Violence in Adornian Aesthetics
and the Art of Anselm Kiefer

by

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Introduction: Violence and Mimesis

According to popular legend, Masaccio’s Santa Trinità (ca. 1426) is said to have instigated a small riot among Florentine churchgoers upon its initial completion.¹ The fresco is arguably the first in the Western canon to faithfully execute the Brunelleschian system of linear perspective; its trompe l’œil illusionism was apparently so convincing that it was mistaken for a revelation of Christ himself, provoking its first audience to flee from the Chiesa di Santa Maria Novella in terror.² The tale is almost certainly a fiction, however. If for a moment the Santa Trinità did in fact accomplish the deception of three-dimensionality, early viewers would have been far more likely to confuse it for one of the crucifix statues, fashioned with extreme accuracy in painted wood, that were frequently installed inside the naves of Italian churches in the early fifteenth century.³

So why, if it is without historical basis, would this rumor have come to be associated with Masaccio’s fresco? What assumptions about spectatorship and its relation to representation and revelation might be indicated here? Akin to the period of public acculturation to the moving picture, when naïve audience members would often panic at the projected image of an oncoming train or automobile, it is certainly suggestive of the delay in spectatorial awareness that sometimes accompanies sudden advance in the

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³ I thank Professor John Paoletti for this insight, which he suggested to me in conversation as grounds to doubt the historical accuracy of the Santa Trinità anecdote.
technology of mimesis. But the apocryphal legend also associates this decisive event in pictorial innovation with a mode of responding to images that was already anachronistic by the fifteenth century, the primitive conviction that the divine was literally present in its material representation, itself apprehended as an “instrument of magic.”

We might imagine the alleged fear of the early-Renaissance Florentines, however, to have been provoked by more than just the novelty of single-point perspective. The Santa Trinità not only represents the crucified body of Christ with cogent plausibility; it also offsets that rendering against an image of God that is contrastingly two-dimensional, difficult to situate in physical space and apparently incompatible with the light-source that governs the modulation of tone for the rest of the picture. This juxtaposition of style underscores a thematic contrast between Christ’s emphatic corporeality and the incorporeal Father, who eludes the capture of human representation. (In a more secular register, by invoking the conventions of Medieval icon painting that the work aimed to surpass, and then demonstrating that surpassing, the contrast also flaunts the sheer innovativeness of Masaccio’s technique.)

Even more striking than this formal juxtaposition, the orthogonal lines that describe the painting’s architectural space have been made to converge at the exact place upon the mensa where the consecrated Host would have been positioned, in adherence with the thirteenth-century instructions of the Dominican conventual mass still administered at Santa Maria Novella at the time of the fresco’s completion. Through the governing logic of prospectiva pingendi, the Santa Trinità coheres around this vanishing

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point, thereby disposing the totality of its visible content towards the transubstantiated
*Corpus Christi* in all of its invisible resonance.\(^7\)

Painterly perspective in the *Santa Trinità* thus grants a double access to the
martyred body: the same technical procedure that enables the corporeal Christ to be
rendered palpable in paint also orients that rendering towards the site of the body’s literal
absence, saturating the Host, its synecdochical proxy, with an expectant charge of
compositional energy. And in relation to this calculated manipulation of perspective, the
portrayal of God, tied only rudimentarily to the work’s perspectival logic, seems to
somehow mediate between representation and the unrepresented, as though the figure of
the divine itself occupied the disconnect between the absent presence of the literal body
and its illusionistic imitation. These three elements might even be understood as forming
a second trinity, with the art historical Father as incorporeal Icon, his Son outshining
Him in the sumptuousness of mimetic likeness, and the Holy Ghost of the inassimilable
to art asserting its spectral presence.

If Masaccio’s *Santa Trinità* has achieved the status of legend for the remarkable
techniques through which it discloses the mortified Christ, the archive of art history is
also filled with failed attempts to communicate the exemplary suffering body. The
assimilation of this body in pain into art, or so I want to suggest, poses a problem for
representation. In his *On Pictures and the Words that Fail Them*, James Elkins describes a
fifteenth-century German image of the crucifixion, in which Christ’s bleeding far exceeds
his five wounds, his entire body erupting “into showers of blood.”\(^8\) This spectacle, for
Elkins, “is strange and a little embarrassing, and a figure of St. Bernard at the foot of the

\(^7\) Moffitt pushes this link between perspective and the corporal even further, arguing compellingly that the
vanishing point in early-Renaissance painting is often positioned at the center of the groin of the Virgin
Mary, a practice that he calls “uterine perspective.” (Moffitt 170).

cross seems to start back at the impropriety of it all.”9 The pictorial tradition of the ‘Holy Wound,’ “where an entire page might be occupied by a vulva-shaped scarlet ellipse,” similarly sought to exhort the viewer into awareness of Christ’s pain with a blunt strategy of vehement emphasis. Elkins suggests that in the attempt to bridge the disconnect between “mimetic conventions and the numinous, unrepresentable character of God…something appears to have gone wrong with representation itself: some concept of decorum has exceeded its bounds, some protocol of piety is not working right.”10 Ugo da Carpi’s Veronica between Saints Peter and Paul offers a particularly compelling example of the endeavor, gone awry, to capture the sacred body in paint. As an inscription beneath the painting attests, da Carpi rendered the impression left by the head of Christ with his own fingers – “senza penelo,” – in the effort to “mimic, by its technique, the quality of immediate contact that gives the Veronica itself its holiness.”11 Da Carpi’s idiosyncratic technique decidedly fails to convey the direct impression of bodily form onto cloth, however: in his Lives, Giorgio Vasari relates how he and Michelangelo poked fun at the expense of da Carpi’s bungled effort to bypass artifice.12

Both Masaccio’s technical virtuosity and these various failed experiments point towards a fundamental difficulty in visual art-making, generated out of the near incompatibility between mimesis – understood as the illusory semblance of the Real – and the fact of painful embodiment. As Elaine Scarry decisively argues, the experience of physical pain is uniquely obdurate to expression in language and in culture. Pain is never “available to sensory confirmation;” it occurs exclusively within the body, and therefore

9 Elkins 241.
10 Ibid.
cannot be recognizably objectified in the external world.\textsuperscript{13} While to have pain is to experience utter certainty, to be told of another’s pain is to experience doubt at that which can neither be proven nor disproved.\textsuperscript{14} If, as Scarry contends, pain is not only resistant to language but marks a limit of linguistic communicability, pain also effectively undermines the mode of truth-claiming particular to visual mimesis.\textsuperscript{15} The mimetic is already mere illusion, and because the visible signs of harm (the wound, the weapon) cannot verify the felt experience of pain but only indicate its possible source, these signs lose all authority of reference when translated into artifice. An illustration of bodily damage demonstrates the lie of mimesis, as it is readily recognized to be unconnected to the sensation of actual injury. In order to convince, then, the representation of pain is compelled to sabotage its status as representation, to establish a causal relevance to the event of pain as experienced by a real body.

Yet in the very broadest sense, innovation in the practice of mimesis is always consistent with a dissatisfaction with the mimetic status quo: the imperative to re-present the Real in ever more convincing ways entails the goal of transcending the condition of being only illusion. The logical mimetic optimum – an illusion so complete as to be indistinguishable from its referent – would literally make present the object of its exertion, the thing-in-itself. But if pain is defined as utterly lacking in intentional objects, in evidence within the visible world, then its mimetic representation also lacks ‘things-in-themselves’ to duplicate. Adequate representation of the suffering body, would thus entail that mimesis transgress the whole apparatus of sensory perception in order to communicate directly with the nervous impulses that are themselves productive of pain.

\textsuperscript{14} Scarry 5.
\textsuperscript{15} Ibid.
To be truly commensurable with the violated body of Christ, this optimum in mimesis would be obliged to actually enact an identical violence on the body of the viewer. The work of art that achieved this ideal, however, would cease to be art; it would become a weapon.

The claim that the categories of art and weapon are mutually exclusive invites obvious misunderstanding. If art is no more than a bracketing term that embraces all individual “works,” then there are innumerable examples that would seem to discredit the contention of categorical exclusivity. A decorative sword previously used in battle might accurately come to be called ‘art’ when installed in a museum display case, and the magical powers once ascribed to a relic of cultic worship might encourage acknowledgment as having been at one time a form of weaponry. Nearer to the present, contemporary practices of performance and video art, such as the use of scarification in the work of Ron Athey and Catherine Opie, often incorporate acts of literal wounding.¹⁶ These examples only contradict the claim I am trying to assert, however, if art is conceived as a category whose definitional hold on objects is atemporal, or more precisely, if a contemporary understanding of the category is abstracted from its historical contingency. If art is defined, rather, as a certain phenomenal mode of relationship between objects and their viewers, then there is no reason why an object cannot inhabit both the categories of art and weapon, at different times and for different viewers. But I would argue that a given viewer cannot simultaneously relate to an object as a piece of art and as a weapon directed towards herself; indeed, it is not even quite appropriate to call the target of a weapon its ‘viewer.’ The category of art becomes quite thin in meaning if it is not limited, as a minimal criterion, to conditions of looking that

preclude the immediate danger of direct bodily harm. In response to André Breton’s provocative proposal that the most basic work of Surrealist art would consist in the shot of a pistol into a crowd of viewers, it might be contended that such a work could be experienced as art by all but the person whom the bullet hits.17

Construing the Santa Trinità as a sort of divine violence, the legend of the Florentine churchgoers’ panic effectively ‘proves’ Masaccio’s mimetic innovation as an innovation against mimesis; it suggests that, for at least a brief moment, the painting was so realistic as to become real, the source of holy terror or an overwhelming wonder. The viewer for whom the work was a sight impossible to behold, saw in the Santa Trinità not a painting but a revelation of Christ; put differently, to see the painting as literal revelation is entirely incompatible with seeing the painting as a painting. This legend begins to indicate why superlative mimetic achievement – which necessarily entails a dislocation from the status of mimesis – is so frequently imagined as a feat of violence. It is this transcendence of artifice that is indicated when Kleist writes, of Caspar David Friedrich’s Münch am Meer, that “it is as if one’s eyelids had been cut away,” and that is indicated when Salvador Dalí and Luis Buñuel incorporate the image of a lacerated eye into the opening sequence of Un chien andalou (1929).18 As a contemporary instance of this imagined scenario, take the claim at which Michael Fried arrives in the course of his analysis of Thomas Eakins’ The Gross Clinic:

[I am led] to imagine that the definitive realist painting would be one that the viewer literally could not bear to look at: as if at its most extreme, or

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at this extreme, the enterprise of realism required an effacing of seeing in
the act of looking.19

Fried’s hyperbolic paradigm would assert its definitive realism by blinding its viewer, just
as, in the legend of the *Santa Trinità*, total realism of effect is established when the
painting is experienced as unbearable to behold; in both accounts, painting transforms
into weapon.

The quotation cited above is directly succeeded, in Fried’s text, with the
following parenthetical comment: “(hence the peculiar centrality to the realist canon of
Caravaggio’s *Medusa*).”20 Fried invokes the figure of Medusa to symbolize the “wounding
of seeing” that his “definitive realist painting” would perpetrate against its viewer. A
monstrosity so fearsome as to turn its beholder to stone, the figure of Medusa signifies
an unconditionally aversive response to the insufferable (female) body, dramatized by the
gesture of shielding one’s eyes at the risk of death, or in the psychoanalytic literature, at
the risk of castration.21

Fried stops just short of claiming the paradigm of Medusa’s body as the single
logical extreme of the project of painterly realism. His equivocation of phrase –“at its
most extreme, or at this extreme…”– registers an uncertainty as to the appropriate scope
for this analogy. By preserving both the first clausal statement and its qualification, Fried
is able to avoid the categorical generalization about blinding violence and realistic
painting that is nonetheless insinuated. And as the passage continues, it becomes clear
that the Medusa paradigm is insufficient, at least for an account of *The Gross Clinic.*

Maintaining his stylistic conceit of equivocal self-editing, Fried writes:

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19 Michael Fried. *Realism, Writing, Disfiguration: on Thomas Eakins and Stephen Crane.* Chicago and London:
The University of Chicago Press, 1987; 65.
20 Fried 65.
28-40.
“Or perhaps I should say…that what confronts us as viewers in *The Gross Clinic*, as repeatedly in Caravaggio, is an image at once painful to look at (so piercingly does it threaten our visual defenses) and all but impossible, hence painful, *to look away from*…”

What makes *The Gross Clinic* so vexing, in Fried’s reading, is the affective polarity between attraction and aversion that it incites simultaneously in its viewer. The “effacement of seeing,” enacted by all in the painting that approaches the standard of Medusa’s body, is challenged by another set of pictorial forces that rivet the viewer’s gaze in place. These forces of unwilled fixation constitute a second source of pain, one that both attenuates and intensifies the first.

To extend the mythological reference already underway, I want to identify this second painfulness with the figure of Narcissus. While it is unbearable to look upon Medusa, Narcissus is an unattainable object of erotic fixation, who causes such suffering in the nymph Echo that “her body dries and shrivels till…she is voice only / For the bones are turned to stone.” Narcissus himself falls victim to his captivating image, when glimpsing its reflection in water he “fell in love / With that unbodied hope, and found a substance / In what was only shadow.” Whereas Medusa represents an abhorrent intensification of the bodily, Narcissus’ intoxicating image suppresses his embodied existence with its dominating claim to unmitigated attention, until he, like Echo, withers away into pure incorporeality.

If, at an opposite “extreme” from the figure of Medusa, the figure of Narcissus designates a second paradigm for the “definitive realist painting,” how the two coincide in total incompatibility within *The Gross Clinic* remains unclear. Narcissus and Medusa signify two opposing ideals for violent art, but they also lie decisively outside of the

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22 Fried 65.
24 Ovid 420-422.
domain of art itself because their adequate objectivation would produce something lethal. Art can only approach them asymptotically; as limit terms, their respective violences both resemble and are incommensurable with the actual violence of art.

To abstract drastically from Masaccio, Eakins, Scarry and Fried, I want to now plainly state the theoretical definition of artistic violence that informs this thesis:

_The violence of a piece of art corresponds to the incommensurability with reality that it establishes in the failed attempt to reach the status of the Real._ This attempt defines mimesis as an imperative to assimilate into the Real by reproducing it, aiming to extinguish itself in that which it does not know, but which simultaneously attracts and repels it. If the Real is defined by its quality of always having eluded the grasp of existing forms of signification, then the syllogism follows that it cannot be adequately known within language or other stable symbolic systems. Yet if the Real _could_ be known, defined, then it would cease to provoke mimesis in art. And likewise, if artistic mimesis were able to adequately know the Real, it would cease to be art. It would then become a form of weapon, having attained a kind of violence that is indicated by the figures of Medusa and Narcissus. The category of art is circumscribed by these limit-paradigms of violence, and the violence that artworks do possess is defined in contrast to them. It is through their perpetual failure to become non-art that artworks articulate the historical trajectory of artistic innovation, and continuously (re)define the category of art itself. This failed striving is both the pain and the violence of art.

Unsurprisingly, this conjectural definition is hardly my own, but has been derived from my engagement with the primary sources for this thesis: the aesthetic writing of Theodor Adorno and the artwork of Anselm Kiefer. It has also been informed by sources that are only discussed in passing in the following pages or are not mentioned at all; the most crucial of these include Gilles Deleuze’s _The Logic of Sensation_, Elaine Scarry’s _The Body in Pain_, Michael Fried’s _Realism, Writing, Disfiguration_, Roland Barthes’ _Camera Lucida_ and Judith Butler’s _Precarious Life_.

The following thesis, moreover, is not a proof of this definition of artistic violence, although it will be instantiated variously in the written and visual texts I discuss. Rather, in the three chapters that follow, the word ‘violence’ will fluctuate in meaning as I examine the rhetoric of corporeal injury, blindness, and physical pain that animates
Adorno and Horkheimer’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory*, and as I correlate this rhetoric with Anselm Kiefer’s painting and the critical controversy that it has incited. Both Kiefer and Adorno’s respective projects orient art not towards the suffering body of Christ but towards the historical violence of modernity, and with particular urgency, towards the legacy of National Socialism. What is at stake in the dialogue that I will attempt to establish between Kiefer and Adorno is the imperative to testify to the Nazi past, to encounter both its petrifying atrocity and its toxic allure. I hope that this dialogue will enrich an understanding of these figures’ shared concern with the act of witnessing; I also hope that artistic violence will emerge as a productive concept for continued aesthetic inquiry.
Chapter 1: Adorno and the Ethics of Wounding

“Waking in the middle of a dream, even the worst, one feels disappointed, cheated of the best in life. But pleasant, fulfilled dreams are actually as rare, to use Schubert’s words, as happy music.”

In the closing remarks to his fourteenth lecture in *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*, Theodor Adorno relates a reoccurring dream “that I am no longer really alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz.”26 This intensely intimate disclosure is positioned at the crest of a sequence of questions of mounting urgency – the question of whether one can make art after Auschwitz has bled into the question of whether one can continue to live. Just as it reaches an impossible expansiveness, this sequence is arrested in the specificity of guilty conscience that for Adorno is its appropriate domain of reference.

In the context of his lecture, the ethical demand on the living to contend with the implications of Auschwitz raises the “total suspension of metaphysics,” necessary as long as the discipline’s ascription of inherent meaning to the world threatens to lapse into the mere affirmation of barbaric life: “For anyone who allows himself to be fobbed off with such meaning moderates in some way the unspeakable and irreparable things which have happened by conceding that somehow, in a secret order of being, all this will

have had some kind of purpose." Adorno’s dream registers the almost histrionic uncertainty of “whether one can *live* after Auschwitz” by calling into question the very facticity of life, Adorno’s own life, and thus underlines his conviction that the demand on metaphysics is inescapably binding for all, who by living on, affirm life after the Nazi genocide. With the frank consideration of suicide as a viable mode of response, remembrance – which entails that metaphysics think its own abolition – is here an almost involuntary compulsion.

But what is so haunting about Adorno’s dream is that it shifts the issue of the moral culpability of survival into an uncanny temporal register. The question asked by the lecturer, ‘how can one advance one’s own life when the interchangeability of human bodies in modern society has authorized the total eradication of life?’ dissolves into the question ‘will I survive?’, asked from the anonymous position of a figure from out of the past, whose life the dream has already terminated. The attempt to interrogate the conditions of survival collapses into an uncertainty as to whether one actually exists at all.

Written almost twenty years earlier, the seventeenth aphorism in *Minima Moralia* invokes dreaming in a way that similarly frustrates clear, diachronic temporality. Here also, critique is aimed at the impossibility of self-determining autonomy in a social context that has reduced individuals to ever complicit, fungible objects, and again what is at stake in critique is suicide. Adorno writes: “anyone who attempts to come out alive – and survival itself has something nonsensical about it, like dreams in which, having experienced the end of the world, one afterwards crawls from a basement – ought also to be prepared at each moment to end his life” (MM 17, p. 38). Life that continues after

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“the end of the world,” for Adorno, has taken on the distorted temporality of dreaming and the complexion of nonsense, against which the effort to avoid total complicity necessitates recourse to suicide. And with even greater ambiguity than in the fourteenth lecture, Adorno blurs the boundary between the subject position of those who are in danger of being killed by authoritarian power – those who “are hanged by Hitler and beheaded by Chiang Kai-shek” – and the position of those who look on, safe from at least imminent physical danger. This elision naturally suggests that the same social conditions that enable modern violence also determine the imperiled status of individual subjectivity. But more drastically, clear dichotomy between victim and witness is rhetorically undercut because the position of witness, for Adorno, is at risk of vanishing entirely.

This relation of victim to witness takes on a certain perversity in the dream recounted in the fourteenth lecture that is perhaps less explicit in the aphorism. To recall Freud, a dream is, after all, “a fulfilled wish,” and a wish represented moreover in the “distorted form” through which it has “evaded the censorship set up by [egoic] resistance.” Thus the content of the dream – the individual will to survive uttered out of its radical alienation from agency – is bracketed by the constitutive eroticism of dreaming, indicating a disconnect between the dreamt victim’s wish and the dream as wish. But as the voice of the victim threatens to wholly eclipse the actuality of the dreamer’s life, Adorno is also dreaming his own nonexistence. And somehow through its incorporation into dreamwork, the victim’s unfulfilled wish to preserve its life comes

28 The purview of military aggression under discussion here is in fact no more broad than that invoked in the fourteenth lecture with the word “Auschwitz.” In an earlier lecture, Adorno clarifies his use of the term, writing that by the “sign” of Auschwitz “I mean not only Auschwitz but the world of torture which has continued to exist after Auschwitz and of which we are receiving the most horrifying reports from Vietnam” (Adorno, *Metaphysics* 101).

to motivate a reflection on suicide. Yet what is the object of the victim’s “wish,” the wish that constitutes Adorno’s person yet is left compellingly indeterminate? I want to suggest that in the paradoxical incompatibility between dreamer and dream content, this encounter with alterity speaks not only of an unfulfilled desire to live but also of hope for a life that is radical different, for the unknowable of utopian redemption.

In his persistent attempt to theorize the anticipation of utopia to which great works of art can sometimes grant access, Adorno often borrows a remark from Stendhal that “la beauté n’est que la promesse du bonheur.” Miriam Hansen summarily argues that in Adornian aesthetics Stendhal’s dandyish phrase comes to signify “the unfulfilled promise of reconciliation” that artworks objectify “through the density of their construction.” But as she also acknowledges, such categories in Adorno’s thought polemically sustain “a number of different, possibly conflicting meanings depending on the constellation in which [they] are used,” thereby frustrating definitive encapsulation.

In Aesthetic Theory, intimations of art’s utopian potential are positioned within a rhetoric that suggests the infliction of physical pain, evidenced most overtly by the insistent mobilization of a semantic field comprised of the overlapping terms ‘blindness,’ ‘wounding,’ ‘tension,’ ‘shock,’ and ‘dissonance.’ By way of an analysis of this rhetoric of violence, I hope to put myself in a position to draw a structural connection between Adorno’s dream and his conceptualization of the art object as promesse du bonheur, a connection that not only animates the extreme negativity that marks this promise but

30 Stendhal. De l’Amour. Ed. Henri Martineau. Paris: Éditions Garnier Frères, 1959; 41. In Stendhal’s original usage, the promesse du bonheur was sensed by the male connoisseur of female beauty who anticipated the fulfillment of sexual pleasure. But even before Adorno’s far more oblique usage of the term, the phrase had already come to be incorporated into the domain of philosophical aesthetics, at least as early as in Nietzsche’s On the Genealogy of Morality.
32 Ibid.
also reflects back onto the violence that is both demanded of art and which constitutes its guilty conscience.

In a move that will be essential to their indictment of modernity from the vantage point of pre-history, in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* Adorno and Horkheimer characterize the birth of language as a drama of intractable violence. Primitive humankind, they suggest, apprehended nature as an unfathomable power and a mortal threat; the first act of naming was no more than a “cry of terror called forth by the unfamiliar.”33 Yet this first, involuntary act of naming was also a leaping step towards the progressive mastery over nature that would mark the telos of enlightenment.

Adorno and Horkheimer contend that the emergence of language coincided with the establishment of class domination. “When language first entered history,” they write, “its masters were already priests and sorcerers,” mediators between humans and the terror-inspiring power of nature, whose assertion of “spiritual” authority also ensured “obedience” from the remainder of the social unit by consigning it to the domain of the profane (DE 15). Adorno and Horkheimer suggestively speculate that “how much violence preceded the habituation to even so simple an order cannot be known” (DE 15).

But intimation of this social violence is cited primarily to corroborate the epistemological violence inherent to the linguistic act and is regarded as its secondary effect. Language only emerges from tautological denotation, for Adorno and Horkheimer, when it comes to address the specific ‘existent’ – a tree, for instance – as also the locus of (divine) power: “the tree is addressed no longer as simply a tree but as

evidence of something else, a location of *mana*” (DE 11). This “appearance of the whole in the particular,” it is claimed, “was experienced as a new and terrible event in the magic of primitives,” not least of all because it also conferred upon language the contradictory status of simultaneous “identity and nonidentity” (DE 14). The sign, in the form of the archaic symbol, becomes both the thing it names and something supplementary: “The dread objectified in the fixed image becomes a sign of…consolidated power” (DE 16).

If the act of naming is also an act of appropriation, the sign, then, congeals within itself something of the violent power that it attributes to the natural object. But by equating the nonidentical, it also eclipses the incommensurability of the individual existent that it names. (We might here recall Nietzsche’s assertion that any two experiences “are never identical, and hence absolutely dissimilar”).34 In Adorno and Horkheimer’s characterization of primitive magic, the sign’s mimetic affinity to natural violence constitutes its protective potency. It is only with the ascendance of enlightenment – and ‘enlightenment’ is here conceived expansively as “the disenchantment of the world” – that the abstraction inherent to signification becomes an instrument for dominating the nature that it no longer fears (DE 2). As humans increasingly apprehend the world through the aperture of autonomous signifying structures, nature becomes “mere objectivity”: “Human beings purchase the increase in their power with estrangement from that over which it is exerted” (DE 6).

Adorno and Horkheimer indict language\textsuperscript{35} under enlightenment with both a violence against nature understood as a source of inherent, non-significative knowledge, and a violence against language itself. As “the manifold affinities between existing things are supplanted by the single relationship between the subject who confers meaning and the meaningless object,” enlightenment becomes a form of knowledge that seeks only “to dominate both [nature] and human beings” (DE pg 7). Adorno and Horkheimer write of linguistic abstraction in an adamantly bellicose vocabulary to suggest that the physical violence endemic in modern society is only enabled by such language, in which it is first precipitated. In his *Against Voluptuous Bodies*, J. M. Bernstein compellingly elucidates the far reaching material repercussions that stem from language that has become autonomous from the world it describes:

Delegitimizing sensory knowledge takes with it the sensible world. It is not too much of a stretch to see the abstraction from particularity and sensory givenness as the abstractive device of modern forms of social reproduction: the subsuming of the use values of particular goods beneath the exchange value of monetary worth, or the domination of intersubjective practices by norms of instrumental reason that yield the rationalization or bureaucratization of our dominant institutions.\textsuperscript{36}

But as Bernstein also contends, this violence is enacted first and foremost on the human body. “Nature speaks or means in our bodies,” he argues, “in the issuing of pains, pleasures, desires, feelings, needs.” If the natural existent is reduced to the status of an individual datum that is only possessive of meaning once incorporated into discursivity – the common basis of economic calculation, political policy and the natural and social sciences – “these promptings of the body come to lack normative authority…and so

\textsuperscript{35} In this chapter and those following, I will often use the word ‘language’ in the very broadest sense, to refer to the abstracting logic of rationalized structures of significiation, of which the linguistic is the conspicuous representative.

cannot be thought to raise claims or demands that should (or should not) be heeded.”

Yet we continue to experience pain and pleasure. That these promptings persist after
their epistemological delegitimation is precisely the cause of the modern “crisis of the
subject” that Bernstein (and Adorno) seek to identify: if sensory experience constitutes a
“minimal language of nature,” the unintelligibility to us of its continued utterance marks
our alienation from ourselves as inherent bearers of meaning. And Adorno’s own
formulation underscores the particular relevance of this insight to culture after the
Shoah: “something in reality rebuffs rational knowledge… Suffering conceptualized
remains mute and inconsequential, as is obvious in post-Hitler Germany” (AT 18).

Adorno and Horkheimer’s vocabulary of linguistic violence becomes most
acutely focalized (and problematized) as they discuss technological rationality, which they
take to represent the “purest articulation” of the enlightenment impulse “to produce
neither concepts nor images, nor the joy of understanding, but method, exploitation of
the labor of others, capital” (DE 2). In its crystallization into technology, enlightenment
thought “does violence to itself,” excising its capacity for “self-awareness” to become a
pure means towards practical domination (DE 2). Thought disclaims itself in
technological rationality because it loses the ability to reflect back upon its own
intervention into the world that describes and manipulates; in this mode of self-
disavowal, the asserted autonomy of language culminates in its utter transparency.

Throughout *Minima Moralia*, Adorno calls the decline of reflexivity in
technological language the “blindness” of instrumentality. And in such phrases as “the
blindest self-interest” and “blind self-assertion,” he extends this visual metaphor to
equate instrumentality with the self-preservational drive that he holds responsible for the

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37 Bernstein 50.
38 Ibid 50-51.
overwhelming brutality of modern life (MM 13, p. 33-34). The transparency of language coincides with our total reliance upon it as a tool to expand our productive, and destructive, power. To borrow a term that is more relevant than it is anachronistic, the biopolitical state integrates “the mechanism for reproducing life, for dominating and for destroying it” such that the technologies of 20th century warfare “combine utmost technical perfection with total blindness” (MM 33, p. 53, 55). In this light, the Shoah represents a veritable triumph of technical bureaucratization: “What the Germans have done passes understanding, particularly by psychology, just as, indeed, their horrors seem to have been committed rather as measures of blind planning and alienated terrorization than for spontaneous gratification” (MM 67, p. 103). With the total estrangement of enlightenment from its own methodological processes, language becomes only the assertion of dominance that it had always been in part. Against this increasingly powerful obduracy to thought, critical reflection, which for Adorno can at best hope “if not to escape doom, at least to rob it of its dreadful violence, that of blindness,” must seek to destabilize that within itself that is consistent with the domination of technologized language (MM 13, p. 33). Even if every discursive act is also an assertion of power, critical thought can attempt to teach itself to see, to mitigate the violence of blindness by learning to recognize itself.

Adorno positions artistic violence as the dialectical negation of the violence that pervades human history and underlies its social formations. Yet as I will attempt to make clear, artistic negativity is fundamentally complicit in the violence that it opposes. The rhetoric of ‘blissness,’ ‘wounding’ and ‘violence’ that punctuates the historical trajectory traced by Dialectic of Enlightenment returns in Adorno’s aesthetic writing, and as mentioned
above, is supplemented by a descriptive language of ‘cruelty,’ ‘domination,’ ‘dissonance,’
‘antagonism,’ ‘tension,’ and ‘shock.’ As I will seek to demonstrate, these pervasive figures
come to cohere around a unifying metaphorical characterization of the art object as a
“wound” that, enigmatically, also enacts its own injury. And corresponding to this
rhetorical field, the icons of artistic modernism that Adorno consistently valorizes –
Picasso’s *Guernica*, Schoenberg’s *Pierrot lunaire*, Beckett’s *Endgame*, Franz Kafka’s *In the
Penal Colony* – are profoundly hostile works that aim to disturb and destabilize, to inflict
pain upon their audiences. How, then, does the violence bound up in enlightenment,
and in particular, in enlightenment language, relate to the insinuation of violence into
Adorno’s discussions of modern art?

In that the making of art is motivated by an impulse to name that which has not
already been named, the fundamental process that gave birth to language is in some way
recapitulated in every original piece of artwork. If through the senses the world always
appears as something more than factually given – as when an arrangement of colors or a
disposition of forms is not only experienced as *there*, as existing, but also as an incitement
to sensory engagement – then this world always impels such recapitulation. Yet if the
world is inherently historical in its availability to sense, (that is, if the cry of terror that
nature extracted from the primitive human is precisely what locates that human as
primitive) then the cognition through which nature is objectified will reflect its historical
situatedness. Hence the claim: “In every particular aesthetic experience of nature the
social whole is lodged” (AT 68).

But whatever the conditions that might have prompted it, Adorno and
Horkheimer’s primal scenario of original birth can never be replicated. The artwork
must *a priori* negotiate the structures of signification – linguistic, visual, and auditory –
that it inherits as its determining ground. Thus although Adorno and Horkheimer insist on a structural parallel between the origin of language and the creation of artworks, the givenness of the former is always a conditioning factor in the “empirical reality” out of which artworks are fashioned.

In *Aesthetic Theory*, Adorno rehearses the Marxian orthodoxy that holds that all works of art are inherently social things, “in which the dialectic of the forces and relations of production is concentrated” (AT 225). Yet the immanent logic of their formal construction also confers an autonomous remove from the conditions of their making. That artworks “detach” themselves from the empirical world acknowledges their origination in that world, which precedes their self-differentiation from it. By characterizing the work of art as the contingent, heteronymous artifact of the social, Adorno insists that the autonomy of art does not correlate to the figure of an autonomous artistic subject (indeed, this is a notion that he vehemently discredits). Rather, artworks realize their autonomy as unique distillations of natural semblance\(^{39}\) that refuse to take part in instrumental activity, “the business of self-preservation” (AT 14). But this refusal to serve a socially useful function requires that artworks deny their social derivation: they repel reality “as if” the world they bring forth “were an autonomous entity.” As the subjunctive “were” indicates, this autonomy requires a continual covering over, a self-aggrandizing insistence on difference. In perpetual conflict with art’s claim to sovereignty is the constitutive stuff of reality that is “foreign and opposed” to the

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\(^{39}\) In *Aesthetic Theory* a Hegelian vocabulary of “semblance,” “spirit” and “transcendence” generally replaces the pseudo-anthropological language of “mana” and “magic” employed in the *Dialectic*. To unfairly condense Adorno’s usage, the notion of nature as ‘semblance’ denotes its quality of always exceeding factual givenness in sensory experience. In Adorno’s formulation, “artworks become artworks in the production of this more; they produce their transcendence” by appropriating the semblance-character of nature as “aura”, which they thereby negate as unreal (AT 78).
assertion that disavows it. The signs of this conflict between subject material and the formal logic that “oppresses” it, for Adorno, are “scars” (AT 35).

The always compromised gesture by which artwork wrests its autonomy reveals the precise sense of its mimetic affinity to nature. As long as artworks attempt not just to consecrate an aesthetic experience of the world, but to re-present that experience, to create it over again, art seeks not merely to resemble the specific natural existent but to be what nature already is, to do what it is uniquely able to do. Like the archaic symbol, art does “violence” to material nature, and in doing so “imitates the violence that issued from the material and that endures in its resistance to form” (AT 50). Thus through their very success, works of art commit the original sin of usurpation from nature out of which language was first precipitated. Adorno writes:

As Nietzsche knew, art’s own gesture is cruel. In aesthetic forms, cruelty becomes imagination: Something is excised from the living, from the body of language, from tones, from visual experience. The purer the form and the higher the autonomy of works, the more cruel they are (AT 50).

The more forcefully artworks assert a self-governing independence from their source material, in this formulation, the more ‘cruelly’ they participate in the occlusion of nature by significative abstraction. An unexpected parallel emerges out of this claim between autonomous art and enlightenment language; language, that is, that has been finally severed from its forgotten dependency on its natural source.

But although this quotation primarily bears upon the work of art as an already constituted, already perpetrated dislocation from the conditions of its making, by foregrounding the relationship between cruelty and imagination, Adorno also directs the reader’s focus back onto the scene of the work’s original production by a human subject. Elsewhere, Adorno describes artworks as artifacts of “successfully sublimated rage,”
writing that every work of art amounts to “an uncommitted crime” (MM 72, p. 109-111). Rhetorical bravura aside, Adorno’s assertion is that creative generativity is just one species of the drive to mutilate the always unsatisfactory given in an exercise of subjective power. Prefiguring the artist who dislocates an apperception of form out from the world, in this model, is the child who breaks her recalcitrant toys. (As this formulation suggests, Adorno’s engagement with Freudian theory foregrounds the fundamental destructiveness of libidinal energy.)

If the art object is the product of sublimated aggression, its effect on the viewer is also that of sublimation. Artistic beauty, for Adorno, is produced out of the revocation of sexual fulfillment. But artworks are not perpetual come-ons; they do not merely transpose the object of lust into forms that cannot be physically possessed. Rather, by figuring an already sublimated erotic relationship to their subject matter, they incite a kind of libidinal investment in their viewers that is not tied to corporeal possession. Construing Kant’s classic formulation of aesthetic disinterest as “a castrated hedonism, desire without desire,” Adorno in this move traces an uneasy synthesis of Kantian aesthetics and the Freudian view of art as wish fulfillment (AT 11).

If artworks are constituted out of a process that is structurally parallel to subjective sublimation, then the historical contingency of artistic beauty is also the historical contingency of the human subject. Adorno and Horkheimer's exegesis of the Homeric Siren song – their model for art before art in all of its lethal voluptuousness – is a helpful point of reference here. The Siren song represents an unadulterated promesse du bonheur, offering the allurement of insight into ‘all that has ever happened on this fruitful

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40 This is what differentiates artwork from pornography. Incidentally, Adorno associates the products of the culture industry – the image of the seductively chaste film star, for instance – with this definition of the pornographic.
earth,” an ecstasy of self-abnegation in the infinite plenitude of a living past (DE 25).

For Odysseus, that exemplary representative of proto-bourgeois mastery over nature, this knowledge comes at the sacrifice of unitary subjectivity. Adorno and Horkheimer write: “[h]umanity had to inflict terrible injuries on itself before the self – the identical, purpose-directed, masculine character of human beings – was created” (DE 26). In the disfiguring repression out of which the historical ego is forged, in this lapsarian scenario, humankind relinquished the unmediated access to natural alterity that it had still been able to encounter through the mimetic, non-objectifying affinities of mystical knowledge. The intoxicating temptation of the Siren song is not only the temptation to abandon the voyage to Ithaka but also to transgress the self-imposed alienation from nature that was the price of its subjugation by instrumentality.

The fact that the Sirens also augur certain death merely indicates that enlightenment ‘progress’ is non-reversible. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the severance of the archaic symbol irrevocably divided the denotative sign that science manipulates from the components of “sound, image, or word proper” that artistic media exploit independently, thus insuring both the historical separation of art and religion as well as artistic and conceptual modes of knowing.41 (The ideal of the Gesamtkunstwerk, for Adorno, is no more than Romantic nostalgia.) Yet Adorno and Horkheimer suggest that something of the enlightenment subject’s dislocation from the natural environment “is repeated in every childhood” (DE 26). This would suggest that the destructive energy of the angry child – and later, the destructive energy encoded in the artwork – marks the process of exile from the unbound somatic fulfillment of the infantile state prior to the imposition of the reality principle. The individual subject is not only the objective

product of the historical telos of enlightenment; her constitution from infancy also mirrors its historical trajectory into alienation. If each infant possesses something of what the Sirens promise to bestow, then we can start to unravel the affinity that Adorno elusively indicates between infantile sexuality and the artistic promesse du bonheur.

To summarize briefly (and perhaps simplistically), what I have tried to foreground in the various threads of Adornian thought that I have so far elaborated is a series of ambivalently parallel structures of argument: the ascendance of enlightenment language constitutes a violent process of subjective alienation from nature; this meta-historical process is recapitulated in the irrevocable alienation from infantile eroticism that marks the egoic construction of each socialized human subject. Original works of art are both the inheritors of this meta-history and reiterate its violent origins; in their assertion of autonomy over and against their basis in nature and the destructive instinctual libido, they also reenact the process of egoic construction that produces the modern, alienated subject.

If this account begins make sense of the coincidence of violent rhetoric in the Dialectic and in Adorno’s aesthetic writing, it still leaves important questions unanswered. How is the violence of art other and more than the violence of enlightenment, which for Adorno it must not only mirror but fundamentally oppose? How is it that artworks are not merely tokens of our alienation from ourselves and nature (which are, of course, ultimately the same), but are also objects that work to somehow destabilize that alienation? How are they more than affidavits of happiness revoked, that remain capable of orienting their audiences towards a utopian promise of happiness?

These questions point towards the severe historicity of value in Adorno’s appraisal of art. As long as humans are estranged from their environment and the
corporality that they have subjugated, pastoral landscapes and portraits in soft focus lack the authority that art earns only by mimetically capturing the originary power of nature. As kitsch, such works instead efface nature by reproducing its very reification. Yet how can art continue to harness the authority of natural semblance – the echo of primal terror in the “shudder” of natural beauty – when nature, our nature, has become inscrutable to us?

Adorno writes: “the unsolved antagonisms of reality return in artworks as immanent problems of form” (AT 6). Artworks reflect the fractures of empirical reality not by depicting them explicitly, but by submitting their own methodological processes to a hostile scrutiny. A “successful” work of art, for Adorno, does not conceal the formal tensions through which it refracts the real; although it must integrate “thematic strata and details into [an] immanent law of form,” this integration must at the same time “maintain what resists it and the fissures that occur in the process of integration” (AT 7). Thus rather than hide the “scars” of nature’s hostile immunity to formal integration, the successful work testifies to the formal irreconcilability of these scars, their “explosion” of formal cohesiveness (AT 84).

The acrimony of formal tension is experienced as that which is painful in a piece of art, and for Adorno, “the socially critical zones of artworks are those where it hurts” (AT 237). Whether by excavating all that reigning standards of beauty repel (that which the beautiful renders taboo is for Adorno the “canon” of the ugly) or by infecting the sensuality of harmony with dissonance, art disrupts the façade of intelligibility that obscures the violence endemic to modern life (AT 45). Thus although they share the common guilt of violent abstraction from nature, unlike enlightenment language, artworks also render visible the repercussions of this violence. By triggering “shock,”
such works disclose the disfigurement of nature by constituting themselves as “the wounds of society” (AT 237). This metaphor of the artwork as wound, which I will insist is fundamental to an understanding of Adorno’s aesthetics of violence, suggests that artworks inflict hurt not as weapons that threaten additional pain, but as lacerations bared to sight, towards which the recipient is positioned as spectator of the already painful.

The work of art achieves a (precarious) commensurability to its inheritance of devastated nature, then, by doing violence to itself. If disenchanted language does violence to itself by becoming blind to itself, the self-inflicted violence of art has the effect of producing blindness. Like the figure of Medusa – one paradigm for art that is so violent that it cannot be seen – art that approaches this standard attests to the effacement of nature by reenacting that very effacement.

Yet before she was cursed by the gods for her excessive vanity, the Medusa was not a gorgon but a mortal renowned for her beauty. The face that turns its onlooker into stone was once the face that gave (him) pause, and something of that original beauty is preserved, in the form of taboo, by the metamorphosis that hyperbolized it. And if Medusa’s beauty lies in an irrevocable past, her image will be again transfigured as the august symbol adorning the very shield that first attenuated her scopic power by capturing its reflection. Violent art does not only produce pain but is also indissociable from a kind of pleasure that is at once remotely past and elusively projected into futurity. In Adorno’s formulation, dissonance “gives access to the alluringly sensuous by transfiguring it into its antithesis, pain…If art, in the midst of unfree society, were to

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42 By this phrase, which I will use frequently throughout this essay, I do not mean to suggest that violence amounts to an independent category for aesthetic reflection in Adorno. On the contrary, it is precisely Adorno’s application of a violent rhetoric to the discussion of artworks that might represent any variety of subjects that I hope to explain.
make utopia visible it would betray utopia by revoking the demand for it” (AT 15, 32). The negativity of dissonant artwork, then, constitutes a *promesse du bonheur* precisely by refusing to present actual fulfillment. This is the utopian figure of art: the wordless, invisible, silent disclosure of a social situation that is otherwise than empirical reality. This “irruption of objectivity into subjective consciousness” is necessarily noumenal (AT 244).

The figure of blindness or ‘blind sight’ is only one of three interrelated and highly paradoxical metaphors that Adorno mobilizes in his persistent labor to indicate the ever evasive utopian moment in art. Because the truth about utopia might only be articulated adequately in a discourse profoundly unlike our own – and the notion of a purely non-violent human discourse, as should be clear by this point, is for Adorno at best improbable – the rhetoric with which he attempts to allude to such a notion is both highly precise and highly fraught with difficulty. Blind sight thus cannot be sufficient in itself as a metaphor for artistic truth-telling, and so *Aesthetic Theory* both augments this figure and undermines its stability by aligning it with the corresponding figures of ‘broken language’ and what I will rather crudely call ‘static motility.’

Adorno returns repeatedly throughout *Aesthetic Theory* to a definition of the artwork as a kind of fragmented language, as a “cryptogram” or “cipher,” “a script without meaning or, more precisely, a script with broken or veiled meaning” (AT 33, 32, 78). This is not, despite Michael Kelly’s argument to the contrary, an iconoclastic assertion of the linguistic over and against sensory modes of knowing; rather, it reflects, as Rolf Tiedemann argues, the fact that Adorno “developed the utopian from the idea of

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a language in which word and thing might unite without truncation or violence.” Any attempt to encapsulate the semblance character of nature in human language ultimately fails nature; Adorno derides the stock phrase ‘Oh, how beautiful’ as an insult to the “mute language” of nature, which can only be approximated through art according to “the model of a nonconceptual, nonrigidified significative language” that seeks to render muteness “eloquent” (AT 67, 69). As has been already discussed, nature is not equally incommensurable to human discourse at all times, and the “moment of falling mute,” which Adorno identifies as first taking place in Beckett’s oeuvre, is as much an aesthetic demand rooted in modernity as it is an a priori fact about nature. As the attempt to realize “with human means…the language of what is not human,” “mute language” converges with that which can “only be seen blindly” in art’s utopian moment (AT 69).

Equally pervasive is a family of rhetorical figures that refer to art objects as enacting a kind of movement other than physical movement. Adorno writes: “[a]rtworks have the immanent character of being an act, even if they are carved in stone, and this endows them with the quality of being something momentary and sudden” (AT 79). This account foregrounds the work’s active wresting of autonomy out of its empirical substrate as integral to the utopian meaning that cannot be made present, but towards which the work of art must insistently “point…as with [its] finger” (AT 245). Artworks in this analogy function as catalysts that impel their audiences towards a meaning that they fail to grasp as available content. If the figures of blind sight and broken language remain associatively linked to the acts of seeing and reading, this figure unifies artwork across media in order to designate the fundamentally active and engaged quality of

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objects that are constituted by their removal from active engagement with the world. Along with the scriptural analogy, this figure reveals the notion of art as *promesse du bonheur* as the disclosure of the future disclosure of meaning, meaning that means by anticipating meaning.

I want to suggest that the metaphor of the artwork as wound represents a synthesis of the figures of blind sight, broken language and static motility. If on initial consideration this figure too seems emphatically suggestive of visual experience – recalling perhaps the grizzly carcasses of a Chaim Soutine or the painfully distorted figures of an Egon Schiele – it is abstracted from such facile associations in the paradoxical demand that the wound also function as weapon, that it somehow perpetrate the act of wounding upon itself.

In *The Body in Pain*, Elaine Scarry writes that “physical pain is exceptional in the whole fabric of psychic, somatic, and perceptual states for being the only one that has no object…in the external world.”\(^{45}\) When one desires or fears, one desires or fears *something*, and when one sees, hears, or smells, one is inevitably bound to some aspect of the external world, whether or not that referent can be identified. But Scarry contends that even when an external object has occasioned it, the experience of physical pain is unique in that it orients the body exclusively back upon itself.\(^{46}\) The extreme difficulty of rendering physical pain in language – which is, of course, the subject of Scarry’s book – stems from this objectlessness, this “complete absence of referential content.”\(^{47}\)

If pain is uniquely experienced as an intentional state that lacks an intentional object outside of the boundaries of the body, Scarry also suggests that all other forms of

\(^{45}\) Scarry 161.  
\(^{46}\) Ibid 162.  
\(^{47}\) Ibid.
perception approach the vicinity of pain the more decisively they become separated from the objects to which they refer. The example that Scarry provides is tellingly relevant: “if one experiences one’s eyes or ears themselves,” she writes, “if the woman working looks up at the sun too suddenly and her eyes fill with blinding light – then vision falls back to the neighborhood of pain.”

The woman in this instance becomes suddenly and emphatically aware of “the event of ‘seeing’ itself…experiencing her own body in the mode of aversiveness and deprivation.” It is this observation in particular that I want to borrow from Scarry in order to start to make sense of the three paradoxical figures just outlined. If, following Scarry’s model, the artwork is construed as a “form of perception,” then it follows that the work’s intentional object is utopia. Yet all that is known about utopia is its bitter absence, an absence that the artwork registers by becoming achingly aware of itself: “the new is the longing for the new, not the new itself…that is what everything new suffers from” (AT 32). Art that sees and sees nothing, attempts to write and produces only indecipherable script, and reaches towards vacancy must then constitute a wound, a sensory apparatus in pain.

This interpretation entails that the artwork itself be understood as a kind of embodied subject. And Adorno makes precisely this claim: “Society, the determinant of experience, constitutes artworks as their true subject” (AT 86). Less direct indications of this notion of artwork-as-subject pervade *Aesthetic Theory*; Adorno writes that artworks “open their eyes,” not ours, that they “are alive in that they speak in a fashion that is denied to natural objects and the subjects who make them” (AT 66, 5). The aliveness of

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48 Scarry 165.
49 Ibid.
artworks results from their constitution as structures of address, their affinity to interpersonal communication; it is this affinity that constitutes the “aura” of the work.50

As I have already argued, this structural affinity between artwork and the human subject is linked to their common estrangement from the unrestricted eroticism of the infantile state. If the principle of repression governs the generation of artworks, it is because they are produced out of the same violence that precipitates the unitary, alienated modern subject. The model of the artwork as a wound that also perpetrates the act of wounding thus has its basis in the fact that the ego only achieves its self-same status by enacting its own repression, by becoming also a self-immolating wound.

It is perhaps because artworks objectify alienated subjectivity – that in them it becomes visible – that the outcome of formal negation is a “shock,” a “moment of being shaken” in which viewers can “forget themselves and disappear into the work” (AT 244). This experience is not a “distraction” from the “prison” of the I, but a “glimpse beyond” it (AT 245). Adorno continues:

The I is seized by the unmetaphorical, semblance-shattering consciousness: that it itself is not ultimate, but semblance. For the subject, this transforms art into what it is in-itself, the historical voice of repressed nature, ultimately critical of the principal of the I, that internal agent of repression. This subjective experience [Erfahrung] directed against the I is an element of the objective truth of art (AT 246).

For Adorno the art object becomes a subject at the same time that it violently dissolves the subjectivity of the viewer. The artwork addresses its witness, then, in the moment that it destabilizes her capacity to look and apprehend, disrupting her subjective constitution as witness.

50 Benjamin articulates this fundamental quality of aura in his “On Some Motifs in Baudelaire,” writing that “the experience of the aura thus rests on the transposition of a response common in human relationships to the relationship between the inanimate or natural object and man” (Benjamin 188).
These observations put us in a position to revisit the dream that Adorno recounts in the fourteenth lecture of *Metaphysics: Concept and Problems*. I do not want to suggest that the dream is analogous to the art object; Adorno makes clear that while dreamwork and artwork represent two modes of “empirical deformation,” the process of formal objectivation distinguishes the artwork from subjective dreaming and imagining (AT 86). But as a rhetorical figure in the fourteenth lecture, the dreamt encounter with the victim of Auschwitz has a compelling likeness to the viewing encounter with the modern artwork as Adorno articulates it.

The dream interrupts the interrogative demand upon metaphysics as it dilates impossibly in scope, intervening just as the question of ‘whether one can live after Auschwitz’ lapses into an irrational doubt in the very facticity of life amid its aftermath. If the continued viability of metaphysics requires that it “gain access to the unsayable,” Adorno’s appeal to the irrationality of dream narrative might be taken to indicate the limiting margin of that access.⁵¹ As he acknowledges elsewhere, “[s]uffering remains foreign to knowledge; although knowledge can subordinate it conceptually and provide means for its amelioration, knowledge can scarcely express it through its own means of experience without itself becoming irrational” (AT 18). The context of this quotation from *Aesthetic Theory* is a discussion of art’s unique function as “consciousness of plight,” but its aptness to the dream-intervention suggests that art and the dream share a comparable proximity to the unutterable pain that eludes discursive expression.

But dreamwork and the artwork also incite critical thought at the impasse of its apparent inadequacy. Metaphysics, Adorno argues, must both “think the last extreme of horror” – it must virtually inhabit the experience of trauma – and also “gain mastery

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over it” in and through language. But, as Slavoj Žižek contends, “the essence of the trauma is precisely that it is too horrible to be remembered, to be integrated into our symbolic universe.” If the traumatic Real is fundamentally unyielding to what Cathy Caruth calls “associative chains of meaning,” its compelling truth is inseparable from its obduracy to signification, inseparable from its status as a “crisis of truth.” As he demands of metaphysics a steadfast coherence at the limit of negativity, Adorno is fully aware of this contradiction. Unlike Žižek, Adorno refuses to concede that testimony is able only to “mark repeatedly the trauma as such, in its very ‘impossibility’…by means of some ‘empty’ symbolic gesture.” Rather, in order to become adequate to its obligation to testify, metaphysics must transgress its affirmative moment by fracturing the constitutive autonomy of its discursive medium. And in so doing, metaphysics approaches the territory of both dreaming and artwork.

The dreamt manifestation of the Auschwitz victim is not only a proxy for an impossible experience of witnessing, it is also an uncanny dislocation from self. Similarly, the art object only divulges its insight into negativity when it perforates the subjective cohesion of its viewer. If, as Adorno suggests, it is only possible to think the total fungibility of life in proportion to the cognitive suspension of one’s own life, then it is this surreal dissolution of the “I” that temporarily disconnects thought from its basis in self-preservation. When what is at stake for metaphysics is not only its abolition as a discourse but also the tenuosity of the decision to continue living – the decision to wake up from the fantasy of one’s own nonexistence – then an adequate metaphysics,

52 Adorno, Metaphysics 125.
55 Žižek 272.
like an adequate art, must approximate itself to the condition of death. This orientation derives from the imperative to demonstrate the possibility of witnessing against the blindness of an all inclusive victimhood; it is expressed in art as violence, in thought as aporia, and to subjectivity as nightmare.
Chapter 2: Kiefer and the Unreconciled Past

“If finished works only become what they are because their being is a process of becoming, they are in turn dependent on forms in which their process crystallizes; interpretation, commentary, and critique. These…are the arena of the historical development of artworks in themselves, and thus they are forms in their own right.”
- Theodor Adorno (AT 194)

“A painting is a conglomeration of failings. But we can say this of life also”
- Anselm Kiefer

Until only recently, vehement critical controversy has accompanied every successive development in artist Anselm Kiefer’s oeuvre. For the attempt to identify the senses in which his work may be called violent – and this is the intention of this chapter – Kiefer’s bellicose reception history provides an instructive point of entry, not only because it elaborates an explicit, if heterogeneous, discourse of violence but also in that it constitutes an archive of violent affective responses to his work. For the present analysis, the trenchant antagonism that characterizes this archive compels an ambivalence of approach, since the notion of violence can be equally situated within a theory of subjective aesthetic response as in a formal analysis directed towards the structuring logic of the work.

With characteristic rhetorical imprecision, Donald B. Kuspit’s “Flack from the ‘Radicals’: The American Case Against Current German Painting” begins with a

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56 Sean O’Hagan. “When I was four I wanted to be Jesus. It was only a short step to becoming an artist.” The Observer (April 2008): 3.
description of the work of Kiefer and several peer artists that might be read to (unintentionally) anticipate the need for this methodological equivocation. He writes: “The new painting was fiercely opposed from the start. Violent anger met its own violence, as if to defy its authority.” Despite Kuspit’s declaratory tone, the syntax of the second sentence is compellingly ambiguous. Does “[v]iolent anger” refer to a feature apparently manifested in the corpus of painting at issue here or does it refer to the reactions of those who opposed it? The structure of Kuspit’s first sentence recommends the former reading, but this would suggest that the German painting instigated a violent reaction that was in fact “its own,” a subjective manifestation of the inherent violence of the work. Extended into the second clause, this would somewhat paradoxically imply that it was the work itself that sought to “defy” its own authority in the person of the American critic. If the subject of Kuspit’s second sentence is instead ‘critical opposition,’ however, then the sentence must intend to mean that the violence of the work was itself a (perhaps preemptive) response to an antagonistic critical audience. The rest of the paragraph makes clear that it was the American critical establishment that sought to defy the authority of the German artwork, but it is also clear that the perceived aggressions of the art itself constituted an engagement with critical antipathy by artists who knew that their work deviated from the interpretive criteria of that establishment. If subject and object can indeed be interchanged in Kuspit’s description, then this gives some initial sense of the extent to which work and criticism must be necessarily enmeshed in an analysis that seeks to coordinate a notion of artistic violence to Kiefer’s oeuvre.

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But by now, twenty-five years after Kuspit’s essay, Kiefer’s oeuvre has become so thoroughly established by the authority of commercial success, by its canonization in museum collections and by the sheer amount of discourse it has generated, that critical denunciation has effectively become irrelevant. And so contemporary criticism is almost unanimously laudatory. (Harold Bloom’s voice resounds from a 2002 Gagosian exhibition catalogue: “I cannot think of an equivalent [to Kiefer] in imaginative literature, music, or elsewhere in the visual arts. One would have to go back to the High Modernists: Joyce and Proust, Stravinsky and Schönberg, Picasso and Matisse.”59) Often, recent criticism seeks to apologize for its earlier bitterness. This scholarship tends either to assert that Kiefer’s early reception was “misguided” but “understandable at the time,” or to discredit it as an indication of cultural anxieties now overcome, which do not therefore indict Kiefer’s work itself.60 These perspectives either privilege Kiefer’s own account of his artistic intentions to the exclusion of other interpretations, or belie an implicit obligation to adhere to the cultural legitimization that Kiefer’s work has since achieved.

From the vantage point of the 21st century, however, the critical controversies of the 1960s, 70s and 80s grant access to interpretive perspectives that are no longer truly available, when the simple predominance of Kiefer’s work did not already obviate the potential for its public rejection. If, as I will argue, Kiefer’s criticality lies precisely in his works’ capacity to elicit readings that appear diametrically opposed and mutually exclusive, readings that are used to authorize a whole host of constructions of the figure

of the ‘artist’ himself, then these critical responses become the primary data that a theory of Kiefer’s painterly practice must accommodate. Accordingly, I will in this chapter provide a selective introduction to Kiefer’s work through a discussion of two pivotal exhibitions, organizing my presentation of this work in dialogue with its contemporaneous reception. I will then attempt to synthesize these critical perspectives through an extended analysis of one painting, Kiefer’s 1981 Innenraum, thus supplementing the multiplicity of documented viewing responses with the single, hypothetical viewing response entailed by my own interpretation.

Anselm Kiefer, born in the 1945 – a year unavoidably laden with symbolic resonance – dropped out of law school at the height of the 1960s student uprisings and enrolled as an art student, first at the Staatliche Hochschule der Bildenden Künste and later at the Düsseldorf Kunsthochschule. In 1969 he exhibited a set of photographed performances collectively entitled Besetzungen (‘Occupations’) at the Galerie am Kaiserplatz in Karlsruhe (Fig. A). The exhibition was almost universally panned; indeed it seemed that the young artist’s career, having barely begun, was unlikely to survive. The Besetzungen photographs show Kiefer ostensibly pledge allegiance to the Nazi Party by performing the Sieg-Heil salute variously at historically significant sites throughout Europe, in the privacy of his studio, by the sea, on the banks of the Rhine. Obviously, the

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61 O’Hagan, 5.
63 Rafael López-Pedraza. Anselm Kiefer: The Psychology of ‘After the Catastrophe.’ New York, NY: George Braziller, 1996; 13-15. In the following discussion, I will conflate the photographs displayed in the Galerie am Kaiserplatz exhibit and those included in the artist’s book Für Genet, which Kiefer also produced in 1969, and which incorporates the Sieg-Heil photographs into a kind of perverse vacation scrap-book. Photographs from these contemporaneous projects were included in a 17-page spread published in the Cologne art journal interfunctionen under the collective title Occupations in 1975.
photographs invite uncharitable interpretation, and were construed as literal assertions of Neo-Nazi sympathy, as non-art, or simply as poor taste.⁶⁴

Yet even without reference to his subsequent artwork and his own explanatory gloss on the Besetzungen photographs, a sustained reading of Kiefer’s embodiment of the Sieg-Heil as patently fascist propaganda is implausible. The artist is pictured exclusively alone, estranged spatially and temporally from the thousands of others who had once taken part in the searingly iconic choreographies of the Nazi period. Photographed from a distance, generally dwarfed by his surroundings, the figure seems to have missed the rally and appears thoroughly lonely, comically impotent. In several photographs Kiefer trades his para-military outfit for a woman’s dress, and in others his wrist droops effeminately. In still others he appears standing on top of a bathtub filled with water to invoke the character of a reclusive National Socialist Jesus, embedding darkly provocative implications of baptism and cleansing in a tone of absurdist satire.⁶⁵

Peter Arnds aligns this work with the tradition of the buffoon and the fool, figures who transgress military power by caricaturing it. He argues that Kiefer’s citation of the Sieg-Heil breaks down the “monotony and synchronicity” of the gesture, countering an expression of the virile, idealized body of fascist aesthetics with the grotesque body of “modern degeneracy.”⁶⁶ In this reading, Kiefer’s mimicry works to reactivate the authority of the individual by negating an image that signifies “the people’s powerlessness vis-à-vis those who govern them.”⁶⁷ But while the clown may represent the subversive Other of ruling power, it nonetheless finds its voice through a kind of

⁶⁴ Adriani 12.
⁶⁷ Arnds, 239.
symbiotic parroting that is only energized by its relation to that power. And while in retrospect it may be difficult to appreciate how objectionable these works appeared when first exhibited, their ironic belittlement of the “very real terror…[of] the Sieg-Heil” continues to provoke, in Andreas Huyssen’s words, “a fundamental uneasiness.”68 It is not so much that the critics ‘didn’t get the joke’ but that it simply couldn’t be funny for a German audience in 1969. If, as Henri Bergson suggests, “indifference is [the] natural environment for laughter,” then the critical charge of Kiefer’s parodic gesture was precisely its instigation of an emotive response that effectively blocked the potential for humor.69

The significance of Kiefer’s performance is indeed only recoverable in relation not just to the German legacy of National Socialism, but in the context of the visual culture that developed in the years immediately following the war. As Günter Grass recalls, post-War culture in West Germany was dominated by a sentiment that “all that unpleasantness was safely behind us, and the less that was seen of it the better,”70 giving rise to an artistic practice that upheld and perpetuated a taboo on aesthetic engagement with the recent national past, art that Siegfried Gohr calls a “tamed version of non-objective abstraction.”71 Signaling a willful break from this milieu, Kiefer’s work identifies and violates a representational taboo by bringing the legacy of National Socialism into the purview of artistic manipulation. Andreas Huyssen argues, further, that Kiefer’s gesture of conquest not only ‘occupies’ physical spaces that were then

photographed, but that his act of occupation is also directed at “various framed image-
spaces.” This suggests that the Besetzungen series be interpreted “as a conceptual gesture
reminding us that indeed Nazi culture had most effectively occupied, exploited, and
abused the power of the visual...[sucking up] whole territories of a German image-
world, turning national iconic and literary traditions into mere ornaments of power.”

Of particular relevance here are the ‘image spaces’ of Romantic painting, those scenes of
natural grandeur that had once expressed the heroic exertions of the artistic genius, but
which had since become fully absorbed into the aseptic radiance of the propaganda
film. Evoking this tradition, Kiefer’s salute frequently reaches out from a desolate
mountain top or into an expanse of sea. But unlike the lone figure out of a Friedrich
painting, Kiefer’s Heil-ing character does not seem to actually behold his surroundings,
but turns his head downward or faces away from the landscape, thereby obstinately
claiming the Romantic territory of sublime reflection for its comprehending
exploitation by the political agenda of National Socialism. Thus, by figuring the
Romantic tradition as definitively compromised by its appropriation within the visual
sign-system of Hitler’s Germany, the photographs not only assert the visceral
presentness of a painful past, but also imply that the dominant topoi of modernist
abstraction constituted so many strategies of avoidance of this visual heritage. Kiefer’s

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72 In the Strachey translation of Freud into English, the term “besetzung” or “libidobesetzung” is rendered as “catheixs.” The double connotation of occupation and catheix, in Kiefer’s title, underscores Huyssen’s reading by suggesting both the physical occupation of space and the way those spaces ‘occupy,’ the way they have become the sites of unresolved investment of psychic energy within post-War cultural memory.
73 Huyssen 33-34.
74 Describing the influence of auteur Arnold Fanck on Leni Riefenstahl’s propaganda films, Susan Sontag examines this incorporation of Romantic topoi into Fascist ideology: “Fanck’s pop-Wagnerian vehicles for Riefenstahl were not just ‘tensely romantic.’ No doubt thought of as apolitical when they were made, these films now seem in retrospect, as Siegfried Kracauer has pointed out, to be an anthology of proto-Nazi sentiments. Mountain climbing in Fanck’s films was a visually irresistible metaphor for unlimited aspiration toward the high mystic goal, both beautiful and terrifying, which was later to become concrete in Führer-worship.” Susan Sontag, “Fascinating Fascism.” Under the Sign of Saturn. New York, NY: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1972; 76.
Besetzungen photographs, then, suggest that the social valence of artistic negation in 1969 was not to be found in abstraction’s renunciation of the figure but rather in the act of representing the unavailability of figuration to the German artist after National Socialism.

For the purposes of this chapter, what is perhaps most pertinent is the simple fact that Kiefer – in what was his professional introduction to a critical audience – chose to inhabit the figure of authoritarian domination, to conflate this figure with his own image. For all the framing techniques that mitigate its potency, the Besetzungen photographs posit the very assertion of power over nature and over human life as their own constitutive gesture. And if we grant the photographs the air of historical and personal necessity that they themselves claim, this suggests that at least for Anselm Kiefer, to function as a young artist required an act of fundamental collusion with the visual signification of violent political power.

While this audacious gesture is perhaps Kiefer’s most forthright avowal of what I will call the ‘trope of complicity’ in his work, its saturation in irony (which, as Paul de Man writes, “consoles and it promises as it excuses,”) facilitates an avoidance of any more potentially compromising stance of genuine engagement.75 In contrast, the corpus of painting that comprises the later and largest portion of Kiefer’s oeuvre, and to which I will now turn, elaborates this thematic with greater complexity and nuance, and with an earnest humourlessness that brings with it an ultimately more significant terrain of (ethical) risk. It was this body of work, which Kiefer developed during the 1970s, that would generate bitter contention throughout the international critical community at the 1980 Venice Biennale.

Alongside the work of Georg Baselitz, eight paintings and a series of artist’s books by Kiefer comprised the German contribution to the exhibit. The work shown at Venice, purportedly united by a common preoccupation with the acts of “burning, lignifying, sinking, silting up” (Verbrennen, Verholzen, Versenken, Versanden), is expansive in magnitude and ambition. Kiefer’s eight enormous canvases combine oil paint, synthetic resin, acrylic, emulsion and lead, gesturally applied and suffused with natural debris such as dried grass and ash; chemically incompatible media have been mixed, layered and then scraped away, and several canvases reveal having been cut, burnt and corroded with noxious substances. At the same time, the paintings are unequivocally figurative, charged with both visual and textual references to icons of German nationalist culture, from the evocation of Siegfried and Brünhilde to the inscribed names of German war heroes. In the four versions of Wege der Weltweisheit (“Paths of Worldly Wisdom”) on display in the German Pavilion, a visual ‘family tree’ made up of portraits of German cultural figures – from Kant to the Romantic poets to Hitler – inhabits a landscape that simultaneously conjures up the endlessly mythologized Schwartzwald, vast coils of barbed wire and an immense fire (Fig. B). In Deutschlands Geisteshelden (“German Spirit-Heroes”), an immense interior structure built of impossibly large planks of wood dominates the visual field, connoting the Mead Hall of Medieval Germanic legend, the Walhalla Hall of Fame and Honor near Regensburg, and the extermination chamber (Fig. C). Each painting enacts a collision of German mythological motifs, German literary and artistic references, and elliptical allusion to the Second World War and the Shoah.

76 More specifically, Baselitz and Kiefer’s work comprised the installation, curated by Klaus Gallwitz, in the German Pavilion of the Venice Giardini. Work by several other German artists, including Gerhard Richter and Sigmar Polke, was also incorporated into the exhibitions “L’arte negli anni settanta” and “Aperto 80.”
77 Daniel Arasse 28-29.
78 Celant, Anselm Kiefer 490.
79 Ibid 98, 102-103.
Kiefer and Baselitz’ work provoked remarkable dismay, vitriol, and outright mockery within Germany. I will quote Peter Iden, art reviewer for the leftist daily "Frankfurter Rundschau," who was joined by virtually every German critic in his denunciation of the exhibit, which was panned, ridiculed and lamented across the German media: 80

Anselm Kiefer takes the opportunity to present for viewing his ideologically confused, thematically overloaded painting: The alleged analysis of German traditions in these huge pictorial spaces is a technically lamentable, coloristically helpless and compositionally pathetic, bombastic ‘painting,’ and exposes itself as being in dangerous proximity to glorifying German megalomania. 81

The indictment is clear, and the tone is frankly vengeful. Iden is confident that Kiefer’s ‘megalomaniacal’ engagement with German mythical and intellectual traditions is intended as undiluted veneration, that it seeks to establish a historicist continuity that would disavow the events in the 20th century that call the status of these traditions for contemporary culture into question. Iden also denies the possibility that the paintings adopt a stance of effective “analysis” in the same breath that he discredits Kiefer’s ability to purposively control the techniques of his medium.

I want to argue that the critic is compelled not only to censor Kiefer’s choice of subject matter but to specifically invalidate his painterly craftsmanship – going so far as to suggest that the works are not even equal to the honorific category of “painting” – because the technical devices that they exploit are willfully calculated to be consistent with those that typified representational practice under Fascism. Indeed, the scale of these works can be read as aggressively monumental, and their powerful adherence to single-point perspective does effectively isolate the viewer, engulfing her in the

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80 Saltzman 108.
destabilizing attraction of cavernous illusionistic depth. In Eric Kligerman’s words, Kiefer “denies to the spectator a passive encounter with the artwork,” enacting “a series of perceptual assaults;” these techniques “create a gravitational pull...to overwhelm, estrange, and isolate the spectator.” And if the paintings’ myriad cultural referents are interpreted as univocally symbolic, then it appears that Kiefer has brandished them as opaque emblems of authority.

Viewed in this way, Kiefer’s paintings are consistent with what Boris Groys describes as “Hitler’s art theory,” that “spiritual tradition” of art which aims to transmit visual power directly to the body of the viewer, provoking an aesthetic engagement that rebuffs theoretical contingency or the interpretive frameworks of historical context. Later in this chapter I will argue that this reading constitutes only one of several affective moments required for an adequate account of these works, but I do not want to minimize the fact that at the time of the Biennale, the insistent persuasiveness of this reading virtually eclipsed all others.

Petra Kipphoff, art critic for Die Zeit, offered an even more extensive defamation of the exhibit as “a rekindling and perpetuating of Nazi ideology,” articulating her critique in an insistently violent vocabulary of “brutality,” “injury,” and “offense.” Kipphoff maligned Kiefer’s use of fire and corrosive materials to damage his canvases, techniques that foreground disfigurement and ruination within the creational process of painting. Objecting to what she saw as the fundamental “irrationality” of his work, Kipphoff described Kiefer’s aggressive treatment of his media as “his game of

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extermination/destruction in the studio.” 85 As Lisa Saltzman points out, “the historical resonances implicit in the term ‘extermination’” are quite firmly intended; Kipphoff stops just short of explicitly claiming that the violent destructiveness incorporated into the paintings’ mode of construction phantasmagorically pantomimes the violence done to the victims of the Shoah.

While I would argue that this portrayal unfairly shortchanges the multivalence of Kiefer’s artwork, Kipphoff does signal towards at least one of its most vexing features. While the work from this period seeks to represent, more and less explicitly, the historical violence of National Socialism and the Shoah, the boundary between depiction and literal enactment – on and towards the canvas itself, and by extension, towards its subject matter – is never cleanly dissociable. Kiefer’s 1975 artists book Ausbrennen des Landkreises Buchen III (“Cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen III”), while not one of the works included at the Biennale, exemplifies the problematic shared by them with particular clarity (Fig. D). The work is made up of fragments from former oil paintings on burlap, which the artist has cut roughly and bound to produce a volume of thirty-one pages. 86 All traces of the original paintings themselves have been obliterated by a black, viscous coating of ferrous oxide and linseed oil that smothers each page and has thoroughly corroded the underlying paint. 87 As its title indicates, the work refers elusively to violence done to the physical landscape or inhabitants of the town of Buchen, where Kiefer housed his studio throughout the 1970s. 88 It is impossible to determine this allusion with any further specificity: a 14th century bubonic plague epidemic, a catastrophic fire in 1717, and the town’s near ruination during the Second

85 Kipphoff 42.
86 Adriani 16.
87 Celant, Anselm Kiefer 94-97, 490.
88 Arasse 53.
World War are all possible references. And although the town is in fact fairly distant from the infamous Buchenwald concentration camp, this additional reference is also inescapably evoked.

While the unclear historical context of the title and the sequential book format suggest the potential for narrative, each page is no more than a surface of blackened grime; if represented here at all, this is history that wholly rejects the diachronic, the past seen from the vantage point of Benjamin’s apocalyptic Angel of History as one “single catastrophe which keeps piling wreckage upon wreckage.” But while the work does rather powerfully suggest the fundamental resistance of history’s ruins to the narrativizing grasp of the present, it also very literally performs that resistance on the surface of the page. It is Kiefer who has burnt this book, who has made this history inaccessible, and thus the allegorical thematization of representational limits coincides with an enforcement of those limits. Recalling that the Nazis also burned the evidence of their crimes to protect themselves from the grasp of history, it becomes unclear whether Kiefer seeks to reenact this gesture of occlusion, to represent history or obscure it. Kiefer’s choice of the word “cauterization” – specifically the act of burning that prevents a wound from additional bleeding or infection – further troubles this relationship between the historical past and its documentation, by positing the work as itself an aggressive intervention in history. The representation of natural calamity here coincides with its metonymic reproduction.

The simultaneity of what I have called the depiction and enactment of violence in Kiefer’s artistic process has the compelling effect of making his work obdurately resistant to definitive exegetical encapsulation. Often, in Kiefer, the viewer is simply not

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given sufficient information to determine the target and parameters of the works’ aggressive energy. This evasiveness is heightened by the seemingly immediate accessibility of much of what has been taken as most inflammatory about the work. (One of Kiefer’s greatest successes has been to show that by simply painting abandoned railroad tracks in post-war Germany he is already making a painting about the Shoah). Thus for all the vehemence of the German critical indictment of Kiefer’s work, the many attempts to name what must have appeared as an excess of offending meanings are frustrated in the transition from visual evidence to normative conclusion.

One of the more elaborate strategies by which these critics sought to resist this difficulty was to condemn Kiefer by imagining an affective encounter other than their own, above all by the figure of a potential Jewish viewer. Kipphoff, for instance, writes that Kiefer’s work “must be simply unbearable for the many who were nearly exterminated by such German megalomania.”90 In what, according to Saltzman, “was to become a significant aspect in Kiefer’s ensuing reception,” the German critics justified their indictments of Kiefer’s work as violent not so much by defending their own intuited experiences before the paintings, but by positing an aesthetic encounter that they were compelled to construct discursively.91 It would seem that the accusation of violence came not out of a simple sensation of pain, but from a subject position that experienced itself as located closer to that of alarmed witness than victim.

Much has been written about the social historical implications of Kiefer’s emphatic rejection by German critics, and Saltzman and others have specifically cited

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90 Saltzman 110.
91 Indeed, the staunch endorsement of Kiefer by Jewish collectors, art dealers, and Israeli cultural institutions subsequently became a crucial factor in the ultimate critical reevaluation of his work (Saltzman 123). But this fact is superfluous: the German critical construction of Kiefer’s Jewish viewer was never more than a repository of local and national uneasiness.
this rhetorical move as indicative of a German postwar identity eager to vindicate itself before the “presumptive gazes of the international community.” These arguments are largely persuasive, but they also disconnect the urgency of the German critical appraisals from Kiefer’s work itself. What I find so compelling about these urgent appraisals, and in particular their presumptive construction of the figure of the museum-going (Jewish) ‘victim,’ is that they are also admonitions directed against the potential for spectatorial pleasure, against enjoyment of the work by (non-Jewish) viewers. Thus this display of resistance is simultaneously an acknowledgement of the unsettling seductiveness of Kiefer’s work, registering with trepidation that whatever violence the paintings seem to possess may not be directed towards the critics themselves.

Such psychologizing is at best conjectural; yet if in a meaningful sense there is a violence to Kiefer’s work, it must not be exclusively contingent upon, and determinable through the viewing experience of pain. Later in this chapter, I will have reason to revisit the German critical evaluation of the 1980 Biennale, but I want now to incorporate several critical perspectives that are anything but condemnatory, yet which I suggest further complicate the uncertain ethical status of Kiefer’s painterly transgressions.

Although many throughout the international art community shared the German critics’ aversion to Kiefer’s contribution at the Biennale, there concurrently emerged a vocal (and institutionally powerful) contingent of critics, art dealers, and curators who applauded his work and who began to vigorously promote it abroad; indeed, it was at this juncture that the meteoric commercial success that Kiefer and the other “new German painters” would enjoy in the succeeding decades within the American gallery

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92 Saltzman 111.
and museum establishment was first set in motion.\textsuperscript{93} As an initial articulation of this perspective – exemplary for its unreserved effusiveness – I will take Italian critic Germano Celant’s “The Destiny of Art: Anselm Kiefer.”\textsuperscript{94}

Celant begins his essay not with a discussion of Kiefer’s painting, but with a kind of mythopoetic dramatization of the artist at work: “When, in order to adapt to his destiny as an artist, Anselm Kiefer attempts to throw himself open to a dimension larger than himself, he does not retreat in the face of a force that may overwhelm and daunt him. He allows himself to be possessed and swept away by it…”\textsuperscript{95} Whereas the German critics had imagined Kiefer as a threateningly retrograde reactionary, Celant, with remarkable anachronism, eagerly pictures him as the epitome of the Romantic genius-hero, and uses this characterization to assert what he perceives to be Kiefer’s groundbreaking importance. He depicts Kiefer as grappling courageously with sublime, primal forces; through a martyr-like undertaking to “establish the right relationship with forms and their origins,” Celant writes, the artist “eludes any system,” and “lets himself be shattered and overwhelmed” in valiant self-negation.\textsuperscript{96}

The very fact that Celant gleans from Kiefer’s work an authorization to reassert Romantic ideologies of transcendent artistic virility does lend support to the claim that the work effectively ignores what Eric Santner has called “the core dilemma” of post-War Germany’s relationship to its own cultural legacy, the condition in which “the cultural reservoir has been poisoned” and can only be invoked with “traumatic


\textsuperscript{95} Celant, \textit{Destiny} 13.

\textsuperscript{96} Ibid.
ambivalence.” While I would not concede that Kiefer’s work substantiates less than an incisive awareness of this very dilemma, Celant’s eager prose – which was echoed by many others, from Dutch art historian and museum director Rudi Fuchs to American curator and critic Mark Rosenthal – demonstrates that the works’ signifying structures can (or once could) be taken to endorse the heedless erasure of the historical catastrophe that irrevocably separated post-war German culture from its veteran myths. Thus while this politically problematic scholarship may glimpse only a limited view of Kiefer’s artistic project, it does suggest that to inhabit the motifs and strategies of a National Socialist aesthetic, even if for the ultimate purpose of critique, entails an inherent complicity far more pervasive than that of the Besetzungen photographs.

While Donald Kuspit’s “Flack from the ‘Radicals:’ The American Case Against German Painting,” which I discussed briefly at the beginning of this chapter, demonstrates a far greater sensitivity to historical context, it nonetheless characterizes Kiefer’s work in grandiose heroic proportions that echo Celant’s language of “redemption” and “martyrdom.” What is particularly compelling about Kuspit’s article is that it remains fairly astute until it reaches its rhetorical climax, at which point it directly reverses its terms of analysis in favor of the appeal to an unsettling heroism. Kuspit has argued that “the new German paintings” reveal the historical coding of seemingly “natural” figurative modes, generating a “critique of abstraction” through “an illusion of intense but bizarre naturalness.” But he then abruptly abandons this argument:

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99 Kuspit 44.
“In Anselm Kiefer, for example, we watch these signs – still hauntingly contemporary – of German historical and cultural power, being laid to rest in the collective consciousness by being treated idealistically as unconditional sources of artistic power. They become freshly originative, and are thus revealed as archetypal. They suggest that art still has a redemptive power of transformation over history. The new German painters perform an extraordinary service for the German people. *They lay to rest the ghosts – profound as only the monstrous can be – of German style, culture, and history, so that the people can be authentically new. They are collectively given the mythical opportunity to create a fresh identity.* [100]

Kuspit suddenly reveals that the “signs” of “German historical and cultural power” in fact transcend history, that history can be “laid to rest” at the hands of art’s power of archetype. In the same breath that he invokes a trans-historical conception of artistic generativity, he also asserts the notion of “Germanness” as itself an archetypal category outside of history. Relevantly, as Andreas Huyssen notes, “it was in fact the Nazis who promised authentic national renewal, resurrection of the German *Volks* from the ashes of defeat...who practiced mass cremation not for resurrection, but for total elimination of their victims, memory and all.” [101] In what Huyssen calls “a Bitburg of art criticism,” Kuspit mobilizes a rhetorical logic disconcertingly reminiscent of the Nazi period in the name of normalizing and displacing historical painfulness.

Like Kuspit’s narrative of transcendence, the artist emerges triumphantly from his primal ordeal in Celant’s account, which at its most extravagant comes close to evoking the Führer’s victorious descent out of the clouds in the opening sequence of *Triumph des Willens*: “being ‘blood and soil’ also leads [Kiefer] to a situation of clairvoyance...as prophet and messenger, oracle and vehicle of ‘light,’ [he is] able to illuminate the journey in the labyrinth of life: *Mann in Wald*. [102] This comparison to Riefenstahl’s Hitler is perhaps unfairly hyperbolic; nonetheless Celant and Kuspit’s

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100 Kuspit 45-46, emphasis added.
102 Celant, *Destiny* 15.
grandiose, trans-historicizing accounts must have sounded to the German critics like a decisive vindication of what they had designated a megalomaniacal “overdose of Teutonicness.”103 (Huyssen rejects Celant’s genre of laudatory writing about Kiefer with the terse retort: “This is art theology, not art criticism.”)104 Yet there is indeed a sense in which the accounts of Kiefer’s early detractors and admirers amount to an unsettling consensus: both construe his work as affirming a uniquely ‘Germanic’ sensibility, as an aggressive break from the recent past and a reinvocation of the Romantic tradition. What the German critics saw as “anachronistic” and “hackneyed,” in Kiefer’s work, Celant and Kuspit call “transcendent” and “redeemed.” These two ends of the critical spectrum then seem to converge at the very moment of total evaluative disconnect.

The themes and contradictions that emerge from Kiefer’s reception history, I have argued, point not only to the social and political contexts that inform critical address; rather, their basis can be identified in the pictorial strategies of Kiefer’s works themselves. I want to now examine the 1981 Innenraum, one of a series of paintings created just after the Venice Biennale, which exemplifies those components of Kiefer’s painterly practice that so instigated critical antipathy, and which I hope will provide insight into the very particular violence of this practice (Fig. E).

Innenraum depicts a cavernous architectural interior; a magnetic, obscure space. The painting is enormous (287 x 311 cm) and has been executed with such exacting illusionism that, even if glimpsed from the corner of the eye, the somber, neoclassical atrium seems to issue a challenge to the spatial integrity of the exhibition space. Every

104 Huyssen 29.
region of the canvas has been made to cohere to the strict rule of single-point perspective; the painting is, at first sight, a veritable argument for trompe l’œil imitation. If it were not for the back wall of the chamber, the orthogonal lines that indicate the marble floor, that connect what appear to be towering black windows, and that articulate the glass ceiling and weighty cornice would converge at a point level with the viewer’s gut.

One might imagine that Kiefer has constructed his painting in scrupulous adherence to Edmund Burke’s guidelines for producing an impression of the sublime. In his *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and the Beautiful*, Burke writes that while “greatness of dimension” is in general “a powerful cause of the sublime,” it is “depth” that produces the most forceful effect.105 “Depth” for Burke encompasses both horizontal and vertical extension, both the perspectives of looking out, say, into an expanse of ocean, and looking downward from the top of a mountain. *Innenraum* comes close to merging these two orientations. The viewer is positioned as if standing at the threshold of the great hall, her line of sight directed straight backward into the murky recess of the space. But the composition is dominated by lines that not only pull inward, but that also run down the surface of the canvas. The upward sloping lines of the marble floor are given comparatively little space; the entire top half of the painting is taken up by the downward verticals of the ceiling, with its grid-lined skylight and heavy architectural molding. The lines that designate these forms compel the viewer’s gaze both into the fictional space and vertiginously downward from the top

portions of the picture plane, creating an experience, as Burke writes, of “looking down from a precipice.”

With respect to tone, Burke dictates that “all edifices calculated to produce an idea of the sublime” ought “to be dark and gloomy...with a strict caution however against any thing light and riant.” As if in keeping with this mandate, heavy browns, blacks and dark grays predominate in Kiefer’s palette. Yet although the hall has been painted almost exclusively in deep tones, the viewer soon realizes that it ought to be fully illuminated, both by the harsh white light coming through the skylight and from what appears to be an immense fire burning in the center of the composition. The painting designates these strong light sources without representing what would seem to be their necessary effect on the rest of the space. Qualifying his injunction against all things bright, Burke acknowledges that the sublime can be evoked when a great amount of light “overcome[s] the organs of sight,” such as when one gazes directly into the sun. It is precisely this visual experience – of an excess of light that effectively produces the condition of darkness – that the disequilibrium of tone in Innenraum strikingly captures. Painting, of course, has only pale color at its disposal to depict luminosity, but by juxtaposing the shocking white of both light sources with the darkness that surrounds them, Kiefer is able to convey the sensation of looking from great brightness into a dim interior, the moment when sight is destabilized, before one’s eyes have yet had time to adjust.

In his catalogue of the sublime in all of its iterations, Burke names many more features that Innenraum exemplifies, from irregular roughness of texture to the succession

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106 Burke 114.  
107 Ibid 122-3.  
108 Ibid 121.
of uniform parts to suggest “an artificial infinite.” But the Burkian sublime is not a list of attributes; it is a whole psychological drama of visibility. And correspondingly, if Innenraum were merely a picture of an architectural interior, it would hardly generate what Michael Fried calls Burke’s “dialectic of pain and pleasure” – even for Burke, who incidentally was unconvinced that any painting could attain to the standard of the sublime. I will want to situate Innenraum in a theoretical framework that not only incorporates a fuller reading of Burke through the filter of post-Freudian psychoanalysis, but which also synthesizes the various critical perspectives that I have so far examined. A digression through the formal structure of the work, as well as the historical context of its making and its reference, is first necessary.

The force of perspective holds the viewer before the painting, obligating her to look into its expansive, illusory space. The viewer is compelled to consent to an authoritative exploitation of the power of the visual. In three dimensions, the genre of architecture figured in the painting exploits a similar power. To the uninformed viewer, the ceremonious hall represented here might connote a wide variety of imposing spaces, public or private, and aligned with any range of political contexts; but Innenraum is a painting of the Reich Chancellery in Berlin, designed and built by Albert Speer in 1938 and destroyed by the Soviet army in 1945. The painting is based on a photograph of the ‘mosaic hall,’ in which Hitler and high-ranking Nazi officials would regularly meet to discuss strategy around a central map table. According to Speer’s post-war autobiography, upon first entering the space, Hitler is said to have delightedly exclaimed that the hall would give visitors “a taste of the power and grandeur of the German

109 Burke 116.
111 Schjeldahl 27.
Such visitors would internalize the disproportion of power between themselves and the Führer: in Hitler's words, “[t]he diplomats sitting in front of me…[will] learn to shiver and shake.”

If the visual power of this architectural form functioned to encode and substantiate the political power of the Reich, we must determine what relationship exists between this aesthetic-political nexus and its painterly representation in Innenraum. Several levels of remove mediate the arrival of the image at the painting: there is the viewer present in the physical space, there is the photographing of that space, and there is the life of the photograph in German visual culture up until 1981, when Kiefer selected it as the subject of his painting. And coinciding with this journey is the expanse of time that comprehends the perpetration and public revelation of the Shoah, the military defeat of the Nazi government, and the maturation of the generation that inherited its cultural legacy.

But we should first ask what mediates the relationship between monumental architecture and the specific instance of political power at issue here. Just as Innenraum does not explicitly identify its historical reference, nothing in the source photograph indicates that it was taken inside of the Berlin Chancellery besides the stylized eagle of the Reichsadler, barely visible at the far end of the hall. Out of context, little differentiates this architecture from analogous spaces built during the same period by the Soviet Union and by Roosevelt’s public works projects. But as many commentators have established, Nazi Germany was unequaled in the concerted stylistic and ideological cohesion of its diverse aesthetic manifestations, from physical edifice to monumental

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114 For a particularly cogent example of this stylistic affinity, compare the German, Soviet and American pavilions at the 1937 World’s Fair held in Paris.
sculpture, mass rally and propaganda film.\textsuperscript{115} In her \textit{Fascinating Fascism}, Susan Sontag argues that National Socialism did not merely subordinate art to political needs, but rather that it elevated politics to the status of art, suffusing its repressive demands in an intoxicating “erotic surface.”\textsuperscript{116} Fascist aesthetics, for Sontag, glorifies the Romantic ideal of eros sanitized as a “spiritual’ force,” converting sexuality “into the magnetism of leaders and the joy of followers.” This is eroticism not sublimated but endlessly displaced into symbol and ritual, inspiring a “vertigo before power” that at once involves vicarious identification with and docile submission to the leader and leading agenda.\textsuperscript{117}

This argument recommends that the architecture of the Reich Chancellery mosaic hall – its solemn, rectilinear geometry, its polished marble, its majestic skylight – be understood as inescapably bound up in the comprehensive visual field of the Fascist aesthetic. And although the small black-and-white source photograph for \textit{Innenraum} mitigates the grandeur of the original space, it retains a connotative potency that suggests just how distinct and pervasive this aesthetic remains. Sontag provocatively argues that especially for people born after 1940, Fascism continues to exert a compelling allure, as manifest both in contemporary fascination with Nazi memorabilia and in the popularity of cultural products seemingly remote from the Third Reich (her example is Kubrick’s \textit{2001: A Space Odyssey}).

Saul Friedlander articulates the contemporary\textsuperscript{118} valence of this visual field even more forcefully in his \textit{Reflections of Nazism}. Friedlander orient the aesthetic appeal of

\textsuperscript{115} Sontag 91.
\textsuperscript{116} Ibid 92, 102.
\textsuperscript{117} Ibid 93.
\textsuperscript{118} My use of the term ‘contemporary’ is perhaps misleading, as both Sontag, writing in 1974, and Friedlander, writing in 1984, identify the dramatic rise in interest in Nazi visual culture as beginning in the late 1960s and spanning through to their respective presents. Friedlander calls this “the new discourse on Nazism,” and primarily cites the films of Syberberg and Fassbinder and the books of Michel Tournier and
Nazism around the surprising “frisson” created by “the opposition between the harmony of kitsch…and the constant evocation of themes of death and destruction; a desire aroused by the eroticization of the Leader as Everyman, close to everyone’s heart and of a total power of destruction flung into nothingness.”¹¹⁹ Friedlander’s definition of kitsch is local: it refers to the sentimentality of German Gemütlichkeit, the conservative appeal of ‘things as they are,’ manifested in “a return to a debased Romantic inspiration, to an aesthetic stripped of the force and novelty it had 150 years ago at the dawn of modernity.”¹²⁰ To produce the psychological spell of Nazism, this nostalgic appeal to harmony and order meets another thematic of German Romanticism in the mode of its pop-debasement, the stylization of death as “urgent, essential, in some ways religious, mythical.” (Friedlander cites Wagner, Rilke, Stephan George, and Thomas Mann as primary source material). Although his analysis is significantly more elaborate, Friedlander’s duality of kitsch and death maps onto (and complicates) Sontag’s dual emphases on the erotics of mastery and the erotics of self-sacrificing submission: while the kitsch sensibility aggrandizes a subjectivity reconciled with its surroundings, the thematic of death constitutes a fantasy of apocalyptic self-abnegation.

Whereas Sontag’s gloss helps to culturally situate the voyeuristic appeal of Kiefer’s source photograph to a post-War audience, Friedlander’s analysis speaks more directly to Kiefer’s oeuvre and to Innenraum itself. Like Sontag, Friedlander discusses Nazi aesthetics primarily in order to account for art in the post-Nazi era, and he argues that recent artistic projects designed to encounter the Nazi past – what he calls the “new

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¹²⁰ Friedlander 30.
artistic discourse of Nazism” – manifest a profound structural commonality with art under National Socialism. Although he concedes that “this reevocation and reinter-
pretation of the past...helps us better to understand the past itself,” the very structure of his essay, which examines pre- and post-War artistic products simultaneously as elaborations of his central thesis, unites this work as sharing a common psychological appeal.\textsuperscript{121}

While I will ultimately seek to dissociate Innenraum from the structuring mechanisms that for Sontag and Friedlander constitute the Fascist aesthetic, there is no doubt that the painting, and Kiefer’s work in general, are to be squarely situated within Friedlander’s ‘new discourse.’ Friedlander’s construal of Michel Tournier’s\textit{The Ogre} might equally serve as a description of the work Kiefer exhibited at the 1980 Venice Biennale:

Here is the essence of the frisson: an overload of symbols; a baroque setting; an evocation of a mysterious atmosphere, of the myth and of religiosity enveloping a vision of death announced as a revelation opening out into nothing...And so we return to the pseudo-spirituality that envelops such kitsch, finding there constant exploitations of esotericism and mystery as well as the no less frequent evocation of the universe of legends and myths.”\textsuperscript{122}

I have already discussed Kiefer’s overwhelming incorporation of tropes of Germanic myth, which are frequently represented with such gauche ungainliness that the intended reference can seem to waver between the mythical source material itself and the kitsch of myth as pre-packaged cliché. Beyond his explicit references to the Nibelungen saga, the Holy Trinity, and the Markabah, Kiefer also ‘overloads’ his canvases with a recurring vocabulary of idiosyncratic and intentionally esoteric symbols; the floating painter’s palette, the python, the sword, the detached wing, and the sourceless fire are only the

\textsuperscript{121} Friedlander\textsuperscript{18}
\textsuperscript{122} Ibid 45-46.
most pervasive. These symbols tend to punctuate Kiefer’s canvases like clues cast adrift, which might help to decode the enigmatic spaces in which they are situated if only the viewer could access some lost interpretive key. The incongruous fire\textsuperscript{123} at the center of \textit{Innenraum} belongs to this symbolic lexicon. Its relationship to the rest of the space is cryptic; it may represent some divine revelation, some unidentified sacrifice, or the ritual consecration of the dead – that is, either consecration of the dead victims or of their persecutors.

But it is the overall emotional resonance of these works that the above quotation from Friedlander most effectively captures. All of the works that I have so far discussed seem to evoke a magnitude of destruction intractable to understanding. Like the 1973 \textit{Deutschlands Geistesbelden} (which I mentioned only briefly in conjunction with the Biennale), \textit{Innenraum} atmospherically recalls a setting that is overdetermined by its insidious connection to the Third Reich. In both paintings, historical violence is connoted both through the artist’s choice to figure spaces implicated in the crimes of National Socialism and through the rough and destructive handling of artistic media. But the human body subjected to violence is conspicuously absent. Death, then, is everywhere present, but nowhere visible; thereby it becomes an unsettling specter of anticipation.

Both Sontag and Friedlander’s analyses can be read, anachronistically, as 20\textsuperscript{th} century contextualizations of the Burkian sublime.\textsuperscript{124} No less than “the strongest

\textsuperscript{123} This feature of the painting is in fact a portion of the same woodblock print incorporated into several of the versions of \textit{Wege der Weltweisheit} on view at Venice. Whereas in the earlier paintings, the graphic, two-dimensional flames appear to consume the pantheon of German literary figures depicted above them, here the fire both stands in for Hitler’s map table and seems to designate an obscure, commemorative pyre. Later in this analysis, I will return to the significance of this transposition of the fire-image from its original outdoor context into the interior space of \textit{Innenraum}.

\textsuperscript{124} Of course, the application of a Burkian framework is complicated by the fact that the tradition of the sublime is very much a part of the Romantic heritage subsumed by Nazi aesthetic practice. Yet I want to
emotion which the mind is capable of feeling,” the sublime for Burke is a species of pain, a modulation between delight and uneasiness. Burke’s paradigmatic example of the sublime encounter is the public execution of the “state criminal of highest rank.”

The thrill that the onlooker at the scaffold experiences is sympathy at its most ethically thin, a vicarious “substitution, by which we are put into the place of another man.” Fear, according to the logic of Burke’s 18th century scientism, is only a quantitative diminution of physical pain, and so in this model, the terror that takes hold of the onlooker is structurally analogous, if less intense, to the torture of the condemned body itself. But this emotional self-substitution for the condemned is coupled with the awareness of actual safety, and as the viewer’s self-preservational impulse undergoes both the sensations of threat and its elating release, she is filled with delight. (Burke explicitly suggests that we feel “delight…in the real misfortunes and pains of others.”)

At the scaffold, to extrapolate from Burke, the onlooker first identifies herself with the victim of state power only to then derive a vicarious exhilaration from the reassertion of that power through the execution. She feels no outrage on behalf of the condemned, but rather a sequential identification with the two loci of power whose disproportion is dramatized before her, first with the figure of defiance and then with the overpowering force which annuls it. But what is particularly intriguing about Burke’s model – and what makes it pressingly relevant to Innenraum – is the fact that the paradigm of the execution also animates the aesthetic effect of all manner of sublime sights, from the menacing cliff-edge to the foreboding architectural edifice. The body

suggest that it is precisely because this discourse comes from within the contaminated aesthetic field at issue here that it offers a compellingly relevant way to theorize the relationship between Kiefer’s work and this tradition.

125 Burke 86, 93.

126 Ibid 87. The example of public execution cited by Burke is the regicide Damiens, which Michel Foucault also explores in the opening section of his Discipline and Punish.

127 Ibid 91-92.
subjected to violence is not present in these cases, yet the play of aversion from and identification with terrifying power—which is always at least implicitly a bodily terror—still structures the viewer’s emotive response.

If this dynamic still appears somewhat remote from Sontag and Friedlander’s characterization of the National Socialist aesthetic, it may nevertheless help to express Burke’s account in the psychoanalytic vocabulary in which Thomas Weiskel and Neil Hertz have influentially reformulated it. As has already been stated, the power of the sublime object is contingent upon “its [perceived] ability to hurt,” and the fear of injury, Weiskel argues, “points genetically and synecdochically to castration anxiety.” But because the threat is not in fact directed against the viewer, his response is not one of genuine panic. He rather indulges a “fantasy of aggression or resistance” toward the superior power, a positive resolution of which is made possible by his ultimate psychological identification with that power, which assumes the position of superegoic Ideal. The sublime moment thus “recapitulates and thereby reestablishes” the Oedipus complex: “The boy neutralizes the possibility of danger by incorporating or swallowing it… it is now within and can’t hurt him from without.”

It is this formulation in particular which authorizes the structural parallel that I am suggesting between Sontag’s, Friedlander’s and Burke’s respective dramas of seeing. Weiskel’s updated version of the Burkian sublime encourages us to focalize Sontag and Friedlander’s emphases on the erotic through the specific framework of the Oedipus complex. To recap: any object that takes part in the aesthetic field of Fascism is first of

129 The viewer at this juncture becomes inescapably gendered: the sublime moment pantomimes the experience of the young boy in the throes of the Oedipal scenario.
130 Weiskel 94.
all an assertion or glorification of power, and moreover an all-encompassing power, so
incommensurate with the capabilities of the individual that the subject position of
resistance is all but wiped out from the start. This is the merciless harmony of kitsch,
which proclaims itself by enforcing the structural invisibility of all positions of dissent
(or, in Milan Kundera’s words, “the absolute denial of shit.”131) From this simple logic
of elimination, fantasies of resistance are necessarily subsumed into empathic
identification with the ruling power of the Führer, the father figure who obviates all
father figures in his monopoly on the superegoic Ideal. But to celebrate one’s own
submission to a power that demands the mutual exchangeability and eradicability of
individuals is to welcome one’s own death as a function of incalculable and random
probability. Hence the aesthetic genius of Fascism: with the impossibility of accession to
the position of erotic mastery held by the father, death itself becomes an object of erotic
fixation. As Friedlander so suggestively articulates, death is transformed into a figure of
anticipatory revelation, which portends an apocalyptic “annulment of all power.”132 And
to preemptively re-incorporate the language of the previous chapter, death in this
scenario becomes a faceless, unknowable promesse du bonheur.

All this, however, has taken us away from Innenraum. It would perhaps be
implausible to wedge this entire theoretical elaboration into the frame of a single
painting. But it is my contention that the formal characteristics that make up Innenraum
intentionally enmesh it within this aesthetic discourse. Only because it represents the
Reich Chancellery mosaic hall, and only because Kiefer’s compositional choices willfully
amplify the affective power that the hall must have held, does the work come to acquire

Row, 1984; 248.
132 Friedlander 19.
its unsettling potency. As I have already suggested, it is the apparent continuity of Kiefer’s work with the domain of National Socialist aesthetics that so enraged the German critics in 1980, and this painting is no exception. But if the subjective encounter with this aesthetic entails just as much pleasure as pain, we can then begin account for these critics’ awareness of their own affective complicity, which impelled them to construct the discursive figure of the Jewish museum-goer whom they imagined would be more acutely victimized by Kiefer’s work. And if the linkage that I have sought to establish between Kiefer’s project and the Burkian sublime is warranted, we can also start to explain why critics such as Celant saw in Kiefer the opportunity to reassert outmoded Romantic ideologies of transcendent artistic heroism. In Innenraum, the very reproduction of the space of Nazi intrigue through the visual persuasiveness of single-point perspective constitutes a refusal to relinquish the aesthetic ‘heritage’ of the Nazi era. The image-space of National Socialism is mobilized as if its corresponding reality were also very much alive, a return of the repressed accomplished through the virtuosity of figuration.

The blazing fire collaged into the heart of Innenraum serves a pivotal role in consummating this upsetting, erotic interpellation of the viewer. Even at first glance, its black-and-white woodblock rendering is strikingly graphic, far less literal than the illusionistic standard of the rest of the hall. It is centrally located, undeniably positioned within the space, yet it also extends to the bottom margin of the painting, and because its two-dimensional execution makes no distinction of depth, it locally collapses the illusionistic distance between the region ‘closest’ to the viewer and an area that should be at least several meters away from the frontal threshold. By occupying both a central place within the space and simultaneously encroaching upon the viewer’s positional
territory, it denies the viewer the option of spatial detachment from the interior. This technique compels the viewer into the space, facilitating an experience of engulfment that intensifies the physical expansiveness of the work.

But the fire also signals towards a very different viewing relationship to the space. In a picture that aggressively asserts perspectival depth, it is, irreducibly, flat. And when the viewer notices the obstinate two-dimensionality of this superimposed element, other aspects of the painting begin to declare their inconsistency with the work’s fundamental fiction. With the fire’s indeterminable positionality, the ground, ‘all of a sudden,’ begins to look as though it might not support human weight. Whereas the marble pavement to the right of the fire is faintly convex and disturbed by rough gouges of paint, to the left it has been veiled by a semi-transparent coating of milky-pink acrylic that gives it an unstable, almost molten quality. The rectangular fields of black pigment lining the three visible walls of the atrium – what had appeared to be windows, and which, in fact, have also been collaged onto the canvas – are entirely monotone, although their difference of position should be registered by a range of shading. Regardless of their varying spatial orientations they share a common tonal plane of inky blackness, and thus seem to push back in unison against the perspective of the whole. Most subtly, although the dominant centrality of perspective causes the space to appear initially symmetrical around a rigid, medial axis, the entire space is in fact slightly canted to the left with respect to the edges of the picture. As a result, this apparent symmetry becomes offset, jostled by sustained looking. The architecture of the room seems almost to be in the process of pulling itself apart.

I have so far withheld considerable information about the painting’s formal construction, which at this juncture is due to be incorporated. Consistent with the style
of almost all of Kiefer’s large-format works on canvas, Innenraum is rendered in a range of media that includes oil, latex, acrylic, shellac, carpenter’s glue and paraffin emulsion.\textsuperscript{133} These materials, vigorously applied, are chemically incompatible.\textsuperscript{134} The resulting discordant reactions have left deep lacerations, intricate capillary networks of cracks, congealed blisters, and partially detached scabs of pigment, making of the work’s surface a vast field of textural volatility. Material incompatibility has not only ripped open the membrane of paint, but the canvas, in several places, has been literally torn through by Kiefer’s palette knife. This broken surface is suffused with strands of hay and various less identifiable bits of organic matter. An occasional staple or suture is visible. In order to examine this sedimented terrain, the viewer is required to move so close to the canvas that she loses the perspectival coherence of the whole. And even upon stepping back to regain the work in its entirety, once the viewer has become aware of the layering of coarsely irregular, matte and shiny media – which variously absorb and reflect her gaze – it becomes more difficult to reestablish the hall’s spatial integrity.

Thus a cognitive dissonance comes to interrupt the viewer’s initial identification with deep space; this identification is impeded by an awareness of tension between fictional depth and literal flatness, or rather, between the appearance of depth through perspective and a second kind of depth, a tactile, “shallow depth.”\textsuperscript{135} This produces a vacillating effect of being alternately pulled in and ejected from the space. There is precedent for this dynamic in other of Kiefer’s works; Deutschlands Geistesbelden, for

\textsuperscript{133} Celant, \textit{Anselm Kiefer} 491.
\textsuperscript{134} Stedelijk’s chief curator, Geurt Imanse, who facilitated my visit to \textit{Innenraum} in the museum’s archives, explained that Kiefer’s use of chemically unstable materials was destined to become “a constant source of trouble and worries for the coming generations as the painting literally falls apart.” Imanse expected that these conservational challenges were only likely to become truly pressing, however, at some time after he and his colleagues will have retired, provoking him to quip, “après nous, le déluge.”
instance, counterpoises extreme depth with the flattening force of a graphic, two-tone wood grain which refuses to be appropriately foreshortened (Fig. C). But Innenraum, which Kiefer painted eight years after the series of wooden spaces of which Deutschlands Geisteshelden is an exemplary representative, might be understood as culminating the technical dialectic of fictional depth and shallow depth that was developed throughout the 1970s. These contradictory spaces, which I will denote as the ‘y-z plane’ and ‘x-y plane,’ respectively, are elaborated in Innenraum with a concerted rigor that in 1981 was novel to Kiefer’s oeuvre. These spaces coexist but are never reconcilable; to excerpt a phrase of Michael Fried’s from a very different context, they “interpenetrate without losing their separate identities…they coincide through and through but do not merge.”

I want to suggest that these spaces not only provide alternate orientations for looking, but that the x-y plane fundamentally disputes the y-z plane. While there can be no question of a ‘merging’ or consolidating of these two spaces, it is precisely the function of the x-y plane to aggressively reconfigure the way that the viewer sees the y-z plane. As I have already described it, the x-y plane is composed of so many techniques of assault; and its destructive energies, its distortions, incisions, burns, and scarifications are directed at the very coherence of spatial illusion. These techniques constitute a kind of violence specific to painting, what Gilles Deleuze calls “a violence that is involved only with color and line,” to which I would add the category of texture. Unlike, for

\[136\] I will use this denotation for the sake of shorthand. ‘Y-z’ refers to the plane composed of the axes of height (y) and depth (z) on a three dimensional Cartesian coordinate system, whereas ‘x-y’ refers to the plane composed of the axes of length (x) and height (y). The y-z plane designates the space of perspectival depth, corresponding to act of looking ‘into’ the painting, and the x-y designates the literal plane of the canvas surface. Of course, neither of these expressions is quite accurate, both because perspectival depth is the illusion of three dimensions, not two, and because I have described the canvas surface as itself having a certain thickness, a shallow depth. But I have chosen these expressions for their simplicity and for their evocation of intersecting perpendicularity, which emphasizes the “interpenetration without reconciliation” that I will argue characterizes the relationship between these two spatial modes.

instance, a figurative image of a tortured body or a historical catastrophe – which Deleuze calls “the bogus violence of the represented or signified” – this is violence that does not refer symbolically or metonymically to physical violence. I have used a vocabulary of bodily deformity to describe the texture of the canvas surface, but this corporeal resonance is merely the effect of the internal antagonism between the spatial modes I have been discussing, the visible record of the painting’s iconoclastic relationship to itself.

Through his examination of the work of Francis Bacon, Deleuze argues that modern painting confronts two unavoidable tasks. The “problem of painting,” he suggests, is “the attempt to render visible forces that are not themselves visible.”138 The sensory world is articulated by forces and their interactions, but these forces are not to be confused with their perceptible manifestations. To paint a scream, for instance, Bacon must paint not simply the “visible horror” of the open mouth, but must configure the relationship between the mouth that screams and the “forces that sustain it.”139 In order to paint the unseen dynamics of sensation, painting must liberate itself from representation, which always “implies the relationship of an image to an object that it is supposed to illustrate.”140 To enable the violent capacities special to paint to configure force, painting must transcend the mere re-presentation of the visible by severing the image from its referential context. This is the second task that confronts painting, stemming directly from the demands of the first: “to break with representation, to disrupt narration, to escape illustration.”141

138 Deleuze 48.
139 Ibid 51.
140 Ibid 6. Deleuze tends to use the word “figuration” rather than “representation” in order to emphasize a contrast between figuration and the term “figure.”
141 Ibid.
This is precisely the purpose of Kiefer’s textural paroxysms. The grid lines that
designate the skylight have been dragged over a thickness of parched acrylic, whose
creaks are clogged with ashy-transparent shellac. On the x-y plane, these lines are a thin,
cursory interjection. On the y-z plane, they face the impossible task of passing through
the sedimented layers of the canvas’ vertical terrain. The walls seem to contract and
expand as glue oozes out from the viscous protrusions of oil mixed with hay. The
cornice sags under the gross weight of latex caked onto wax. The work collapses into
the blunt fact of its materials.

As a picture of the Berlin chancellery, Innenraum is deeply illustrative,
indissociable from the phantasmagorical life of everything of the Third Reich that
remains for the imagination. The source photograph is only this; “by attesting that the
object has been real, the photograph surreptitiously induces belief that it is alive.”142 If,
as Roland Barthes suggests, the referent always adheres stubbornly to the photograph,
which, “deprived of a principle of marking,” is never able to escape its contingency in
order to reach the level of the autonomous sign, we might think of Innenraum as no more
than an overabundance of mark.143 The painting is a viscerally specific object; whereas the
photograph ratifies the tenacious presence of a space that has since been demolished, the
painting’s presence is rooted in the physical location of its viewing. In the final analysis,
the illusion of deep space is just that, an illusion; it is nowhere materially present on the
canvas, although it continues to haunt it, as if projected on top of it or as if lying beneath
its surface. And if the viewer’s libidinal investment in (visual, political) power is
restricted to the plausible address of the painting’s illusion of three-dimensionality, the

and Wang, 1981; 79.
143 Barthes 6.
powerfully dissociative techniques that make up the canvas surface function exclusively to undercut its hold. The painting, then, both inspires and seeks to destroy our fascination – or at least, its own fascination – with the Nazi image-world. To return to Deleuze, *Innenraum* is a painting of an *activity*, not a space.

These are the grounds on which I want to substantiate my earlier claim that Kiefer’s work manifests a profound awareness of the “traumatic ambivalence” of post-War Germany’s relationship to the historical and cultural legacy of National Socialism. If this analysis is warranted, then his work ultimately eludes definitive inscription, either by Nazi ideology or any other. But while this implies a departure from the German critical response to Kiefer, I hope that it also helps to account for that response. *Innenraum*, my representative of Kiefer’s broader painterly project, only encounters the aesthetic field of National Socialism by taking it into itself, by embodying its operating logic. If Kiefer’s work had not incited both such vitriol and such disconcerting praise, one would be inclined to doubt the genuineness of this pictorial complicity. Further, if the bitter condemnation that animated early Kiefer reception represents above all an archive of affective indications of the work’s intrinsic violence, but if, as I have argued, this reception does not sufficiently identify the nature of that violence, then we can begin to address this gap. The violence of Kiefer’s painting occurs within the frame; it is violence enacted by the image and directed not towards the viewer but towards the image itself: a self-immolating violence.
Chapter 3: Painting Violence, Violent Paint

Part 1: Aesthetics and the Aesthetic Object

“Aesthetics is not obliged as under the spell of its object, to exorcise concepts. Rather, its responsibility is to free concepts from their externality to the particular object and to bring them within the work.” (AT 181)

“The task of aesthetics is not to comprehend artworks as hermeneutical objects; in the contemporary situation, it is their incomprehensibility that needs to be comprehended.” (AT 118)

The formidable expansiveness of Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* provokes the question of its viable application to any individual work of art. Its primary object is Art, and the blunt magnitude of this category somewhat confounds the discrete parameters of this or that particular work. Adorno rarely discusses the same painting, poem or symphony for more than several consecutive sentences, making it difficult to imagine a work – beyond perhaps the icons of art history that he memorializes – which might withstand the sheer weight of his theoretical apparatus. Yet there are moments, such as in the above quotations, in which Adorno indicates quite plainly how his text ought to be read, and how it can be made commensurable to the analysis of individual works. These excerpted passages suggest that aesthetics misperceives its object when it posits its interpretative framework as indiscriminately grafted onto specific works. Rather, because works of art, following the Hegelian formulation, constitute distinct concretions of the universal and the particular, the theory of art must find its bearings within the individual work in order to identify the anatomy of this concretion. Adorno’s aesthetics thus aims to
produce itself not just out of the Continental tradition of art philosophy but out of the specific artwork.

The first chapter of this thesis asked why Adorno articulates his *Aesthetic Theory* in a concerted language of violence, bodily harm and blindness, and sought to determine the work that this language performs for his argument. Through a discussion of Anselm Kiefer’s oeuvre and its critical reception, the second chapter has aimed to prepare for another mode of engagement with these questions. While I have so far chosen to examine Kiefer’s artistic project, and *Innenraum* in particular, with reference to thinkers other than Adorno, the thrust of my analysis of the painting is already almost explicitly Adornian. I want now to extend and problematize the interpretation of *Innenraum* begun in the last chapter in order to focus a further reading of Adorno’s aesthetics of violence.

Although passing reference to Adorno’s notorious dictum that ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric’ has become almost a commonplace in Kiefer criticism, the paucity of sustained reflection correlating these two figures is remarkable.144 There are fairly obvious (and considerably dubious) grounds for charting connection between them. Adorno is known to popular culture as the philosopher who suggested that the fact of the Shoah demands a radical reconsideration of the place of culture in modern society, while Kiefer struck his fame as the artistic representative of the German post-War generation who singularly took on the Shoah as the subject for his art. This shared associative context is misleading, not least because of Adorno’s insistent depreciation of politically “committed” or “socially useful” art (AT 226). As has already been noted,

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Adorno is unequivocally skeptical of “[t]he notion of a ‘message’ in art, even when politically radical,” and maintains that the manifest content of a piece of art is perhaps the least meaningful indicator of its social relevance. To move past such facile connections, I will rely on Lisa Saltzman’s *Anselm Kiefer and Art after Auschwitz*, which represents the only concerted attempt, in the English language literature, to examine Kiefer’s work through the lens of Adornian aesthetics. But the mutual relevance of Adorno and Kiefer is further attenuated by the fact that, whereas he left exquisite analyses of individual works of music, literature and drama, which can serve as models for orienting his *Aesthetic Theory* in relation to particular works, Adorno wrote little about visual art. J. M. Bernstein’s theorization of an Adornian visual aesthetics in *Against Voluptuous Bodies* will be helpful here. Bernstein does not discuss Kiefer in particular, but his application of Adornian thought to modernist painting, sculpture and photography provides an accommodating framework in which Kiefer’s work can be provisionally situated.

Because a shared preoccupation with the legacy of National Socialism does not provide readily sufficient grounds for comparison, I will attempt, with reference to Saltzman and Bernstein’s arguments, to establish the basis of shared concern that makes dialogue between Adorno’s text and Kiefer’s painting viable and valuable. However, justification for this specific coupling is anticipated by the question of how it is that a discursive argument and a visual text can be made to speak to one another at all. Of course, this question is inscribed within the project of aesthetics itself, in its examination of the epistemological structures by which artworks are productive of meaning. To
assume preemptively that an argument can be extracted analogously from its discursive formulation in a given written text and off of the face of a given painting would obviate this question. But such an analysis would concern arguments and not texts, written or visual; and it would not be relevant to the present discussion simply because my treatment of Adorno has examined his elaboration of a particular discourse, and my treatment of *Innenraum* has dealt more with the implications of a formal structure than with conclusions regarding its thematic content. The issue, then, does not so much concern the manifest meaning of *Innenraum* but how it means, and how this mode of meaning relates to Adorno’s account of artistic meaningfulness as encoded in the language of his own text. I will therefore attempt to animate Adorno’s violence out of the formal construction of *Innenraum*, asking ultimately how the exigencies of this painterly form qualify or augment the reading of Adorno already put forth.

In the first chapter I traced an extended comparison between Adorno’s construal of the violence of rational thought as codified in language and the violence of art. If the instrumentalization of nature as exploitable ‘resource’ is – in a sense most near to common usage – a *violence* that humans have done to their world, we can summarily orient Adorno’s notions of linguistic and aesthetic violence in relation to it. The violence of language, which is only consummated in the accelerating process of enlightenment, is imagined to have been first precipitated out of primitive humankind’s awe at some terrifying spectacle of natural power. The original modes of naming this dreaded intractability were mimetic; they sought to appropriate nature’s violent power by invoking it symbolically. As the archaic symbol became enmeshed into fixed systems of signification, however, humans acquired a medium through which to make each item in the natural world commensurable, thereby within the purview of human apprehension,
and hence measurement and ultimately control. In Adorno and Horkheimer’s account, this asserted autonomy of language is equivalent to a simultaneous disavowal of the violence language originally derived from nature and a mobilization of that violence as instead a means to subordinate nature. When it excises its basis in mimesis, language becomes doubly blind: it ceases to register nature (and thus the body) as a source of normative authority, and therefore loses the capacity to reflect upon its own methodological intervention into the world. As such, in its modern manifestation it comes to function as the epistemological basis for nature’s physical exploitation.

Art, for Adorno, is a mode of signification that has preserved its mimetic relationship to nature, and thus continues to recapitulate the appropriation of natural power that constitutes its common origin with language. Artistic mimesis negates empirical reality, a term that is coextensive with ‘nature’ but localized to name the art object’s opposition to the formative context to and against which it responds. Adorno articulates the transaction between artworks and nature in this way: “They speak on its behalf and violate it” (AT 184). By positing its self-governing form as autonomous, any work of art parallels the gesture of dislocation from nature that defines language – and the modern subject – under enlightenment. Yet the work bares the signs of this dislocation in the violence that it necessarily performs against its own formal logic. Because nature is historically constituted, and artworks, like consciousness, lack the capacity to orient themselves to a context beyond their own, the product of mimesis represents nature already in the mode of its present alienation. The irreconcilability of the natural source with formal cohesion bares the blindness of our relationship to nature, as concretized in language, to sight. Thus the blindness of art amounts to the determinate negation of the blindness of alienated language and subjectivity. If art’s first moment of
violence reprises that of linguistic genesis, its second moment acts against rationalized language as testimony of our exploitative relationship to nature and ourselves. It is for this reason that negation, for Adorno, no longer produces unequivocal affirmation: the work stops short at the presentation (enactment) of the wound, lacking the means to picture the beyond that it demands.

This abridged summary unfairly shortchanges the richness of Adorno’s theorization of aesthetic violence. By reducing to a series of definitions what in *Aesthetic Theory* unfolds rhetorically, it undercuts a terminological multivalence that is intended to destabilize the linguistic domination inherent, for Adorno, to any closed denotative system. Adorno’s language of violence is at times so pervasive that it can seem almost to galvanize his argument, yet its significance is so intricately bound up in its original narrative formulation that it largely eludes synopsis. This indicates how obdurately resistant to definitive encapsulation the motif of violence is in Adorno. But while this may serve as an illustration of what Rolf Tiedemann calls Adorno’s deep mistrust of stable definitions, a nagging uncertainty remains: *why must art, for Adorno, be called violent?*

I want to suggest that the necessity of Adorno’s rhetoric of violence is closely linked to the question of why formal reconciliation within the individual artwork is unattainable, why the work, for Adorno, must necessarily remain incomprehensible, internally fractured. Although I have discussed Adorno’s figurative account of the art object as self-inflicting wound and have provisionally described the violence of *Innenraum* as a violence of self-immolation, my analysis has not so far taken up this question adequately. The explanation that I have already cited – that art would betray unreconciled nature by becoming internally reconciled – is more an injunction, an

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146 Tiedemann 134.
aesthetic taboo on reconciliation than an argument for its inconceivability. And to say that the visual presentation of nature always reproduces an alienation from nature merely sidesteps the question: why is art unable to fulfill its aspiration to achieve an integrated, unfractured autonomy? This question can be put differently: why must art be violent?

A question of word choice thus dovetails with a question of the constitutive nature of the art object. To be sure, the second question already assumes a definition of artistic violence as the structural antipathy operating within the work, but it reconfigures the first question in several significant ways. If internal tension is in fact an inescapable requirement for any artwork (that is, if the second question is proven affirmatively), then a vocabulary that will orient aesthetic theorizing in relation to this structural violence is also required. Further, if the artwork’s internal tension thus constitutes a generative demand for the aesthetic project, then what I have called art’s “second moment” of violence is in fact what urges, retroactively, for an account of the first. Our trajectory then needs to be traced backwards, with art’s self-directed violence understood as the explanation and the provocation for the story of art’s formation out of the unbound violence of nature that it appropriates. Were this not the case, Adorno and Horkheimer’s all-encompassing history of mimesis, in language and in art, might perhaps seem fanciful or arbitrary. But if the content of this history is encoded within every work of art, if it is entailed directly by the artwork’s fractured structure, then it is through the analysis of individual works that its logical basis can be substantiated. And Adorno calls for just this methodological approach when he demands that we recognize all “aesthetic form as sedimented content” (AT 5).
And yet, *Aesthetic Theory* may not justify its definition of the art object as fundamentally unreconciled and irreconcilable, at least in the form of a conclusion proven by argument. Adorno writes:

> The rank of an artwork is defined essentially by whether it exposes itself to, or withdraws from, the irreconcilable. Even in so-called formal elements there is by virtue of their relation to the unreconcilable a return of content [*Inhalt*] that is refracted by their law. This dialectic in the form constitutes its depth...The deepest antimony of artworks, the most threatening and fruitful, is that they are irreconcilable by way of reconciliation, whereas actually their constitutive irreconcilability at the same time deprives them too of reconciliation. Yet they converge with knowledge through their synthetic function, their joining of the disjoint. (AT 190)

At this point in his text, Adorno has already discounted the duality of good and bad artwork (“failed artworks are not art”) and so is compelled to formulate an alternate criterion for measuring artistic success (AT 188). He thus introduces the notion of “depth,” which names the encounter with irreconcilability, manifested in the always impossible “joining of the disjoint,” as the sole avenue by which artworks become (nondiscursive) modes of producing knowledge. Depth is at first an evaluative measure that allows one to assess an artwork's relative “rank.” But since depth exclusively represents a work’s convergence with knowledge, it is ultimately what determines its very status as artwork at all. Depth therefore designates the parameters of the category of art, that which makes art not merely an ostensive bracketing term for the infinite multiplicity of artworks. It is a definitional postulate; and it is also an injunction that marks the point of contact of art with ethics. But this does not mean that any work that is productive of knowledge is thereby ethically vindicated. Thus if Adorno’s vocabulary of violence, as I have suggested, stems directly from the fact of formal fracture, the primary function of this vocabulary is to negotiate the treacherous territory between ethical value, art’s redemptive import, and ethical risk, art’s fundamental culpability.
Part 2: Innenraum and the Enigma of Irreconcilability

“The dynamic that each artwork encapsulates is what is eloquent in it...Thus it is that the more insistently they are observed the more paradoxical they become: Each artwork is a system of irreconcilables” (AT 184).

I have so far identified the dynamic structure of Innenraum in the oscillation between what I have called the x-y and y-z planes of sight. These planes only exist by way of one another; if it were not for the illusion of three-dimensional space and its malignant political coding, the textural aggressivity of the canvas surface would lack its tensional orientation. But the original potency of the y-z plane is equally contingent on the antagonism of the x-y, for the uncanny quality that makes it so captivating is only generated from the fact that it seems never to be quite fixed in place; because it is inimical to the physicality of the canvas it appears as an intangible, haunting specter. These two spatial orientations coexist, then, in a mutually destructive codependence.

For Adorno, art meaning is produced processually out of the enlivening ‘friction’ of formal tension. Meaning transpires in phenomenal and historical time, and so cannot be pinned down as ever definitive: “Analysis is therefore adequate to the work only if it grasps the relation of its elements to each other processually rather than reducing them analytically to purported fundamental elements” (AT 176). It would be impossible to “analytically” isolate the x-y and y-z planes as independent bearers of meaning. But their interrelation also refuses the assignment of fixed significance because its effect is one of active, and temporally discontinuous, catalysis.

This last claim calls for elaboration. To argue that the two planes pull ceaselessly against one another, that they preclude formal cohesion, does not necessarily imply that their significative correlation is unstable or invariable. It could be contended instead that
tensional opposition characterizes a fairly fixed and coherent relationship. Furthermore, while even naming these two components of the painting already directs analysis towards the tacit conception of their respective autonomy, to assign them the role of determinate antagonism is to further hypostatize their discrete identities. But my account of the x-y and y-z planes enacts an artificial separation; while it may be useful to designate them for the sake of argument, they nonetheless occupy the same frame. This is an obvious fact but one that bears mentioning. The viewer may never uncouple these planes as wholly alternate orientations for looking, and she only ‘sees’ their interrelation indirectly. What she does see is a painting that restlessly fluctuates in its apparent meaning under her gaze. (This is precisely the cause for the wide variance in critical opinion towards Kiefer’s oeuvre.) To again invoke Deleuze, *Innenraum* is animated by the visible effects of forces that are not themselves visible. It is because mutually inconsistent events of meaning accrue and dissipate out of this instability that these forces constitute a catalytic problem, or in Adorno’s words, a “paradox.” The formal incompatibility of what I have called the x-y and y-z planar relationship serves to instigate an incompatibility of meaning, and thus a demand for formal reconciliation. This, at least, is what I hope to demonstrate. And if, as Adorno suggests, “The solution of the enigma amounts to giving the reason for its insolubility,” these forces must be examined in correspondence to the unstable meanings that they produce (AT 122).

The apotheosis of perspectival illusion would actually ‘trick the eye,’ and fool the spectator into believing that the painting is not a painting at all but a genuine three-dimensional space. The formal elements in *Innenraum* that are conducive to illusion – all those that make up the y-z plane – can be thought of as oriented towards this ideal,
which entails an experience of scale far beyond the already monumental proportions of the painting. In contrast, the tendency of surface texture is to locate the painting as a literal object, measuring 287 x 311 cm. Concerted techniques of compositional exaggeration intensify this tensational contrast, causing the viewer’s experience of space to vacillate between a sense of impossible expansiveness and equally impossible smallness. Kiefer has removed all specific indicators of scale in the figuration of his source photograph, replacing the wall-paneling of mosaic tile with intractable black rectangular forms, one of which covers over the area that in the photograph shows the anterior door of the chamber. This door would otherwise orient the space approximately to the scale of the human body; in its place, what is in the source image a rather small recess on the chamber’s right wall comes to read as itself perhaps a doorway. Constrained as such, this element implies a scale greatly exceeding that of the actual dimensions of the architectural referent. Working against this impression of enormity, key portions of the physical structure have been delineated with an oversized brush, the thick, imprecise strokes of which refer the image to the modest scale of the artist’s hand. These schematic marks encourage an impression of the space as paradoxically small, almost as if it were a toy model.

Whereas in the previous chapter I described the opposition between the y-z and x-y planes as alternately pulling the viewer into the space of three-dimensional illusion and ejecting her from that space, and tied this discontinuity in the viewer’s subjective position to the experiences of libidinal investment in and dissociation from the aesthetic enticement of National Socialism, the drastic oscillation of scale that I am arguing is also enacted along the y-z and x-y binary complicates this reading. Although it maintains the dichotomy between illusionistic intimation and material application, it suggests not the
semblance of space and its repudiation but the semblance of two qualitatively incongruous types of space. But the collision of Innenraum's two planes of sight conjures up a whole matrix of incompatible spaces.

In his Against Voluptuous Bodies, J.M. Bernstein describes a formal caesura within Cindy Sherman's Untitled Film Stills that resonates compellingly with the interpretation of Innenraum that I would like to advance. In these works, Sherman photographs herself under the guise of various clichés of Hollywood femininity, which Bernstein calls not just “ready-to-hand representations of ideas of selfhood, but commandments about who the self must be.”\textsuperscript{147} The mass cultural ‘types’ that Sherman reconstructs are both simulacral – they never refer back to a specific film or an individual celebrity – and instantly familiar. Like the stereotypes that the culture industry endlessly promotes, Sherman’s characters recruit the viewer to conform, to identify with an already socially enforced ideal of gender performance. But Sherman’s characters also work to negate these coded abstractions, revealing “what representational likeness misrepresents, suppresses and denies.”\textsuperscript{148} They are, for Bernstein, both “the vehicle and the victim of the cliché they exemplify.”\textsuperscript{149}

Sherman's characters, the pre-given “mechanisms of abstraction” embodied in her Untitled Film Stills, are objects of desire – the desires to assimilate and to sexually possess – that also function to undermine desire, to sever libidinal investment in the photographic image. As Bernstein illustrates, Sherman accomplishes this dual effect through a complex of framing techniques; her meticulously crafted setups are slightly off-key, overeager, subtly foregrounding the artifice that underlies all that is seemingly

\textsuperscript{147} Bernstein 270.  
\textsuperscript{148} Ibid 254.  
\textsuperscript{149} Ibid 272.
natural in their source material. This simultaneous enactment and subversion of photographic authority, for Bernstein, reveals the imaged body as “a form of meaning beyond representational meaning.” A fairly conspicuous parallel is probably already apparent between this formulation and the account of Innenraum that I have given. But this parallel is even more emphatic in the context of the tradition of modernist painting with which Bernstein aligns Sherman’s photographs, which he polemically designates as “paintings in the absence of painting.”

Bernstein rehearses the commonplace that under modernism art becomes an “autonomous practice,” but he reformulates this maxim as an autonomy of exile rather than assertive self-mastery. Paraphrasing Adorno, he claims that art has become isolated from the norms that govern the everyday, and hence represents not “the achievement of...a space free from the interference of social or political utility” but rather the “consequence and...expression of the fragmentation and reification of modern life.”

He writes:

“What lives on in an afterlife in the modern arts, is our sensory experience of the world, and of the world as composed of objects, things, whose integral character is apprehensible only through sensory encounter, where sensory encounter is not the simple filling out of an antecedent structure, but formative. Conversely then, what has been excised from the everyday is the orientational significance of sensory encounter, sensory experience as constitutive of conviction and connection to the world of things.”

I have already relied on this formulation in my discussion of Adorno’s indictment of the disenchanted and rationalized present. But what is particularly engaging about Bernstein’s text is the way that he invigorates this central claim by providing a narrative trajectory of our estrangement from authoritative sensory experience, moving from

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150 Bernstein 253.
151 Ibid 10.
152 Ibid 3.
153 Ibid. (Italics present in the original text.)
Kant’s structural marginalization of the category of “intuition,” through Descartes’ dismissal of his famous piece of wax as perceived by the senses, to the contemporary practices of commodity exchange and industrial exploitation. Particularly immanent to the concerns of this thesis, Bernstein’s narrative helps to situate the instrumentalized subject’s alienation from agency under the authoritarian state – as indicated, for instance, in the bureaucratized implementation of the Final Solution that Hannah Arendt so provocatively recounts in her report on the banality of evil.

This narrative incorporates and extends Adorno’s rhetoric of violence with persuasive (and sometimes melodramatic) effect: art is for Bernstein a suffering object that registers the continual “slaughtering” of sensory authority; witness to this slaughter, art is unable to “re-animate” a dead nature but can only impotently draw attention to its death.¹⁵⁴ Art becomes a plenipotentiary for delegitimized sensuous meaningfulness, for nature made invisible by reflective abstraction, when mimesis in art ceases to be coextensive with figurative representation. Already with the darting impulses of Impressionist painting, the grounds for art’s relevance to lived experience come to depend not so much upon accuracy of portrayal as upon a cognitive affinity between our bodily apprehension of nature and the evocative potential of the artistic medium itself. Abstract Expressionism’s total abandonment of representational content fully exemplifies this shift, as painting that “has only paint-on-canvas with which to forge a meaning for itself and so be meaningful, a source of conviction and connectedness to the world.”¹⁵⁵ In this account, the materiality of paint-stuff comes to stand in for nature

¹⁵⁴ Bernstein 10.
¹⁵⁵ Ibid 67.
itself, to figure “the semblance of life, and life of the gelatinous stuff, that appears vital, quivering and alive.”  

Here what places us in relation to nature is not likeness but the violence of decomposition operating on painting and object alike, in which the joining between them lies finally and by historical necessity in the synecdochical relation of paint matter (and its potentiality for imaging) to organic/inorganic matter.  

In this interpretation of modernist art’s coerced revelation of its autonomy, the base materiality of artistic media articulate the promptings of nature and embodied experience that have been epistemologically suppressed for the modern subject. With more than an echo of the passage from Elaine Scarry cited in the first chapter, Bernstein is led to the conclusion that “modernist works of art mean the way a body in pain means.”  

Although his text primarily concerns paintings that are generally situated within the modernist period, by incorporating Sherman’s canonically post-modern photographic manipulations, Bernstein extracts his (cogent, but fairly narrow) concept of modernist meaningfulness from conventional periodization and from the specific medium of painting. Kiefer’s oeuvre, like Sherman’s, is indissociable from the art historical category of the post-modern; its unabashed recourse to representational reference would have been unthinkable, for example, in the painterly milieu of the New York school.  

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156 Bernstein 67.  
157 Ibid 73.  
158 Ibid.  
159 Indeed, as was discussed in the context of the Besetzungen photographs, Kiefer’s departure from non-referential abstraction was still controversial in 1969. The perceived disconnect between his painting and the canon of artistic modernism is exemplified with particular clarity in Arthur Danto’s dismissal of Kiefer and his German peers. It was in fact ‘New German Painting’ – its apparent break from the established trajectory of art history – that first motivated Danto to formulate his well known “end of art” thesis. Danto writes that, standing in front of one such painting, “I though: art does not have that kind of future…[this] was not the way things were supposed to go next, and with that it seemed to me that art must after all have an ordered history….” Arthur Danto. The Philosophical Disenfranchisement of Art. New York, NY: Columbia UP, 1986; xiii.
determinate negation, against inherited abstractions and on behalf of the sensuous particular, then they are excused from at least Bernstein’s disparagement of post-modernity as “the concession that art has lost the argument.”

As with the Sherman of Bernstein’s analysis, Kiefer’s illustration compels an unsettling identificatory engagement from the viewer. The evocative rendering of *Innenraum*, as I contended earlier, orients the viewer towards the phantasmagoric image-space of Nazi aesthetic production, a space much vaster than that of the Reich Chancellery mosaic hall. What would seem to most closely reflect external reality – the proportionally accurate figuration of physical space – in fact reproduces a pre-given mechanism of abstraction, an already encoded significative field. Both Kiefer’s collusion with National Socialist aesthetics and Sherman’s photographic stereotyping thus furnish a false semblance of the natural that erotically interpellates the viewer. But the illusory likeness of nature with which the Third Reich ‘covered over’ actual nature, and which is reproduced in Kiefer’s work, is only superficially analogous to the false semblances of the culture industry evoked in Sherman’s photographs. The vigorous dissemination of aesthetic harmony under National Socialism, its imagery of fitness and strength, the fantasies of predestination and the fetishization of epic death, were not only intended to imbue a repressive reality with an intoxicating fiction of agency. The production of a reconciled aesthetic – a cohesive figuration of the subject, her environment, and the Fatherland – functioned most crucially to ensure the structural invisibility of the actual unreconciled, violence against whole classes of bodies. Like the opacity of the very term ‘Final Solution,’ artistically fabricated power deflected all that might have been found incompatible with its authority. This was achieved in Nazi Germany not only by the

160 Bernstein 29.
removal of violence from sight, but by the conversion of potentially detectable signs of violence into the visibility of authorized power. Although the simple lack of public resistance to the deportations is far too vexing a problem even to begin to consider here, the compliance of average citizens with the Shoah would have been unthinkable without the Nazis’ concerted harnessing of art and language to produce the specious truth of their authority.

If Bernstein’s analysis clarifies Adorno’s notion of the blindness to harm that stems from nature’s occlusion by significative abstraction, thereby indicating the link between this blindness and Kiefer’s evocation of National Socialist power, it also helps articulate the meaning(s) of painterly texture in Kiefer. With its non-representational but highly associative marks, its incorporation of dead, organic matter, Innenraum’s material surface seems to gesture remotely beyond itself. And to warrant continued analogy with Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills, this intimation of a certain meaningfulness specific to surface material should undercut the political authority enacted on the y-z plane. This of course would accord with the interpretation of the x-y plane that I gave in the last chapter.

However, before I continue to trace this analogy, I want to register a limited disagreement with Bernstein’s characterization of non-figurative, material meaning. As Bernstein’s text consolidates its argument, the claim that the materiality of the artistic medium signifies the sublinguistic meaning of sensuous experience comes to acquire a suspect universality. Bernstein’s generalization detaches the cognitive significance of the medium (paint, most emphatically) from its embeddedness in specific artworks, with the effect that it almost comes to seem as if paint always means the same thing, indiscriminately, across all individual works. I am slightly overstating this problem, for
Bernstein does perform sensitive interpretations of a number of works of art. But by assigning an independent significance to medium, Bernstein departs from the idea that meaning is only produced out of the dynamic interaction of formal components.

Thus to simply apply Bernstein’s notion of material sensuousness to *Innenraum* would be to implement the very hypostatization of the x-y plane that I have already argued is inconsistent with an Adornian reading and incompatible with the formal logic of the work. Yet Bernstein’s ready faith in material meaningfulness does not necessarily invalidate the generation of certain versions of such meaningfulness in particular works; rather, what is doubtful in his text is the abstractability of this notion from its derivation in formal context. Bernstein’s characterization of Sherman’s *Untitled Film Stills* still holds as an interpretive question for *Innenraum*: How is Kiefer’s painting both ‘vehicle and victim’ of the subject matter it figures?

The image of Nazi power ensures that the consequences of its own violence – the body in pain, the corpse – are concealed from visibility. In Kiefer’s source photograph for *Innenraum*, the mosaic hall is immaculate, gleaming, incorporeal. If we preemptively assert that the x-y plane determinately negates the y-z, then it follows that its coagulated texture discloses the concealed, that it raises the obscurity of the offended body to cognition. Only for this reason are *Innenraum’s* various dispositions of pigment so readily described as lacerations, sores, incisions. The synecdochical correspondence between material sediment and the sensation of wounding, however, does not mean that the painting renders the bodies of Nazi victims visible; the painting is not equivalent to the horrific documentary photographs taken just after the dismantling of the camps. The viewer sees only the friction of latex against acrylic suffused with straw and the physical incompatibility of emulsion with oil. Over and against the authoritative space
that it nonetheless describes, this material disorder attests to the absent existence of all that the space rebuffs. This is precisely what it means for a work to bear the blindness of violence to sight.

In an argument that helps consolidate this reading, Eric Kligerman suggests that the inscriptive potency of Kiefer’s material surfaces conjures up what he calls “the holocaustal uncanny” because Kiefer’s spaces, which never actually represent Nazi violence, are so suffused with “phantom associations of the camps” by our cultural memory of the Shoah, the viewer senses that the “place of extermination” is both intensely present and lies just beyond “the painting’s vanishing point.” Called forth from the furthest extremity of depth, for Kligerman, the extermination chamber is collapsed onto the decimated surface of the canvas.

But I would contend that Kligerman relies too confidently on the notion of cultural memory as a way to resolve the unsettled inscriptive reference of Kiefer’s textural field. To conclude that it is the victims of genocide whose lost corporality is evoked through the sensuous particularity of paint would be, as Theo Buck argues, to “force[e] something upon the canvas that is not there.” However cogently this paint may resonate with a sensory knowingness of the body, the picture appeals to the viewer’s imagination to identify a reference for the sublinguistic cognition it instigates. The body in pain is figured, in the sense of Deleuze’s antithesis between figure and figuration, but the meaningfulness of texture, lying outside of representation, does not translate into the kind of discursive knowledge that would authorize any definitive claim about its historical reference.

161 Kligerman 276.
162 Ibid.
Yet given Kiefer’s choice of subject matter, the viewer cannot help but reach towards the narrative implication of this cognitive meaningfulness. It is impossible not to ask who, and whose flesh, speaks indecipherably from out of the painting. And as the viewer’s experience of texture is infected by narrative(s) of referential content, it becomes clear that the x-y plane does not possess a power of univocal negation.\textsuperscript{163} Rather, negation caves back upon itself as the felt presence of the dead provokes a number of urgent questions for interpretation.

The spectral fire burning at the center of \textit{Innenraum} – which I have argued operates both as an object within the space and as an indicator of spatial detachment – returns again as the site of a complex problematic of inscription. If seen as positioned upon the canvas surface, does it summarize the aggressive energy of texture, symbolizing, on behalf of the negated, a burning repudiation of the Reich Chancellery space and the Nazi image-world? Or if located within the hall, does it represent a kind of commemoration of this space, and by extension a memorial to the political entity that built it? Most troublingly, if it makes reference to another space entirely, does it stand in for the practice of extermination itself, for the occurrence that is the historical cause of the painting’s charred surface?

These divergent readings of the fire and its relation to the space each imply an incompatible reconfiguration of the textural surface. The viewer is compelled, in an impossible simultaneity, to identify scarred, aching pigment with the victims, with their perpetrators, and with the \textit{action} of perpetrating genocide itself. This is why the

\textsuperscript{163} In other words, Kiefer’s textural effects both function as non-representational mark and come to be charged with problematic meaning. To cite this ambivalence in a work other than \textit{Innenraum}, in Kiefer’s 1981 \textit{Margarete}, straw embedded in paint appears both as pure material and acquires the significance, as Lisa Saltzman notes, of “pictorially enacting the conceit of Nazism, namely, that German identity was autochthonous, that it was rooted in and emerged from the soils” (Saltzman 28).
unidentifiability of the dead is, vehemently, a problem for the painting and for the viewer who seeks to encounter it. And as the very orientation of its testimony comes undone, this problem in painting becomes, insistently, a problem of the politics of historical representation.

The viewer is thus unable to determine, with any clarity, what nature of space is depicted in *Innenraum*, what is happening – and what has already happened – in and against it. The weight of all that is not represented exerts a pressure that the visual field is unfit to withstand. And this underdetermination of discursable meaning rebounds to produce a profusion of mutually exclusive, overdetermined potential propositional meanings. (This is why the disagreements between Kiefer’s critics are not amenable to resolution). The viewer can interpret *Innenraum* – translatable as either “Inner Room” or “Inner Space” – as the psychological space of a subjectivity constituted by its memory of the Nazi past, and constituted again by the representation of its remembrance. (Lisa Saltzman makes this argument, writing that Kiefer’s architectural paintings negotiate “the very identity of the German subject…founded in the historical trauma which that subject survives and inherits, if only by virtue of the belatedness of his birth”).

Or the viewer can interpret the painting as a space of sacrifice, with the fire and burnt pigment standing in for the fire of cremation. (This is the argument made by Petra Kipphoff, in her denigration of Kiefer’s “game of extermination in the studio” cited earlier). Or the

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164 Saltzman 3.
165 The problematic implications of assigning a ‘sacrificial’ significance to the Shoah have been most expansively articulated in the continued debate over the most appropriate term to designate the Nazi genocide. As Giorgio Agamben writes: “The term *völk*, which means ‘devastation, catastrophe’, in the Bible, often implies the idea of a divine punishment…In the case of the term ‘holocaust,’ by contrast, the attempt to establish a connection, however distant, between Auschwitz and the Biblical *völk* and between death in the gas chamber and the “complete devotion to sacred and superior motives”...[implies] an unacceptable equation between crematoria and altars; it also continues a semantic heredity that is from its inception anti-Semitic.” Giorgio Agamben. *Remnants of Auschwitz: The Witness and the Archive*. Trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen. New York, NY: Zone Books, 2002; 31.
viewer can interpret the painting as signifying the fate of National Socialism and its protagonists, the fire perhaps denoting their ongoing commemoration. (Donald Kuspit reaches towards a version of this argument: “Kiefer’s use of paint is like the use of fire to cremate the bodies of dead, however dubious, heroes, in the expectation of their Phoenix-like resurrection in another form”).166

It should be clear that I do not believe that the painting can or does sustain any of these positions. But the equally (non)viable interpretations that I have just listed – and this list includes only a representative few – are points on a trajectory that begins with the attempt at remembrance, however compromised, and ends with no less than a pseudo-myth of Nazi ideology. The viewer is thus returned to her initial, voyeuristic identification with the aesthetic field of National Socialism, to the apocalyptic fantasy of redemption in death. But she is now unable to indulge this fantasy, sensing only a demand for an adequate meaning in the painful deficiency of insupportable, false meanings. This trajectory of deficient meaning describes a circle around a missed encounter with a Real that the viewer has sensed but cannot quite see. And I would conjecture that this lack could only be filled by the gaze of the victim of Nazi violence, looking out at the viewer from the most remote recess of the work.

The appearance of this gaze, of course, would turn the viewer to stone. This is one imagined ideal of violent painting. The real violence of painting, on the other hand, is the irreconcilability oriented around the absence of the petrifying gaze, generated in this case out of the formal incompatibility of historically coded space and sticky, curdled pigment. Benjamin writes that “to perceive the aura of an object we look at means to

166 Kuspit 45.
invest it with the ability to look at us in return.” 167 The fractured structure of address by which Innenraum beholds the viewer and speaks, produces only a cacophony of conflicting utterances, an aporetic dissonance.

Part 3: Adorno, Kiefer, and the Status of Witness

“In the face of the abnormity into which reality is developing, art’s inescapable affirmative essence has become insufferable. Art must turn against itself, in opposition to its own concept, and thus become uncertain of itself right into its innermost fiber” (AT 2).

If the foregoing analysis is accurate, then discursable meaning in Innenraum is as elusive as the dreamt “wish” that Adorno relates in the fourteenth lecture of Metaphysics: Concept and Problems. In that dream, as discussed at the very outset of this thesis, Adorno imagines “that I am no longer really alive, but am just the emanation of a wish of some victim of Auschwitz.” 168 Although the anonymous victim’s wish was charged with all the gravity of Adorno’s own life, it remained compellingly indeterminate, an intransitive verb lacking an object. I have sought to argue that the signifying structure of Kiefer’s painting precludes the definitive assignment of meaning, that its catalytic formal tension is also akin to a verb lacking an object. Innenraum is what Adorno calls “a system of irreconcilables,” generating a profusion of mutually exclusive apparitions of meaning. If any of these meanings came to dominate the picture and cancel out all others, the painting would instantly become insufferable, and would wholly warrant the malice that Kiefer’s early critics conferred upon his work. But as long as this work insistently withstands lapsing into mere ‘theme’ or ‘message,’ then it works to unmake the violence

168 Adorno, Metaphysics 110.
of determinate meaning, the specious coherency of address through which the National Socialist aesthetic constituted the Nazified subject.

Early in this chapter, I suggested that Adorno’s *Aesthetic Theory* seeks not to impose itself on the work of art, but rather to compose itself out of the encounter with individual works. At least in part, this methodology accounts for both *Aesthetic Theory’s* responsiveness to the heterogeneity of art and for its embeddedness in the historical moment of high modernism. Although Adorno speaks little about visual art, his aesthetics most closely correlates, as Bernstein argues, with the canon of Abstract Expressionism, with the work of artists such as Pollack, Rothko and Frank Stella. There is indeed a certain blasphemy to discussing Anselm Kiefer as an elaboration of Adornian aesthetics; Kiefer’s figurative rendering, his manipulation of symbolic forms, his unabashed recourse to literary and mythological reference all represent a marked break from the field of works with which *Aesthetic Theory* establishes dialogue.

And yet Adorno, so eager to insist that aesthetics comprehend the historical contingency of artistic forms, allows for the possibility, albeit with a certain skepticism, that figuration may prove itself as a viable mode of artistic practice:

> It remains to be demonstrated that symbols or metaphors in modern art make themselves progressively independent of their symbolic function and thereby contribute to the constitution of a realm that is antithetical to the empirical world and its meanings (AT 95).

This, I want to insist, is precisely what is demonstrated in Kiefer’s oeuvre. On the qualitatively “new” in art, Adorno writes further:

> Radical art today is synonymous with dark art; its primary color is black. The ideal of blackness with regard to content is one of the deepest impulses of abstraction…perhaps art will one day be able to abolish this axiom without self-betrayal” (AT 39-40).
Adorno here mobilizes the term “blackness” in its most literal and most figurative senses, to encompass, for instance, both the monochrome pigment of Kazimir Malevich’s *Black Square* (1915) and the disastrous negativity of Beckett’s *Endgame* (1957). Black is understood as the extremity of abstraction, art’s most vehement mode of resisting the empirical world. If Adorno’s polemical usage is taken as a provocation to reimagine a non-literal blackness, there may be a sense – perhaps against his intended meaning – in which *Innenraum* provides another way to construe this ideal of “[r]adical art.”

The conspicuous blackness of Kiefer’s art is twofold. It is the void of the victim’s gaze – the void that is also a demand – disclosed at the center of his most powerful works, of which *Innenraum* has been my representative. It is also the bitter sense of spectatorial culpability incited by the work’s detestable pleasurableness. However packed with form, color and reference Kiefer’s work may be, these are modes of abstraction from the empirical that are far more dire than any Frank Stella diagram.

If, as I discussed in the first chapter, art’s inwardly directed negativity is for Adorno its oblique gesture towards a utopian *promesse du bonheur*, this entails that art orient itself towards utopia by way of its orientation to its opposite: “Art today is scarcely conceivable except as a form of reaction that anticipates the apocalypse” (AT 85). Again: “aesthetic experience is that of something that spirit may find neither in the world nor in itself; it is possibility promised by its impossibility. Art is the ever broken promise of happiness” (AT 135-6). There is an ambivalence in this second quotation that indicates that the viability of utopia, even as an orientational concept for critical thought, is perhaps purely chimerical, an enigma that ultimately turns out to have been an ordinary lie. The temporal scope within which happiness is an “ever broken promise” is
equivocal, as the “yet-to-exist” may prove to have always been out of question (AT 135). “Spirit,” it is claimed, may never realize utopia; spirit may also be constituted such that utopia was never its possible form. The sequential ordering – anticipation of apocalypse that is ultimately the anticipation of utopia – thus threatens to lapse into a mutually negating coincidence. It is for this reason that aesthetics is always at risk of becoming art’s “necrology” (AT 4).

This uncertainty is registered in the unfolding life of Adorno’s much debated phrase, ‘to write poetry after Auschwitz is barbaric.’ When first written in 1949, it may well have simply expressed a basic disgust at the notion of poeticizing in the face of social degradation, coming to assume the pathos, once taken out of context, of an austere pessimism in the continued value of any culture after the Shoah. But in later iterations, as in the fourteenth lecture on Metaphysics, the phrase is coupled with an insistence that art respond to the situation of its barbarism: “just as I said that after Auschwitz one could not write poems…it could equally well be said, on the other hand, that one must write poems.”169 If to make art after Auschwitz is barbaric, and one must continue to make art, then one must make barbaric art. In the space between art’s current impossibility and its current exigency, art is compelled to confront its own condition of barbarism. Adorno’s dictum might then be read not as a prohibition on the making of graven images but as an injunction to produce images that encounter the limit of total debasement.

The moment at which the continued viability of art’s promesse du bonheur is most threatened is also the moment when the notion of apocalypse ceases to be a figure of

169 Adorno, Metaphysics 110.
expectation. As Adorno asks, “What more is this culture waiting for?” Kiefer’s painting, which demonstrates that even the anticipation of self-negation is already encoded and eroticized within the aesthetic of political domination, is at its most powerful when it verges on a perfect, Narcissistic identity with that aesthetic. The very real possibility that both the gesture towards utopia and the gesture towards death have been finally invalidated, that there is nothing left to witness, becomes the condition of testimony.

170 Adorno, Minima Moralia 33, p. 55.
Figure A

Selection from *Besetzungen*, 1969
From the Series, *Wege der Weltweisheit* (Ways of Worldly Wisdom), 1976-77
Figure C

Deutschlands Gestesbelden (German Spirit-Heroes), 1973
Figure D

Ausbrennen des Landkreises Buchen III
(cauterization of the Rural District of Buchen III), 1975
Figure E

Inneraum (Inner Space), 1981
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