

The Primitivist Critique of Modernity: Carl Einstein and Walter Benjamin¹

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In the “Sirens” episode in Homer’s *Odyssey*, Odysseus, relying on nothing more than the wax in his sailors’ ears and the rope binding him to the mast of his ship, was able to hear the sirens’ song without being drawn to his death like all the sailors before him.² Franz Kafka, finally giving the sirens their due, points out that their song could certainly pierce wax and would lead a man to burst all bonds. Instead of attributing Odysseus’ survival to his cunning use of technical means, which he calls “childish measures,”³ Kafka attributes it to the sirens’ use of an even more horrible weapon than their song: their silence. Believing his trick had worked, Odysseus did not hear their silence, but imagined he heard the sound of their singing, for no one could resist “the feeling of having triumphed over them by one’s own strength, and the consequent exaltation that bears down everything before it.”⁴ The sirens disappeared from Odysseus’ perceptions, which were focused entirely on himself. Kafka concludes: “If the sirens had possessed consciousness, they would have been annihilated at that moment. But they remained as they had been; all that had happened was that Odysseus had escaped them.”⁵

Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno have argued that this ancient

1. From *Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism* by David Pan. Copyright 2001 by the University of Nebraska Press.

2. Homer, *Odyssey*, Book 12, pp.166-200.

3. Franz Kafka, “The Silence of the Sirens,” in *The Complete Stories*, Nahum N. Glatzer, ed. and tr. by Willa and Edwin Muir (New York: Schocken, 1971), p. 430.

4. *Ibid.*, p. 431.

5. *Ibid.*, p. 432.

epic demonstrates the inseparability of myth and Enlightenment. Odysseus is the model of an Enlightenment faith in human technology. Through clever technical means he is able to escape the injunctions of a mythic fate. By creating an exception to the mythic law and thereby destroying it, he replaces it with a new law of human technical mastery over nature.⁶ In Kafka's account, however, the fascination of the story does not stem from Odysseus' cunning, but from the naïve optimism that could place so much trust in "his handful of wax and his fathom of chain."⁷ This interpretation changes the character of the exception to the rule of fate that the story of the sirens presents. Instead of being the first instance of a new law of human sovereignty over nature, Odysseus' escape is an exception to the law of mythic fate that only affirms fate's capricious power to grant survival as well as to ordain death. His actions prove the degree of his self-delusion, and his refusal to recognize the power of the sirens has no effect on these impersonal manifestations of the forces of nature. The punishment that they have prepared for him is far worse than the physical death other sailors had found. In contrast to his predecessors, Odysseus, mesmerized by his faith in his own technical powers, has been rendered deaf to the voice of fate and dead to the world of spirit. The song of the sirens becomes an invention of his own mind that, in its inconsequential entertainment, diverts him from the silence that surrounds him. His survival in the epic depends on silencing the myth; but the fate that lies behind the myth continues to exist, though he is oblivious to it.

In this example, Kafka has taken the epic modernity of Homer's story and reinterpreted it, revealing once again the primitive mythic power that Horkheimer and Adorno seek to deny. If, in their reading, Homer's text struggles to overcome a mythic fate, Kafka's text struggles to revive it. The contrast between the Frankfurt School's modernist reading and Kafka's primitivist one does not demonstrate the regressive implications of progress, as Horkheimer and Adorno argue.⁸ Rather, it reveals an alternative to the twin notions of progression and of regression in history. The progressivist position is not new. It is simply the latest version of the kind of cultural chauvinism that motivates the episodes of *The Odyssey* in which Homer describes how Odysseus' cleverness ultimately overcomes various instances of a backward or barbaric primitivity (e.g., the Lotus

6. Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, tr. by John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1972), pp. 34 and 58-59.

7. Kafka, *op. cit.*, p. 431.

8. Horkheimer and Adorno, *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

Eaters or the Cyclops).⁹ When Kafka reads the opposition between myth and Enlightenment as part of a continuing conflict in human culture between piety and pride, he defends the coherence and relevance of a primitive perspective. In presenting this perspective, Kafka does not close off all possibility of Odysseus succeeding in his struggle against the sirens; he merely redefines the criteria for determining this success. He notes in an addendum to his story that Odysseus' only hope of outwitting the sirens, "although here the human understanding is beyond its depths," is by hearing their silence, thereby recognizing their power, and then feigning a feeling of victory.¹⁰ This chance to effect a true escape from the sirens' trap does not lie in Odysseus' own technical abilities, but rather in his ability to maintain an inner consciousness of their sovereignty.

The opposition between a modern belief in human achievement and a primitive reverence for mythic fate provides the two basic perspectives defining the development of German culture in the 20th century. Both coexist, often within a single text, yet this opposition does not mean that expressionism is ambiguous.¹¹ Rather, it should be interpreted as part of the struggle of a primitive perspective¹² to assert itself in art and literature

9. Horkheimer and Adorno, *ibid.*, pp. 62-67.

10. Kafka, *op. cit.*, p. 432.

11. See Silvio Vietta and Hans-Georg Kemper, *Expressionismus* (Munich: Fink, 1975), pp. 22, who describe a "'dialectic' of subject dissociation and renewal of humanity"; and Thomas Anz, "Gesellschaftliche Modernisierung, literarische Moderne und philosophische Postmoderne: Fünf Thesen" in Thomas Anz and Michael Stark eds., *Die Modernität des Expressionismus* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1994), pp. 2-3. See also Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1992), pp. vi-ix.

12. Since the mid-1980s, a growing body of work has investigated the primitivist character of modernism. See Robert Goldwater's classic study, *Primitivism in Modern Art* (New York: Random House, 1938; Vintage Books, 1967); the catalog of the exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York edited by William Rubin, "*Primitivism*" in *20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984); and such recent books as Karla Bilang, *Bild und Gegenbild: Das Ursprüngliche in der Kunst des 20. Jahrhunderts* (Stuttgart: W. Kohlhammer, 1989); Lloyd, *German Expressionism, op. cit.*; Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1994); and Peg Weiss, *Kandinsky and Old Russia: The Artist As Ethnographer and Shaman* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1995). Other recent works include Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995); Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park, PA: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995); Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Michael D. Hall and Eugene W. Metcalf Jr., eds., *The Artist Outsider: Creativity and the Boundaries of Culture* (Washington, DC: Smithsonian Institution Press, 1994); and Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses* (New York: Routledge, 1993).

after a prolonged suppression of primitive forms.¹³ According to this interpretation, “modernism” is a misnomer for early 20th-century aesthetic movements. The idea of progress and opposition to the notion of tradition embedded in this word do not describe, but rather contradict the motivating impulses of this “primitivist” movement.

The confusion is not simply due to an interpretive fallacy, but to the historical situation of modernization against which the expressionists were revolting. The artists and writers of this period were deeply affected by the rapid pace of industrialization, which had transformed Europe from a traditional agrarian to a modern industrial society.¹⁴ Yet, 20th-century aesthetic movements did not develop as an accompaniment to modernity, but as a reaction to and revolt against it. The age of industrialism institutionalized an aesthetics of autonomy in the 19th century and in the 20th century avant-garde attempts to merge art with life sought to overturn this Enlightenment aesthetics of autonomy and to criticize social modernization.¹⁵ This double revolt against modernity leads to the development of a perspective on culture that does not supplement or accompany, but contradicts and replaces a modern perspective. Rather than subsuming 20th-century art within a larger process of modernization, understanding this art as fundamentally primitivist serves to emphasize the polar opposition between the modern and the primitive.

The equation of expressionism with primitivism brings with it a reinterpretation of the former’s historical context. It makes expressionism a result of the imitation of primitive art forms rather than the creation of the radically new, and part of a cyclical rather than evolutionary European

13. See also Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); and C. Stanley Urban and S. Thomas Urban in collaboration with Jeff Urban, *Anti-Primitivism and the Decline of the West: The Social Cost of Cultural Ignorance*, 2 vols. (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1993). With regard to German literature, Regina Baltz-Balzberg provides an overview of broadly defined primitivist tendencies in the early 20th century in order to demonstrate the “primitivity of modernism” in *Primitivität der Moderne: 1895-1925 am Beispiel des Theaters* (Königstein im Taunus: Hain, 1983), p. 7. Meanwhile, August K. Weidmann makes a similar argument about the pervasiveness of “‘primalizing’ tendencies” in German literature and art in the early 20th century to show, however, that modernist primitivism “knowingly or unaware, paved the way for Hitler.” See *The German Quest for Primal Origins in Art, Culture, and Politics 1900-1933: “Die Flucht in Urzustände”* (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1995), p. 4.

14. See, for example, Vietta and Kemper, *op. cit.*, pp. 18-19.

15. See Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, tr. by Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), pp. 47-50.

development. Primitive art, including the art of Africa and the South Seas as well as medieval and 20th-century European folk and religious art, played a crucial role in the development of 20th-century European art, analogous to the influence Greek classicism had on the Renaissance. In both cases, art from other cultures inspired a radical shift in the development of Western art. Yet both the Renaissance and the rise of primitivism were integral parts of an inner-European movement between the two poles of progressivism and primitivism. In fact, the 20th-century primitive renaissance was described by expressionists such as Franz Marc as the completion of a cyclical trajectory that began in the Middle Ages, moved through the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, and ended with a return to the aesthetic forms of, among others, the pre-Renaissance Italian primitives.¹⁶ Thus, the first formal definition of primitivism, published in France at the turn of the 20th century, designated it as “*imitation des primitifs*,” where the word *primitif* referred to pre-Renaissance European art.¹⁷

This initial understanding demonstrates that the primitive did not simply invade the European cultural tradition from outside, but rather developed out of the European critique of a Renaissance-oriented aesthetic. The primitive does not designate something foreign, but familiar, though perhaps repressed. While the receptivity of European artists to the primitive art of Africa and the South Seas sometimes reverted to exoticism,¹⁸ the underlying impulse was determined by a coincidence of goals pursued by these European primitivists and the tribal primitives they imitated.

Defining expressionism as a primitivist critique of modernity does not limit the heterogeneity of positions encompassed by this movement. Rather, it explains the explosion of new artistic practices that characterize late 19th and early 20th century European culture. The examples of primitive art from Africa, the Americas, and the South Seas that expressionists used, all came from cultural contexts in which no unifying, imperial culture was dominant. Instead, they came, from cultural environments in which the art of each particular tribe was allowed to develop on its own. Primitive art is local art, and

16. Franz Marc, “Two Pictures,” in *The Blaue Reiter Almanac*, Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc, eds. (1912; reprint, New York: Viking, Da Capo Paperback, 1974), pp. 65-67. This was a documentary edition edited by Klaus Lankheit.

17. *Nouveau Larousse illustré* (Paris: Librairie Larousse, 1897-1904), s.v. “primitif,” p. 32.

18. For an analysis of such exoticism in Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde, see Lloyd, *op. cit.*, pp. 161-234, and Russell Berman, “German Primitivism/Primitive Germany: The Case of Emil Nolde,” in *Fascism, Aesthetics, and Culture*, ed. by Richard J. Golsan (Hanover, NH: University Press of New England, 1992), pp. 56-66.

the primitivism of expressionist art becomes evident not only in the stylistic affinities between expressionist and African art, but also in the genesis of expressionism in a series of local groups of artists in separate centers such as Berlin, Dresden, Munich, Vienna, and Prague. One of the main characteristics of primitivism is thus the elimination of a unifying “imperialist” perspective, and a multiplication of local aesthetic possibilities.

The aesthetic multiplicity of primitivism also corresponds to a political heterogeneity. The political allegiances of expressionist writers and artists are notoriously difficult to typify. Yet, when considered as political primitivists, writers and artists with such varying political sympathies as the communists Johannes Becher and Max Pechstein, the anarchists Carl Einstein and Franz Kafka, and the protofascists Gottfried Benn and Emil Nolde all suddenly appear as presenters of variations on a single political theme.¹⁹ Though the specific characteristics of each variant, whether communist or anarchist or fascist, were to have dire consequences for the political history of Europe, the primitivist political outlook they shared clearly links these figures to each other as expressionists.²⁰

But, if primitivism is linked to such aesthetic and social variety, how can a specifically primitivist perspective be defined? What do all of the competing primitivist aesthetic forms share? Determining what primitivism excludes is a first step, and primitivism excludes the idea of progress along with aesthetic forms based on this idea. Progressivism and primitivism²¹ can be distinguished according to their view of the possibilities of human endeavor in light of recent advances in science and technology. While a progressivist view discerns in modern, technological development a fundamental change in the parameters of human existence, the

19. For a description of Kafka's anarchist interests, see Michael Löwy, *Redemption and Utopia: Jewish Libertarian Thought in Central Europe: A Study in Elective Affinity* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1992), p. 72 and 82-83.

20. For an analysis of the different political tendencies within “charismatic modernism,” see Russell Berman, *The Rise of the Modern German Novel: Crisis and Charisma* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1986).

21. Use of the word *primitive* is an attempt to redeem it from a modern, evolutionary perspective and emphasize the proximity between the primitive and the primitivist. If the primitivist character of modernism has been demonstrated, it has also resulted in such a broad definition of primitivism that it now encompasses not just an interest in the art of Africa, the Americas, and Oceania, but much more. The result is that what is “primitive” rather than “primitivist” in modernism has been obscured and even denied. See Connelly, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6; and William Rubin, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-6. See also Thomas McEvilley *et al.*, “Doctor Lawyer Indian Chief: ‘Primitivism’ in 20th Century Art at the Museum of Modern Art,” in Russell Ferguson *et al.*, eds., *Discourses: Conversations in Postmodern Art and Culture* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990), p. 342.

primitivist view emphasizes that technological progress does not change the existential situation of the modern compared to the primitive.

It is necessary, however, to demonstrate this distinction in perspective, and to sketch out a preliminary definition of primitivism and the viewpoint it seeks to recover. This can be done by comparing the critique of modernity developed by the art historian Carl Einstein (1885-1940) with that of Walter Benjamin (1892-1940). Both were German Jews with secular educations, who nevertheless became interested in the relations between art and religious forms. Neither of them held any academic or official positions, and they lived by writing books, reviews, and articles for journals and newspapers. They spent most of their lives in Berlin and Paris, writing and publishing in both German and French. Finally, they both committed suicide in southern France in 1940, shortly after the German invasion.²² But, though Benjamin has enjoyed a recent revival, Einstein's work remains unknown outside of a small circle of specialists.

The reasons for the previous neglect of Einstein's work and the current interest coincide. While his political affinities placed him in the same category as leftist and anarchist intellectuals such as Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Gustav Landauer, and Franz Kafka, his theories contain an unmistakable metaphysical element that ultimately lines up closer to conservative figures such as Gottfried Benn, Ernst Jünger, or Carl Schmitt. As a testament to the unsettling affinities between left-wing and right-wing critiques of modernity between the wars, Einstein's work was unassimilable by a Cold War, liberal academic perspective. As a consequence of the end of the Cold War and a renewed postmodern critique of Enlightenment, it has now begun to reemerge.

Einstein's innovation as a thinker becomes immediately evident when his work is compared with Benjamin's. Though Benjamin is known for being a critic of the idea of progress, his concept of modernity is nevertheless founded on a progressivist consciousness that believes in evolution from a traditional to a modern world. By contrast, Einstein's primitivist refusal to accept the validity of an evolutionary understanding of the distinction between tradition and modernity leads him to view them

22. See Sibylle Penkert, *Carl Einstein: Beiträge zu einer Monographie* (Göttingen: Vandenhoeck & Ruprecht, 1969); and Bernd Witte, *Walter Benjamin: An Intellectual Biography* (1985), tr. by James Rolleston (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1991). For details about Benjamin's death, see Ingrid Scheurmann, "New Documents on Walter Benjamin's Death," in Ingrid and Konrad Scheurmann, eds., *For Walter Benjamin*, tr. by Timothy Nevill (Bonn: Arbeitskreis selbständiger Kultur-Institute, 1993), pp. 265-97.

as opposite poles of a constant conflict within human society. The strength of Einstein's view lies in his ability to delineate a distinction between rationalist and mythic modes of relating to nature. By the same token, the weakness of Benjamin's argument stems from his inability to recognize that myth and ritual remain crucial for human experience because rational critique is an imperfect tool for organizing cultural life.

Commentators have noted in Benjamin's work an ambivalent attitude toward tradition and ritual.²³ He acknowledges the hypothetical value of aura and ritual for maintaining the possibility of coherent, communal experience in the modern psyche, but argues that traditional forms dependent on aura and ritual can no longer function in the modern world.²⁴ He voices his regret at the loss of the cult ritual when, in "The Storyteller" (1936) and "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire" (1939), he recognizes that the aura of the cult object is the prerequisite for genuine experience: "Where there is experience in the strict sense of the word, certain contents of the individual past combine with material of the collective past. The rituals with their ceremonies, their festivals (probably nowhere recalled in Proust's work) kept producing the amalgamation of these two elements of memory over and over again. They triggered recollection at certain times and remained handles of memory for a lifetime."²⁵ In contrast to modern genres such as the novel, traditional forms such as oral storytelling presuppose the audience's embeddedness within a collective cultic experience. Benjamin's mourning of the end of storytelling is based on his recognition of the need for cultural constructs that integrate individual experience with collective memory.

Though Benjamin's nostalgia for traditions and rituals such as storytelling may be read as a celebration of tradition, his work is built on the anti-traditionalist assumption that culture evolves as a progression from a traditional to a modern world. He attributes the causes of this evolution to advances in technology that create an incommensurability between a modern situation and traditional modes of experience. Describing a modern

23. Rainer Rochlitz, *The Disenchantment of Art: The Philosophy of Walter Benjamin*, tr. by Jane Marie Todd (New York: Guilford Press, 1996), p. 214. See also Richard Wolin, *Walter Benjamin: An Aesthetics of Redemption*, 2nd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), pp. 224-25.

24. John McCole notes that: "Benjamin's work celebrates and mourns, by turns, the liquidation of tradition." See McCole, *Walter Benjamin and the Antinomies of Tradition* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993), p. 8.

25. Walter Benjamin, "On Some Motifs in Baudelaire," in *Illuminations*, tr. by Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken, 1968), p. 159. See also Benjamin, "The Storyteller," in *ibid.*, p. 102.

situation inaugurated by WWI, in which communicable experience is no longer possible, Benjamin writes: “For never has experience been contradicted more thoroughly than strategic experience by tactical warfare, economic experience by inflation, bodily experience by mechanical warfare, moral experience by those in power. A generation that had gone to school on a horse-drawn streetcar now stood under the open sky in a countryside in which nothing remained unchanged but the clouds, and beneath these clouds, in a field of force of destructive torrents and explosions, was the tiny, fragile human body.”²⁶ Here, Benjamin depicts the modern decline of experience as an incommensurability of the body (the measure of experience for the individual) with the landscape in which it exists. He blames this situation on the scale of modern structures, which have replaced familiar contexts. In Benjamin’s account, the conflict between the individual and the outside world is a specifically modern dilemma that results from new technology and mass systems of government and economy.

This decidedly progressivist vision of a world that has advanced beyond the capacities of traditional culture undermines any recognition of the value of rituals for constituting human experience. Because Benjamin believes that modernization has made the decline of tradition irreparable, he argues that collective experience can no longer be transmitted, as before, in the form of stories, and that “the art of storytelling is coming to an end.”²⁷ His defense of the possible value of ritual is thus made with the consciousness of its obsolescence. Because he views the liquidation of tradition as an irreversible progression, he turns to modern methods to dispel the alienation that he describes. The solution he offers is to create new hybrid forms such as “profane illumination,” which he sets up as a replacement for religious illumination: “the true, creative overcoming of religious illumination does not lie in narcotics. It resides in a *profane illumination*, a materialistic, anthropological inspiration, to which hashish, opium, or whatever else can give an introductory lesson.”²⁸

Such new secular forms do not create auratic or cultic experience;

26. *Ibid.*, p. 84.

27. *Ibid.*, p. 83.

28. Benjamin, “Surrealism” in *Reflections*, tr. by Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken, 1986), p. 179. In his attempt to develop a theory of mimesis as a “sensuous knowledge in our time” (p. 44), Michael Taussig reads Benjamin as a primitivist (*op. cit.*, pp. 19-20). Yet, because Benjamin attempts to merge “primitive” structures into a “modern” situation in his idea of “profane illumination,” Taussig’s own concept of sensuous knowledge becomes a fusion “where science and art coalesce to create a defetishizing/reenchanted modernist magical technology of embodied knowing” (p. 24).

rather, they foster rational critique and reflection. In contrast to the attitude of submission to a collective past that Benjamin sees in the ritual, his ideal art is a kind of “shock defense” that transforms potentially traumatic experiences, which, much like rituals, would affect the very structure of consciousness, into everyday events that are assigned a specific place in memory: “Without reflection there would be nothing but the sudden start, usually the sensation of fright which, according to Freud, confirms the failure of the shock defense.”²⁹ To cultivate the reflection necessary for a successful “shock defense,” Benjamin seeks (e.g., in “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” [1936]) to develop in the film audience a critical attitude toward the outside world. He looks to film as montage rather than as storytelling to find the essential aesthetic objects of the 20th century. Such a replacement of ritual with reflection is only possible if one believes in the capacity of consciousness to plumb the depths of experience through rational means and denies that nature can present a tragedy-producing opposite to human endeavor. According to Benjamin, myths and rituals can no longer serve any function for consciousness and are simply archaic constructs that need to be replaced by rational critique.³⁰

Yet, Benjamin remains unhappy with this solution, not because he believes the intellect is inadequate to the task of replacing myth, but because he mourns the loss of any resistance to the subject on the part of the object: “To perceive the aura of an object we look at means to invest it with the ability to look at us in return. This experience corresponds to the data of the *mémoire involontaire*.”³¹ The submission to the gaze of the object is a submission to one’s own repressed, involuntary memories and, consequently, to those experiences that are fundamental to the construction of the psyche. Benjamin searches for a modern version of this experience of the object in Baudelaire’s *correspondances* and in Proust’s *mémoire involontaire*. But, in doing so, he must bring back into his theory what he had been trying to ban from it all along: tragedy and mythic sacrifice. For the gaze of the object and the involuntary character of memories are nothing other than continuing reminders of the mythic violence that continues to limit and frustrate human aspirations, threatening the

29. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” *op. cit.*, p. 163.

30. Benjamin, “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction,” in *Illuminations*, pp. 230-41. For a discussion of Benjamin’s progressivism, see Russell Berman, *Modern Culture and Critical Theory: Art, Politics, and the Legacy of the Frankfurt School* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1989), pp. 34-36.

31. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” *op. cit.*, p. 188.

sovereign power of the intellect. A recognition of this violence must lie at the basis of every attempt to recover the auratic gaze of the object, which by definition must be based in a realm that is beyond the control of the intellect and is thus a potential source of danger.

To make a return to rituals and the gaze of the object possible without having to accept the necessity of mythic violence, Benjamin attempts to distinguish between the horror of nature in myth and the overcoming of this horror in the fairy tale. In this way, he is able to posit a secret harmonious bond between humankind and nature that overcomes the violence of myth: "The liberating magic which the fairy tale has at its disposal does not bring nature into play in a mythical way, but points to its complicity with liberated man."³² Benjamin's attempt to separate the happiness of the fairy tale from the horror of myth is based on the assumption of nature's "complicity with liberated man." The belief in this harmony between humankind and nature betrays a naïve faith in the power of technical means, not just to transform life, but to completely subdue nature to the point that it no longer presents any resistance or danger to human endeavor. As Winfried Menninghaus writes in reference to Benjamin's distinction between myth and fairy tale, "the point of Benjamin's idiosyncratic definition of fairy tale (and partly also of epic) is the possibility of a liberation or redemption from the myth through a 'thwarting of the tragic,' and this means above all: without sacrifice and expiation."³³

Such a denial of the relevance of tragedy and sacrifice for the modern age is not based on any objective evidence, but only on the belief that "one's chances increase as the mythical primitive times are left behind."³⁴ Benjamin's attempt to reconcile humankind with nature through visions of the happiness of fairy tales, profane illumination, or poetry as shock defense is based on his inability to accept the basic contradiction between humankind and nature that creates the necessity for myth and ritual. He denies this contradiction, first, as in the passage quoted earlier, by postulating a secret harmony between humankind and nature, and second, by arguing that the age of myth has been superseded in the modern era because of the advance of "productive forces."

32. Benjamin, *ibid.*, p. 102.

33. Winfried Menninghaus, *Schwellenkunde: Walter Benjamins Passage des Mythos* (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1986), p. 91. Menninghaus also describes Benjamin's vision of myth as being determined by his utopian goal of liberation from the domination of nature (pp. 73-75 and 80-81).

34. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *op. cit.*, p. 102.

Using this idea of reconciliation between humankind and nature in the fairy tale, Benjamin seeks to find such harmonious forms of ritual in the work of Baudelaire and Proust. Specifically, he reads Proust's work as an effort "to restore the figure of the storyteller to the present generation."³⁵ But in his discussion of storytelling, Benjamin notes an important difference between these modern ritual elements in the novel and traditional storytelling. In contrast to the collective context of the storyteller, "The novelist has isolated himself. The birthplace of the novel is the solitary individual, who is no longer able to express himself by giving examples of his most important concerns, is himself, uncounseled, and cannot counsel others."³⁶ Rather than submitting in the story to the collective experience embedded in the ritual, the individual in the novel submits to the force of associations derived from private memories.

Benjamin's focus on the Proustian *mémoire involontaire*, though framed as an attempt to retrieve ritual, only demonstrates the novelist's inability to provide a collective, cultic experience of the object,³⁷ since the taste of the madeleine bringing back the involuntary memory of Combray for Proust can only reproduce on an individual level the collective remembrance embedded in the Passover bread or the Catholic communion. Since the primary function of ritual is to integrate individual experience into a collective totality, the *mémoire involontaire* cannot be a blueprint for a modern form of "profane illumination," as Benjamin contends. It can instead only be a symptom of the decline of collective experience in storytelling, and of the institutionalization of social atomization in the novel. This shift from traditional to modern experience is not a form of technological progress or a sign of the obsolescence of rituals. Rather, it is a result of a conscious turning away from collective rituals that, according to Einstein, has led, not to a new rationalized form of experience, but only to the proliferation of private neuroses.

In contrast to Benjamin's progressivism, Einstein's primitivist refusal to accept the validity of an evolutionary understanding of the distinction between tradition and modernity leads him to view them as opposite poles of a constant conflict. Where Benjamin searches for reconciliation, Einstein maintains the irresolvability of contradiction. Einstein's concept of a

35. Benjamin, "On Some Motifs," *op. cit.*, p. 159.

36. Benjamin, "The Storyteller," *op. cit.*, p. 87.

37. See Helmut Pfotenhauer, *Ästhetische Erfahrung und gesellschaftliches System: Untersuchungen zu Methodenproblemen einer materialistischen Literaturanalyse am Spätwerk Walter Benjamins* (Stuttgart: J. B. Metzler, 1975), pp. 75-76.

modern primitivization does not differentiate between myth and fairy tale, and does not offer any idea of a “complicity” between humankind and nature. Consequently, in humankind’s relation to nature there is no possible return to a harmonious, but only to a primitive state of conflict. This perspective is founded on the assumption that the situation of the modern with respect to the outside world is no different than that of the primitive.

In “The Storyteller,” Benjamin describes the incommensurability between the individual and the outside world as a modern experience of alienation from a terrifying world. According to the primitivist viewpoint, this incommensurability is nothing new, but rather the basic presupposition of every mythic system. Einstein writes: “But now, what is the relation of the artistic man to the world? Precisely that of the primitive man, he is fearful of it, he is inhibited by the multiplicity of impressions of civilization, he fears reality, which constantly wants to shock him and tear him out of himself.”³⁸ Einstein interprets the “modern” alienation of the individual from external reality as a return to a primitive attitude toward a hostile world. This attitude is a characteristic of the 20th century “artistic man,” who does not approach reality with the critical attitude of the 19th-century positivist. Instead, he relates to the world with an aesthetic sensibility that recognizes both the power of outside forces and the corresponding inadequacy of rational constructs to organize consciousness.

While Benjamin characterizes the irreversible decline of storytelling as “a concomitant symptom of the secular productive forces of history,” for Einstein the modern decline of communal experience is the result of an abandonment of mythic structures that mediate between the individual and the outside world.³⁹ Like Benjamin, Einstein characterizes the modern situation as an alienation of the individual from the outside world. But instead of providing a technical and materialist explanation for this alienation he suggests a spiritual one. From his viewpoint, technological advances in themselves do not produce a cultural situation of modernity. Rather, modernity stems from the attempt to replace mythic structures of experience with scientific and rational ones that fail to recognize the

38. Carl Einstein, “Probleme heutiger Malerei,” in Carl Einstein, *Werke*, Vol. 3, 1929-1940, Marion Schmid and Liliane Meffre, eds. (Berlin: Medusa, 1985), p. 576. Cf. Georg Simmel, “The Metropolis and Mental Life,” in *The Sociology of Georg Simmel*, tr. and ed. by Kurt H. Wolff (New York: Free Press, 1950), pp. 409-24, which describes the shock effects of the modern city, but sees them as unique to modern urban society. Simmel was one of Einstein’s professors when he was studying in Berlin. See Penkert, *op. cit.*, pp. 44-45.

39. Benjamin, “The Storyteller,” *op. cit.*, p. 87.

unconscious forces of the psyche. In a 1931 lecture on 20th-century art, Einstein remarks: “The mechanization and intellectualization of life was so excessive that a mass of repressions was stored up of forces that could not be utilized within a rational system.”⁴⁰ The alienation of the individual is a result of an application of scientific reasoning in a spiritual area in which it does not belong, leading to a buildup of repressed forces. Early 20th-century primitivist art, however, presents a return to mythic tendencies, which have hitherto been suppressed, but are still necessary in the modern world: “thus something returns, the romantic valorization, the turn to the fairy tale, exactly like the primitive man. Now all of these mythic forces regain their rightful place and man no longer agrees to submit to the inhibitions of a selective rationality.”⁴¹ Because the structures of reason are incapable of organizing individual experience, the return of mythic forces in the fairy tale is not a regression, but rather the return of a repressed dimension in human experience to its rightful place.

Because Einstein rejects the notion of progress, he also does not treat the return to a primitive attitude as a regression to an earlier stage of a supposed human evolution toward modernity. His primitivism does not advocate a rejection of modern technology, a “return to nature,” or a simple reestablishment of the myths of another era. Rather, he attempts to show that mythic thought addresses psychological and spiritual issues that remain relevant even in an age of technological modernization. 20th-century art is consequently bound by the same parameters that have governed the construction of myth up to the present day.

The consequences for Benjamin’s and Einstein’s aesthetics of their disagreement about tradition become most evident in their readings of fascist cult rituals. While Benjamin has been described as the quintessential opponent of fascism, Einstein’s defense of myth has been read as a sign of an ambiguous complicity with a fascist “neo-primitivism.”⁴² His differentiation between conceptual and aesthetic forms leads him to support an aestheticization of experience, bringing him very close to what Benjamin condemns as a characteristic of fascism: “The logical result of Fascism is the introduction of aesthetics into political life. The violation of the masses, whom Fascism, with its Führer cult, forces to their knees,

40. Einstein, *op. cit.*, Vol. 3, p. 578.

41. *Ibid.*, Vol. 3, p. 581.

42. Klaus H. Kiefer, *Diskurswandel im Werk Carl Einsteins: Ein Beitrag zur Theorie und Geschichte der europäischen Avantgarde* (Tübingen: Max Niemeyer Verlag, 1994), p. 519.

has its counterpart in the violation of an apparatus which is pressed into the production of ritual values.”⁴³ For Benjamin, the key issue in the aestheticization of political life is the production of ritual values in the cult. While Einstein sees them as essential for the collective integration of experience, for Benjamin cult and ritual have become as obsolete as the horsedrawn streetcar. For Benjamin, this obsolescence of ritual elements determines their reactionary character in the hands of the fascists.⁴⁴ By contrast, Einstein insists on the continuing relevance of the experience of cultic submission as the only means for a collective appropriation of history.⁴⁵ For him, the cultic experience of submission is necessary for mediating between the outer world and the human psyche, and this mediation is essential for the primitive, whether in the jungles of the Amazon or of the modern European city.

Yet, Einstein’s understanding of the cult ritual can still be clearly differentiated from the fascist one. While the spectator submits to the leader in the fascist Führer cult and, according to Benjamin, the story similarly “bears the marks of the storyteller much as the earthen vessel bears the marks of the potter’s hand,”⁴⁶ in Einstein’s description of African sculpture the creator is not sovereign. Both artist and spectator submit to the power of the cult object and the forces that it invokes: “The effort [of the artist] is a distanced adoration and the work of art. It is therefore *a priori* something independent, more powerful than the creator; particularly since this creator invests his entire energy into the work and therefore sacrifices himself as the weaker one in favor of the work of art.”⁴⁷ The power of the cult object derives from the psychic energy invested in the object by both the creator and the spectator, and both stand in an attitude of submission before the gaze of the object. This gaze, comparable to the gaze of the sirens, presents in plastic form neither a fascist nor a foreign Other. Rather, it presents the forces that limit human endeavor and thereby

43. Benjamin, “The Work of Art,” *op. cit.*, p. 241.

44. See Renate Reschke, “Barbaren, Kult und Katastrophen: Nietzsche bei Benjamin. Unzusammenhängendes im Zusammenhang lesen,” in Michael Opitz and Erdmut Wizisla, eds., *Aber ein Sturm weht vom Paradiese her: Texte zu Walter Benjamin* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1992), pp. 322-23; and Willi Bolle, *Physiognomik der modernen Metropole: Geschichtsdarstellung bei Walter Benjamin* (Cologne: Böhlau, 1994), p. 211 and 214-22.

45. “In order for the eyes of the collective to be able to achieve a structure, laws of seeing are necessary that evaluate the material of physiological vision in order to grant it a human meaning.” See Einstein, “Totalität,” in Rolf-Peter Baacke with Jens Kwasny, eds. *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, 1908-1918 (Berlin: Medusa, 1980), p. 223.

46. Benjamin, “On Some Motifs,” *op. cit.*, p. 159.

47. Einstein, *Negerplastik*, in *op. cit.*, Vol. 1, p. 251.

determine the structure of human experience in a particular cultural context. From Einstein's perspective, the fascist Führer cult is not an example of a functioning ritual whose role is to create a mimesis of the antinomies of experience for a collective. Instead, it is an attempt to manipulate ritual forms to serve the specific political goals of the creator. While, despite his condemnation, Benjamin essentially accepts the fascist reading of art as a form of manipulation, Einstein understands art as mimesis.

In its reaction to industrialization, the primitivist perspective was not a revolt against the particular technological products of natural science such as the railroad, the telegraph, or the cinema, for which primitivists often expressed a deep admiration. Rather, this revolt was directed against the modern worldview that accompanied these technical advances. The success of new technologies infused this worldview with the notion of the obsolescence of the old, borrowed from the history of natural science, in which older scientific models and technologies are superseded by newer ones and rendered irrelevant for later generations. By transferring this idea into the realm of culture, Enlightenment thinkers from the 18th and 19th centuries created not just a particular revolt against a preceding tradition but a revolt against the idea of tradition itself. Hence, the term *modern* brings with it the implication that culture has advanced to a new dimension, undergoing a kind of Copernican revolution in which not only old ideas but an entire relation to the past is overthrown. In contrast to the belief in progress expressed by this Enlightenment attitude, the reaction of early 20th-century artists to modernization was a primitivist one grounded in a critique of science, rather than an emulation of it. Because 19th-century scientific objectivism was both anti-traditional and anti-primitive, the 20th-century critique of science paved the way for a reappraisal of the ideas of tradition and of the primitive.

The primary cultural component of this reappraisal consisted of a reevaluation of the status of art in modern society. Primitivists reacted against the ornamental, accompanying function to which they felt art had been relegated in a society that depends on technological achievements, and therefore attempts to regulate all social functions by means of rational systems. For the primitivists, art was to fulfill essential social functions, such as the creation of group identity and a common language, the establishment of law, and the regulation of generational processes of birth, marriage, and death. All these were functions that, so the primitivists thought, had simply been neglected by a technological worldview incapable of supplanting traditional forms. This primitivist reappraisal of the

role of art in society goes beyond Peter Bürger's understanding of a merging of art and life, which simply means a destruction of the institution of art and the treatment of art as a commodity.⁴⁸ The expressionist revolt must be understood primarily as a primitivist one that attempts to preserve the particularity of aesthetic experience, but wishes also to make aesthetic experience into something more than entertainment or ornament.⁴⁹ Art for the primitivists provides the mytho-aesthetic template for the forms of everyday experience.

48. Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, *op. cit.*, pp. 51-54.

49. Cf. Peter Uwe Hohendahl's argument that what these different modernist models ultimately share is "the valorization of the aesthetic sphere, the insistence [*sic*] that art is not only autonomous but can and will eventually change history." See "The Loss of Reality: Gottfried Benn's Early Prose" in Andreas Huyssen and David Bathrick, eds., *Modernity and the Text: Revisions of German Modernism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), pp. 93-94.