Objectively Curious Commitments

ANNA KORNBLUH

IN these times of ours, whither art? What is the use of the defamiliarizing and the sublime amidst cataclysmic conflicts over identity and belonging, resources and institutions, climate and extinction? Understandably, many defenders of art have lately come to frame their defenses in terms of *messaging*: artists make art to convey messages otherwise excluded from official discourse (ideology, policy, history, social science), to testify and self-express, to achieve recognition and elicit identification. Spectators and readers in turn look to art in order to see themselves mirrored, their experience confirmed, their truth avowed.

Identification and its companion, empathy, make up the ambient affects of this communicationalist, representationalist paradigm of art. This paradigm understands art's value in light of *aboutness*: art as the depiction of things, art as a flashlight in the struggle for awareness. Thus cathected, art confronts a "demand for content," as Kate Marshall helpfully terms it, which actualizes an equivalence between immediacy of representation and efficacy of political representation: the direct presentation of specific subject matter is seen to compensate for an insufficient share of political power.[1] Content-full, representationalist art anchors political imaginings, and it undergirds the three biggest tendencies in literary study today, which might otherwise at first appear unrelated: the historicist correlation of art to nonart discourses, the cognitivist/postcritical fixation on the affective transaction between literature and the reader, and the computational reduction of figurative language to the calculable.

However methodologically sanctified and politically popular, this widespread view of art advances a deeply unartistic value: instrumentalization. Instrumentality has its place, perhaps in politics above all else. Yet the very ability to imagine political futures more conducive to human flourishing, the very faculty of creativity that must exert itself to conjure something worth marshaling instrumentality to implement—this very synthetic making of more than what is already here—is a core of art

Anna Kornbluh is an associate professor and associate head of English at the University of Illinois at Chicago. She is the author of *Realizing Capital* (2014), *Marxist Film Theory and Fight Club* (2019), *The Order of Forms* (2019), and the founding facilitator of the Inter Chicago Circle for Experimental Critical Theory (https://interccect.com) and the V21 Collective (http://v21collective.org).

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frequently appraised as anathema to instrumentalization. That core faces escalating perils, from vocationalized education and the dismantled university to big data and the astronomical fine art market, yet the present desperately requires the mediacy of study, writing, reading, imagining, synthesizing.

It is in this conflagrant context of ours that Theodor Adorno's essay "Commitment" calls out to be reread for its invective against instrumentalizing art. Foremost among the strengths of this essay is the dialectical approach Adorno takes to his invective, forswearing reflexive oppositions. Adorno is of course one of modernity's most eloquent alarmists, sounding over and again the warning that if art is merely communication, it will, in its form and ethos, condone "the whole administered universe"—that triumphant capitalist reification, rationalization, and extraction of the useful and the calculable. But he does not reify this position beyond reason: at the same time, any art that, as it were, instrumentalizes its own anti-instrumentality still falls into the trap. Abiding mischaracterizations of Adorno's notion hold out unpolitical art against political art, autonomous against committed. Such an opposition casts art that imagines its political power to derive from its messaging (including its declarations, its documenting, and its intentions) against art that imagines itself autonomous, indirect, unexpressive. It is a neat opposition, but it is not the one that most interests Adorno in "Commitment." In fact, he warns gravely that "any literature which therefore concludes that it can be a law unto itself and exist only for itself degenerates into ideology," and he even starts the essay with the admonition that noncommitted art is very often "content to be a fetish . . . in an apoliticism that is in fact deeply political."[2]

Rather than a spurious opposition between political commitment and apolitical autonomy, the true opposition at the heart of Adorno's essay inheres in the difference between different modalities of commitment: what we might call the "subjective" and the "objective." Subjective commitments drive art with a specific program; objective commitments activate the mediation of and in aesthetic production as its own program. With this distinction we can perceive that "commitment" as such is not precisely Adorno's target; rather, he has in his sights situations in which artworks make themselves too readily available for deployment as propaganda, such that "committed art" itself emerges as a reified category. Artworks that take a contrasting tack, obstructing their instrumentalization, are not without commitment. It takes commitment to try to produce something for reasons other than expressive rationality or profit

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accumulation. It takes commitment to try to operationalize other value systems, other modes of production. It takes commitment to pursue "objectivity" of a different sort than rationalized capitalist abstraction.

Subjective commitment and objective commitment come into relief against the backdrop of hegemonic reification, the objective dominance of objects. Subjectively committed art tries to combat objectification with strong subjective agency—the agency of the artwork to subjectify, the agency of representationalism. Objectively committed art takes an alternate strategy. It performatively subtracts from hegemonic objectification by juxtaposing a counternotion of the object: not the thing of use, but the thing in and for itself. For Adorno, autonomous art objectively objects to objectification. It does so not through the representation of subjectivity, nor through the explicit indictment of objectification, nor the explicit eliciting of identification, but by composing an objectivity at the level of the aesthetic idea, which emanates, he maintains, from the form. Works that underscore their own form and whose form complicates or obstructs their reduction to content enact this distance from the immediately expressive, impeding the instant uptake or pat certainties that lubricate the cogs of transactional instrumentalism.

The work of art that exerts its own objectivity is one which does not immediately traffic in reified meaning, one which does not immediately answer the call for relevance, one which pursues realms of the intellect beyond mere survival, one which pursues the new and the strange. Objectivity objects—it objects to the capitalist objectifications around it; it objects to the narcissist subjectifications of message; it objects to the restriction of "life" to biopower. To these objective dynamics of the capitalist mode of production, objective art opposes a different objectivity, that of the critique, which grasps the systematicity of those dynamics. In fathoming what is and what isn't, such objectivity helps map what could be, quickening utopian itineraries for art, thought, practice.

Such formal objectivity is rather more abstract than the demand for content. How can we know it when we see it? For Adorno, objectivity involves aesthetic abstraction: those works with the least assimilable content are for that reason more able to resist the course of the world. What he means by this isn't quite the familiar genre of "abstract art," as his contrasts between Sartre and Brecht make clear. "The essence of society . . . the law of exchange is itself abstract" (183); Sartre's dabbling abstractions only insufficiently activate this truth, whereas Brecht's "more consistent" techniques "made this abstraction into a formal principle of his art" (182). Making a formal principle would seem to require consistency,

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with each component that adds up to form asserting itself as abstract. In turn this consistency impedes ready translation into content or message, raising instead questions about the means and meanings of abstraction itself.

Although he doesn't quite specify what this aesthetic form is, Adorno would seem to have said what it is not: realism. "Commitment" ominously notes that "the radical Right constantly stir(s) up indignation against what is unnatural, over-intellectual, morbid and decadent. . . . [T]his hostility to anything alien or alienating can accommodate itself much more easily to literary realism of any provenance . . . than to works which swear allegiance to no political slogans, but whose mere guise is enough to disrupt the whole system of rigid coordinates that governs authoritarian personalities" (179). And certainly there are abundant Adornianisms elsewhere that would disqualify realism as too subjectively committed.

But what is wrong with realism, really? In fact, one question for us critics of Victorian literature revisiting Adorno today, we who share Adorno's concern over "the demand for content," is whether literary realism might indeed turn out to model a kind of *objective* commitment. What if realism, with its frequent third person, its plastic timescales, its dialectic of exterior and interior, its common social expansiveness, its interrogation of the real, reality, sociability, and knowledge, its theoretical impulses—what if all this could precisely be read as an objective aesthetic? Could there, alongside all the clichés of the modernism–realism divide, remain a slim portal to a truly Adornian enthusiasm for realism?

Curiously enough, Adorno himself made some forays toward such a position in an early lecture on Charles Dickens's *The Old Curiosity Shop* (1841). Of paramount importance to Adorno is a strange mixing that takes place via this text. "Dickens is currently considered to be one of the founders of the realistic and social novel. Historically, this is correct; but when one examines the form of his work itself, it requires some qualification."[3] "Form" is here for Adorno the effect of setting, tone, and characterization, Dickens's techniques for each of which produce a palpable sensation of heterogeneity. That is, these techniques generate or allude to registers outside the novel's diegesis, and these very minimal evocations of otherness dimensionalize objectivity.

Considering the setting, Adorno emphasizes how Dickens offers less a detailed presentation of context than a phantasmagoric "arrangement of figures" (172), a carnival of curiosities: flurrying, rotating, superimposed images. Nonetheless, this arrangement reveals itself to be centrifugally anchored by an underlying political judgment of social reality: "all

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these images are arranged, as around their center of gravity, around the depiction of an early industrial city that lies under the space of the allegorical images like a Hell space" (176). The novel's jumbled, heterogeneous setting implies there are other worlds and that this world is inadequate: this in turn cues us to the tone of the work, which for Adorno means that the text is not coincident with itself, that the world depicted is not the only possible one. "This work," he finds, "contains the outlines of a completely different sort of view of the world. You may call it prebourgeois. . . . [T]he novels of Dickens contain a fragment of the dispersed baroque that maintains a strange ghostly presence in the nineteenth century" (171). In contrasting the bourgeois world with these fragments of its antecedent, *Curiosity* stimulates the objective register in which the totality of what is can be relativized and negated.

Even more striking than setting or tone for Adorno are Dickens's unconventional techniques of characterization, which Adorno calls "unpsychological" (172). Sidestepping the unique faculty of narration to comment on interior states, Dickens externalizes character. Though Adorno doesn't say how, this is a familiar enough observation that we can elaborate easily: theatrical preponderance of dialogue, priority in description on physical distortion, proliferating nicknames, unusual social conjunctures, expressive gestures. All these characteristic Dickensian exteriorities function for Adorno to reject interiority and thereby to initiate an alternate political aesthetic: "by not taking as its own criterion the highest norm of bourgeois art, the individual and his psychology, thereby helping to reveal the objective structure of a life space which tries of its own accord to dissolve all objectivity in subjectivity" (172). Dickensian characterization alludes to a world that isn't merely subjective; the external presentation of the subjective predicament opens the hatch to a different dimension, one of objectivity. Across setting, tone, and character, Dickens's style ultimately illustrates for Adorno the ways that objectivity can emerge from dissonant blending, from style that limns its own limits, from techniques of representation that deliver representation itself to study.

What is genuinely mysterious about Adorno's reading of *Curiosity* from the point of view of the later "Commitment" essay—what merits our revisiting now—is that he pays no consideration at all to the form of *narration*, which is after all the most common aesthetic annal of objectivity. This omission is all the stranger because *Curiosity*'s narration is itself so strange, although strange in a way that, I think, serves to illuminate the strangeness of all realism. The novel begins in the first person but startlingly veers to third. As the conclusion of chapter 3 has it: "And now

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that I have carried this history so far as my own character and introduced these personages to the reader, I shall for the convenience of the narrative detach myself from its further course, and leave those who have prominent and necessary parts in it to speak and act for themselves."[4] This detaching announcement itself takes the shape of an offset paragraph of a single sentence, and the closure it makes with the narrative up to that point is doubly underscored by a chapter break. The fourth chapter begins: "Mr. and Mrs. Quilp resided on Tower Hill; and in her bower on Tower Hill, Mrs. Quilp was left to pine the absence of her lord, when he quitted her on the business which he has already been seen to transact" (35). The first sentence of the objective narration cannot help itself but recur to the subjective portion, rehearsing what that portion has already seen—has already, in the position of observer rather than agent, recorded—and such retreading reinforces the laboriously produced abstractions of detachment. Third person is always a mixing, of precisely that sort which highlights its own weird madeness, of precisely that sort which dynamizes objectivity.

Dickens would famously go on to intensify that mixing by innovating the unprecedented sustained split third-person/first-person narration of *Bleak House* (1853), and his fifteen-title oeuvre features, in its later phase, two completely first-person novels—so it is no stretch to perceive within his career pronounced deliberations and pressing uncertainties about the form and function of objective narration. In *The Old Curiosity Shop*, these inquiries surge in the abrupt transformation of perspective, but even that swerve, so insistently the pull for "the convenience of narrative," will undergo a minor corrective introducing yet another degree of detachment. As the very last chapter commences, an offset paragraph again makes metacommentary on the narrative's progress and refers in the third person to the third-person narrator itself: "The magic reel, which, rolling on before, has led the chronicler thus far, now slackens in its pace, and stops. It lies before the goal; the pursuit is at an end" (548). Here Dickens resubjectifies the objective narrative, embodying it as chronicler, while simultaneously introducing an even more diffuse agent of narration, the technology of image projection. The panorama, an immersive protocinematic medium Dickens frequently enjoyed and discussed, figures at the conclusion of *The Old Curiosity Shop* as the seat of swirling illusions that animate the objective narrator. In objectivating, while also technologically determining, the stuff of the objective narration, this conclusion adds another crenulation to the problem of world seeing. And the final words of the novel amplify this contextualizing of

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the objective narration, by turning all narration lethally passive: "[S]o do things pass away, like a tale that is told!" (556). The tale exists outside the telling, not because it preexists the teller, but because the telling can mark the self-difference of its own medium—that things could be told differently.

These involuting subjective-objective techniques give shape to this novel's inquiry into how best to present a changing social world and the people it dispossesses. Dramas of seeing and knowing, perspective and contrivance show up here as the core stuff of realism. The varying temporalities of knowing—the present of narrating and the present of reading; the past of narrated and the past of historical presents—are too. Although paradigms for realism, past and present, from Victorianists and non-Victorianists alike, oscillate continually between reification and imagination, naïveté and critique, many major Victorian novels practice realism as an interrogation of the problem of representation itself, as its own theoretical exercise in mediation. The precipitous, artificial reconstitution of perspective in *The Old Curiosity Shop* makes a perfect emblem of this dynamic; given its elevation of formalized questions about the subjective and the objective, it is no surprise that *Curiosity* was Adorno's favorite Victorian object.

What all this helps us see is that objectivity in literature is less a matter of how much or little political content the work contains and more a question of how its form fabricates itself with folds, textures, and dimensions unavailable to everyday cognition. We mortals stuck in our own heads will never get to exercise the third-person point of view; we socially constructed particulars will rarely get to perceive the intersecting vectors of psychic depth and economic breadth in aggregated generality; ordinary language and ordinary consciousness will never crest in the magnificent abstraction of free indirect discourse; our quotidian entrapment in mortal time and body-space occludes the broader scales at which sociocultural patterns and transformations are perceptible and historical meaning made. In the trappings of mere phenomenality, we see only our particulars, but in the mire of literary language, realism can cast the particular into the general, confabulating generalizations from out of representation. Dickens was a master of this twirl, out from a particular scene of a child's burial toward a general reflection on how "it is hard to take to heart the lesson that such deaths will teach, but let no man reject it, for it is one that all must learn, and it is a mighty universal Truth" (544). Such moments vary in their mockable sentimentality, but they also perform a shift in kind from the immediate topic of representation

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to a mediated, ineffable objectivity—all the more objective in its disclosure of fallible universals.

This twirl's particular universalization pertains to typification, that affordance of realism so celebrated by Lukács: the narrative extrapolates from Nell's death to the weightier, amalgamated deaths of which it is typical. But other techniques of universalization also operate in this text, ones that surpass the subjectivism of typical characters in pursuit of the objectivism of typical socialities. Thus the narration turns to the trope of personification to exhibit the social relations from which types emerge and extrudes perspective on particular places out into projecting the universal determinative force of social context. Personification of poverty pivots the narrative from its specific descriptions to its political invective:

> [T]hey came upon a straggling neighborhood, where the mean houses parceled off in rooms, and windows patched with rags and paper, told of the populous poverty that sheltered there. The shops sold goods that only poverty could buy. . . . [T]he poverty that yet faintly struggled was hardly less squalid and manifest than that which had long ago submitted. (122)

Personified poverty makes a type of a type, a reflexivity that reveals how these contingent social formations ordain misery in the most arbitrary ways. And similarly, just attendant upon this troping, the narrative metonymically squares its character's immediate experience of immediate setting into a narrator's reckoning with volumes of social space:

> At length these streets became more straggling yet, dwindled and dwindled away, until there was only . . . a hill, and on the top of that, the traveler might stop, and—looking back at old Saint Paul's looming through the smoke, its cross peeping above the cloud (if the day were clear), and glittering in the sun, and casting his eyes upon the Babel out of which it grew until he traced it down to the furthest outposts of the invading army of bricks and mortar whose station lay for the present nearly at his feet—might feel at last that he was clear of London. (123)

These spatializations of narrative perspective work to annex the particular locales of Nell's journey with the general transformation of social space in 1840s England, with its great migrations, urban concentrations, and landscape transformations figuring on the spatial axis, the sociocultural and political-economic shifts on the temporal one. Where characters serve as typifications, engaging a dialectic of type and instance whose movement tends toward objective disclosure, the movement of perspective in this novel foregrounds social contextualization by exaggerating

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metonymic connectivity: lawns and lots invaded by bricks and mortar merge into streets that wend and wind into London and Babel. And it will not have gone unremarked that, as if arresting the velocity of this generalizing, the novel also here curbs its omniscient flight, reanchoring its godly bird purview in the individual perspective of a hypothetical "traveler," less identified than Nell but less abstract than purely objective narration. In all these propulsions, then—from instance to universal, from character to type, from caste to trope, from perspective to aerie omniscience and back again to embodied type—*The Old Curiosity Shop* outfits realism as conspicuous manufacture of objective worlds and the objectivity that beholds them, remitting its gaze again and again to the objective-qua-problem.

Under this unrelenting drive, the novel even puts its own premise under erasure, voiding from its narrative its own center. The old curiosity shop itself, so essential as to furnish the novel's title, completely disappears from the story when it is raided and stripped for parts, and is only named in exact words once, long after its demise. First presented in the opening chapter as "one of those receptacles for old and curious things which seem to crouch in odd corners of this town to hide their musty treasures from the public eye," the holdings of "fantastic carvings and distorted figures," the shop's goods are unceremoniously sold off-page in chapter 12, and when the end of that same chapter brings Nell and her grandfather to journey's departure, the shop effectively exits the novel. Only once more does it recur, and then only in its own vacancy, when Kit happens upon it and quickly rushes away from the "dreary . . . broken . . . rusty . . . rattling . . . deserted . . . dull . . . cold, dark, and empty . . . a cheerless spectacle" (310). Its inhabitants expelled onto their journey, its resources thrown onto the market, the shop is rendered as outmoded as its former contents, and it persists only as the echoing title, a haunting reference to a place foregone. As the narrative disjoins its premise from its action, it thus concedes the other trajectories it might have followed, the other social logics that might have withstood market contingencies, gesturing yet again to the wider objective scope through which the specific plot narrowly transpires. These indications otherwise, these propulsive troping gambits, turn the narration round and round in a choreography of self-distancing negation and cartography of social possibility, a movement Adorno could but have called, in a less withering tenor, realism's dialectic.

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For our present, Adorno's admonitions about commitment remind us not only of the dangers of instrumentality but also of the elusive beauties of abstraction. Mediated literary form composes alternative modes of thinking—anti-instrumental, synthetic, projective, imaginative, dialectical, at blended scales—that turn out to be precisely of most use to the world of the now. The problems of climate catastrophe, stark inequality, inadequate forms of collective life are problems unsolvable without dramatically inventive, creative, wild thought. Committed art in the vein of the social problem novel, cinéma vérité, or memoirized testimonial fiction may appear the most adroit at tackling such problems. But Adorno's emphasis on the subtler commitments of artistic abstraction ranges the affinity between large-scale challenges requiring large-scale address and the ambitious, imaginative gambits of creative objectivity, between inventing the social and the benefits of general intellection, between profoundly un-immediate problems and realism's realer mediations. The more enormous and uncognizable the social calamities, the more necessary that art actualize a counterrealm of sublime abstraction. It is to this realm that uncommitted art commits itself.

Notes

1. Marshall, "Readers of the Future."
2. Adorno, "Commitment," 193, 177. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
3. Adorno, "On Dickens' *The Old Curiosity Shop*," 171. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.
4. Dickens, *The Old Curiosity Shop*, 35. All subsequent references to this edition are noted parenthetically in the text.

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