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Source: *New German Critique*, No. 78, Special Issue on German Media Studies (Autumn, 1999), pp. 183-192

Published by: Duke University Press

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/488459>

Accessed: 18-05-2018 08:08 UTC

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# *Lukács and the Essay Form*

Tom Huhn

There is a curious disjointedness between the first and last paragraphs of Lukács's introductory piece for the collection *Soul and Form*. It is a further curiosity that this "essay" on the essay, entitled "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" attempts, cunningly, to protect itself from further reflection and critique by having itself described not as an essay but as a letter to Leo Popper. What I want to explore is the nature of this disjoint. And what I hope to suggest is that the trajectory, so to speak, of this disjoint in Lukács's essay, recapitulates the disjointed trajectory of European aesthetics between Kant and Adorno. Lukács figures then as a crucial, though disjointed, link between Kant and Adorno, and this linkage, and its disjointedness, is clearly performed within "On the Nature and Form of the Essay."

Lukács writes in the opening paragraph of his essay:

For the point at issue for us now is not what these essays can offer as 'studies in literary history,' but whether there is something in them that makes them a new literary form of its own, and whether the principle that makes them such is the same in each one. What is this unity — if unity there is? . . . The question before us is a more important, more general one. It is the question whether such a unity is possible.<sup>1</sup>

And Lukács concludes his essay with the following sentence: "The critique of this book is contained, in all possible sharpness and entirety,

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1. Georg Lukács, *Soul and Form*, trans. Anna Bostock (Cambridge, MA: MIT, 1974) 1. Hereafter cited parenthetically within the text.

in the very approach from which it sprang” (18). In short then, the disjoint of the essay consists of an opening search for unity conjoined with a concluding assertion that the totality of the book — all of the impulses of the book along with their critique — is already contained in the ordinary approach out of which the book sprang. Unity is prefigured not merely in the quest for — or critique of — unity but in whatever precedes that quest and critique. But the totality and unity asserted by Lukács here is importantly not Hegelian. It is instead the particular, idiosyncratic unity specific to the aesthetic. And it is in regard to the exact nature of this unity that I am concerned here.

Lukács’s opening quest for unity is very quickly transformed into a question of identity. Lukács now asks after not what sort of unity the collected critical essays might have — indeed this is a question he considers relevant only to the misguided search for determining whether criticism is an art or science. He instead asserts that the “real question” is “what is an essay? What is its intended form of expression, and what are the ways and means whereby this expression is accomplished?” (1-2). Lukács’s essay is no longer about the status of criticism but instead concerns the nature of the form in and according to which criticism appears. And further, by placing an emphasis on expression — what might be termed the dynamic aspect of critique — Lukács thereby continues his implicit critique of the static aspect of form.

But the essay takes yet another interesting turn at the end of its second paragraph:

But if I speak here of criticism as a form of art, I do so in the name of order (i.e., almost purely symbolically and non-essentially), and solely on the strength of my feeling that the essay has a form which separates it, with the rigour of a law, from all other art forms. I want to try and define the essay as strictly as possible, precisely by describing it as an art form. (2)

First let me comment on the curiosity of the qualifications offered by Lukács: he “speaks” “in the name of order” of criticism as a form of art. His further, parenthetical qualification is to write that this speaking of his in the name of order is symbolic and non-essential. Further still, he writes that he “speaks” of the essay as a form separate from all other art forms based “solely on the strength of my feeling.” A Freudian might well describe this abundance of qualifications as over-determined. And

what, we might well ask, determines this over-determination?

It is perhaps Lukács himself who best answers this question two paragraphs later: “We are not concerned here with replacing something by something else, but with something essentially new, something that remains untouched by the complete or approximate attainment of scientific goals”(3).<sup>2</sup> In short, what concerns us is a particular breed of particularity, and it is the nature of this aesthetic particularity that determines Lukács’s qualifications. That is, Lukács is searching here for some new figure or cipher of what might stand for aesthetic particularity.

The force of this particularity expresses itself in his determination to ceaselessly and repeatedly qualify his own assertions about the aesthetic, about the form of art. He cannot, for example, rest with merely having described the essay as an art form; he must instead repeat this particularizing gesture by differentiating the essay yet again from all other forms of art. So too his gesture toward his own “feeling” as the basis for his assertions about the essay is likewise a repetition of a particularizing dynamic. And Lukács points to himself, via this feeling of his, not so much out of the conviction that his particularity is some legitimating engine, but rather as an analogy in attempting to describe aesthetic form. That is, his particularity as an individual is the most ready-to-hand example of something that cannot be exchanged for something else, separate from everything else, but nonetheless has “the rigour of law.”

This brings us, in two regards, directly back to Kant’s efforts to characterize the aesthetic. That is, Lukács’s looking toward himself for an allegory of the aesthetic form of the essay, of something outside himself, is a reiteration of Kant’s claim that aesthetic judgment is both subjective and universal. The subjective universality of Kant’s aesthetics is reiterated in Lukács’s assertion of the “strength” and quasi-lawfulness of his own “feeling”. But there is a further affinity between Lukács and Kant’s gestures toward the aesthetic. And this affinity has to do with a particular mistake, indeed, a mistakenness so fundamental as to in fact be the originating moment of aesthetic judgment. I am referring to what in Kant’s aesthetics is termed “objective subreption.” And I want to suggest that objective subreption is the crucial, defining moment of the aesthetic and that it has too often been dismissed or ignored by Kant’s

2. This sentiment is strikingly akin to Adorno’s statement that “Since in reality everything stands under the spell of equality, of absolute interchangeability, everything in art must appear to be absolutely individual.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Quasi una Fantasia, Essays on Modern Music*, trans. Rodney Livingstone (London: Verso, 1992) 114.

commentators and by writers on the aesthetic in general. To Lukács's credit, his "On the Nature and Form of the Essay" appears precisely as an encounter with the problem of objective subreption, and further that this is what Adorno finds so valuable in the essay.

What then is objective subreption? It is deceptively simple, though its implications have yet to be fully grasped. Simply put: it is the misrecognition of some subjective state or quality as an object. That is, it is the moment in aesthetic judgment when something is judged beautiful. And according to Kant, this moment is characterized by mistaking some object for something subjective. Recall that aesthetic experience for Kant is the inner harmony of the faculties, and yet that harmony can only occur when the subject of it instead locates it outside herself. The constitutive moment of the aesthetic is thus a mistake, indeed a necessary mistake, for without this mistake there is no aesthetic judgment whatsoever.

If human beings were completely transparent to themselves, what they would say, according to Kant, in front of some artwork or landscape is something like the following: I am now experiencing a harmony of my inner faculties. But that experience can't be had nor that statement made, unless it is instead mistakenly taken to be an experience of an object. The human being thus says not "I am beautiful" but "That is beautiful." A perfectly lucid, transparent and self-knowledgeable human being would of course iterate the former. But it is precisely the opacity of human beings toward themselves which requires that the experience of that which is most human (or subjective) instead be displaced onto an object. It is thus no accident that things sometimes are beautiful. No accident, yet nonetheless thoroughly mistaken. In short, the constitutive moment of aesthetic experience — and might we not also say aesthetic judgment? — is misrecognition, the objective subreption whereby subjectivity loses (and sort of recovers) itself in something other. Finally, this experience is of course for Kant something universally subjective. This moment is after all also premised upon the possibility of a preexisting *sensus communis*, which is to say that this moment of mistaken subjectivity is at the same time a profoundly social moment.

Human subjectivity is thus in the aesthetic doubly mistaken: it mistakes an object for itself and it mistakes something social for something individual, particular, and personal. I believe that the gist of Kant's project in the third Critique is to reveal the constitutive nature of the concealment of both the subjective and the social in aesthetic judgment.

But to have successfully revealed these in the third Critique would thereby have been something like an impossible undoing of the entire dynamic of aesthetic judgment, indeed it would signal the undoing of aesthetic culture altogether.

It is in Kant's account of the sublime that we find evidence of the impossibility of laying bare and revealing the mistakeness central to aesthetic judgment. It is in the sublime that he gives what is in effect a diagram of the genesis of subjectivity, of human coming-into-being out of the experience of extracting pleasure from the internal domination of (the fear of) nature. Without offering a detailed account of the Kantian sublime, suffice it to say that for Kant the sublime presents the possibility of a self-generating subjectivity, a kind of vitalism that necessitates a certain concealment and opacity at its core such that a program of self-generation might be set in motion. (One might recall in this context Kant's remarks in his account of the sublime in regard to the distinction between civilization and barbarism, or his comment on the necessity of war for a healthy civilization).

And what relevance does this digression into Kant's aesthetics possibly have for what could be called Lukács's aesthetics of the essay? The answer, I believe, lies in the continuity between Kant and Lukács with regard to the shape of the failure within each of their aesthetics. I also want to argue, however, that Lukács puts forth the form of the essay as an attempted resolution to Kant's aesthetics. I will further try to show that it is in Adorno's response to Lukács that we find an important formulation of the nature of the failed aesthetic in Kant and Lukács.

First then, let us return to the opening impulse in Kant and Lukács: both begin with a quest for the unity of the aesthetic. And this quest might also be characterized as a search for the boundaries of the aesthetic, as a search for those principles which would produce the realm of the aesthetic as a unified totality, as something identifiable by dint of its having an identity. This characterization of the aesthetic next becomes for each of them the product of opposition and exclusion. For Kant aesthetic taste acquires its traits only in opposition to physical pleasure and/or intellectual interest. (Recall what Kant takes to be the dangers of charm and emotion for taste.) Aesthetic taste is not so much posited by Kant as it is rather the residue remaining after his having described all that it cannot be or take part in. Likewise, for Lukács the form of the essay cannot be like anything else, even other forms of art. While Kant

named those things and tendencies against which aesthetic taste is to be identified, Lukács dispenses altogether with the naming of particulars and instead simply insists on the dynamic of defining the essay form as necessarily in opposition to everything. He is thus a far more thorough — perhaps even too thorough — Kantian in his aesthetics of the essay.

Lukács's Kantianism is so thorough that it fails to provide him with the comfort Kant allowed himself in his own aesthetics: the comfort of judgment completing its circuit. Let me explain: Kant claims that it was his discovery, in 1787, of a faculty of judgment that propelled the writing of a third Critique. And what was perhaps most crucial about that discovery is that it allowed Kant to distinguish between two sorts of judgment: determinant and reflective. The former of course being judgment determined in cognition either by sensation or the concepts of the understanding, or more likely some combination thereof. Reflective judgment, however, is not determined at all. Indeed, we might instead say that it is self-determining, insofar as a reflective aesthetic judgment "determines" some object to be beautiful. In short, reflective judgment works in a direction opposite that of determinant judgment; it is an active, positing judgment rather than the vast majority of our judgments which are the passive judgments determined by cognition. Kant, in his aesthetics, was content to outline the dynamic of reflective judgment; so too can we imagine him satisfied with reflective judgment expressing and completing itself in the form of an objective subreption. That is, reflective judgment completes its circuit by "determining" a beautiful object.

But we cannot imagine a similar satisfaction for Lukács because the place from which he seeks the unity of the aesthetic is not simply, as it was in the case of Kant, the place of reflective judgment. It is instead the place in which reflective judgment is unsatisfied with itself — it is the place in which the judgments made by reflection are once again submitted to reflection. Kant's concern was judgments of taste, Lukács's concern, we might say, is making judgments upon taste; his reflective judgment is directed against reflective judgment. The comfort and solace Kant accords himself by locating the unity of aesthetic judgment within the determining, constituting act of reflection is simply not available to Lukács because the aesthetic form under scrutiny by Lukács is precisely judgment itself. Put differently: Kant succumbed to the comfort of subreption, even in the midst of diagnosing its dangers. Lukács, on the other hand, would like to succumb except that the form of the

essay prohibits him from allowing reflective judgment to forget itself in the determination of an object. The form of the essay is precisely a dialectical interchange with subreption. Put differently: the essay form is the locale where the post-Kantian subject/object dialectic exercises itself. Or, still differently: the technique of the essay makes it the most advanced form of contemporary subjectivity.

Lukács writes: “But in really profound criticism there is no life of things, no image, only transparency, only something that no image would be capable of expressing completely. An ‘imagelessness of all images’ is the aim of all mystics. . . .” (5) How tempting the fluidity and immediacy of transparency, and yet the irony of such a desire is that its fulfillment depends upon the obliteration of just those judgments which, to recall E. M. Forster’s great shibboleth, only connect. Lukács continues:

I shall go further: the separation of image and significance is itself an abstraction, for the significance is always wrapped in images and the reflection of a glow from beyond the image shines through every image. Every image belongs to our world and the joy of being in the world shines in its countenance; yet it also reminds us of something that was once there, at some time or another, a somewhere, its home, the only thing that, in the last analysis, has meaning and significance for the soul. Yes, in their naked purity they are merely abstractions, those two limits of human feeling, but only with the help of such abstractions can I define the two poles of possible literary expression. And the writings which most resolutely reject the image, which reach out most passionately for what lies behind the image, are the writings of the critics, the Platonists and the mystics. (5-6)

The essay, what we might well call the form of criticism, diligently remains dissatisfied with every image and bit of significance put forth as impediment to its restlessness. And yet the essay itself, insofar as it is the form of criticism, has already succumbed in some degree to just that complaisance with stasis, the comfort and distraction of image and meaning. The irony of the essay is its own dissatisfaction with itself. The essay not only “passionately” reaches for whatever may be behind the image, the essay is also passionately ambivalent about images, for those images are not only impediments but also just that which goads the search for imagelessness and transcendence. What Lukács calls the “countenance” of the image displays a reflection of the face of the world, and yet at the same time something from beyond that very world



“shines through every image.” Perhaps the essay is something like the intellectual’s vision of that too shiny countenance. The problem with the image, and perhaps likewise with the essay, is that they reflect too much. The problem for the essayist of the essay is how to distribute and dispose of the abundance of reflection.

The “form” of the essay is the tentative solution to this over-abundant reflection. The form is meant to contain and hold still the reflective judgment whose abundance has turned upon itself. The essay itself, if I may be allowed this locution, is something like rampant reflection, while its form is the equivalent of objective subreption — of the subjective dynamism of pure reflection momentarily halted in the misrecognition of itself as an object, in this case form — indeed, the form of reflection.

Lukács reformulates this dilemma regarding the form of reflection according now to the temporal figure of destiny:<sup>3</sup>

All writings represent the world in the symbolic terms of a destiny relationship; everywhere, the problem of destiny determines the problem of form. . Therefore the separation which I am trying to accomplish here appears, in practice, merely as a shift of emphasis: poetry receives its profile and its form from destiny, and form in poetry appears always only as destiny; but in the works of the essayists form becomes destiny, it is the destiny-creating principle. (7)

It is, I want to argue, precisely here where the disjoint in the trajectory of aesthetic theory from Kant to Adorno is most apparent, for what Lukács attempts to accomplish with the temporal figure of destiny is a unification and totalization that aesthetic judgment ought to avoid:

The critic’s moment of destiny, therefore, is that moment at which things become forms — the moment when all feelings and experiences on the near or the far side of form receive form, are melted down and condensed into form. It is the mystical moment of union between the outer and the inner, between soul and form. (8)

With more time I would argue that what Lukács describes here as a moment of mystical union is best compared with what Kant calls the

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3. For the argument regarding the figural nature of time, see Paul de Man, “The Rhetoric of Temporality,” *Blindness and Insight: Essays in the Rhetoric of Contemporary Criticism*, 2nd rev. ed. Intr. Wlad Godzich (Minneapolis: U of Minnesota P, 1983) 187-228.

“sacred thrill” in the experience of the sublime. But more important than the figures according to which pleasure is characterized in aesthetic judgment is the tendency of judgment itself. For Lukács that tendency, now described as destiny, points directly toward redemption and salvation: “This has shown, however, that salvation is necessary and is therefore becoming possible and real. The essayist must now become conscious of his own self, must find himself and build something of his own out of himself”(15). The disjoint is as follows: Lukács has lost completely just that aspect of aesthetic judgment which in Kant constituted these peculiar judgments: that they are made from the assumed though concealed — position of everyman. That is, precisely what distinguishes liking something from judging it beautiful is the presumption of a universal, disinterested liking. But Lukács discards this foundational, constitutive element and instead prescribes the self-discovery of the individual essayist. And from this salvation is to follow? It is thus no accident that Lukács fails to say just who or what is to receive salvation. In short, Lukács embraces the closure of aesthetic judgment in just that form — the essay — which also attempts to resist it. Near the end of his essay he seems poised to retract his embrace: “The essay is a judgement, but the essential, the value-determining thing about it is not the verdict (as is the case with the system) but the process of judging” (18).

Adorno’s strategy, if we might call it that, is to argue that central to the essay is just that disjointedness within aesthetic judgment that Lukács would have the essay redeem through a mystical union. The temporality of the essay, for Adorno, is not a trajectory that finds its goal and redemption in some sort of destiny, but rather seeks the opposite: to cut short and break off its continuity. The essay seeks self-effacement, not mystical resolution: “[The essay’s] self-relativization is inherent in its form: it has to be constructed as though it could always break off at any point. . . . Discontinuity is essential to the essay; its subject matter is always a conflict brought to a standstill.”<sup>4</sup> The essay insists upon temporality: for Lukács it is an insistence upon the totality and unity of temporality as expressed by and in the notion of destiny; for Adorno the essay’s insistence upon temporality is instead in the direction of particularity and mediation: “For the essay all levels of

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4. Theodor W. Adorno, *Notes to Literature*, vol. 1, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Shierry Weber Nicholsen (New York: Columbia UP, 1991) 16.

mediation are immediate until it begins to reflect.”<sup>5</sup> That is, the essay, as the form of judgment, is reflective of the particularity of mediation. It is thought directed against itself, or, as Adorno has it: “the essay’s innermost formal law is heresy.”<sup>6</sup> I want to suggest that Lukács was in fact aware of the heretical nature of the form of the essay and that a certain discomfort with it led him to try, though only half-heartedly, to ameliorate its fragmented nature. And the best evidence that Lukács fully appreciated the fragmentary and non-redemptive character of the essay lies in the passage Adorno quotes from him:

Perhaps the great *Sieur de Montaigne* felt something like this when he gave his writings the wonderfully elegant and apt title of “*Essay*.” The simple modesty of this word is an arrogant courtesy. The essayist dismisses his own proud hopes which sometimes lead him to believe that he has come close to the ultimate: he has, after all, no more to offer than explanations of the poems of others, or at best of his own ideas. But he ironically adapts himself to this smallness - the eternal smallness of the most profound work of the intellect in face of life — and even emphasizes it with ironic modesty (9-10).

This ironic adaptation to smallness, to particularity, might also be considered *mimesis* (imitation), just that notion so central to aesthetics since Plato. In this light, Lukács’s conclusion — “The critique of this book is contained, in all possible sharpness and entirety, in the very approach from which it sprang” (18) — might now be construed less as a desire for unity and totality and rather as an attempt to retreat, mimetically, back into whatever smallness from which our desires for unity, identity and wholeness are given shape.

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5. Adorno 11.

6. Adorno 23.