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Echoes of the Epochal: Historicism and the Realism Debate

I. The Present “As It Really Is”

Few aesthetic conflicts of the past century appear as stubbornly irresolvable as the “realism debate” that unfolded among Marxist critics and philosophers in the 1930s.¹ The vast differences in the aesthetic assumptions and artistic products defended on each side of the debate seem to admit no theoretical reconciliation. Worse yet, it is not always clear whether the insistent attempts to hash out these differences were even enlightening. At times the debate appears as a grand drama touching on the essential issues of modern aesthetics, while at other times it appears mired in arguments whose abstraction is reminiscent of the scholastic realism debates of the fourteenth century.² Indeed, the ambiguity about what precisely was at stake sometimes lends the twentieth-century realism debate the appearance of a literary-theoretical feud between modernist Montagues and card-carrying Capulets.

¹ I use the singular term “debate” for a phenomenon that is decidedly plural. The best-known version of this debate is a series of exchanges by a range of authors in the German-language exile journal *Das Wort*, published in Moscow in 1937-38. (These materials have been collected by Schmitt, and a selection in English appears in *New Left Review, Aesthetics and Politics*, ed.). On a broader level, however, the exchanges in *Das Wort* are simply a conveniently compact formulation of issues confronting Marxist proponents of the avant-garde or realism in many countries in the mid- to late thirties. For example, the maneuvering of Breton’s surrealists vis-à-vis the cultural authorities in Moscow invoked similar issues and exchanges, as did the never-ending tensions between the Czech poetists and surrealists on the one hand—to anticipate a cultural situation to be examined below—and their interlocutors defending proletkult and socialist realism on the other (see Lewis and Kusák for the French and Czech contexts respectively). In what follows, I refer to the particular debate that unfolded in and around *Das Wort* as the “expressionism debate,” reserving the term “realism debate” for this more general context.

² Thus Fredric Jameson has described the realism debate as an aesthetic event “whose navigation and renegotiation is still unavoidable for us today” (“Reflections on the Brecht-Lukács Debate” 133), while Peter Bürger argues that the issues Lukács and Adorno debated with such energy had in fact already been made obsolete and irrelevant by the avant-garde (*Theory of the Avant-Garde* 86-87).

This impression is heightened by the sense of urgency saturating these exchanges—the sense that it was not only possible but even crucial to resolve these issues and demonstrate the error of the opposing camp. More was at stake than aesthetic method. To antagonists in the debate, the other side did not merely produce “bad art” (bad art rarely causes people to feel so threatened); rather, it promoted fundamentally *false* images. Thus, Fredric Jameson has described Georg Lukács’s concept of decadence as

the equivalent in the aesthetic realm of that of “false consciousness” in the domain of traditional ideological analysis. Both suffer from the same defect: the common presupposition that in the world of culture and society such a thing as pure error is possible. They imply, in other words, that works of art or systems of philosophy are conceivable which have no content, and are therefore to be denounced for failing to grapple with the “serious” issues of the day . . . (“Reflections” 138)

While the aesthetic absolutism Jameson describes here has often served as evidence of Lukács’ traditionalism, spokespeople for the avant-garde were usually just as contemptuous of the errors and emptiness of literary and artistic realism. On both sides ostensibly aesthetic issues merged seamlessly with broader campaigns against false consciousness, and arguments left no room for differences of taste or temperament.

This absolutism is clearly connected with the term *realism* itself. Again, in Jameson’s words,

the originality of the concept of realism . . . lies in its claim to cognitive as well as aesthetic status. . . . [T]he ideal of realism presupposes a form of aesthetic experience that yet lays claim to a binding relationship to the real itself, that is to say, to those realms of knowledge and praxis that had traditionally been differentiated from the realm of the aesthetic, with its disinterested judgments and its constitution as sheer appearance. (“Reflections” 135)

Such an expansion of aesthetic into cognitive concerns necessarily foreclosed any possibility of tolerating alternatives. Because aesthetics functioned as a privileged tool for recognizing the distinctive features of the present, to get aesthetic principles “wrong” meant being fundamentally misled about the social, political, and historical moment in which one participated.

Attending more closely to the negative side of this cognitive moment, however—what it might mean to get one’s own historical moment “wrong”—opens a different perspective on the realism debate. Intractability suddenly gives way to a common rhetoric by which each side of the debate labeled the error of its antagonist as a form of “historicism,” or a cognitive disjunction from the present. What follows explores this shared notion of historicism by staging a realism debate between two Central European theorists who were contemporaries but never direct interlocutors: Georg Lukács and Karel Teige. Lukács is of course well known for his defense of literary realism and his championing of the historical novel. Yet he opposed these ideas to a degraded “historicist” consciousness that he associated with modernism. Teige, while no longer a familiar name, was well known in the interwar period and maintained close contacts with a range of leading figures in the European avant-garde.³ He was the leading theoretician and spokes-

³ The avant-garde figures with whom Teige (1900-1951) had strong contacts include Le Corbusier, whose purism was an important inspiration for Teige in 1922 and whom Teige later hosted in Prague several times; the Soviet constructivists (Teige was part of a Czechoslovak cultural mission to Moscow in 1925); Hannes Meyer and the Bauhaus (Teige lectured there in 1929-30 on the sociology of arch-

person for the Czech avant-garde in the twenties and thirties, and his writings analyzed an unusually broad spectrum of cultural production: from painting and literature, to theater and typography, to architecture and urban design. Although a passionate Marxist, Teige never joined the Communist Party; indeed, he made many influential enemies through his uncompromising avant-gardist views and was subjected to a brutal smear-campaign after the Communists came to power in Czechoslovakia in 1948. Teige's "unified field theory" of the avant-garde, sweeping across the gamut of disciplines, provides an illuminating foil for Lukácsian realism due to the rigor of Teige's effort to integrate a critique of realism (drawing primarily on sources in avant-garde literature and painting) with a critique of historicism (drawing primarily on the architectural discourse of functionalism). Juxtaposing Lukács' and Teige's claims reveals that, while the positive aesthetic prescriptions each put forward are of course entirely at odds, the negative backdrop for their prescriptions—something each labeled "historicism"—is remarkably similar.⁴

Indeed, this rhetoric suggests a common foundation even for the apparently irreconcilable prescriptive claims of modernism and realism: for it reveals how *both* sides used the vocabulary of cognitive aesthetics.⁵ This shared concern has been obscured by literary historical accounts identifying such cognitive claims solely with realism. One such standard account identifies realism (and twentieth-century realism in particular) as the belated offspring of a Hegelian subordination of the aesthetic to the conceptual—thus, its emphasis on totality (expressing art's necessary function as a vehicle for truth content rather than as an autonomous phenomenon), on artistic rather than natural beauty (expressing beauty's

itecture); and André Breton and his group of surrealists (Breton delivered the 1935 lectures "Political Position of Today's Art" and "Surrealist Situation of the Object" as the guest of Teige and the Prague Surrealist Group [see Breton 212-33 and 255-78]). Teige also had strong connections with the structuralists of the Prague Linguistic Circle (see Toman, chapter 11). An overview of the wide range of Teige's activities can be gained from Dluhosch and Švácha, which also contains translations of several important texts by Teige. Some of Teige's major texts on architecture have recently appeared in translation: see Teige, *Modern Architecture in Czechoslovakia* and *The Minimum Dwelling*.

⁴ Historicism is difficult to define in the best of circumstances (see Bambach [4] for a good overview of the term's complexities). It is even more difficult to define the loose, almost pre-conceptual understanding that interests me here. Lukács most often had in mind the historiographical tradition of Ranke and the German Historical School when he explicitly referred to historicism; Teige generally had in mind the eclecticizing trends of nineteenth-century architecture. Despite these differences in reference, however, they invoke a strikingly similar field of semantic resonances with the term, and this is what I shall be exploring below.

⁵ The thesis of an affinity between combatants in the realism debate obviously has much in common with Groys's important argument for the "continuity [of socialist realism] with the avant-garde project" on the grounds that "the Stalin era satisfied the fundamental avant-garde demand that art cease representing life and begin transforming it by means of a total aesthetico-political project" (36). Nonetheless, Groys connects the socialist realism of Stalin's USSR with western European avant-garde movements by emphasizing the contingency of the truth claims raised by the former: "The mimesis of socialist realism is the mimesis of Stalin's will" (53). This clearly represents a radical break from nineteenth-century conceptions of realism, and thus allows Groys to argue that "socialist realism represents the party-minded, collective surrealism that flourished under Lenin's famous slogan 'it is necessary to dream,' and therein is its similarity to Western artistic currents of the 1930s and 1940s" (52). My own argument, focusing on Central European thinkers for whom a more traditional model of mimesis was at issue, moves in the opposite direction from Groys's: rather than finding avant-gardism in twentieth-century theories of realism, I wish to emphasize the implicitly realist claims of the avant-garde.

grounding in the conceptual), and on reflection (expressing the subordination of the aesthetic to the conceptual).⁶ Such an account, however, generally recognizes that this Hegelian realist tradition co-existed with a parallel tradition stemming from Kantian aesthetics and ultimately taking its most extreme form in the twentieth-century avant-garde.⁷ The broad characteristics of this alternate tradition would be its emphasis on art's independence from conceptual truth claims (associated with the notion of the autonomy of art), on the priority of nature and the material over spirit (associated with critiques of "idealisms" of various kinds), and on beauty's immanence to form (and thus its independence from particular content). From such a perspective, the realism debate in twentieth-century aesthetics appears to have its roots in a fundamental division located more or less at the origin of modern aesthetics: a Manichean conflict between Hegelian "conceptual" aesthetics and Kantian "formalist" aesthetics.⁸

However, as tidy as this scheme may be, and as much as it seems to explain the hegemony of terms such as "formalism" and "reflection" in the realism debate, it is misleading even on the broad level on which it is obviously meant to apply. First, it codifies the debate into a series of conceptual dichotomies that appears to be infinitely expandable—Hegelian v. Kantian, content v. form, totality v. fragment, rationality v. irrationality, fact v. value, and so on—and offers no criterion for determining which conceptual opposition might represent the primary or essential issue (thus strengthening the impression that ultimately the debate was simply a feud over cultural-political power). And second, it disguises precisely what the two camps shared: the common vocabulary of a cognitive aesthetics. To be sure, some interpreters have noted that each side of the realism debate represents but one element of a dialectical unity, inseparable from and indeed necessarily summoning the diametrically opposed position.⁹ Yet even when this dialectical interdependence has been emphasized, the result is generally hypostatization of the conflict. Those accounts that have tried to move away from the various conceptual oppositions typically used to define the debate have seen that opposition return with a vengeance on the higher-order, seemingly inevitable level of "realism v. anti-realism."¹⁰

⁶ See, for example, Zima, especially chapter 2. The notion that Hegelian/realist aesthetics involves a necessary subordination of art to truth clearly lays the ground for the recurring emphasis on didactic art in the realist tradition. For many authors writing under the onus of Zhdanovite socialist realism, the progression from realism to didacticism to political prescription and censorship appeared swift and inevitable. See, for example, Kalivoda 19-20 and 39-40.

⁷ Thus, for example, Schneider (53-55) finds one of the theoretical sources for twentieth-century abstract art in Kant's claim (in Section 16 of the *Critique of Judgment*) that the *freie Schönheit* of objects such as flowers, parrots, crustaceans, and wallpaper resides purely in their form rather than any concept. Pippin has recently challenged such genealogies by reading Hegel as (albeit unwittingly) laying theoretical foundations for abstract art.

⁸ Zima (30) describes modern aesthetics as a "pendulum" swinging between the poles of expressive (Kantian) and content (Hegelian) aesthetics. See also Schneider 80.

⁹ See Jameson's "Beyond the Cave." It is also worth recalling here Lunn's warning that "the tendencies to divide the field up between [twentieth-century realism and modernism] and to see the two positions as antithetical and mutually exclusive are real errors, ones made frequently in the many attempts to reconstruct [Lukacs's and Brecht's] 'debate' as a means of championing Brecht's contributions" (77).

¹⁰ Thus Jameson posits behind every modernist work a "cancelled realistic" work against which the reader interprets the formal and symbolic strangeness of the modernist work ("Beyond the

Such a polarity, however, ignores the cognitive claims raised by modernism: for at issue were fundamentally opposed understandings of what precisely constituted “realistic” artistic representation. Defenders of modernist techniques often placed no less emphasis on the ultimate realism of their art than did the theorists of realism. They argued in effect that artistic representations corresponding to the complexities of modern reality could only be achieved through intricate processes, and that those representations thus often generated startling, counter-intuitive forms. In this spirit Teige claimed, for example, that “Surrealism is *realism in the dialectical sense*.”¹¹ If the degree to which many avant-gardists insisted on the realism of their artistic methods is surprising, even more surprising is the insistence of the Lukácsian realists that the failure of avant-garde art consisted in its adherence to the mere appearance of things, the copying of outer forms without the work of mediation that would reveal the true, organic essence underneath. Paradoxically, the distance that separated avant-garde formal vocabularies from standard notions of realistic representation became, in Lukács’ account, not so much the sign of excessive technical reworking, as one would expect, but rather the symptom of unmediated imitation.

Here, rather than in rigid dichotomies such as form versus content or realism versus anti-realism, is where the realism debate ultimately proved so intractable. This feud was interminable precisely because each side raised similar cognitive claims. Each claimed to portray a deeper, essential reality, arrived at through a laborious process of mediation. Correspondingly, each claimed that the other remained entangled in, and misled by, a superficial, merely apparent reality. This rhetoric of surface and essence pervaded both sides of the realism debate and, given the absence of binding criteria for determining when the essential mother lode of truth had been uncovered, remained patently irresolvable.

Using the term *historicism* as a lens brings the shared cognitive assumptions that lay behind these formulations into sharper focus. The affinity or even symbiosis between nineteenth-century realism and historicism has been explored by Hayden White (see *Metahistory*), and the relevance of the term to the twentieth-century realism debate is suggested by Lukács’ statement that the aim of the

Cave” 129). Eagleton makes a similar point: “There is no ‘modernism’ without its attendant ‘realism’; historically positioned as we are, we cannot possibly identify a ‘modernist’ text without automatically thinking up the ‘realist’ canon from which it deviates” (“Aesthetics and Politics” 34). What is remarkable about these statements is that, while arguing for a dialectical linkage between modernism and realism, they simultaneously absolutize an *a priori* concept of realistic representation. See also White’s claim that “Modernism resolves the problems posed by traditional realism, namely, how to represent reality realistically, by simply abandoning the ground on which realism is construed in terms of an opposition between fact and fiction. The denial of the reality of the event undermines the very notion of fact informing traditional realism” (“The Modernist Event” 66-67). Statements such as these undermine Jakobson’s extremely relativistic understanding of realism as being reinvented by every artistic generation. It would rather seem that “traditional” realism still has a certain unassailable status as reference point even now. See Jakobson 22.

¹¹ “Deset let surrealismu” 55 (emphasis in original). Translations throughout are my own where no English edition is cited. See also Jakobson’s claim that “classicists, sentimentalists, the romantics to a certain extent, even the ‘realists’ of the nineteenth century, the modernists to a large degree, and finally the futurists, expressionists and their like, have more than once steadfastly proclaimed faithfulness to reality, verisimilitude—in other words, realism—as the guiding motto of their artistic program” (20).

artwork is to reflect objective reality “as it really is” (“wie sie tatsächlich *beschaffen ist*” [“Es geht um den Realismus” 225]). That Lukács’ statement clearly echoes Ranke’s “wie es eigentlich gewesen ist” seems at first glance to support an account of the debate in which Lukács represents an inherently traditionalist position, a sort of historicism in the present tense. This barely concealed kinship with Rankean historicism would consist, in such an account, in the belief that an unproblematic objectivity or immediate representation of the real—whether past or present—is attainable. Thus, Lukács could seem to be beholden to an affirmative ontology that, by insisting on the objective knowability of the real, also insisted on the givenness of the existing at the expense of imagining historical change. Lukács’ prescription of an already-canonized artistic method then appears as the aesthetic expression of this historical paralysis. As a result, the final—and ironic—consequence of such an interpretation of Lukács’ affinity with historicism is that Lukácsian realism ultimately appears dogmatically *ahistorical*, with Lukács’ faith in objectivity in effect amounting to a form of idealism inconsistent with the postulate of ongoing historical change.¹²

However, there are of course several difficulties with such an interpretation. The most obvious is that “immediate representation” is hardly a desideratum for Lukács. Quite the contrary, Lukács insisted that objectivity was only achieved through a complex process of mediation. Such mediation, he further argued, was essential precisely because it made the complexity of developing historical dynamics comprehensible. Indeed, Lukács’ distance from any naïve notion of immediate objectivity is made quite clear when one considers his own critique of Rankean historicism. Lukács’ condemnations of Rankean historicism as trivial and desiccated were at times expressed with the scorn one might expect from a Futurist on the steps of some National Museum; and what is more, Lukács’ implicit logic was remarkably similar to what a Futurist might use, albeit elaborated in more theoretical language. Thus, if the term “historicism” is to serve as a useful interpretive lens for the realism debate, it is not because it allows a contrast between one position designated as historicist, and so in some manner traditionalist or retrogressive, and another position designated as progressive or liberating. Rather, the term is useful because it describes, almost in the manner of a code word, what was derided by both realist and avant-gardist alike.

The particular aesthetic prescriptions championed by Lukács and Teige thus represented cognitive tools for answering a broader question: how is the modern historical identity to be accurately represented? At issue in the realism debate was the periodization of the present. But this issue of periodization went beyond mere nomenclature, for the process of naming involved not only observation but also selection: apparently there were aspects of the present that did not properly belong to it, and which the interpreter had to guard against to avoid

¹² This was a not uncommon line of argument among leftist critics in the 1960s and 1970s. See, for example, Berman’s claim that Lukács’ “uncritical acceptance of the categories of traditional nineteenth-century aesthetics” resulted from the presumption of an *a priori* “transhistorical structure” or of a “rigid utopia outside of history” (168-69). Berman argues that the “repressive quality inherent in the Lukácsian dialectic” was the consequence of Lukács’ unquestioning acceptance of “the objective form in which the world appears” and his conviction that Marxism-Leninism allowed him to “see how the world really is” (170-71).

the risk of some sort of cognitive expulsion from his or her own era. Historicism, in both Lukács' and Teige's writings, designated just these aspects: events or phenomena that may have occurred in the present but that were somehow not "truly" contemporary.

As a result, the realism debate could only unfold in a gap between two temporal registers. Reinhart Koselleck has commented that the modern period (his discussion focuses on the German term *Neuzeit*, in contrast to those period formulations utilizing the term *Alter*, "age") produced the first period label where chronology was made to bear the weight of epochal signification. Whereas the majority of period labels refer to a content deemed characteristic of the designated segment of time, *Neuzeit* refers only to the segment itself, to its temporal flow, while claiming an epochal status equivalent to the "closed" ages of the past (Koselleck 304-5). The specificity of the term "realism" in the twentieth-century realism debate (as opposed to its nineteenth-century use) is arguably to be found precisely in the insistent emphasis on the convergence of these temporal registers. The claim to access "reality" through art combined a chronological register (reality as "where we are right now," the most up-to-date report on our status) with an epochal register (reality as the "truth of the present moment," or the present "as it really is"). What was at stake was not *a* style, *an* artistic technique, or *an* aesthetic strategy, but rather *the* identity or very physiognomy of the present. But if each of the protagonists in the realism debate claimed to have put his finger on the point of convergence of these temporal registers, what the debate in fact ultimately demonstrates is the parting of the chronological and the epochal, a divergence marked by the opposition of realism to historicism. For both Lukács and Teige, historicism represented the threat of a chronological identity that did not synchronize with the epochal—of a present moment that was not "of this time."

II. The Historicist Novel

The general features of Lukács' critique of modernist art, with its central concepts of decadence and formalism, are all too familiar. That Lukács also associated these concepts with a notion of historicism, however, is less often commented upon. This is due in part to his persistent emphasis on the need to cultivate a deeper historical sense: indeed, the loss of such a historical sense and the consequent pettiness of a present conceived as unconditioned and self-postulating were central aspects of the decadence Lukács perceived in modernist literature. His own elevation of the status of the historical novel and the broad claims he made for it as a cognitive instrument appear to reinforce the interpretation of Lukács as the defender of a specifically historical dimension of culture against the avant-garde ideal of a *tabula rasa*, and, not surprisingly, Lukács' avant-gardist interlocutors generally perceived his aesthetic position in these terms. Lukács' claim that the avant-garde had reduced the cultural heritage to a rummage heap, as well as his occasionally stentorian appeals to "the glorious literary past of the German people" ("Realism" 54; "Es geht um den Realismus" 225), were easily caricatured as the "pious reverence towards the cultural heritage expected from

the executors of a will.”¹³ On a deeper level, Lukács’ efforts to impose upon twentieth-century art the ideals and standards of a genre that had its origin in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries were also easily understood as a call for literature to go “back” to Tolstoy or Balzac, an understanding that lay behind Brecht’s application of the term *formalism* to Lukács’ prescriptions for realism.¹⁴ From this perspective, Lukács’ call for contemporary literature to take the form of realism could appear as a literary form of the historicizing demand, say, that modern architecture utilize the formal vocabulary of classical antiquity or the high Renaissance.

These two factors—the first a justified appreciation of the significance of the historical sense for Lukács’ aesthetics, the second a contentious claim that Lukács was himself locked in a form of historicism—have obscured the significance of Lukács’ own critique of historicism within his theory of realism. In fact, historicism played a major role as a negative concept for Lukács, particularly in *The Historical Novel*, where he implicitly contrasted historicism as a decadent form with the deeper historical sense exercised by novelists in the tradition of Scott. Lukács even managed in this text to link historicism with those cultural practices that claimed to make the most radical break with the past and tradition—that is, Lukács described historicism as a fundamental characteristic of avant-garde art and literature.

Appreciating how this could be so requires examining Lukács’ account not only of the contemporary state of modernist art but also of its origins. Lukács viewed modernism as an extension of tendencies first appearing in the naturalism of the later nineteenth century.¹⁵ That Lukács could identify the roots of modernist art, with its intentional disregard for conventional techniques of realistic representation, in naturalism, for which the high burnish of such techniques was essential, makes clear that the status of mimetic representation was not the central issue for Lukácsian realism. Put another way, there was a level on which the mimetic principle could become so bloated that the result was no longer realism in the positive sense. For Lukács, the hyper-mimetic, “photographic” realism practiced by the naturalists was thus the disguised forerunner of the anti-mimetic montage techniques of the twentieth-century avant-garde:

Born of the nihilist theory and practice of the various Dadaist trends the theory of *montage* “consolidated” itself in this period of “relative stabilization” and became a deliberate surrogate for art: a special creative originality was supposed to manifest itself in the sticking together of disconnected facts. The art of *montage* reached on the one hand the utmost limit of naturalism, because it abandoned even the superficial linguistic-cum-atmospheric elaboration of the empirical world of the older naturalism; on the other, it reached the utmost limit of formalism, since the way in which details were linked no longer had anything to do with the objective inner dialectic of characters’ lives—they are manipulated “originally” from outside.¹⁶

¹³ This statement is from Brecht’s reply to the statement by Lukács that I have just quoted (Brecht’s comments can be found in *New Left Review* 56).

¹⁴ See “On the Formalistic Character,” especially 72; German original: “Über den formalistischen Charakter” 312. See also Lunn’s discussion of this aspect of the Lukács-Brecht exchange (87).

¹⁵ “I would maintain . . . that in modern writing there is a continuity from Naturalism to the Modernism of our day—a continuity restricted, admittedly, to underlying ideological principles. What at first was no more than a dim anticipation of approaching catastrophes developed, after 1914, into an all-pervading obsession” (from *The Meaning of Contemporary Realism*, qtd. in Solomon 397).

¹⁶ *The Historical Novel* (hereinafter “HN”) 252; German original: *Der historische Roman* (hereinafter “HR”) 271.

This surprising association of naturalism and Dada was effected through the central Lukácsian category of totality—or, more precisely, through the perception of its absence. The link between naturalist description and Dadaist montage was their shared fascination with “disconnected facts” and their development of techniques (such as reportage or montage) that exaggerated the disconnection between the details presented. The luxuriant descriptive detail of naturalism failed to hold together as a structured whole, and so, intentionally or not, produced the same effect as the purposefully anti-totalizing montage techniques of the Dadaists. Therefore, naturalism fell under the pall of Lukács’ indictment of modernism as decadent formalism, the hallmark of such decadence being the collapse of a totalizing aesthetic presentation of “objective reality” into a fragmented structure referring to its own internal construction.

However much Lukács insisted on the similarities between naturalism and modernism, they also illustrated for him some sort of historical progression. Since naturalism functions in Lukács’ account as a transition phase between the classic realist and historical novels of the early nineteenth century and the full-blown modernism of the twentieth, it allows some insight into what Lukács felt went wrong in cultural practices once the bourgeoisie was no longer simply ascendant but had become dominant. According to Lukács, the crucial historical moment for the emergence of the line of development leading from naturalism to modernist decadence was the revolutions of 1848. In the aftermath of these upheavals, the bourgeoisie, Lukács believed, lost its role as the most progressive class; furthering its own interests no longer meant furthering the interests of society as a whole. Faced with “historical competition” from the class it was now forced to oppress to protect its own interests, bourgeois ideology hardened into less truthful, less pliant, but more easily defended forms. Lukács perceived a significant echo of this ideological hardening in the shift in the dominant understanding of historical change after 1848. If in his view one of the most progressive effects of earlier bourgeois revolutions had been the emergence of a historical consciousness characterized by the dialectical understanding of historical change as contradiction (Hegel and Thierry served as his favorite examples), the 1848 revolutions, on the other hand, marked the emergence of an implicitly reactionary phenomenon that could be called the modern *historicist* consciousness. This new, historicist consciousness, in an effort to counter the specter of further historical change, now denied the contradictory nature of historical development and formulated a notion of linear evolution that reduced history to an unthreatening system of sociological laws or a compilation of curious facts. For Lukács, the dominance of Rankean historicism was the direct result of this retreat from the appreciation of history as a dialectical process of radical contradiction and violent change:

... Ranke and his school are denying the idea of a contradictory process of human advance. According to their conception history has no direction, no summits and no depressions: “All epochs of history are equally near to God.” Thus, there is perpetual movement, but it has no direction: history is a collection and reproduction of interesting facts about the past. (*HN* 176; *HR* 186)

By reducing history to laws and isolated details, the historicist consciousness held the past at a safe remove from the present, thereby protecting itself against any historical claims the past might raise against it.

This shift in historical consciousness provided the framework within which Lukács analyzed the incubation and emergence of modernist cultural decadence. The transition from the realist and historical novel that had flourished in the first half of the nineteenth century to the naturalist novel that would dominate the second half reflected this shift in historical consciousness. Addressing the question of just what art could draw from this new, historicist conception of the past, Lukács stated:

This past appears, more so even than the present, as a gigantic iridescent chaos. Nothing is really objectively and organically connected with the objective character of the present; and for this reason a freely roaming subjectivity can fasten where and how it likes. And since history has been deprived of its real inner greatness—the dialectic of contradictory development, which has been abstracted intellectually—all that remains for the artists of this period is a pictorial and decorative grandeur. History becomes a collection of exotic anecdotes. (*HN* 182; *HR* 192)

Denied any urgent connection with the present, the past became for the naturalists a mere repository of themes and details that might add color to a narrative but contained no cognitive power. This development inevitably corrupted the classical historical novel both by reducing historical material to the level of trite decoration and by initiating a spiraling process whereby historical detail had to be amassed in ever greater quantities in order to compensate for its lack of objective meaning (*HN* 183; *HR* 193). Lukács described “the principle of . . . photographic authenticity” that underlay naturalism in the following terms: “The ever more furious ransacking of technical dictionaries which goes on in the contemporary novel . . . must in the historical novel lead to archeologism” (*HN* 198; *HR* 210). The details worked into naturalist narratives increased in quantity in proportion to their decreasing significance, thereby becoming caught in a self-perpetuating cycle of exaggeration that took its toll on the work’s formal integrity. Lukács’ often shrill-sounding condemnations of the “perversity” of naturalism—which of course continued as a major theme in his criticism of modernist works—clearly referred to this process. Because the material was fundamentally barren of meaning, “writers are forced to search for more and more exquisite, abnormal, perverse etc. themes in order to escape monotony” (*HN* 194; *HR* 206). Thus, one could trace a logical progression from the pseudo-scientism of the post-1848 historicist consciousness, characterized by the reduction of historical detail to empty decoration, to the exaggerations and “perverse” fascinations of naturalism. Lukács’ critique of modernism was simply an extrapolation from this logic.

Lukács argued the link between historicism and modernism in another way as well. A historicizing naturalist novel such as Flaubert’s *Salammô* may appear on the surface as the product of an attempt to escape the present through a lush, detailed evocation of the past. While Lukács certainly did not refrain from criticizing this novel as escapist (*HN* 183; *HR* 193), he nevertheless also claimed that its elaborate representation of the past in fact served only to lock the novel more firmly in Flaubert’s banal present. This is a dialectical twist that is central to Lukács’ theory of the historical novel: a historical moment could only be represented in a cognitively valuable way if it were represented as the prehistory of the present:

And then the remoulding of events, customs etc. in the past would simply come to this: the writer would allow those tendencies which were alive and active in the past and which in historical reality have led up to the present (but whose later significance contemporaries naturally could not see) to

emerge with that emphasis which they possess in objective, historical terms for the product of this past, namely, the present. (HN 61-62; HR 58)

Because Flaubert's carefully manipulated archaeological details served merely for decorative effect rather than as an expression of the objective situation of a historical moment, however, they constituted nothing more than costumes draped over nineteenth-century bourgeois characters: "In Flaubert there is no such connection between the outside world and the psychology of the principal characters. And the effect of this lack of connection is to degrade the archaeological exactness of the outer world: it becomes a world of historically exact *costumes and decorations*, no more than a pictorial frame within which a purely modern story is unfolded" (HN 189; HR 200; emphasis in original).

This phenomenon—which Lukács describes as the "modernizing of feelings, ideas and thoughts, combined with archaeological faithfulness towards things and customs of no concern to us, which can therefore appear only exotic" (HN 195; HR 207)—provided him with a second major connection between historicist consciousness and the rise of modernist art. Decorative archaism and psychological or linguistic modernization were not contradictory phenomena but rather parallel consequences of the same development: "In debates on the historical novel modernization of language often appears as an *antinomous opposite* of archaism. In fact they are *connected* tendencies, mutually conditioning and complementing one another" (HN 198; HR 211; emphases in original). Since the historicizing details from the start had nothing to do with the past moment they ostensibly recreated, the artistic structure they served to embellish was essentially a disguised modern novel about modern society. Naturalism thus undermined the organic totality of the realist historical novel not only through the uncontrolled proliferation of detail but also through the necessary tension between a decorative "outer" level of historical detail and a hidden "inner" referent to contemporary society, through the creation of a "compound of outward exoticism and inner modernity" (HN 192; HR 203).

Just as Lukács applied the theme of fragmentation and exaggeration central to his account of naturalism to his critique of modernism, so he insisted that the structural split between archaism and modernization characterized more than just the overtly archaizing novels of naturalist historicism. In his polemic with Bloch during the expressionism debate, Lukács similarly spoke of "outer" layers disguising an "inner" essence. Bloch had argued that the expressionists' use of techniques such as montage and stream of consciousness were required to represent the discontinuous or fragmented character of contemporary society; representing this society through the accepted techniques of realism would in Bloch's view have constituted a vain attempt to "play doctor at the sick-bed of capitalism" or to "plaster over the surface of reality" ("Discussing Expressionism" 23; "Diskussionen" 187). Lukács accepted Bloch's assertion that the intensification of capitalist society had caused contemporary reality to appear discontinuous. But he then claimed that this appearance did not go to the core of the matter: "If literature is a particular form by means of which objective reality is reflected, then it becomes of crucial importance for it to grasp that reality as it truly is, and not merely to confine itself to reproducing whatever manifests itself immediately

and on the surface.”¹⁷ To accept such surfaces as reality was to be hoodwinked by the ideological distortions of capitalism. Indeed, the primary reason for the failure of “the modern literary schools of the imperialist era, from Naturalism to Surrealism, which have followed each other in such swift succession” was that “they all remain frozen in their own immediacy; they fail to pierce the surface to discover the underlying essence, i.e. the real factors that relate their experiences to the hidden social forces that produce them” (“Realism” 36-37; “Es geht um den Realismus” 202). Only by penetrating this surface distortion, Lukács continued, could one uncover a continuous and cognitively valuable—if sometimes unpleasant—image of the present as a totality.

The terminology of appearance and essence in Lukács’ critique of expressionism thus echoed his analysis of the outer archaism and inner modernity of naturalism. The historical decorativeness of a naturalist novel such as *Salammô* lent it the appearance of being an historical novel, but to accept it as such was to miss its true nature as a novel of advanced bourgeois society and thus to lose whatever insight could be taken from the novel. Analogously, although modernist and avant-garde literature appeared on the surface to analyze contemporary society critically by engaging with its formal chaos head on, it in fact merely reproduced that chaos rather than uncovered the hidden significance beneath. In both cases, a reader who accepted the surface claims of the artwork remained unaware of, and thus captive to, the deep structural split between surface and essence marring the artwork as a whole. If, however, a reader worked through to the deeper meaning—this penetration of surface appearance being simply a metaphor for what Lukács elsewhere termed “mediation”—then that structural split itself became part of the work’s cognitive content.

Lukács’ theory of naturalism thus reveals how, in his account, formal structures linked with the emergence of the post-1848 historicist consciousness continued within modernism even after overtly historicizing gestures had disappeared. For Lukács, the empty, decorative historicist details of *Salammô* were echoed in the profusion of unconnected detail in modernist stream of consciousness; the split between outer archaism and inner modernity was deepened by expressionism’s failure to distinguish discontinuous appearance from deeper totality. In other words, the primary structures Lukács identified when criticizing the historicism of the naturalist novel could exist in artworks that portrayed no historical content whatsoever. This separation of “historicist” structural flaws from the appearance of overt historical content allowed Lukács to call into question one of the fundamental pillars of the self-understanding of the avant-garde: namely, that the avant-garde was engaged in a ruthless battle *against* historicism. Thus, while what Lukács might have termed the “ideology of the avant-garde” claimed to be battling obsolete formal languages inherited from the past and inventing a new language expressive of the present, Lukács insisted that this new language was

¹⁷ “Realism” 33. In the original German the passage reads as follows: “Wenn die Literatur tatsächlich eine besondere Form der Widerspiegelung der objektiven Wirklichkeit ist, so kommt es für sie sehr darauf an, diese Wirklichkeit so zu erfassen, wie sie tatsächlich *beschaffen ist*, und sich nicht darauf zu beschränken, das wiederzugeben, was und wie es unmittelbar *erscheint*” (“Es geht um den Realismus” 198).

simply a further stage of the development it claimed to combat. In Lukács' scheme, it was irrelevant that the Dadaists engaged in iconoclastic gesturing or that the Futurists called for the burning of museums. These movements remained "historicist" by virtue of their deeper structure.

III. The Functionalist Sublime

Lukács' depiction of avant-garde art as an outgrowth of historicism contains a counterintuitive element, brushing as it does against the grain of the apparently hostile temporal connotations of "avant-garde" and "historicism" as oriented, respectively, towards the future and the past. The work of Karel Teige, on the other hand—which mounted a broad defense of avant-garde culture against the forces of "traditionalism" and "the academy"—presumed a genetic relation between historicism and realist art. In late 1934, for example, as left-wing intellectual circles in Prague were sounding out the implications of the ascendant Soviet literary and artistic policy of socialist realism, Teige composed a long article assessing the potential compatibility and relative merits of that policy vis-à-vis surrealism. Although Teige in this period was for the most part ferociously pro-Soviet, the products of socialist realism—not surprisingly—fared poorly in his estimation:

In Soviet literary and artistic production we know not a single work that does not conceal under the banner of socialist realism the same old realist wares, the old realist descriptive methods, old realist clichés, . . . the same simple-mindedness, behind which hide artistic laziness and lies, wretched form—at times drowned out by the tenor of propaganda—and mindless portrayal of the external symptoms of class struggle.¹⁸

Teige, who had long been watching with concern the fate of Soviet avant-garde architecture, did not hesitate to see the results of socialist realism as literary counterparts to the eclecticizing and historicizing projects that had been dominating Soviet architecture for several years. He wrote, for example, that "especially Soviet socialist realist painting is in practice drowning in the most barren, naturalistic, illustrated-magazine kitsch, while architecture walks around in academic togas, dresses itself in the Greco-Roman orders, and eclecticizes [sic] between antiquity, renaissance, baroque, empire, and formalist modernism" ("Socialistický realismus a surrealismus" 247). Realism, historicism, and kitsch here form a constellation unworthy even of theoretical elaboration.

This linkage places Teige within the mainstream of an avant-garde rhetoric that condemned realism in art and historicism in architecture as retrograde nineteenth-century aesthetic positions too timorous to confront the uniqueness of the present. If at first glance this ideological branding seems like the critical counterpart to collective guilt, in Teige's case it emerged from a more complex train of logic that he had developed much earlier in texts from the early twenties.¹⁹ Indeed, one

¹⁸ "Socialistický realismus a surrealismus" 291-320. This article was published in 1935. Prague was at this time a major center of surrealist activity, and Teige had become a leading figure in the Surrealist Group founded in the spring of 1934.

¹⁹ In the account that follows I do not intend to deny the major developments that Teige's thought underwent from the early 1920s to the mid-1930s, for example, his shift from attempts to integrate the rationalist and irrationalist moments of his discourse within a unified dialectical model (the constructivism/poetism dualism) to a polyfunctional model in which functionalism and surrealism

of the unique features of Teige's texts from that early period was the effort he put into articulating the theoretical compatibility of two avant-gardist discourses: the architectural critique of *historicism* and the literary and artistic critique of *representation*.

Teige's concern to unite these discourses is most succinctly demonstrated by the early development of his ideas regarding tendentious art. Initially, Teige believed that tendentiousness was the guarantor of art's social engagement and so the antidote to the great cultural weakness of the bourgeois era: the autonomy of art. In mid-1922, however, Teige's exposure to Le Corbusier's notion of purism and Soviet theories of constructivism seems to have encouraged him to apply the architectural criterion of "functionality" across the spectrum of avant-garde artistic production. Function quickly displaced tendentiousness as aesthetic panacea: "the *tendentiousness* of modern art is given by its *functionality*" ("Umění dnes a zítra," qtd. in *Svět stavby a básně* 519, emphases in original), and the result was a sweeping application of architectural vocabulary to artistic production in general: "*In the new world art has a new function. It does not need to ornament or decorate life, because the beauty of life, bare and powerful, need not be concealed or disguised by decorative adornments*" ("Umění" 518-19, emphasis in original). Tendentiousness, on the other hand, now became a despised ornamental appendage that marred artistic efficacy: "To force tendentiousness in some external and inorganic manner on a poem, novel, sculpture or picture is just as foolish as ornamenting the bare, functional, and beautiful structure of an airplane hangar with nationalist trimmings" (519).

Ornament was particularly insidious for Teige because he felt it locked in a temporal disjunction that amounted to a sort of cultural schizophrenia. Just as the inner functional core of nineteenth-century architecture had emerged from modern constructional requirements and exploited revolutionary advances in engineering, so, Teige felt, the initial inspiration of any worthy artwork must respond to the cultural requirements of its moment. Ornamentation attempted timidly to disguise this radical inner modernity by imposing on it forms borrowed from earlier historical moments, rather than simply allowing the form to evolve out of the artwork itself.²⁰ With a logic analogous to Lukács', therefore, Teige decried the "compound of outward exoticism and inner modernity" (Lukács, *HN* 192; *HR* 203) of the ornamental artwork. For Teige, such internal division was the mark of aesthetic autonomy: clothed in forms from the past, the artwork could not truly express the present.

Indeed, the architectural terminology of functional structure versus parasitic ornament (or "core and stylistic husk" in the discourse of German modernist

attended to separate areas (the practical function and the aesthetic function, respectively). Second, my discussion concentrates on constructivism; poetism (the other pole of Teige's dualism) is not directly examined below. (I have analyzed the implications of Teige's problematic dualism in my article "The Style of the Present: On Karel Teige's Dualism of Poetism and Constructivism," forthcoming in *Representations*.) Although both issues would require attention in any comprehensive narrative of Teige's thought in the twenties and thirties, I leave them aside here in order to give the following account greater heuristic value.

²⁰ As with most contemporary theorists of modernist architecture, Teige's antipathy to ornament extended well beyond the historicizing schemes of mid-nineteenth-century eclecticism to encompass any features perceived as nonfunctional. Thus, for example, Teige criticized the *Jugendstil*, Czech cubist architects, and even Le Corbusier for producing "ornamental" buildings.

architecture; see Oechslin) provided the early Teige with a model for conceptualizing the relation of form to content in other artistic media. Teige simply equated artistic content as a whole with ornamental tendentiousness, thereby rendering it parasitic or insubstantial (see “Doba a umění” 45). The idea that manipulating artistic content had any fundamental consequence for an artwork was for Teige equivalent to believing that the choice of a particular style of façade or ornamental vocabulary had any essential significance for a work of architecture: such an idea was “historicist.” In a manner similar to Lukács, therefore, Teige distanced the term “historicism” from its original association with historical content and transformed it into a label denoting a defective aesthetic configuration and implying dishonesty, disguise, and diremption.²¹

This denigration of content, however, did not imply a straightforward valorization of form (as the term “formalist”—a standard derogatory label used by critics against the avant-garde—presupposed). Teige wrote: “In itself form is indifferent; it is neither beautiful nor ugly. Form stirs our sensibilities and engages our vital responses only when coupled with a specific function” (“Towards a Theory of Constructivism” 292). Rather, for Teige the concept of function provided a perspective that allowed one to avoid the form/content dichotomy altogether: “We will not in the future waste time on abstract questions concerning form and content or their relationship. A well-posed question asks what the function is.”²² For the “functionalist” poem or painting, in other words, “content” was indistinguishable from material structure.

Teige’s notion of a sublation of the form/content distinction is, of course, in itself not an original contribution to aesthetic thought. Among the illustrious predecessors who formulated various versions of such a sublation, Marx is particularly relevant given Teige’s political and philosophical reference points. Terry Eagleton has in fact described Marx’s account of the representational structure of socialist revolution in *The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte* as being motivated by the ideal of an “aesthetic interfusion of form and content” (“The Marxist Sublime” 210). Eagleton further associates this interfusion with the notion of sublimity, describing it thus:

It is less a matter of discovering the expressive forms “adequate to” the substance of socialism, than of rethinking that whole opposition—of grasping form no longer as the symbolic mould into which that substance is poured, but as the “form of the content,” as the structure of a ceaseless self-production. (213)

In this understanding, sublimity resolves the dilemma of a form/content tension by in effect revealing form not as a stable shape for content but rather as the shifting outer contour of a self-transcending content. The result is that in Marx’s text the socialist revolution cannot be represented: for representation necessarily invokes predetermined forms (the ghosts and costumes from past ages in which bourgeois revolutions, for Marx, have clothed themselves), thus locking

²¹ Both Teige and (ironically) Lukács clearly echo here the rhetoric of Adolf Loos and, ultimately, of Nietzsche (in the second of the *Untimely Meditations*). On Nietzsche’s legacy among modernist architects, see Buddensieg, Neumeyer, and Cohen.

²² “Constructivism and the Liquidation of ‘Art’” 335. On the form/content distinction, see also the key passage from the early 1930s in *The Minimum Dwelling* 18-19.

in the familiar dichotomy. The sublime, by contrast, always remains one step ahead of its representation.

Teige's functionalist sublime operates analogously. It cannot represent an *object*, for that would require the imposition of form. As a result, the avant-garde artwork must renounce representation altogether: it "represents only itself. It is not a depiction" ("Doba a umění" 46). This is the ultimate theoretical grounding for Teige's negative association of realism with historicism. Realist aesthetics presupposes an object that can be separated or reified from the form of its representation, and the consequent form/content dichotomy always produces for Teige an artwork that is "ornamental." The functionalist sublime, conversely, dictates that a literary or artistic work have no object of representation: its meaning or significance lies in its totalization as sheer material facticity.

Thus the application of a concept of historicism remarkably similar to Lukács' led Teige to the absolutely opposite aesthetic conclusion. Yet, paradoxically, Teige's fierce denunciations of traditional realism in no way prevented him from making simultaneous claims for a deeper realism inhering in the avant-garde practices unveiled by the functionalist sublime. Teige argued such claims in precisely the terms that would become so central for Lukács: the distinction between "true" realism and a superficial, descriptive, or "photographic" naturalism. In an early text Teige extolled the "direct realism . . . (in contrast to the indirect, illusive, descriptive form of realism, i.e., naturalism), which, after more than four hundred years of empirical and sensual painting, is returning art to its true foundation: cognition of the real [*poznání skutečna*]" ("Umění přítomnosti" 133-34). This direct realism of course had nothing to do with mimetic representation, as Teige made clear with his further contention that it constituted "a higher realism of strict formal purity, of an independent and self-governing form, the true opposite of the imitative, visual, optically illusive naturalism of the descriptive and so-called 'photographic' kind" (134). In other words: by renouncing the appearance of reality, Teige's direct realism would gain a deeper cognitive power to express reality.

Despite the seismic shifts that separate Teige's early theoretical position from his position during Czech debates on Soviet-sanctified socialist realism in the mid-thirties (see note 19), this commitment to "direct realism" stood firm. Indeed, it underlay the most peculiar feature of Teige's preliminary response to socialist realism. While his 1935 article "Socialist Realism and Surrealism" abhorred the socialist realist works actually being produced in the Soviet Union, Teige nonetheless felt that *in theory* socialist realism was a promising position. In all earnestness Teige even claimed that a rigorous theory of socialist realism would in practice encompass surrealism: "*there is no theoretical conflict between surrealism and socialist realism, and surrealism falls within the general theoretical framework of the theory of socialist realism.*"²³ This striking equation of surrealism and socialist real-

²³ "Socialistický realismus a surrealismus" 197; emphasis in original. The notion that socialist realism envisioned a *synthesis* of traditional realism with modernist developments was a widespread illusion within the Czech response to the new policy (Kusák 103). Teige, however, was particularly blunt in his outright *equation* of socialist realism with surrealism (although he was not the only surrealist to do so: see Lewis 127-28). Most of those who subscribed to such beliefs (including Teige) based their interpretations on Lunacharsky's and Bucharin's statements on socialist realism rather than Zhdanov's.

ism alluded once again to the specter of “photographic” naturalism: “The poetic no less than the scientific interpretation of reality is not a photographic recording; rather it utilizes its particular x-rays, microscopes and telescopes” (“Socialistický realismus a surrealismus” 238). Whereas descriptive representation merely reproduced surface appearances, “direct” socialist realism (to baptize Teige’s unorthodox conception) used innovative methods to reveal deeper truths and expose outer appearances as illusory: “the gaze of socialist realism thus must penetrate like an x-ray into the depths of reality, and reveal in cinematographic fashion its dynamics and mutual interrelations. . . . Socialist realism tries to be as omniscient as Vico’s God, whereas realism records the outer surface of natural and social reality” (“Socialistický realismus” 198-99). That surrealism produced artistic products that did not look realistic in the standard sense was thus the sign of its cognitive power to uncover a deeper reality, just as the efficacy of x-ray pictures began precisely where they departed from the photographic image of a human being.

The comparison to advanced scientific equipment not only metaphorically defined surrealism as the cutting edge of aesthetic technique but also reinforced the claim that the dreamlike logic of surrealism was not “idealist,” as orthodox Communist critics claimed, but radically materialist. Surrealism’s x-ray images penetrated through illusory layers (the appearances mimetic realism sought to imitate) to reveal the functional skeleton shaping and supporting reality, just as functionalist architecture had stripped off ornamental layers to reveal the skeletal structure of contemporary buildings. For Teige, therefore, these two avant-garde practices were radically “realist” in that each dissolved accrued layers of obsolete meanings and superimposed patterns in order to trace sheer underlying materiality. K. Michael Hays has described a similar radical realism in the functionalism of Hannes Meyer—an architect with whom Teige had personal and theoretical affinities.²⁴ Describing Meyer’s functionalism as a form of anti-humanism, Hays writes:

Whereas humanism, in its ceaseless effort to fill the void between ourselves and the world, forever finds ways to convert things into their forms, into names, into totems, Meyer intensifies the raw materiality of the thing—the glaring brightness, the hardness, the smell, the taste—and thrusts the experience of that thing, previously indifferent and unimaginably external, toward the subject with unpadding harshness. (*Modernism and the Posthumanist Subject* 111)

Shattering the forms and narratives traditionally imposed upon objects to make them cohere, such materialism was radically anti-totalizing in its acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of matter. For Teige, this materialist realism—the common ground of surrealism and functionalism—uncovered the essential features of the present. By removing the sediment of historical or conventional forms, the avant-gardist revealed the bedrock of present reality.

Placing this notion of materialist realism next to Teige’s functionalist sublime, however, reveals a fundamental tension. The functionalist sublime harbored a radically totalizing impulse: the debilitating dualities of form and content, structure and ornament were to give way before this integrative force. Indeed, in his

²⁴ See note 3. Some architectural historians have compared Teige’s radical functionalism with Meyer’s (see Frampton).

more lyrical moments Teige indicated that such fundamental diremptions as that between high and low art, science and art, or rationality and irrationality would be eliminated by a creative vision that refused to distinguish between the aesthetic and the extra-aesthetic, between art and everyday life (see, for example, "Poetism"). This in itself is surprising: such totalizing rhetoric considerably complicates the common account of left-wing avant-garde aesthetics as one of fragmentation, hostile to totalities at all levels.²⁵ But even more perplexing is how this totalizing moment of the functionalist sublime converges with the anti-totalizing drive of Teige's materialist realism. That realist practice shattered *a priori* or formalist interpretive layers—traditions, prescriptions, ideologies—to gain privileged access to the bedrock reality of the present, the radical heterogeneity of the real. Conjoining Teige's two overarching notions, therefore, produces the paradox that the rigorous demythologization of totalities provided cognitive access to a reality that disclosed itself as totalized.

This paradox reveals the mutual interaction—and resistance—of the two temporal registers discussed at the outset of this essay. Teige's notion of materialist realism operates on what I earlier called a chronological register. As a confrontation with brute material conditions (functionalist architecture, the manipulation and mastery of incontractible material, is perhaps the purest form of such confrontation), this realism does not celebrate so much as take the measure of the present. It reveals soberly where we are on the chronological scale: what possibilities are "realistic" for present capacities. The notion of the functionalist sublime, however, operates on an epochal register. It promises qualitative difference: totalization, resolution of diremptions, and libratory potential—in short, nothing less than a historical change in our relation to the aesthetic. In the case of Lukácsian realism, the divergence of the chronological and the epochal registers is evident: Lukács' claim for realism as the chronological state of twentieth-century literature has retained few adherents. Teige presented a more convincing case for the convergence of these temporal registers. But the simultaneously totalizing and anti-totalizing moments of his rhetoric are symptomatic not of convergence but of tension.

The realism debate thus represents more than a straightforward conflict between "realistic" and "non-realistic" art, or between content- and form-based aesthetics, or between any of the various antipodes that are generated so readily from its terms. Rather, it plays out a paradox implicit in a particular aspiration of modern temporality: the desire to superimpose an epochal register on top of the chronological register of the present. Because "historicism" designated the disjuncture of the chronological and the epochal, or precisely the opposite of what realism—however that might be conceptualized—was supposed to reveal, the threat of historicism had to be an element of the realism debate. In a different context Fredric Jameson has defined the postmodern "as an attempt to think the present historically in an age that has forgotten how to think historically in the first place" (*Postmodernism* ix). The realism debate expresses the converse: the

²⁵ The *locus classicus* for this account is Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, which seems to extrapolate from Benjamin's and Adorno's critiques of totalities.

attempt to think unhistorically (i.e., chronologically) in an age that did not yet know how to think in any way other than historically (in epochs).

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