Chapter 8

Close Reading and the Market

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Why do we read literary texts closely? There are plenty of other things to do with literary texts, many of them more fun, some of them even interesting. But the interesting ones, though they may help us in our close reading, or may indeed challenge, limit, or secure its conditions of possibility, belong to other disciplines: psychology, linguistics, sociology of art, anthropology, area studies, history, religious studies, philosophy, neurobiology, and so on. Inasmuch as the literary object is peculiar enough to warrant its own discipline—and we cannot yet dismiss the claim that it does not—that discipline is close reading. Questions about the way we read “now” are always beside the point, for the reason that the way we read now is the way we have always read—provided we understand that the domain of this “always” is limited to the rather young “we” of literary studies as a discipline. What additional qualifiers attach to reading as a slogan do not add much: since there is nothing to read but the textual surface, “surface reading,” for example, is simply a synonym for reading.1 Such slogans are presumably ginned up to generate disagreement, which would be useful for everyone except that in order to count as a disagreement, there would have to be something to disagree about, and that something would be, for both avowed surface readers and any conceivable interlocutor in the discipline, how to account for the words on the page, in other words the meaning of a literary text. Which is to say, more practically, that nobody disagrees about how to go about disagreeing. If you disagree with someone’s reading of a literary text, no amount of methodological critique will save you the work of doing your own.

But why do we read literary texts closely? We read literary texts closely because that is how they are meant to be read.

Literature is a social machine, what will below be called a universal, and like all such machines is of historical origin. To be specific, literature is invented in the aftermath of the Kantian revolution—particularly in the wake of its elevation of aesthetic judgment to a keystone position—at the turn of the nineteenth century, in the circle around Friedrich Schlegel. “Where philosophy leaves off,” writes Schlegel, inaugurating the age of
literature’s peculiar status, “poetry must begin.” Schlegel outlines, with fearsome precision, the reflexivity that will characterize the literary object up until our own day: “Poetry should in all its descriptions describe itself, and everywhere be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.” The word “everywhere” clues us in to the radicality of this conception. There is no distinction between poetry and its account of itself: poetry should not only include an account of itself, but be self-framing at every point. Literature and close reading are born at a single stroke: from this moment forth—though the institutionalization of criticism as a separate discipline will take some time—no properly literary reading can be just reading.

No doubt this monogenetic account is excessive, not to mention Eurocentric (Jena-centric, to be precise). No doubt self-mediating texts are found, more or less densely or sparsely, throughout human history and geography. But it is just as sure that for the past 200 years and not much more, we have been hunting such texts down and calling them literature. Unsurprisingly, Schlegel was among the first:

Poetry should unite transcendental materials and preliminaries of a theory of the poetic faculty—these not rare in modern poets—with the artistic reflection and beautiful self-mirroring that is found in Pindar, in the lyric fragments of the Greeks, in the classical elegy, and, among the moderns, in Goethe. It should in all its descriptions describe itself, and everywhere be simultaneously poetry and the poetry of poetry.

The pathways—many of them barbaric, some of them revolutionary—through which this conception came to underlie, if nothing even remotely approaching a large subset of any empirically delimitable set of texts, then a monopoly of what literary scholars read in a literary way, very much including literature that claims to evade this imperative—because how could the claim be convincing unless it were made by the evasion itself?—are far beyond the scope of this essay. Similarly outside the scope of this essay are the pathways through which such self-reflexivity, theorized by the early German Romantics with reference to poetry, comes to characterize the disciplinary study of all the arts. What is important to secure for the moment is the idea that what literature is, is an object for close reading—that what the work of art is, is an object that tells us how to understand it, that frames itself at every point.

It would seem that on this view there is precious little room for materialism. Would that matters were so simple.

One of the first lessons of Hegel’s *Phenomenology of Spirit*—and one repeated throughout that text—is that particular meanings only subsist within the medium of the universal. The word “universal” here should not be a cause for alarm; all the rather modest word *das Allgemeine* means in this context is a social machine, be it language as such or a particular signifying network like the royal court; or, for our purposes, literature itself, particular forms, genres, or subgenres, or social networks, systems of
meaning, or indeed ideological fields in which a text is intended to intervene. While meanings are produced only by the text, on its surface if you like, and therefore exist _sub specie aeternitatis_, the media or social machines in which they mean are, it seems almost too obvious to point out, historical. Further, nothing prevents us from chasing down what meanings a text might entail as a logically necessary consequence or condition of possibility. The word “unconscious,” having been ruined for us by psychoanalysis, is probably not recuperable, but it is worth remembering that in _Phenomenology of Spirit_ what is performed unconsciously is simply what is entailed or presupposed by an action that is not present to consciousness in that action itself. (The distinction between the Hegelian and the Freudian unconscious can be seen most starkly in Hegel’s few words in _Phenomenology of Spirit_ on _Oedipus Rex_ [§468], where _Das Unbewusste_, unusually nominalized, as opposed to the more common, adjectival _bewusstlos_, is simply the unknown that is nonetheless part of the deed. The modern equivalent, where fate hinges on consequences that are unconscious in the un-mysterious, Hegelian sense, is the tragic time-travel plot.) This entailment is often, in _Phenomenology of Spirit_, an action’s necessary interaction with a universal, with a social machine. Such interaction yields a properly Hegelian mode of irony: the ignorance of the provincial _type_ at court necessarily turns every attempt at sincerity into a performance; the “beautiful soul,” by imagining himself to be beyond politics, necessarily commits to a politics more culpable than any he condemns.

A certain materialism is then not only a possible but an unavoidable aspect of close reading. That is, the text is material in two interesting senses (in addition to lots of other, less interesting ones). First, its medium is material, not in the trivial sense that words have a material existence as sound or ink or data or whatever else, but in the more consequential sense that the social machine in which they mean is not dead context but the very substance of the meaning itself. Wyndham Lewis’s _The Childermass_ means anything at all and precisely as a novel, one such institution or social machine. Aspects of it only make sense within an English literary field dominated by Bloomsbury and haunted by Joyce—another. And much of it cannot be understood except as participating in two other social machines, discourses around Britain’s colonial project and around the rise of industrial Stalinism in the Soviet Union. Second—and one can see that this is not strictly a second sense but rather another angle on the first—is that the text’s meaning itself is material in that it is meant to make a real intervention into these very networks: the novel form, the English literary field, relations with the colonies and with Communism.

The self-mediating nature of the literary text can therefore not insulate it entirely from the mediation of the universal. When Fredric Jameson produces Wyndham Lewis’s work as pivoting on working-class consciousness, this certainly seems to be a perverse reading. But Jameson’s point is that Lewis’s avowed intellectual class-consciousness, for which one does not have to read very closely at all and which is more or less central to Lewis’s intervention in all these social machines, logically presupposes working-class
consciousness, is unnecessary and unthinkable without it. (This claim may be incorrect; but to disagree on this point would not yet be a literary disagreement.) There is no claim about Lewis’s awareness, conscious or not, of that entailment. Perhaps he would have disavowed it; perhaps, as he sometimes came close to doing, in, for example, the notorious Hitler, he would have cheerfully acknowledged it. There is no claim, that is, that anything in particular resides in the depths of the text or of Lewis’s brain. If the question is to become again a literary one, it must become again about how to account for the text. Any textual “return of the repressed” in the form, say, of the inability of this class-consciousness to achieve anything like its ostensible narrative purpose in the three volumes of Lewis’s Childermass, would have to be reframed instead as the Hegelian “ruse of reason,” that is, as an example of the fact that logical entailments are real entailments, and thus even in narrative not ignored without a formal cost that Lewis was, to his great credit as an artist, not willing to pay.

In what follows, the place of the universal will be largely occupied by the medium in which artworks circulate today, namely the market, and the primary question that will be asked is whether the minimum conditions of possibility for the practice of close reading can be met for artworks whose existence is only ratified on the market. If it turned out that close reading was, under contemporary conditions, an incoherent project, we would have to give up literary studies altogether or fold it into some other discipline—which again is not, at least for the crisis-peddlers, an implausible prospect. The question is: Can art that is mediated by the market plausibly mediate itself? Can art that is a commodity before it is anything else be an object for close reading?

Unlike the Romantics (and the Modernists after them), we are wise enough to know that the work of art is a commodity like any other. Chances are that we do not have a very clear idea what we mean by that. Marx, however, does.

What chiefly distinguishes the commodity-owner from the commodity is the circumstance that the latter treats every other commodity as nothing more than the form of appearance of its own value. Born leveler and cynic, it is therefore always on the jump to exchange not only soul but body with any other commodity, be it plagued by more deformities than Maritornes herself. With his five and more senses, the owner of the commodity makes up for the latter’s lack of a feel for the concrete in other commodities. His commodity has for him no unmediated use value. Otherwise he would not bring it to market. It has use value for others. For him its only unmediated use value is to be the bearer of exchange value, and so to be a medium of exchange. That is why he wants to dispose of it in exchange for commodities whose use values appeal to him. All commodities are non-use-values for their owners, use values for their non-owners. Consequently, they must all change hands. But this change of hands constitutes their exchange, and their exchange relates them to one another as values and realizes them as values. Commodities must be realized as values before they can be realized as use values. (K 100/C 179)
This is a knotty passage (and one whose gender politics are thankfully not entirely legible in English). Its difficulty and indeed “literariness” seem all out of proportion to the matter in hand. Should it not be among the easiest things in the world to distinguish commodity-owner from commodity? Is it not rather an odd flourish to stack the deck by personifying the commodity, and then to feign perplexity in distinguishing the personification from the person?

But the operation is the opposite of this: we have been told in the previous paragraph that “the characters who appear on the economic stage are merely personifications of economic relations” (K 100/C 179). So it is not only that the commodity is personified, but rather, it proving easier to talk of the commodity as a “she” than the owner as an “it,” that the owner is. The distinction is therefore between two logical standpoints—something which the fact that one of them is occupied by a consciousness tends to obscure—and the distinction is simply this: from the standpoint of the commodity, all commodities are qualitatively indifferent. If you imagine a market without buyers and sellers, you are left with a mass of commodities that are exchangeable in various ratios, but none of which is not exchangeable, which is to say none of which possesses any qualities that cannot be expressed as quantity. (The basis of this qualitative indifference, established in Marx’s previous chapter, does not concern us at the moment.) But from the standpoint of the commodity owner—who, because he owns a commodity and not some other kind of thing, is both buyer and seller—his commodity is qualitatively different from all the others in that his alone has no qualities. To be more precise, his has only one quality that matters, which is its lack of qualities: that is, its qualitative equality with other commodities, its exchangeability. All other commodities—that is, the commodities he encounters as a buyer rather than a seller—are, for his “five and more senses” full of qualities. Quality, use value, counts for him as a buyer: otherwise he would not want to buy. Quality, use value, counts nothing for him as a seller: otherwise he would not be willing to sell. Of course, as a seller, he knows that the commodities he brings to market must “stand the test as use-values before they can be realized as values” (K 100/C 179). “But”—and this is a Hegelian “but,” the conjunction that changes everything—“only the act of exchange can prove whether or not [the human labor expended in them] is useful for others, whether the product of such labor can therefore satisfy alien needs” (K 100–01/C 180). We thus find ourselves in a chicken-and-egg loop—exchange value precedes use value precedes exchange value precedes use value—that Marx’s imaginary commodity owner wants no part of: “he wants to realize his commodity as value . . . whether or not his own commodity has any use value for the owner of the other commodity” (K 101/C 180). The problem can only be resolved—for the time being, for it will reemerge in several forms, including what our contemporary Keynesians will call a liquidity trap—by giving the contradiction “room to move” (K 118/C 198). Marx is preparing the ground for the appearance of money, which turns the relationship to a single buyer into a relationship with the market, and provides a practical basis for the radical exchangeability of the commodity.
For our present purposes, however, what is important is that even in the case of the individual buyer, and therefore also in the case of the market, it is only the exchangeability that matters to the commodity owner, as frustrated as he might be by the fact that its use value is from one angle prior. If he sells you a salad bowl and you use it as a chamber pot, it is strictly your business. As far as the seller is concerned, the use value of “his” commodity only makes its appearance as exchange value: “only the act of exchange can prove whether that labor is useful to others.” The commodity owner wants to realize the exchange value of his commodity by producing something that is a use-value for others. But he isn’t in the business of legislating or even knowing what that use-value should be; he doesn’t even know it has a use-value until it sells. Indeed, the more potential uses it has—it slices, it dices, and it’s a typewriter, a shoe store, a status symbol, a peepshow—the less he legislates what its actual use-value should be, and the happier he is.

If this were the only possible state of affairs, there would be no reason to demonstrate its peculiarity. So what is the other of “a society of commodity producers”? (K 93/C 172)? We are given several options in Marx’s previous chapter: Robinson Crusoe, the medieval corvée, the peasant family, hints of various historical noncapitalist societies, and finally the famous “association of free people, working with the means of production held in common, and, in full self-awareness, expending their many individual labor powers as one social labor power” (K 92/C 171). These are all others of commodity production, but its determinate other, the other that the capitalist market produces as its own internal frame, is Hegel’s image of collective labor, which Marx here and there explicitly recalls. This image appears most explicitly in Hegel’s idealized evocation of Greek ethical life, an evocation that refers not to the Greek polis as it actually was or as Hegel imagined it actually was, but rather to its own immanent horizon, an ideal Greek customary life must presuppose but can only realize in an unsatisfactory, contradictory and unstable way:

The individual’s labor to satisfy his own needs is as much a satisfaction of the needs of others as his own, and the satisfaction of his own needs is achieved only through the labor of others. As the individual in his individual labor already unconsciously accomplishes a common labor, so again he also produces the common as his conscious object; the whole becomes, as whole, his work, for which he sacrifices himself, and precisely thus is himself restored by it. (265/§351).9

The problem—the satisfaction of “universal” or social needs through individual labor, irreducibly particular talents and drives—is the same in Marx and Hegel, though for Marx “full self-awareness” will mark a crucial difference. Marx, however, considers this problem by means of a different social formation, namely capitalism, one in which there is nothing customary about what is produced or who produces it; one in which, as we have seen, exchange precedes use. In Marx’s version—“only the act of exchange can
prove whether or not [such labor] is useful for others, whether the product of such labor can therefore satisfy alien needs”—the two subordinate clauses appear to say the same thing. The function of the second clause is to emphasize the shift from the neutral “other” to “alien” (fremde); that is, to point out the peculiarity of commodity exchange in which “the needs of others,” taken for granted in the Hegelian version of customary life, are reduced to a cipher whose index is exchangeability. As Fredric Jameson has recently reminded us, the logic of alienation (Entfremdung) in Marx is intimately related to that of Hegelian externalization (Entäusserung, though neither Hegel nor Marx adheres rigorously to the linguistic distinction). The other or negative horizon of commodity exchange is what Hegel calls die Kraft der Entäusserung, “the power of externalization, the power to make oneself into a thing” (483/§658).

Let us then take a moment to establish the precise contours of this negative, Hegelian horizon of commodity exchange. Plenty has been said about the lordship and bondage theme in Phenomenology of Spirit, and we have no interest in revisiting it here, even if the relation of buyer to seller—logically encompassing the two moments of indifference and petulance—does, in its utter failure to produce anything like intersubjectivity (it produces instead a market where the parties can safely face one another in the aggregate rather than as antagonists) ironically recall it. What is important here is how we get out of this dialectic. As is well known, this is through the labor of the bondsman who, in forming and shaping the thing, in externalizing himself in the production of the life world of both himself and his master, comes to find in that world not the master’s power but his own:

Thus the form [of the product of labor], set outside himself, is not an other to him, for this form is precisely his own pure being-for-self, which to him becomes the truth. What he rediscovers, precisely through labor which appears to harbor only an alien purpose, is nothing other than his own purpose, arrived at through his own means. (154/§196)

This is Hegel’s materialism—the exact opposite, it might be said in passing, of causal or vulgar materialism—and indeed it represents a kind of ideological core to Phenomenology of Spirit. But the point to be made here is that the object the bondsman shapes is not just made—Marx’s commodity will also be the product of labor—but intended: a purpose arrived at by his own means. The thing is not a cipher whose use is indexed by its exchange, but rather a use whose purpose is legible, which is to say normative. The master can and presumably does find another purpose in it; but that will now be an occasion for conflict. The owner of commodities, on the other hand, doesn’t care what purpose a buyer finds in his commodity, as long as someone will buy it.

What we have arrived at is the distinction between the exchange formula C-M-C (Commodity-Money-Commodity or Hegelian Sittlichkeit, the satisfaction of individual needs as the universal satisfaction of needs through
the social metabolism, as use-values are exchanged through the medium
of money) and M-C-M, the same relation but now understood as the ker-
nel of capitalism itself, where use-value is only a vanishing moment in the
valorization of capital. What we have arrived at is the distinction between
an object whose use (or purpose or meaning) is normatively inscribed in
the object itself—a meaning that is in Hegel’s terms universal, again simply
“allgemein,” available for everyone, part of a social machine and not there-
fore a private matter—and an object whose use is a matter of indifference
from one position, and a matter of possibly intense but necessarily private
concern from another. What we have arrived at is the distinction between
an object that embodies, and must seek to compel, conviction, and one that
seeks to provoke interest in its beholder—or perhaps all kinds of different
interest from different beholders. What we have arrived at, no doubt through
an unusual route, is the distinction between art and objecthood. 11

The distinction is of course Michael Fried’s, but it has become central to
the debate over the dominant strand in contemporary cultural production,
or, more likely, the dominant strand in the cultural production of the very
recent past, a period for which the term “postmodernism” will do as well as
any other. Everything Fried finds objectionable in the art “object”—its “the-
aticality,” which is to say the imperative to excite the interest of a beholder
rather than to compel her conviction—is on the other hand perfectly legiti-
mate for a certain class of objects we are already familiar with, namely com-
modities. Or, to put this another way, Fried’s “formalist” account of the
distinction between art and nonart is also an historicist one, fully derivable
from the Marxian problematic of the “real subsumption of labor under capi-
tal,” or the closure of the world market.

To return, then, to Capital. As we just saw, one way of understanding
Marx’s analysis is to say that in commodity exchange, the site of purpose or
intention shifts. If I make a bowl for myself, it is a bowl because I wanted to
make a bowl, and I will be concerned about all kinds of concrete attributes
the bowl might have. If it is shallow rather than deep, wood rather than
metal, these attributes are as they are because I intend them to be that way,
and we are in the world of Hegelian externalization. If I make a bowl for
the market, I am primarily concerned only with one attribute, its exchange-
ability: that is, the demand for bowls. And that demand, and therefore all of
the concrete attributes that factor into that demand, are decided elsewhere,
namely on the market. So while I might still make decisions about my
bowls, those decisions no longer matter as intentions even for me, because
they are entirely subordinated to more or less informed guesses about other
people’s desires. This has obvious repercussions for cultural interpretation.
If a work of art is not a commodity—or if it is not only a commodity, which
is to say that a moment of externality to the commodity form is analytically
isolable, which is to say that there is something in the work that is not a
commodity—then it makes entirely good sense to read it closely, since it can
plausibly be intended to mean something. (In the passage from Hegel cited
above—“his own purpose, arrived at through his own means”—“Sinn,” a
multivalent word translated here as “purpose,” could also be translated as “meaning,” and indeed the conflict immanent in the normativity of the formed object will, in *Phenomenology of Spirit*, devolve in skepticism and stoicism to a mere conflict of interpretation. But that is another story.) If a work of art is only a commodity, close reading suddenly makes no sense at all, since the form the object takes is determined elsewhere than where it is made, namely on the market. This would not quite spell the end of interpretation, but rather the end of the idea that what we were interpreting was the artwork. It would be rather the desires represented by the market that would be subject to analysis and elucidation.

It might seem absurd to say the art commodity is uninterpretable, but think for a moment of an industrial spectacle like James Cameron’s *Avatar*. The sight of critics producing a welter of completely incompatible (but also generally plausible) interpretations was an amusing one that did not go unnoticed by the critics themselves. This empirical profusion is insignificant in itself: all of these interpretations could be wrong. But it is also possible that since the film is only concerned with producing a set of marketable effects, it cannot at the same time be concerned with producing the minimal internal consistency required to produce a meaning. And in fact, James Cameron himself is pretty clear that this is the case. When asked why female Na’vi have breasts, Cameron replies: “Right from the beginning I said, ‘She’s got to have tits,’ even though that makes no sense because her race, the Na’vi, aren’t placental mammals.”12 Cameron is more precise than he probably means to be when he says that “makes no sense.” Pressed in a different interview, Cameron responds that the female Na’vi have breasts “because this is a movie for human people.”13 In other words, people— enough of them anyway—will pay to see breasts, so the breasts go in. But this “makes no sense”: there is no point in interpreting it, because the salient fact is not that Cameron wanted them there but that he thought a lot of other people would want them there, and the wildly inconsistent ideology of the film is likewise composed of saleable ideologemes that together make no sense. This is not to say that all art commodities are similarly inconsistent: some audiences will pay for ideological or narrative or aesthetic consistency, so we have Michael Moore, middlebrow cinema, and independent film. But this consistency doesn’t add up to a meaning, since what looks like meaning is only an appeal to a market niche.

But this is nothing new and is rather a very old line, essentially Adorno’s critique of the culture industry.14 The lineaments of that critique are well known; it will be enough for the present to remind ourselves that in that essay Adorno has no interest in explicating works because in commercial culture there are no works to critique and no meanings to be found. The culture industry as it appears in Adorno is simpler than ours, seemingly only differentiated vertically rather than splintered into potentially infinite socioaesthetico-cultural niches, but the essential situation is the one we are attempting to understand. “The varying production values in the culture industry have nothing to do with content, nothing to do with the meaning
of the product” (DA 132/DE 124) because the varying production values are aimed at different markets rather than different purposes, and this principle is “the meaningful content of all film, whatever plot the production team may have selected” (DA 132/DE 124). So while one can ask sociological questions about art commodities—Why do people like violent movies?—interpretive questions—Why is there a love scene in the middle of Three Days of the Condor?—do not have interesting answers.

For Adorno, however, the art commodity had a plausible other or negative horizon, namely modernism (even if this is usually referred to collectively in the essay as “bourgeois artworks,” and usually in the past tense), where Hegelian externalization—compensatory, tragic, but an externalization nonetheless—holds. Adorno accounts for this possibility by the residual phenomenon of tributary backwaters within capitalism, spaces left behind by the expansion of capital. The persistence of such spaces “strengthened art in this late phase against the verdict of supply and demand, and increased its resistance far beyond the actual degree of protection” (DA 141/DE 133). What differentiates Adorno’s culture industry from the self-representation of our contemporary moment is that the art commodity now has no other. Fredric Jameson, bringing the problem up to the day before yesterday, simply says, matter-of-factly: “What has happened is that aesthetic production today has become integrated into commodity production generally.”

From this, everything follows.

The logic of this transition is already available in Marx, in a draft chapter for Capital I that was not available in the West until the 1960s. What we have is often fragmentary, but the basic distinction in the “Results of the Immediate Process of Production” between the “formal subsumption” and the “real subsumption of labor under capital” is clear. Under conditions of formal subsumption, an industry or production process is drawn into a capitalist economy, but “there is no change as yet in the mode of production itself” (R 106/C 1026). Under conditions of “real subsumption,” on the other hand, the production process itself is altered, such that the producers are no longer selling their surplus product to the capitalist, but are instead selling their labor to the capitalist, who will eventually be compelled to reorganize the production process altogether. (Production, as well as exchange, has both a C-M-C or “customary” in the Hegelian sense and an M-C-M or capitalist form. The latter haunts the former until the phase change to capitalism proper, when the former haunts the latter.) Logically speaking, the distance between formal and real subsumption is vanishingly small (just as C-M-C and M-C-M are the same process, examined from different standpoints); but the status of the product of labor, and eventually the work process itself, is fundamentally different under each. Indeed, as will no doubt already be apparent, “formal subsumption” allows for Hegelian externalization to continue under capitalism, since it is, for example, only accidental surplus that is sold: “Milton produced Paradise Lost as a silkworm produces silk, as the manifestation of his own nature. He later sold the product for £5 and thus became a dealer in commodities” (R 128/C 1044). Under “real
subsumption,” on the other hand, we are already in the world of Marxian separation, where the whole production process is oriented toward exchange. But what this logical proximity means is that directly “capitalist production has a tendency to take over all branches of industry...where only formal subsumption obtains” (R 118/C 1036). In order for formal subsumption in a given corner of industry to obtain with any permanence, it must be afforded some degree of protection: professional guilds, research-based tenure, Adorno’s well-funded state cultural institutions, or, as we shall consider shortly, something like Bourdieu’s concept of a field of restricted production.

For once underestimating capitalism, Marx seems to think in these fragments that the arts are, by their very nature, unsuitable candidates for real subsumption (see R 133/C 1048). Little did he imagine that once the means of distribution were fully subsumed, whatever is genuinely inassimilable in artistic labor would cease to make any difference; that the artist, when not genuinely a cultural worker, would be forced to conceive of herself, in true neoliberal fashion, as an entrepreneur of herself; that any remaining pockets of autonomy would effectively cease to exist by lacking access to distribution and, once granted access, would cease to function as meaningfully autonomous. Adorno has no trouble imagining a still-incomplete real subsumption, which is the culture industry, with modernism as the last holdout of merely formal subsumption.17 For Jameson, finally, the real subsumption of cultural labor under capital is an established fact. The result is a “dissolution of an autonomous sphere of culture” that is at the same time “a prodigious expansion of culture throughout the social realm” (48).

This end of autonomy directly implies, along with the reading practices modernism presumes, the end of modernism itself. If canonical modernism conceived of itself as autonomous—as producing the “critical distance” (48) that Jameson sees as having been “abolished,” along with any “autonomous sphere of culture...in the new space of postmodernism” (48)—then today we tend to understand this critical distance as nothing more than modernism’s aesthetic ideology; modernist artworks are and were commodities after all.18 So far we have done no more than reconstruct the logic that lends contemporary common sense with its plausibility.

Nobody could be more skeptical of modernism’s self-representation than Pierre Bourdieu. And yet Bourdieu produced, in his two-field theory of aesthetic production, an account of the real referent of modernism’s self-representation in the development of a “field of restricted production,” which lies behind the ability of artists to “affirm, both in their practice and their representation of it, the irreducibility of the work of art to the status of a simple commodity.”19 This dual affirmation is key, for the ideological representation of autonomy has its basis in the real autonomization of aesthetic practice in the struggle by artists to institute a “field of restricted production,” which forcibly substitutes for the “unpredictable verdicts of an anonymous public” (54)—the problem of the seller of commodities—a “public of equals who are also competitors” (58). In other words, the establishment of a field of
restricted production forcibly carves a zone of formal subsumption out of the field of large-scale production, which is really and entirely subsumed under capital. (It is worth pointing out that such a restricted field is not a market in any meaningful sense: judgments by peers, struggles over the significance of particular interventions, are precisely the opposite of purchases on a market, which cannot provoke disagreement because, as we have seen, no agreement is presupposed.) Adorno’s more ad hoc version of the two-field hypothesis conceives of its restricted zone as a residual rather than an emergent space; but he and Bourdieu share an understanding of the essentiality of such a zone to meaning as such, as well as a sense of its precariousness.

In Bourdieu’s account, the establishment of such a zone directly implies the tendency of art produced in a restricted field to gravitate toward formal concerns, toward the progressive working-out of problems specific to individual media. What a restricted public of (e.g.) painters, critics of painting, and connoisseurs of painting share is nothing other than expertise in painting. “Painting was thus set on the road towards a conscious and explicit implementation or setting-into-work of the most specifically pictorial principles of painting, which already equals a questioning of these principles, and hence a questioning, within painting itself, of painting itself” (66). In other words, modernism: “Especially since the middle of the nineteenth century, art finds the principle of change within itself, as though history were internal to the system and as though the development of forms of representation and expression were nothing more than the product of the logical development of systems of axioms specific to the various arts” (126). But for the characteristic “as though,” which marks this as an imaginary relation whose real referent is the logic of the restricted field, the words could have been written by Clement Greenberg. Indeed, the Bourdieusian restricted field is the condition of possibility of modernism as such, the condition of possibility of a Hegelian concern for “the matter in hand” under full-blown capitalism.

With the collapse of an autonomous field, with the real subsumption of aesthetic labor under capital, the possibility of something bearing a family resemblance to modernism abruptly disappears. What had been central was a problem to be addressed—a problem in which the general market, because it is a market, has no interest—and all the old solutions had been ruled out of bounds not because they were not nice to hang on a wall or fun to read, but because they had been absorbed into the game of producing new ones. For this reason, what appears as loss from the perspective of autonomy is at the same time a tremendous liberation of formal energies. The leapfrogging, dialectical modernist game—in which every attempt to solve the central problem posed by a medium represents, for every other producer, a new version of the problem—becomes more hermetic and difficult to play over time. One can immediately see that the isolation of an autonomous field is not only the necessary condition of possibility (within market society) for the production of any meaning whatsoever, it is also a condition that leads to the increasing difficulty of producing meaning or, more accurately, the increasing formalization of meaning itself. Meanings are made possible by autonimization,
but these meanings themselves are increasingly only formally meanings—that is, they are legible as intentions, but the only meanings they convey are specifically painterly, musical, novelistic, etcetera. The very dynamic that makes modernism possible tends at the same time to restrict its movement to an increasingly narrow ambit.

With the real subsumption of art under capital and the end of the modernist game, then, all of the old solutions, each one of which had been invalidated by subsequent solutions, suddenly again become available for use. A certain historicism—Jamesonian postmodern pastiche—becomes possible. Such an historicism is null as historicism, since what it doesn’t produce is precisely anything like history; but on the other hand it is practically bursting with the excitement at being allowed to apply its galvanic fluid to the great gallery of dead forms, which are suddenly candidates for resuscitation. Friedian “objecthood” is also liberated at this same moment: the reaction of the spectator, or customer, assumes importance in precise correlation to the recession of the formal problem confronted by the artist.

But, as is probably obvious by now, liberation from the strictures of the old modernist games is at the same time subjection to something else, namely the “anonymous market” from which the autonomous field had wrested a degree of autonomy. If artworks can now make use of all the old styles (or become objects), it is not clear why one would call them artworks at all, since the honest old art-commodity, precisely because it was more interested in the appeal to a market (the effect on an audience) than on formal problems, was able to make use of the old styles (or be an object) all along. In other words, there is nothing new in unabashedly borrowing indiscriminately from the great gallery of dead forms, or in appealing theatrically to consumer desires. These procedures are in fact the norm. The innovation of postmodern pastiche is—by definition—not formal, but in the collapse of art into what was already the status quo of the culture at large. Postmodernism’s innovation is precisely in evacuating the distinction between industrial spectacle—Cameron’s ideological mishmash—and the Jamesonian postmodern art object, assembled from its “grab bag or lumber room of disjointed subsystems and raw materials and impulses of all kinds” (31).

Of course, this is the point. And indeed there is nothing implausible about a scenario in which artworks as such disappear, to be entirely replaced by art commodities, and in which the close reading of artworks would have to be replaced with the study of reception, of desires legible in the market, and so on. There is a deeply egalitarian promise in such a scenario, precisely because the formal concerns addressed by artworks are in general the province of a few—in the absence of a strong public education system, are necessarily the province of a few. The problem is that a world where the work of art is a commodity like any other is the world neoliberalism claims we already live in and have always lived in, a world where everything is (and if it isn’t, should be) a market. The old vanguardist horizon of equivalence between art and life—which only made sense as a progressive impulse when “life” was understood as something other than the status quo—reverses meaning and
becomes deeply conformist. Against this market conformism the assertion of autonomy—even as its very plausibility now seems in doubt—becomes vital once again.

A host of consequences follows from this reversal. Most relevant to our own immediate purposes, the assertion of autonomy by a work of art minimally but directly implies that an artwork must contain its own interpretation (i.e., it must at a minimum include somehow the assertion of autonomy, which is to say the assertion that it has a meaning); that is, the artwork must be a theory of itself. The assertion of autonomy, in other words, demands a return to the notion of self-legislating form, to the early Romantic conception of poetry that alone justifies a practice like close reading. The compelling assertion of aesthetic autonomy returns the discipline of literary studies, which, absent such an assertion, can only flounder in search of a relevance it lacks by definition, to theoretical coherence.

Meanwhile, the charge of “elitism,” or the class stratification of aesthetic response, accrues to the claim to universal heteronomy rather than to autonomous art. For if nothing essential distinguishes between art and nonart, the only distinction left—and some distinction is necessary in order for the word “art” to have any referent, not to mention in order to populate the institutions that still exist to preserve, transmit, and consecrate it—is between expensive art and cheap art, or art whose means of appropriation are expensive or cheap to acquire. Indeed, rather than affirm emphatically the status of the work of art as nothing more than the luxury good that it undoubtedly also is, it would be prettier to claim heteronomy as a critique of autonomy. But this would mean affirming a meaning, and as we have seen this would necessarily entail a self-legislating moment, which is to say a claim to autonomy from the market even as that claim is disavowed.

Under contemporary conditions, the assertion of aesthetic autonomy is, in itself, a political assertion. (A minimal one, to be sure.) This was not always the case. In the modernist period, for example, the convincing assertion of autonomy produced, as it does now, a peculiar nonmarket space within the capitalist social field. But there is no natural political valence to modernism’s distance from the market, since modernism does not make its way under anything like the dominance of market ideology that we experience today. (It was also easier to confuse personal with aesthetic autonomy. Today their opposition is clear. Personal autonomy—choice—takes place in the market. Aesthetic autonomy—meaning—can take place only in a nonmarket. Outside of the work, the assertion of autonomy is advertising copy.) Modernism tends to be hostile to the culture market, but all kinds of politics (Heidegger as much as Adorno) are hostile to the market. Indeed, Lisa Siraganian has suggested that underlying the panoply of modernist radicalisms is nothing other than a deeper commitment to classical political liberalism, to a zone of deliberative autonomy. Modernist hostility to the market only acquires a definite political valence after modernism: when the claim of the universality of the market is, as it is today, the primary ideological weapon wielded in the class violence that is the redistribution of wealth upward. The upward
redistribution of wealth in the current conjuncture would be unthinkable without this weapon: the entire ideology of neoliberalism hinges on the assertion that this redistribution is what a competitive market both produces and requires as a precondition. If the claim to autonomy is today a minimal political claim, it is not for all that a trivial one. A plausible claim to autonomy is in fact the precondition for any politics at all other than the politics of acquiescence to the dictates of the market.

In the new dispensation, in other words, the assertion of autonomy is no longer a commitment to liberalism. The horizon of the liberal commitment to disagreement is agreement. Aesthetic autonomy today is, on the other hand, locked in a life or death struggle with the market. Our social machine is not the market itself but rather capitalism, which requires (among other things, like exploitation) both markets and institutions autonomous of them. There is then nothing archaic about the institution of art, nothing rear-guard about the assertion of autonomy. As with the enlightenment in Hegel (who referred rather to “the struggle of Enlightenment with Supersition”), capitalism is not one thing but rather the struggle between two things. (To be more precise, it is many such struggles, or one such struggle with many forms of appearance.) Autonomous institutions, “matters in hand,” are, in other words, not mere spaces of critique, somehow removed from the social machine; they are rather integral to it. The assertion of autonomy is the assertion that, rather than in the heat-death of the closure of the market, or in the static symbiosis of markets and regulation, history lies in the struggle between autonomy and the market.

But how to make the claim to autonomy plausible? Haven’t we, in outlining the collapse of modernism, done no more than confirm the wisdom that the work of art is a commodity like any other? In fact, it is the claim to universal heteronomy that is implausible. Markets—and this was recognized in some of the precursors to neoliberal discourse—depend on a host of nonmarket actors and institutions, even as these are always at the same time under threat from the market itself. And a major consequence of Bourdieu’s discovery of the restricted field was the demonstration that the field of large-scale cultural production, the culture industry as such, is utterly dependent on the persistence of the restricted field. If the old modernist autonomy has been revealed to be an aesthetic ideology, there is no reason to believe that the new heteronomy therefore represents the truth. Like modernist autonomy, it is a productive ideology: it frees artists to do something other than the old modernist games, and it allows them to work in the culture industry without facing the accusation of selling out, which now seems like an anachronistic accusation indeed. But that doesn’t mean that aesthetic heteronomy corresponds to the actual state of affairs, though it must refer to something real in order to be effective. And at any rate, it takes half a second to realize that both heteronomy and autonomy are, taken separately, deeply contradictory positions that could not be occupied by any actual cultural production worth talking about. Pure autonomy would have no relation to the world; pure heteronomy would be indistinguishable from
it. Rather, this is the question: How and where is autonomy asserted? What are the mechanisms that make it possible? How, in short, does heteronomy produce or presume the autonomous?

Two answers suggest themselves, though both Fried and Jameson have their own solutions with which readers will already be familiar. The first is what one might call, in search of a better term, positive historicism, as a necessary logical advance from null historicism or pastiche. As long as an artwork is making a claim to be an artwork, the very heteronomy proclaimed by historicism can only be the appearance of heteronomy. The “grab bag or lumber room” is only an apparent grab bag or lumber room; it is in fact governed by a principle of selection. If it is an actual grab bag or lumber room, it is the internet or an archive or a mall or simply everyday experience itself, and we don’t need artists for those. As a disavowed principle of selection it may be weak or inconsistent; but from disavowed principle to conscious principle is but a tiny Hegelian step, and weak or null historicism turns into strong or positive historicism. So in this case the legible element of form, its meaning, is not so much to be found in the formal reduction of an art into the problem of its medium as it is in the process of framing its raw materials: in the selection of a particular formal or thematic problem as central, and the rewriting of the history of the medium or genre or even sociocultural aesthetic field as the history of that problem. Possibly because of the one-time dominance of the album form, this solution is most abundantly audible in popular music. (Meanwhile, in large-format photography, precisely because it does open up an entirely new arena to be formally reduced to the problem of medium, and because this arena can be explored on the basis of an already existing restricted field, this solution is less urgent.)

One of the best examples in music is the Brazilian Tropicália movement, one of the first pastiche postmodernisms. But it becomes obvious almost immediately that Tropicália’s “lumber room” is a national lumber room, and that the materials it cobbles together are only those materials that register, on their own as it were, what had been the thematic center of Brazilian modernism. Brazilian modernism had been concerned with the perverse coexistence of the archaic and the hypermodern typical of Brazil’s insertion into the world economy as a relatively wealthy peripheral economy. Tropicália, rather than search for a form adequate to express this content, will scour the cultural landscape for forms that already embody it: for example, slave culture electrified in *trio elétrico* or submitted to modernist compositional technique in *bossa nova*. The two musical forms—a street music invented for Carnaval in Salvador and a chamber music invented for bourgeois living rooms in Rio—would seem to have nothing to do with each other until Tropicália asserts their identity, at which point they can only be understood as forms of appearance of the same essential contradiction. And indeed now purely commercial forms like *iê-iê-iê* (from “yeah, yeah, yeah”: derivative pop) can be seen, properly framed, to take part of this same contradiction from the other direction, since the attempt to keep up with the metropolitan culture industry is already the failure to keep up with it. A more formalized
version of the historicist solution can be seen in the United States in, for example, the project of the White Stripes, which was essentially a theory of rock in musical form, and Cee-Lo Green’s recent album *The Lady Killer*, which produces a history of that sliver of black music that for a time assumed a dominant presence in the mass market, from the girl groups of the early 1960s to Prince and Michael Jackson and even Lionel Richie in the early 1980s.  

A second possibility, which bears a family resemblance to the first but is closer in structure to Fried’s version of the problem than to Jameson’s, is the autonomization of genre. In a recent discussion, David Simon, the creator of the television show *The Wire*, points to genre fiction as the one place where stories other than the now-standard, character-driven family narratives of contemporary high populism can be reliably found. But why should genre fiction be a zone of autonomy? Isn’t genre fiction the quintessential art commodity? In an interview, this time with Nick Hornby, Simon repeatedly says, in various ways: “Fuck the average reader.” This is a completely modernist statement, an assertion of autonomy from the culture market. But how can someone who writes for TV possibly imagine his work as autonomous from the culture market? Because a genre, already marketable or it wouldn’t be a genre, is also governed by rules. The very thing that invalidates genre fiction in relation to modernist autonomy—“formulas,” Adorno called them—opens up a zone of autonomy within the heteronomous space of cultural commodities. The requirements are rigid enough to pose a problem, which can now be thought of as a formal problem like the problem of the flatness of the canvas or the pull of harmonic resolution. “Subverting the genre” means doing the genre better, just as every modernist painting had to assume the posture of sublating all the previous modernisms. Simon’s only concession to the market is to the genre itself: Simon has to “solve the problem” of the police procedural—in other words, to produce a new way of satisfying the requirements of the genre—and he is free within that genre to use what narrative materials he likes. Ultimately, he is free to orient the entire work toward a plausible left project, namely a classically realist mapping of social space.

The assertion of autonomy implied in positive historicism, above, can lead to an attractive politics, an ambivalent one, or indeed can produce no legible politics at all beyond the minimal one entailed in the claim to autonomy. Similarly, even when the autonomization of genre doesn’t lead to an obviously attractive politics, it does lead to better art, or rather to the possibility of art as such—a possibility that, this essay has tried to show, today itself entails a minimal politics. A time-travel narrative can only have one of two endings: either history can be changed, or it can’t: *Back to the Future* or *La jetée*. So the problem of the time-travel flick is how to keep these two incompatible possibilities in play until the end, and if possible even beyond the end, so you can have a sequel. And James Cameron can, within this genre, make all kinds of choices that don’t hinge on guesses about what audiences want, but rather, because they can only be understood in relation to the formal
problem they both produce and address, cohere into a demand to be read closely. And *Terminator II* can be a work of art, while *Avatar* is only an art commodity.

Notes

1. The well-known etymological redundancy of the phrase “textual surface” reminds us that surface and depth are metaphors without any independent conceptual content.

2. *Idee* 48, in *Fragmente der Frühromantik*, ed. Friedrich Strack and Martina Eicheldinger (Berlin: de Gruyter, 2011), 87. Indeed Hegel, not yet Hegel but a decidedly marginal figure, is working through similar ideas with Schelling and with his good friend Hölderlin:

   The philosophy of spirit is an aesthetic philosophy…Poetry thereby acquires a higher dignity; it becomes again in the end what it was in the beginning: teacher of humanity, because there is no longer any philosophy, any history; poetic art alone will outlive all the rest of the sciences and arts. (*Das älteste Systemprogramm des deutschen Idealismus. Hegel, Werke*, Band 1 [Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1979], 234–37.)

   The Hegel we know conceives virtually the opposite future for literature and philosophy. But this “earliest system-program of German idealism,” a fragment in Hegel’s hand but composed by or in collaboration with Hölderlin and possibly Schelling, reminds us that the romantic concept of “poetry” and Hegel’s dialectic are long lost siblings.


4. This is only the barest sketch of Philippe Lacoue-Labarthe’s and Jean-Luc Nancy’s account of what they call the “eidaesthetic” motif in early German Romanticism. *L’Absolu littéraire: Théorie de la littérature du romantisme allemand* (Paris: Seuil, 1978). I have made use of their account in the past, and for those few who notice I apologize for the repetition.


8. The logic here is enough to differentiate the Hegelian–Marxian concept of standpoint from the contemporary notion of viewpoint. The denotations of the words in English are more or less indistinguishable, but standpoint in the Hegelian–Marxian tradition means virtually the opposite of what we usually mean by viewpoint. “Standpoint” refers to a logical position within a system of logical positions, where the system is not posited as unknowable a priori. Since standpoints are logical positions, they can be adopted at will, even if they are empirically native to this or that social position. In the master–slave dialectic, one can adopt either position at will, and presumably the relation between the two only becomes clear in the shuttling back and forth between...
the two positions. But one can also adopt the standpoint of nonpersons: the State in Hegel, the proletariat in Lukács. Viewpoint, however, can only apply to persons. Marx’s distinction between M-C-M and C-M-C, which will have a role to play in what follows, is also one of standpoint, since both are merely segments in the unsegmented process of continuous exchange. The “small master” may experience exchange as C-M-C, and the capitalist proper may experience exchange as M-C-M, but the distinction is not reducible to their subject positions or viewpoints. The point here is that the commodity has a standpoint as much as the capitalist. The capitalist can of course also have a viewpoint. But Marx’s point in “personifying” the capitalist is that the viewpoint, to the extent that it diverges from the standpoint, is irrelevant.


10. Fredric Jameson, *Representing Capital* (London: Verso, 2011). See, e.g., p. 81: “What the figure of externalization and the return or taking back into self is for Hegel, the trope of separation and its various cognates and synonyms is for Marx.”


17. Marx’s notes on formal and real subsumption were not available to Adorno when he and Horkheimer were writing *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, but the logic, operative here and there in the published text of *Capital* (see particularly the section on “Absolute and Relative Surplus Value,” K 531–42/C 644–54, two terms that map roughly onto “formal and real subsumption,” which also make a brief appearance there), is clearly operative in Adorno’s work.

18. It is by no means self-evident that the formal subsumption of aesthetic labor under capitalism is an effect of capitalism’s triumphant march, rather than a consequence of its ever more desperate search for profits once the rate of profit native to industrial capital has begun a secular decline. See Part One,


20. “The essence of Modernism lies, as I see it, in the use of characteristic methods of a discipline in order to criticize the discipline itself . . . [What quickly emerges is] that the unique and proper area of competence of each art coincide[s] with all that [is] unique in the nature of its medium. The task of self-criticism [becomes] to eliminate from the specific effects of each art any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other art.” Clement Greenberg, “Modernist Painting,” in *The Collected Essays and Criticism, vol. 4: Modernism with a Vengeance, 1957–1969* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 85–86.

21. Though we know from his letters that Joyce was hostile to the publishing market, he imagines himself from the beginning as superior to it, which is what makes his hostility so entertaining: graver threats to autonomy are church and nation, though it is really the latter that threatens aesthetic, as opposed to personal autonomy. Astonishingly, the same logic holds with South African writer Es’kia Mphahlele. Mphahlele is disgusted with the South African publishing industry and his position within it, and, in a country where until 1953 all education for black students had been run through mission schools, is frustrated with ever-present “South African ‘churchianity’”; Ezekiel Mphahlele, *Down Second Avenue* (1959; New York: Anchor, 1971), 210. Apartheid South Africa is nothing like a neoliberal state, requiring a massive bureaucracy to administer Apartheid and to keep white unemployment low; under Apartheid, the market is far from the most obvious threat. The astonishing thing is that despite the almost unimaginable humiliation of living under Apartheid, Mphahlele exiles himself from South Africa not only because of Apartheid (“I can’t teach [having been banned], and I want to teach”), but because of the threat to aesthetic autonomy represented by a resistance with which he is in full sympathy: “I can’t write here and I want to write,” and he can’t write not because he has been banned, but because the situation itself, a political urgency that is as much internal as external to Mphahlele himself, represents “a paralyzing spur” (199). This is not to endorse Mphahlele’s decision over other possible ones, but to point out that the Adornian option between engagement and autonomy—the strong version of the heteronomy/autonomy problem, a version in which both sides have a plausible attraction for the Left, but which presupposes, as this example underscores, something plausibly Left to be heteronomous to—is far from a parochial concern and cannot be overcome at will.


23. Even the most laissez-faire theories of the market require at least one non-market institution, namely money. Foucault’s lectures on neoliberalism have become the locus classicus for the understanding of neoliberalism as the recognition that nonintervention in the mechanisms of the market requires strong intervention on the conditions of the market. Foucault’s lecture of 14 February 1979 (138) paraphrases Walter Eucken, quoted in the footnotes: “Die wirtschaftspolitische Tätigkeit des Staates sollte auf die Gestaltung der Ordnungsformen der Wirtschaft gerichtet sein, nicht auf die Lenkung des Wirtschaftsprozesses.” *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the College*
The neoliberal utopia is in fact an upgrade of Hegel’s much more naïve one in *Philosophy of Right*, which essentially lets capitalists accumulate as much as they like—for Hegel understands that, under capitalism, the wealth of capital is the wealth of nations—as long as they are not, heaven forefend, allowed to usurp the job of intellectuals, which is to make decisions about the whole. What neither Hegel nor the neoliberal utopians allow for is that once you understand that wealth is itself a power that can be arrayed against the regulatory apparatus, you understand that what the economists call “regulatory capture” is implied by the concept regulation itself.


25. This is not to say that such a solution is unthinkable in photography; the Bechers’ industrial “albums” bear a family resemblance to the musical solution, though the representational and political project is completely different. The discovery of large-scale photography as precisely a new medium in the Greenbergian sense is of course Michael Fried’s. Michael Fried, *Why Photography Matters as Art as Never Before* (New Haven: Yale, 2008).


27. The White Stripes example shows the family resemblance of these two solutions. Producing a narrative account of rock involves, in this case, producing a set of formal prohibitions; that is, (paraphrasing Greenberg on painting) eliminating from the specific effects of rock any and every effect that might conceivably be borrowed from or by the medium of any other music. “70 to 80 percent of what we do is constriction, and the other 20 to 30 percent is us breaking that constriction to see what happens.” Jack White, interview by Noel Murray, *The A.V. Club*, June 20, 2007, http://www.avclub.com/articles/jack-white,14117/.


29. David Simon, interview by Nick Hornby, *The Believer*, August 2007, http://www.believermag.com/issues/200708/?read=interview_simon. An annoyance in being asked to care about the reader turns out to be a surprisingly—but not so surprisingly, if what I have said in these pages is convincing—common attitude revealed in interviews with authors as disparate as Philip Roth and Zulîkar Ghose. The fun begins the moment the author is asked about his or her “audience”; a question that, in the light of the above, immediately puts the work in the category of the art commodity.

30. Compare Simon’s “Fuck the reader” with a statement plausibly attributed to Steve Jobs: “Consumer’s aren’t in the business of knowing what they want.” There’s a certain similarity of attitude, but what they mean is completely different. Steve Jobs’s claim is that consumers aren’t in the business of knowing what they want, but that he is precisely in the business of knowing what consumers want or will want. “Fuck the reader” does not say “Readers don’t know what they want, but I do”: it says rather, “what the reader wants is irrelevant to what I do.”