Recent histories of art comprise a number of distinct critical models (for example, formalism, structuralist semiotics, psychoanalysis, social art history, and feminism) that have been merged and integrated in various ways, in particular in the work of American and British art historians since the seventies. This situation sometimes makes it difficult, if not altogether pointless, to insist on methodological consistency, let alone on a singular methodological position. The complexity of these various individual strands and their integrated forms points firstly to the problematic nature of any claim that one particular model should be accepted as exclusively valid or as dominant within the interpretative processes of art history. Our attempts to integrate a broad variety of methodological positions also efface the earlier theoretical rigor that had previously generated a degree of precision in the process of historical analysis and interpretation. That precision now seems to have been lost in an increasingly complex weave of methodological eclecticism.

The origins of the methodologies

All these models were initially formulated as attempts to displace earlier humanist (subjective) approaches to criticism and interpretation. They had been motivated by the desire to position the study of all types of cultural production (such as literature or the fine arts) on a more solidly scientific basis of method and insight, rather than have criticism remain dependent on the various more-or-less subjective approaches of the late nineteenth century, such as the biographical, psychologistic, and historicist survey methods.

• Just as the early Russian Formalists made Ferdinand de Saussure’s linguistic structure the matrix of their own efforts to understand the formation and functions of cultural representation, subsequent historians who attempted to interpret works of art in psychoanalytic terms tried to find a map of artistic subject.

• Formulation in the writings of Sigmund Freud. Proponents of both models argued that they could generate a verifiable understanding of the processes of aesthetic production and reception, and promised to anchor the “meaning” of the work of art solidly in the operations of either the conventions of language and/or the system of the unconscious, arguing that aesthetic or poetic meaning operated in a manner analogous to other linguistic conventions and narrative structures (e.g., the folktale), or, in terms of the unconscious, as in Freud’s and Carl Jung’s theories, analogous to the joke and the dream, the symptom and the trauma.

The social history of art, from its very beginning in the first decades of the twentieth century, had a similar ambition to make the analysis and interpretation of works of art more rigorous and verifiable. Most importantly, the early social historians of art (Marxist scholars like the Anglo-German Francis Klingender [1907–55] and the Anglo-Hungarian Frederick Antal [1887–1954]) tried to situate cultural representation within the existing communication structures of society, primarily within the field of ideological production under the rise of industrial capitalism. After all, social art history’s philosophical inspiration was the scientificity of Marxism itself, a philosophy that had aimed from the very beginning not only to analyze and interpret economic, political, and ideological relations, but also to make the writing of history itself—its historicity—contribute to the larger project of social and political change.

This critical and analytical project of social art history formulated a number of key concepts that I will discuss further: I shall also try to give their original definitions, as well as subsequent modifications to these concepts, in order to acknowledge the increasing complexity of the terminology of social art history, which results partially from the growing differentiation of the philosophical concepts of Marxist thought itself. At the same time, it may become apparent that some of these key concepts are presented not because they are important in the early years of the twenty-first century, but, rather, because of their obsolescence, withering away in the present and in the recent past. This is because the methodological conviction of certain models of analysis has been just as over-determined as that of all the other methodological models that have temporarily governed the interpretation and the writing of art history at different points in the twentieth century.

Autonomy

• German philosopher and sociologist Jürgen Habermas (born 1929) has defined the formation of the bourgeois public sphere in general and the development of cultural practices within that
sphere as social processes of subjective differentiation that lead to the historical construction of bourgeois individuality. These processes guarantee the individual's identity and historical status as a self-determining and self-governing subject. One of the necessary conditions of bourgeois identity was the subject's capacity to experience the autonomy of the aesthetic, to experience pleasure without interest.

This concept of aesthetic autonomy was as integral to the differentiation of bourgeois subjectivity as it was to the differentiation of cultural production according to its proper technical and procedural characteristics, eventually leading to the modernist orthodoxy of medium-specificity. Inevitably then, autonomy served as a foundational concept during the first five decades of European modernism. From Théophile Gautier’s program of *part pour l’art* and Édouard Manet’s conception of painting as a project of perpetual self-reflexivity, the aesthetics of autonomy culminate in the poetics of Stéphane Mallarmé in the 1880s. Aestheticism conceiving the work of art as a purely self-sufficient and self-reflexive experience—identified by Walter Benjamin as a nineteenth-century theology of art—generated, in early-twentieth-century formalist thought, similar conceptions that would later become the doxa of painterly self-reflexivity for formalist critics and historians. These ranged from Roger Fry’s responses to Postimpressionism—in particular the work of Paul Cézanne—to Daniel-Henry Kahnweiler’s neo-Kantian theories of Analytical Cubism, to the work of Clement Greenberg (1909–94) in the postwar period. Any attempt to transform autonomy into a transhistorical, if not ontological precondition of aesthetic experience, however, is profoundly problematic. It becomes evident upon closer historical inspection that the formation of the concept of aesthetic autonomy itself was far from autonomous. This is first of all because the aesthetics of autonomy had been determined by the overarching philosophical framework of Enlightenment philosophy (Immanuel Kant’s 1724–1804 concept of disinterestedness) while it simultaneously operated in opposition to the rigorous instrumentalization of experience that emerged with the rise of the mercantile capitalist class.

Within the field of cultural representation, the cult of autonomy liberated linguistic and artistic practices from mythical and religious thought just as much as it emancipated them from the politically adulatory service and economic dependency under the auspices of a rigorously controlling feudal patronage. While the cult of autonomy might have originated with the emancipation of bourgeois subjectivity from aristocratic and religious hegemony, autonomy also saw the theocratic and hierarchical structures of that patronage as having their own reality. The modernist aesthetic of autonomy thus constituted the social and subjective sphere from within which an opposition against the totality of interested activities and instrumentalized forms of experience could be articulated in artistic acts of open negation and refusal. Paradoxically, however, these acts served as opposition and—in their ineluctable condition as extreme exceptions from the universal rule—they confirmed the regime of total instrumentalization. One might have
Like Henri Matisse, El Lissitzky transformed the legacies of collage and photomontage according to the needs of a newly industrialized collective. Especially in the new genre of exhibition design, which he developed in the twenties in works such as the Soviet Pavilion for the international exhibition Pressa, it became evident that Lissitzky was one of the first (and few) artists of the twenties and thirties to understand that the spaces of public architecture (that is, of simultaneous collective reception) and the space of public information had collapsed in the new spaces of the mass-cultural sphere. Therefore Lissitzky, an exemplary "artist-as-producer," as Walter Benjamin would identify the artist's new social role, would situate his practice within the very parameters and modes of production of a newly developing proletarian public sphere.

Actual study of the critical phase of the aesthetic of autonomy in the nineteenth century (from Manet to Mallarmé) would recognize that this very paradox is the actual formative structure of their pictorial and poetic genius. Both define modernist representation as an advanced form of critical self-reflexivity and define their hermetic artifice in assimilation and in opposition to the emerging mass-cultural forms of instrumentalized representation. Typically, the concept of autonomy was both formed by and oppositional to the instrumental logic of bourgeois rationality, rigorously enforcing the requirements of that rationality within the sphere of cultural production through its commitment to empirical criticality. Thereby an aesthetics of autonomy contributed to one of the most fundamental transformations of the experience of the work of art, initiating the shift that Walter Benjamin in his essays of the thirties called the historical transition.
from cult-value to exhibition-value. These essays have come to be universally considered as the founding texts of a philosophical theory of the social history of art.

The concept of autonomy also served to idealize the new distribution form of the work of art, now that it had become a free-floating commodity on the bourgeois market of objects and luxury goods. Thus autonomy aesthetics was engendered by the capitalist logic of commodity production as much as it opposed that logic. In fact, the Marxist aesthetician Theodor W. Adorno (1903–69) still maintained in the late sixties that artistic independence and aesthetic autonomy could, paradoxically, be guaranteed only in the commodity structure of the work of art.

Antiaesthetic

Peter Bürger (born 1936), in his important—although problematic—essay, *Theory of the Avant-Garde* (1974), argued that the new spectrum of antiaesthetic practices in 1913 arose as a contestation of autonomy aesthetics. Thus—according to Bürger—the historical avant-gardes after Cubism universally attempted to "integrate art with life" and to challenge the autonomous "institution of art." Bürger perceives this project of the antiaesthetic to be at the center of the revolts of Dadaism, Russian Constructivism, and French Surrealism. Yet, rather than focusing on a nebulously conceived integration of art and life (an integration never satisfactorily defined at any point in history) or on a rather abstract debate on the nature of the institution of art, it seems more productive to focus here on the very strategies that these avant-garde practitioners themselves had propagated: in particular, strategies to initiate fundamental changes in the conception of audience and spectatorial agency, to reverse the bourgeois hierarchy of aesthetic exchange-value and use-value, and most importantly perhaps, to conceive of cultural practices for a newly emerging internationalist proletarian public sphere within the advanced industrial nation states.

Such an approach would not only allow us to differentiate these avant-garde projects more adequately, but would also help us understand that the rise of an aesthetic of technical reproduction (in diametrical opposition to an aesthetic of autonomy) emerges at that very moment of the twenties when the bourgeois public sphere begins to wither away. It is at first displaced by the progressive forces of an emerging proletarian public sphere (as was the case in the early phases of the Soviet Union and the Weimar Republic), only to be followed, of course, by the rise of the mass-cultural public sphere, either in its totalitarian fascist or state-socialist versions in the thirties or by its postwar regimes of the culture industry and of spectacle, emerging with the hegemony of the United States and a largely dependent culture of European reconstruction.

The antiaesthetic dismantles the aesthetics of autonomy on all levels: it replaces originality with technical reproduction, it destroys a work’s aura and the contemplative modes of aesthetic experience and replaces these with communicative action and aspirations toward simultaneous collective perception. The antiaesthetic (such as the work of John Heartfield [1]) defines its artistic practices as temporary and geopolitically specific (rather than as transhistorical), as participatory (rather than as a unique emanation of an exceptional form of knowledge). The antiaesthetic also operates as a utilitarian aesthetic (e.g., in the work of the Soviet Productivists [2]), situating the work of art in a social context where it assumes a variety of productive functions such as information and education or political enlightenment, serving the needs of a cultural self-constitution for the newly emerging audiences of the industrial proletariat who were previously excluded from cultural representation on the levels of both production and reception.

Class, agency, and activism

The central premises of Marxist political theory had been the concepts of class and class-consciousness—the most important factors to drive forward the historical process. Classes served in different moments of history as the agents of historical, social, and political change (e.g., the aristocracy, the bourgeoisie, the proletariat, and the most powerful class in the twentieth century, the petite bourgeoisie, paradoxically the most neglected by classical Marxist accounts). It had been Marx’s argument that class itself was defined by one crucial condition: a subject’s situation in relation to the means of production. Thus, privileged access to (or, more decisively, controlling ownership of) the means of production was the constitutive condition of bourgeois class identity in the later eighteenth and the entire nineteenth centuries. In contrast, during the same period, the conditions of proletarianization identify those subjects who will remain forever economically, legally, and socially barred from access to the means of production (which would, of course, also include the means of education and the acquisition of improved professional skills).

Questions concerning the concept of class are central to the social history of art, ranging from the class identity of the artist to whether cultural solidarity or mimetic artistic identification with the struggles of the oppressed and exploited classes of modernity can actually amount to acts of political support for revolutionary or oppositional movements. Marxist political theorists have often regarded that kind of cultural class alliance with considerable skepticism. Yet this mode of class alliance determined practically all politically motivated artistic production of modernity, since very few, if any, artists and intellectuals had actually emerged from the conditions of proletarian existence at that time. Class identity becomes all the more complicated when considering how the consciousness of individual artists might well have become radicalized at certain points (e.g., the revolution of 1848, the revolutions of 1917, or the anti-imperialist struggles of 1968) and artists might then have assumed positions of solidarity with the oppressed classes of those historical moments [3]. Slightly later, however, in the wake of their cultural assimilation, the same artists might have assumed positions of complicit or active affirmation of the ruling order and simply served as the providers of cultural legitimation.
This also points to the necessary insight that the registers of artistic production and their latent or manifest relationships to political activism are infinitely more differentiated than arguments for the politicization of art might generally have assumed. We are not simply confronted with an alternative between a politically conscious or activist practice on the one hand, and a merely affirmative, hegemonic culture (as the Italian Marxist philosopher and aesthetician Antonio Gramsci [1891–1937] called it) on the other. Yet, the function of hegemonic culture is clearly to sustain power and legitimize the perceptual and behavioral forms of the ruling class through cultural representation, while oppositional cultural practices articulate resistance to hierarchical thought, subvert privileged forms of experience, and destabilize the ruling regimes of vision and perception just as they can also massively and manifestly destabilize governing notions of hegemonic power.

If we accept that some forms of cultural production can assume the role of agency (i.e., that of information and enlightenment, that of criticality and counterinformation), then the social history of art faces one of its most precarious insights, if not a condition of crisis: if it were to align its aesthetic judgment with the condition of political solidarity and class alliance, it would inevitably be left with only a few heroic figures in whom such a correlation between class-consciousness, agency, and revolutionary alliance could actually be ascertained. These examples would include Gustave Courbet and Honoré Daumier in the nineteenth century, Käthe Kollwitz and John Heartfield in the first half of the twentieth century, and artists such as Martha Rosler [4] Hans Haacke [6] and Allan Sekula in the second half of the twentieth century.

Thus, in recognizing that compliance with class interests and political revolutionary consciousness can at best be considered an exceptional rather than a necessary condition within the aesthetic practices of modernity, it leaves the social art historian with a difficult choice. That is, either to exclude from consideration most actual artistic practices of any particular moment of modernism, disregarding both the artists and their production because of their lack of commitment, class-consciousness, and political correctness, or to recognize the necessity of numerous other criteria (beyond political and social history) to enter the process of historical and critical analysis.

Since the proletarian’s only means of survival is the sale of his or her own labor like any other commodity, producing a phenomenal accretion of surplus value to the entrepreneurial bourgeois or to the corporate enterprise by supplying the subject’s labor power, it is, therefore, the very condition of labor and the laborer that radical artists from the nineteenth century onward, from Gustave Courbet to the Productivists of the twenties, confront. For the most part, however, they confront it not on the level of iconography (in fact, the almost total absence of the representation of alienated labor is the rule of modernism) but rather with the perpetual question of whether the labor of industrial production and the labor of cultural production can and should be related, and, if so, how—as analogous? as dialectical opposites? as complementary? as mutually exclusive? Marxist attempts to theorize this relationship (and the
Rosler is one of the very few artists in the postwar period to have taken up the legacies of the political photomontage work of the thirties. Her series Bringing the War Back Home: House Beautiful, begun in 1987, explicitly responds to both a historical and an artistic situation. First of all, the work participated in the growing cultural and political opposition against the imperialist American war in Vietnam. Rather than creating the works as individual photomontages, Rosler conceived them as a series for reproduction and dissemination in a number of antiwar and countercultural journals in order to increase the visibility and impact of the images. She had clearly understood Heartfield’s legacy and the dialectics of distribution form and mass-cultural iconography. Second, Rosler explicitly countered the Conceptualist’s claim that photography should merely serve as a neutral document of analytical self-criticism, or as an indexical trace of the spatio-temporal stagings of the subject. Rather, she identified photography as one of several discursive tools in the production of ideology in the mass-cultural arsenal. By inserting sudden documentary images of the war in Vietnam into the seemingly blissful and opulent world of American domesticity, Rosler not only revealed the intricate intertwinement of domestic and militaristic forms of advanced capitalist consumption, but also manifestly challenges the credibility of photography as a truthful carrier of authentic information.

Social art historian’s attempts to come to terms with these theorizations span an extreme range: from a productivist-utilitarian aesthetic that affirms the constitution of the subject as necessary in the production of use-value (as in the Soviet Productivists, the German Bauhaus, and the De Stijl movements) to an aesthetic of ludic counterproductivity (as in the simultaneous practices of Surrealism) which negates labor-as-value and denies it any purchase whatsoever on the territory of art. Such an aesthetic regards artistic practice as the one experience where the possibility of historically available forms of unalienated and uninstrumentalized existence shine forth, whether for the first time or as celebratory reminiscences of the bliss of rituals, games, and child’s play.

It is no accident, then, that modernism has mostly avoided the actual representation of alienated labor, except for the work of great activist photographers such as Lewis Hine, where the abolition of child labor was the driving agenda of the project. In contrast, whatever painting or photography in the twentieth century celebrated the labor force or the forceful laborer, one could—and can—be sure of being in the company of totalitarian ideologies, whether fascist, Stalinist, or corporate. The heroization of the body subjected to alienated physical labor serves to instill collective respect for intolerable conditions of subjectivation, and in a false celebration of that labor it also serves to naturalize that which should be critically analyzed in terms of its potential transformation, if not its final abolition. Conversely, the all-too-easy acceptance of artistic practices as mere playful opposition fails to recognize not only the pervasiveness of alienated labor as a governing form of collective experience, but also prematurely accepts the relegation of artistic practice to merely a pointless exemption from the reality principle altogether.

Ideology: reflection and mediation

The concept of ideology played an important role in the aesthetics of György Lukács (1885–1971), who wrote one of the most cohesive Marxist literary aesthetic theories of the twentieth century. Although rarely addressing artistic visual production, Lukács’s theories had a tremendous impact on the formation of social art history in its second phase of the forties and fifties, in particular on the work of his fellow Hungarian Arnold Hauser (1892–1978) and the Austrian Marxist Ernst Fischer (1889–1972).

Lukács’s key concept was that of reflection, establishing a rather mechanistic relationship between the forces of the economic and political base and the ideological and institutional superstructure. Ideology was defined as an inverted form of consciousness or—worse—as mere false consciousness. Furthermore, the concept of reflection argued that the phenomena of cultural representation were ultimately mere secondary phenomena of the class politics and ideological interests of a particular historical moment. Subsequently, though, the understanding of reflection would depart from these mechanistic assumptions. Lukács’s analysis had in fact argued for an understanding of cultural production as dialectical historical operations, and he saw certain cultural practices (e.g., the
bourgeois novel and its project of realism) as the quintessential cultural achievement of the progressive forces of the bourgeoisie. When it came to the development of a proletarian aesthetic, however, Lukács became a stalwart of reactionary thought, arguing that the preservation of the legacies of bourgeois culture would have to be an integral force within an emerging proletarian realism. The task of Socialist realism in Lukács’s account eventually came simultaneously to preserve the revolutionary potential of the progressive bourgeois moment that had been betrayed and to lay the foundations of a new proletarian culture that had truly taken possession of the bourgeois means of cultural production.

Since the theorizations of ideology in the sixties, aestheticians and art historians have not only differentiated general theories of ideology, but have also elaborated the questions of how cultural production relates to the apparatus of ideology at large. The question of whether artistic practice operates inside or outside ideological representations has especially preoccupied social art historians since the seventies, all of them arriving at very different answers, depending on the theory of ideology to which they subscribe. Thus, for example, those social art historians who followed the model of the early Marxist phase of American art historian Meyer Schapiro (1904-96) continued to operate under the assumption that cultural representation is the mirror reflection of the ideological interests of a ruling class (e.g., Schapiro’s argument about Impressionism being the cultural expression of the leisureed share-holding bourgeoisie). According to Schapiro, these cultural representations do not merely articulate the mental universe of the bourgeois; they also invest it with the cultural authority to claim and maintain its political legitimacy as a ruling class.

Others have taken Meyer Schapiro’s Marxist social history of art as a point of departure, but have also adopted the complex ideas that he developed in his later work. He took the infinitely more complicated questions of mediation between art and ideology into account by recognizing that aesthetic formations are relatively autonomous, rather than fully dependent upon or congruent with ideological interests (a development that is evident, for example, in Schapiro’s subsequent turn to an early semiology of abstraction). One result of a more complex theorization of ideology was the attempt to situate artistic representations as dialectical forces within their historically specific moment. That is, in certain cases a particular practice might very well articulate the rise of progressive consciousness not only within an individual artist, but also the progressive trajectory of its self-definition in terms of a project of bourgeois enlightenment and ever-expanding social and economic justice (see, for example, Thomas Crow’s [born 1948] classic essay “Modernism and Mass Culture,” concerning the dialectical conception of the idiom of neo-Impressionist divisionism in its drastic changes from affiliation with the politics of radical anarchism to an indulgent style).

Social art historians of the seventies, like Crow and T. J. Clark (born 1945), conceived of the production of cultural representation as both dependent upon class ideology and generative of counter-ideological models. Thus, the most comprehensive account of
nineteenth-century modernist painting and its shifting fortunes within the larger apparatus of ideological production can still be found in the complex and increasingly differentiated approach to the question of ideology in the work of Clark, the leading social art historian of the late twentieth century. In Clark’s accounts of the work of Daumier and Courbet, for example, ideology and painting are still conceived in the dialectical relations that Lukács had suggested in his accounts of the work of eighteenth and nineteenth-century literature: as an articulation of the progressive forces of the bourgeois class in a process of coming into its own mature identity to accomplish the promises of the French Revolution and of the culture of the Enlightenment at large.

Clark’s later work The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and his Followers (1984), by contrast, does not merely the extreme difficulty of situating the work of Manet and Seurat within such a clear and dynamic relationship to the progressive forces of a particular segment of society. Rather, Clark now faces the task of confronting the newfound complexity of the relationship between ideology and artistic production, and of integrating it with the methodology of social art history that he had developed up to this point. This theoretical crisis undoubtedly resulted in large part from Clark’s discovery of the work of the Marxist Lacanian Louis Althusser (1918–90). Althusser’s conception of ideology still remains the most productive one, in particular with regard to its capacity to situate aesthetic and art-historical phenomena in a position of relative autonomy with regard to the totality of ideology. This is not just because Althusser theorizes ideology as a totality of linguistic representations in which the subject is constituted in a politicized version of Lacan’s account of the symbolic order. Perhaps even more important is Althusser’s distinction between the totality of the ideological state apparatus (and its subversive in all domains of representation) and the explicit exemption of artistic representations (as well as scientific knowledge) from that totality of ideological representations.

Popular culture versus mass culture

One of the most important debates among social art historians concerns the question of how so-called high art or avant-garde practices relate to the emerging mass-cultural formations of modernity. And while it is of course understood that these formations change continuously (as the interactions between the two halves of the systems of representation are continuously reconfigured), it has remained a difficult debate whose outcome is often indicative of the particular type of Marxism embraced by the critics of mass culture. It ranges from the most violent rejection of mass-cultural formations in the work of Adorno, whose infamous condemnation of jazz is now universally discredited as a form of eurocentric Alexandrianism that was—worst of all—largely dependent on the author’s total lack of actual information about the musical phenomena he so disdained.

The opposite approach to mass-cultural phenomena was first developed in England, in the work of Raymond Williams (1921–88),
whose crucial distinction between popular culture and mass culture became a productive one for subsequent attempts by cultural historians such as Stuart Hall (born 1932) to argue for an infinitely more differentiated approach when analyzing mass-cultural phenomena. Hall argued that the same dialectical movement that aestheticians and art historians had detected in the gradual shift of stylistic phenomena from revolutionary and emancipatory to regressive and politically reactionary could be detected in the production of mass culture as well: here a perpetual oscillation from initial contestation and transgression to eventual affirmation in the process of industrialized acculturation would take place. Hall also made it seem plausible that a fundamental first step in overcoming the eurocentric fixation on hegemonic culture (whether high bourgeois or avant-garde) was acceptance that different audiences communicate within different frames of tradition, linguistic convention, and behavioral forms of interaction. Therefore, according to the new cultural-studies approach, the specificity of audience address and experiences should be posited above all claims—as authoritarian as they are numerous—for universally valid criteria of aesthetic evaluation, that is, that hierarchical canonicity whose ultimate and latent goal would always remain the confirmation of the supremacy of white, male, bourgeois culture.

Sublimation and desublimation

The model of cultural studies that Williams and Hall elaborated, and that became known later as the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies, laid the foundations for most of the work in cultural studies being done today. Even though he is not known ever to have engaged with the work of any of the British Marxists, Adorno’s counterargument would undoubtedly have been to accuse their project of being one of extending desublimation into the very center of aesthetic experience, its conception and critical evaluation. Desublimation for Adorno internalizes the very destruction of subjectivity further; its agenda is to dismantle the processes of complex consciousness formation, the desire for political self-determination and resistance, and ultimately to annihilate experience itself in order to become totally controlled by the demands of late capitalism.

Another and rather different Marxist aesthetician, Herbert Marcuse (1898–1979), conceived of the concept of desublimation in almost the opposite way, arguing that the structure of aesthetic experience consisted of the desire to undermine the apparatus of libidinal repression and to generate an anticipatory moment of an existence liberated from needs and instrumentalizing demands. Marcuse’s Freudo-Marxist aesthetic of libidinal liberation was situated at the absolute opposite pole of Adorno’s ascetic aesthetics of a negative dialectics, and Adorno did not fail to chastize Marcuse publicly for what he perceived to be the horrifying effects of hedonistic American consumer culture on Marcuse’s thoughts.

Whatever the ramifications of Marcuse’s reconception of desublimation, it is certainly a term for which ample evidence could be

introduction 2 | The social history of art: models and concepts
It appears that the strengths and successes of the social history of art are most evident in those historical situations where actual mediations between classes, political interests, and cultural forms of representation are solidly enacted and therefore relatively verifiable. Their unique capacity to reconstruct the narratives around those revolutionary or foundational situations of modernity makes the accounts of social art historians the most compelling interpretations of the first hundred years of modernism, from David in the work of Thomas Crow to the beginnings of Cubism in T. J. Clark’s work.

However, when it comes to the historical emergence of avant-garde practices such as abstraction, collage, Dada, or the work of Duchamp, whose innermost telos it had been actively to destroy traditional subject–object relationships and to register the destruction of traditional forms of experience, both on the level of narrative and on that of pictorial representation, social art history’s attempts to maintain cohesive narrative accounts often emerge at best as either incongruent or incompatible with the structures and morphologies at hand, or at worst, as falsely recuperative. Once the extreme forms of particularization and fragmentation have become the central formal concerns in which postbourgeois subjectivity finds its correlative remnants of figuration, the interpretative desire to reimpose totalizing visions onto historical phenomena sometimes appears reactionary and at other times paranoid in its enforcement of structures of meaning and experience. After all, the radicality of these artistic practices had involved not only their refusal to allow for such visions but also their formulation of syntax and structures where neither narrative nor figuration could still obtain. If meaning could still obtain at all, it would require accounts that would inevitably lead beyond the frameworks of those of deterministic causation.

**FURTHER READING**

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