

## Adorno-Benjamin Correspondence

Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin, 10 November 1938, in *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 285.

[285] Immediately [end 285] on his return in the middle of September, Max asked me to pursue my long intended project instead, and compose the essay 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening'. (1) I completed the manuscript just three days before your own arrived. It has now gone to press and I have given Brill instructions to send you the galley proofs, along with those of my polemical piece on Sibelius. The work certainly bears the marks of haste in composition; but perhaps that is not entirely a bad thing. I am particularly eager to hear your response to the theory that today exchange-value itself is being consumed. The tension between this theory and your own concerning the buyer's empathy with the soul of the commodity, could prove to be a very fruitful one. Incidentally, I think I can add the hope that the far more innocuous character of my piece will allow you to read it more gently than I was permitted to do with yours.

(1) 'On the Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening' Adorno essay, completed in the late summer of 1938.

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Walter Benjamin to Theodor W. Adorno, 9 December 1938, in *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 289.

[289] You will not have been particularly surprised to notice that it has taken me some time to draft my reply to your letter of 10 November. ... In addition, I wanted to await the arrival of the galley proofs you promised me, (1) and they did not come until 6 December.

[295] This brings me to your recent work and thus to the sunnier part of my letter. The subject matter of your work touches upon my own in two respects, both of which you have indicated yourself. Firstly, in those parts which relate certain characteristics of the contemporary acoustic perception of jazz to the optical perception of film as I have described it. *Ex improvisio*, I cannot decide whether the different distribution of light and shade in our respective approaches is due to theoretical divergencies or not. Perhaps it is only a case of apparent differences between two perspectives, which are in fact equally adequately directed upon different objects. I do not mean to suggest that acoustic and optical perception are equally susceptible to revolutionary transformation. This may explain the fact that the prospect of a quite different way of listening, with which you conclude your essay, is not immediately clear, at least to someone like me, for whom Mahler is not a completely intelligible experience.

In my own essay (2) I attempted to articulate the positive moments as clearly as you have articulated the negative ones. I can therefore see that your study is strong precisely in places where mine was weak. Your analysis of the psychological types produced by the industry, and your presentation of the way in which they are produced, seems particularly felicitous. If I had devoted more attention to this aspect of the matter, my own study would have gained something

in historical plasticity. I see more and more clearly that the launching of the sound film must be regarded as an operation of the film industry designed to break the revolutionary primacy of the silent film, which had produced reactions that were difficult to control and hence dangerous politically. An analysis of the sound film would constitute a critique of contemporary art, which would provide a dialectical mediation between your views and mine.

(1) the galley proofs you promised me: those of Adorno's essay on 'The Fetish Character of Music and the Regression of Listening'.

(2) In my own essay: the essay entitled 'The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction'.

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Theodor W. Adorno to Walter Benjamin, 1 February 1939, in *The Complete Correspondence, 1928-1940*, ed. Henri Lonitz (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999), 305-306.

[305] Just a few words on what you said about my essay on fetishism. I agree with you entirely that the somewhat different angle of the problem as presented in cinema and jazz results essentially from the material elements in each case, and one must not forget that film involves an effectively new material altogether, whereas jazz does not. I am all too aware of the weakness of the work. And this consists, to put it crudely, in the tendency to indulge in Jeremiads and polemics. You are absolutely right that lamenting the conditions of the present is quite fruitless, although I would also add that the perspective of the philosophy of history currently prohibits any attempt at 'salvation' anyway. The only possible question we must pose now, so it seems to me, is an experimental one: what will become of human beings and their capacity for aesthetic perception when they are fully exposed to the conditions of monopoly capitalism? But when I composed the essay, I was not yet psychologically capable of posing the question in such diabolical and behavioristic terms. The piece must be seen essentially as an expression of my experiences here in America, which may well inspire me one day to grapple with something that we have both rightly felt was previously missing in our writings on mass art and monopoly capitalism. I agree with your view on sound film, and something very similar can also be observed in jazz itself, although I believe it has more to do with objectively developing tendencies than it does with the intrigues of business interests. As far as the advance of the comic dimension in music is concerned: I do indeed see something entirely positive in this, just as I do in the 'disintegration of the feeling of sacred reconciliation', and I am sure [end 305] that my work nowhere corresponds more powerfully with your own essay on mechanical reproduction than it does here. If that remained less than obvious in the text, I would look upon it as a serious deficiency. As far as the decisive theoretical issue is concerned, namely, the relationship between aesthetic perception and the commodity character, I would ask you to be patient for a while longer.