Enlightenment, that it is instead a particular kind of dialectical *solution* that allows the overcoming of an impasse to its progress. It is thus defined in their work not by the various evolving forms that comprise it but more essentially by the function that it serves.

Living Straight Ahead; or, The Being of “Being-Thus-and-Not-Otherwise”

I have yet, however, to relate how this function of providing outlets for “losing oneself” connects to that upon which the Frankfurt school so obsessed: namely, normalization, conformity, and standardization. Earlier I questioned the precision of Adorno’s term “ego-weakness,” which was already in circulation before his appropriation of it. In a short paper from 1938, for instance, Otto Fenichel defines a “weak ego” as one too defensive and anxious to tolerate tension and thus, for this reason, incapable of analysis.⁸⁵ If this is what is meant by the term, I much prefer “ego rigidity,” both descriptively and aesthetically, for its implicit affirmation of openness and receptivity over “strength.”⁸⁶ But Adorno had an altogether different phenomenon in mind: a weak ego, for him, was one that had given in to the “ever-present temptation of regressing to a state where the basic desires for libidinal gratification—which are never eliminated, only disciplined—once again take control,” thus stunting the ego and its capacity for judgment and reality testing.⁸⁷ On first glance, something is amiss: if egos have truly been made weak in this way, then subjects in late capitalism would not be the brutally efficient executors of instrumental reason that they are.⁸⁸

Indeed, the problem is not that subjects have become divorced from reality or incapable of judging, deciding, and calculating,⁸⁹ but that reality has become static, rigidly “one way,” and that the subject’s judgments and decisions are themselves not judged and assessed, only applied. It is thus not that society “generates illusions and distortions, presenting a façade that is actively misleading,” but rather that it generates a remarkably stubborn adherence to the status quo.⁹⁰ In “Notizen zur neuen Anthropologie,” Adorno characterizes the “new anthropological type”⁹¹ that emerges in late capitalism as “Vor-Sich-Hinleben,” or “living straight ahead.”⁹² The expression is related to *vor sich hinschauen*, or

“looking straight ahead” without looking about to orient oneself to one’s surroundings. This quality of living straight ahead, Adorno tells us, is ingrained from an early age in children, who are instructed “ceaselessly to follow goals, stubbornly live for them, their eyes consumed by the gain one is always trying to snatch up, without looking left or right.”⁹³ By being trained to aim straight ahead without looking around, the subject is reduced to the task of applying pre-given codes of judgment.

One could certainly frame this as a problem of “ego weakness,” but the fit is not exact: it is not that the ego does not judge for itself—it does, and quite efficiently—but rather that it bears no capacity for self-reflectively assessing its own judgments. For this reason, it makes much more sense to describe this loss as *superego* weakness (keeping in mind again that the superego is not understood here as a father substitute):⁹⁴ the superego fails to provide the ego with the tension of a real adversary, becoming much more like a motivational coach who only castigates the ego for failing to live up to preestablished norms.⁹⁵ The superego thus sees its function *streamlined*: there is self-reflection, a judgment of the ego by the superego that produces a certain tension, but the superego possesses no real force of its own, no capacity for “unco-ordinated judgement.”⁹⁶ In place of a difficult dialogue between two stubborn agencies, there are preestablished standards of judgment; their only communication concerns the failure or success of the ego in meeting those standards (standards that, as all analysts know, are typically enforced quite harshly).

Jonathan Lear gets at the difference in superego types that I am trying to formulate in his distinction between two kinds of reflection, one “pretense-enforcing” and the other “pretense-transcending.”⁹⁷ The first, which he associates with the typical functioning of the superego, keeps “us on the straight and narrow when it comes to the demands of morality and civilization.”⁹⁸ The second, which he calls “ironic” reflection, is not about failing to live up to ideals but about questioning “whether there is any longer an ideal to live up to or fail to live up to.”⁹⁹ The first is a sign that civilization “has its hooks” in us; the second that “civilization has itself become unhooked.”¹⁰⁰ I would like to suggest that this first reflective capacity corresponds roughly to that of the diminished superego that guides the subject “straight ahead” and the second to the critical reflection of a strong superego.¹⁰¹ Like the superego that “judges without judging,” pretense-enforcing reflection keeps one “firmly ensconced” in the status quo.¹⁰² Pretense-transcending reflection, by contrast, “disrupt[s] our lives

in somewhat unpleasant and unfamiliar ways”; it is, as both Kierkegaard and Adorno assert, a form of “infinite negativity.”¹⁰³

As has been well documented, the culture industry is relentless in producing and reinforcing standards of beauty, intelligence, masculinity, femininity, the typical features of what Lear calls the “pretense” of the ego. That we are constantly bombarded by these standards is, perhaps, one explanation for their acceptance; their insistence alone is quite overwhelming. My suspicion, however, is that we are *primed* to accept them in a more complicated way having to do with the energetic balance of the psyche. As I claimed in chapter 2, the superego—the agency that enforces ideals and norms, from which the ego views and judges itself—inherits from the death drive a dedifferentiating force and gives it stable expression. The superego, in short, gains its strength from death drive sublimation.

My proposal here is that what occurs in the confusion of subject and object characteristic of the identifications the culture industry makes possible is a *direct death drive gratification* that siphons the energy once sublimated into the superego by lowering the temperature of oedipal conflict. It is thus not simply that the culture industry’s administered form of relief is fleeting but also that it saps of its strength the authority responsible for critical self-reflection.¹⁰⁴ Like capital working on both the demand and the supply of labor,¹⁰⁵ the culture industry gains its efficacy from working on both sides of the ego, *providing id satisfaction as a way of diminishing the superego’s capacities*.¹⁰⁶ To Jessica Benjamin’s argument that Adorno and Horkheimer confused two levels of psychic functioning, we can thus reply that their “inconsistency” on this matter reflected the fact that both the relations id-ego and ego-superego are transformed by the crisis of internalization. If their theory unintentionally works at two levels, it is because the psyche is doubly transformed.

I have thus far focused on the weakening of the superego as a problem of diminished criticality, but it is no less one of diminished *sociality*: the emergence of the superego marks the entrance of the child into the adult universe, the moment when it becomes possible to identify with others not as “others” (what I have called preoedipal mimesis) but rather as real others (postoedipal mimesis). In other words, on account of the fact that we “lose ourselves” in the machinations of the culture industry, “it is no longer possible to lose oneself *in others*,” that is, the pervasive opportunity for primary identification reduces the possibility for secondary identification.¹⁰⁷ Given what Loewald has said of the temporal orientation of the

structural agencies, superego weakness is also a problem of diminished *temporality* and thus ought to be understood as the psychic dimension of what David Harvey calls the “time-space compression” of late capitalism.¹⁰⁸ With the enervation of that which represents “the past as seen from the future,” the “category of the future” is slowly replaced by the “the idea of an extended, but manageable and controllable, present.”¹⁰⁹

In sum, to say that the culture industry simply disseminates messages of conformity is to miss its real power.¹¹⁰ Both increasing feelings of disconnectedness and the “leveling” first theorized by Kierkegaard must be understood as predicated on a more primary psychic satisfaction. Critics of the culture industry have generally focused on its homogenizing and alienating effects without investigating why we willingly and, most of the time, self-consciously fall for the ruse. What I have tried to do here is follow up on Adorno’s little hints about the psychic motivation for conformity.

A Superego Substitute: Adorno *Contra* Horkheimer

We thus arrive at the difficult question: out of this “construction of a configuration of reality,” what kind of “demand for its [reality’s] real change” follows?¹¹¹ Horkheimer, for his part, places his hope in “small groups of admirable men” who have managed to escape the fate of being stunted by the culture industry, who still have enough of their wits about them to perceive and combat the irrationalities of modern life.¹¹² He calls these privileged few “resistant individuals.”

The resistant individual will oppose any pragmatic attempt to reconcile the demands of truth and the irrationalities of existence. Rather than to sacrifice truth by conforming to prevailing standards, he will insist on expressing in his life as much truth as he can, both in theory and in practice. His will be a life of conflict; he must be ready to run the risk of utter loneliness. The irrational hostility that would incline him to project his inner difficulties upon the world is overcome by a passion to realize what his father represented in his childish imagination, namely, truth. This type of youth—if it is a type—takes seriously what he has been taught. He at least is successful in the process of internalization to the extent of turning against outside authority and the blind cult of so-called reality.

He does not shrink from persistently confronting reality with truth, from unveiling the antagonism between ideals and actualities. His criticism itself, theoretical and practical, is a negative reassertion of the positive faith he had as a child.¹¹³

Unlike “submissive” individuals, resistant individuals neither repress the world of “childish imagination,” nor do they carry immaturity into adult life. They instead *sublimate* their infantile desires and cultivate the “positive faith” of childhood in the secondary process. Loewald hints at the effects of the division and fragmentation of the modern world on psychic health, but does not come all of the way around to Horkheimer’s conclusion: that the culture industry forces the healthy into an isolated unhealth and thus that “resistant individuals” must relentlessly fight against and expose the untruth of prevailing standards from a place of utter loneliness.

This controversial “privileged few” justification, to which Adorno himself ascribed at times, is, to my mind, one of the worst inheritances that we have received from the Frankfurt school and an idea that ought to be happily and decisively abandoned. Although it is not, strictly speaking, incompatible with critical theory,¹¹⁴ it is fairly remarkable that someone who charged *himself* with making sense of the possibility of his own theorizing should come to the conclusion that it is on account of “a stroke of undeserved luck” that he and a few others who closely resemble him are “not quite adjusted to the prevailing norms,”¹¹⁵ and thus capable of making “the moral and, as it were, representative effort to say what most of those for whom they say it cannot see or, to do justice to reality, will not allow themselves to see.”¹¹⁶ Marx and Durkheim could have made the same move, but they instead, being good critical theorists, accounted for the possibility of their own work within the historical dynamic analyzed in that work. To his credit, Adorno, like Freud, typically supplied the resources for a critique of his own position. In what follows, I will attempt to situate critical theory within the crisis of internalization narrative that I have just outlined and in so doing offer not simply “reasons for the right of criticism” but also a description of a possibility for that criticism unique to subjects of late capitalism.¹¹⁷

Adorno emphasized throughout his work, and often against his own assertions, that it is rather delusory to think that anyone could escape the culture industry’s long reach: nobody can claim to see through the haze of the present any more than a theory can claim to be free of the

marketplace.¹¹⁸ Whereas Horkheimer clung to the special privilege of membership in his vaunted group of “admirable men,” Adorno took seriously their claim in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that “the whole world is passed through the filter of the culture industry.”¹¹⁹ Just as it would be impossible, for Kant, to throw off the categories of understanding, so too is it impossible, for Adorno, to step outside the culture industry today. It has reshaped the world and consciousness both (though not “completely,” as I have argued), endangering the very process that gives rise to the resistant individual’s “truth.” To be even more precise, if the process of internalization has been compromised in late capitalism, it is more likely that the “truth” of the resistant individual is not the product of successful sublimation but rather the omnipotent dream of the regressed narcissist.¹²⁰ When “there is no peeping out,” we ought to be suspicious of those who claim to have found a peephole.¹²¹

Since no one escapes the desublimation of the culture industry, both the kind of psychic health envisioned by Loewald and the kind of resistance encouraged by Horkheimer can only be desperate clinging to ideals whose real basis has been eroded. This is not to say, however, that Adorno gave up on the ideal of a critical capacity able to resist the fictions of the culture industry and approach the object *qua* object in mimetic rapport, only that he precluded the possibility of attaining this goal *directly*. In a world where everything is passed through the filter of the culture industry, the kind of nondominating relationship characteristic of postoeidipal mimesis most certainly cannot be practiced: “we are *not yet* able to think the priority of the object.”¹²² The question, then, is how we begin to reestablish the kind of psychic tension that holds at bay an aggressive narcissism and makes superfluous the real need for administered breaks from oneself.¹²³

Robert Hullot-Kentor has suggested recently that the only way out of direct domination today is *through* the new anthropological type; that is, through the use of “what new powers this new type of being might have, among which [Adorno] mentions the following: a cold readiness for sacrifice, a cleverness in the struggle with meta-organizations, a speechless preparedness to do what is decisive.”¹²⁴ Robbed of the capacity of making pliable its own ego, the new anthropological type is coldly instrumental to the core and thus capable, despite “system-immanent” thinking, of a particular kind of blunt resistance. Thus, “if regression is the tendency of the new type of human being, this not only makes us vulnerable to the slightest manipulation of the most primitive impulses; it can also become

the ability to find the no less requisitely primitive impulse to stand up and say ‘Enough!’”¹²⁵

While Hullot-Kentor is correct to emphasize that “there is nothing to return to,” if he means by this that the kind of psychic tension that held together the old anthropological type is a thing of the past, he conceives of the transition to the new anthropological type as complete, the very move I have been attempting to parry here. As Rose argues, it is because we are able to conclude that everything cannot be completely reified if we understand the thesis of complete reification that there is still hope. Or, as Adorno himself argues, it is in the gap between the people that the culture industry attempts to fashion and the people that we are that it is possible to “glimpse a chance of maturity.”¹²⁶ Thus the “possibility that, by the standards of a truly emancipated humanity, [is] visible in our present situation, however faintly or negatively,” lies not in the (extremely limited and questionable) capacities of the new anthropological type but rather in the incompleteness of the transformation.¹²⁷ But what distinct possibility opens up while straddling these two anthropological types?

My proposal is the following: that, while heading toward that much worse fate of direct domination, we can turn around and assess the form of authority from which we are departing and redeploy it on our own terms. In other words, the relentless critique of the “schema of mass culture” is not only a way of unveiling its source of appeal and loosening entanglement in the tight circuit of interpellation and projection that is its filter *but also a practical training in the exercise of a critical capacity that takes over from the old superego the task of limiting the ego*. A critique of the culture industry is also a making conscious of the manipulation of one’s drives. Thus the confrontation of the intolerability of life without the fleeting gratifications of the culture industry is also an illumination of primary process life and a taking within one’s conscious control an old way of mitigating ego rigidity: the lasting satisfaction that comes with “criticism of that unyielding, inexorable something that sets itself up in us” (i.e., the ego).¹²⁸

Adorno’s devotion to “unfruitful negativity” would be, in this view, not simply a form of resistance aimed at attaining a kind of “sober-mindedness” about the present but also a way—a way, again, that is *made possible* by late capitalism—of recultivating the kind of psychic conflict that would allow for a noncoercive mimesis; that is, of reclaiming the *experiential satisfaction* of living outside one’s own conceptual projections.¹²⁹ This move frees Adorno of the charge made by Rose that negative

dialectics is ultimately a “morality (*Moralität*), in the limited sense which Hegel criticized: a general prescription not located in the social relations which underlie it.”¹³⁰ Negative dialectics is no “morality of method”: “not to be at home in one’s home” is a direct response to the diminution of internalization wrought by the culture industry and only a way of achieving mimetic rapport for a being who has been partially loosened from the old superego.¹³¹

One might still, however, follow Jessica Benjamin in accusing Adorno of a nostalgia for the repressed bourgeois subject,¹³² and it is important to clarify that, despite their hope for the return of an interest in forming autonomous subjects, neither he nor Horkheimer had anything but criticism for the bourgeois superego.¹³³ Indeed, Adorno did not desire a return of repression so much as he saw the possibility of something else to fill the vacuum left by its demise: “we must have a conscience, but may not insist on our own conscience,” which is nothing but “self-assertion . . . pretending to be the moral.”¹³⁴ To offer a *real* “replacement of the appropriate super-ego,” we must reinvent a mostly unconscious “authority” crippled by the culture industry as a conscious agent of “autonomy.”¹³⁵ *Where the bourgeois superego guided by an individualistic ethics was, so shall a conscious critical capacity guided by a dialectical social theory be.*¹³⁶ The moment of possibility engendered by the culture industry is thus located not, as later cultural critics would have it, in its new modes of creativity and innovation but rather in the fact that it partially “frees” us of an old form of internalized authority,¹³⁷ leading both to the danger of “direct domination” by “immediate social power” but also to the possibility of consciously directed ego curbing.¹³⁸

Bewältigung, Gewalt, Verwaltung

If the term *culture industry* is to be more than a reminder of the manufacturedness of culture, then we must be able to name the *function* that unites the diverse set of media and practices that comprise it, which means not simply asserting the *effects* of the culture industry—conformity, conventionalism, etc.—but rather shedding light on the kind of satisfactions provided by it and how those satisfactions work on the psyche. Addressing these latter problems—that is, a) naming the reason that we all so willingly devour the machinations of an industry that most of us understand to be manipulative and b) theorizing how the consumption

of those products changes the nature of our psychic lives—is absolutely necessary if the term *culture industry* is to bear any weight. To the first question, I have answered that the culture industry provides the subject hardened by economic rationalism administered breaks from its own ego, opportunities to “lose oneself,” to lapse back into indifference, if only for an afternoon at the movies. To the second, I have said that this direct death drive gratification weakens the superego, which, in this diminished state, more easily accepts codes of judgment upon which it does not itself cast judgment. It is only because we are able so regularly and easily to “lose ourselves” that we accept “living straight ahead.”

This reformulation of Adorno and Horkheimer’s understanding of the culture industry’s effect on the psyche not only articulates a more rigorous psychoanalytic frame for the project of critical theory but also historically situates it, thereby accounting for its very possibility but also the possibility it engenders.¹³⁹ From this perspective, it is because we are “straddling” anthropological types, loosened from the bourgeois superego but not yet reduced to products of immediate social power, that it is possible to engage in a particular kind of critical self-reflection: namely, of consciously appropriating the superego function of judging the ego and thereby limiting its narcissistic “rigidity.” Of the numerous pessimists scattered throughout the history of philosophy, Adorno certainly ranks among the greats; but, for all the suffocating bleakness that emanates from his work, his theory of a crisis of internalization contains within it this objective possibility of transforming an old form of psychic authority that unconsciously disciplined the ego into a critical capacity that consciously limits the ego.¹⁴⁰ This transformation is, as I have argued here, less a return to the superego than it is a reinvention of it. Perhaps this hoped-for reconstruction is another way of expressing Freud’s wish that psychoanalysis replace religion.

In this view, critical theory is more than just theory that is able to account for its own possibility: if Adorno’s critical method has an end point (postoedipal mimesis), then he must view critical practice not simply as a way of bucking ideology and coming to a sober view of the world but also as a way of recreating a kind of experiential satisfaction, one in which one’s conceptual projections onto the object have been curbed and in which thereby the object is experienced “as such.” I take this view to account not for the objective or ethical necessity of critical theory but for its *pleasure*, for its *appeal*, and thus, perhaps, for the rather uncritical pervasiveness of the word *critical* in academia today: as

opposed to the temporary self-forgetting propagated by the culture industry, critical reflection bears the possibility of the happiness of real self-transcendence. Thus, when Adorno claims that “thought is happiness, even where unhappiness prevails,” he means that critical thinking allows a *self-overcoming*—in admittedly small realizations that we have been repressed or deluded—that is cause for the real drive gratification that attends knowledge of the world, even though that knowledge reveals the world to be one structured in such a way as to maintain repression and delusion and thus one to be transcended.¹⁴¹

Since this possibility—that of creating the kind of psychic tension necessary for nonprojective relationships to others and the world and thus for “autonomy”¹⁴²—is one open to *individuals* engaged in critical practice, one might wonder: does this position consign Adorno to advocating for individual redemption in a fallen world? Despite his own political involvements,¹⁴³ I do not believe Adorno could, under the constraints of his own theory, support “political action” in any straightforward sense.¹⁴⁴ To promote movement in a people confined to their narcissism is, for him, the best way to ensure the maintenance of domination.¹⁴⁵ He did, however, hold out possibility for one particular form of collective struggle, which he called “education to maturity” (*Erziehung zur Mündigkeit*) (reminiscent of Freud’s “education to reality” [*Erziehung zur Realität*]).¹⁴⁶ I agree with Iain Macdonald that “when Adorno speaks of an ‘education in maturity,’ he does not have in mind merely *self*-education, but actual reforms of the educational system that would allow critical thought, and therefore autonomy, to be cultivated across the board in society.”¹⁴⁷ It is this education that would then create the kind of community necessary for “*substantial autonomy*,” an “autonomy integrated into the very fabric of society,” as opposed, one might say, to the “formal autonomy” available to those without the requisite ethical substance.¹⁴⁸ If Adorno thus had a politics, it was one that was simultaneously an education that developed the capacities for autonomy necessary for political action—a politics that made politics possible.

In the previous chapter, I analyzed the relation between what Freud calls *Bewältigung*, the fundamental capacity of the psyche to “master” stimuli and achieve a degree of equilibrium, and the outbreak of a kind of violence (*Gewalt*) that Lacan calls aggressivity. In the theory proposed there, *Gewalt* is not the primary force that is “brought in” by *Bewältigung* but rather a secondary effect,¹⁴⁹ an unfortunate but understandable consequence of the dialectic of dependence that defines our preoedipal lives.

In Lacanian theory, aggressivity is supposed to be overcome with the resolution of imaginary conflict in symbolic identification (what Freud would call the “dissolution of the Oedipus complex”). In this chapter I identified, with Adorno and Horkheimer, a particular threat to this process of overcoming. By providing direct relief from defensive rigidity, the culture industry lowers the pitch of oedipal conflict, thus diminishing the power of the superego and allowing a more direct administration (*Verwaltung*) of the subject in late capitalism. The possibility of attaining post-oedipal psychic *Bewältigung*—defined by a strong tension between ego and superego—is thereby diminished, leaving the subject grasping at the administered relief from the cold confines of its own narcissism. The very same movement, however, also engenders the possibility of consciously achieving that mastery, and it is this achievement that I have portrayed as the end of philosophy for Adorno.