

# 1

## Habermas and Aesthetics: The First Phase

The experience of the Second World War, and more specifically the occurrence of the Holocaust, made a lasting impact on the intellectual career of Jürgen Habermas.<sup>1</sup> As a young student, after these events, he had to find his way out of the physical and spiritual ruins of Germany. In an interview, he describes his reaction to the Nüremberg trials as one of shock: 'Our own history was suddenly cast in a light that made all its essential elements appear radically different. All at once we saw that we had been living in a political criminal system. I had never imagined that before.'<sup>2</sup> In this context of world disclosure Habermas had to answer some very painful questions: how was it possible that the intellectual accomplishments of a Kant or a Marx, in which the themes of critical rationality and practical realization of freedom are predominant, could have been such a fertile ground for the rise of Hitler and totalitarianism? Why did this development not encounter greater resistance from the Germans? How was it possible for Nazism to develop within the logic of modernity? Habermas's response to these questions came down to nothing less than a careful, comprehensive reconstruction of the trajectory of modern reason. In pursuing this issue, it was inevitable that his path would cross that of Critical Theory, in which figures such as Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin were prominent. The interesting aspect of these figures, in comparison to Habermas, is the important role that aesthetically informed arguments play in their attempt to come to a critical understanding of modern society.

In order to trace the fate of aesthetics in Habermas's reconstruction of modern reason, this chapter starts with a brief intellectual-historical sketch (section 1.1). Habermas started his career with a

Heideggerian study of Schelling before turning to Critical Theory and other intellectual traditions in the 1950s. His relationship with the Critical Theory of Horkheimer and Adorno (the focus of chapter 2) is filled with paradoxes and complexities, however. The complexity of the relationship is already present in his first major work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which his earliest reflections on the public sphere and aesthetics are formulated (sections 1.2 and 1.3). The differences between Habermas and Horkheimer/Adorno are especially discernible in the first part of the book, where a relatively optimistic picture is provided of the historical development of the public sphere. This must be seen against the pessimistic view of the public sphere found in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Eventually these differences intensified in the 1960s and early 1970s (section 1.4). A work such as *Knowledge and Human Interests*, for example, is more a reflection on the methodology of the social sciences than a substantive questioning of cultural and aesthetic issues. Only with the publication of his interesting essay on Benjamin (1973) did Habermas return to the relationship between aesthetics, language and society (section 1.5). This essay, which stands at an interesting juncture in Habermas's intellectual development (and marks the end of the first phase of his aesthetics), did not lead to a further exploration of aesthetic issues, however, but rather to the development of a systematic and formal analysis of rational communication in contemporary society.

## 1.1 Initial influences and themes in Habermas's work

As a student in Göttingen, Zurich and Bonn, Habermas studied in a provincial intellectual atmosphere. After the war, most of the professors of philosophy, who were appointed before and during the Nazi era, remained.<sup>3</sup> Generally there was an apolitical and inward-looking mood in German academia. Intellectually, little was known or heard of analytical philosophy or Critical Theory, both having German origins. In these circumstances Habermas wrote a Heidegger-informed thesis in Bonn on Schelling's transcendental reconciliation between nature and spirit. This study, which has received little attention from commentators and critics, is in many ways fascinating.<sup>4</sup> It is an attempt not just to critique Cartesian dualism from the tradition of Jewish-Christian mysticism and Heideggerian ontology, but also to interpret the social and aesthetic implications of

Schelling's thinking. This study is in style and atmosphere quite different from Habermas's later studies on the rationality of modern culture and society. Habermas's break with the philosophical tradition in which he grew up came when Heidegger republished his *Introduction to Metaphysics* (first published in 1935) without any explanation in the 1950s.<sup>5</sup> It was unacceptable to the young doctoral student that an influential philosopher could treat the political implications of Nazism so uncritically. At the same time, Habermas's readings of Marx, Lukács and Löwith convinced him that the spiritual fragmentation and alienation of the modern era were of a social-rational rather than an ontological or metaphysical nature – a conviction that had profound implications for aesthetics.

During the 1950s Habermas became interested in the pathology of modernity as seen from the viewpoint of the distorted realization of reason in history.<sup>6</sup> This concern with the modern paradox – that is, the loss of freedom in the face of technical rational progress – brought him into contact with the Institute for Social Research, which relocated to Frankfurt in 1950. As Adorno's assistant (1956–9), he enthusiastically studied Marxist economy, Freudian psychology, and the sociology of Weber, Durkheim and Parsons. In addition, he was influenced by philosophical anthropology, hermeneutics (Gadamer), pragmatism (Pierce/Mead/Dewey) and analytical language theory (Wittgenstein).<sup>7</sup> Habermas writes:

I saw myself as someone who, in the face of a very narrow, almost dogmatic selection of acceptable texts, carried on philosophical and academic traditions in a less strict manner . . . it became clear to me that the 1920s, in which I have lived theoretically during my student years, were, after all, the 1920s. That became a stimulus to become interested in American sociology for example. Analytical philosophy came afterward . . . In principle, I considered worthwhile anything that had a cognitive, structural, or hermeneutical element.<sup>8</sup>

At this time Habermas also discovered the seminal essays of the Institute for Social Research of the 1930s. This discovery persuaded him to revisit the critical and normative foundations of social rationality as defended by Horkheimer and associates in their interdisciplinary research programme of the 1930s.

Through his studies in the 1950s and 1960s, and the intellectual influences as indicated, Habermas became more and more critical of Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of post-1945 Western societies (including West Germany), and more specifically their concepts of history and instrumental reason.<sup>9</sup> One of the main issues at this

stage, as will be argued in greater detail in the next chapter, was their reductive interpretation of history as well as their pronounced negative view concerning the democratic potentials of a rational public sphere.<sup>10</sup> Habermas's differences with Horkheimer and Adorno became more substantial after their deaths (that of Adorno in 1969 and Horkheimer in 1973). This is the historical moment when Habermas, as the most prominent member of the second generation of Critical Theorists, consolidated his reconstruction of Critical Theory – a project that found its most programmatic formulation in *The Theory of Communicative Action* (1981). In this process Habermas had to find an alternative to Adorno's critique of conceptual thinking via the idea of a mimetic and aesthetic rationality, as well as to Horkheimer's Schopenhauerian pessimism pointing in the direction of a negative theology of the other and Marcuse's sensual-aesthetic bid to save the lost revolution.<sup>11</sup> In contrast, Habermas (and his generation of intellectuals) responded differently to the challenges of twentieth-century society.

On the occasion of Habermas's seventieth birthday, Pierre Bourdieu, also a member of Habermas's generation, provided the following explanation for their intellectual response. Habermas and his generation had to confront Western Marxism, and especially the work of the young Hegelians (of *History and Class Consciousness*); they had to critically confront the life, work and influence of Martin Heidegger in post-1945 Europe; they had to come to terms with powerfully victorious American social sciences, which provided the theoretical and practical criteria for thinking about the social in the post-war years; they had to deal with the late discovery that university life in Europe moved quite arrogantly in closed circles; they discovered the Anglo-Saxon philosophy of Peirce, Mead, Dewey and the later Wittgenstein; and finally (and perhaps most important, according to Bourdieu) there was the influence of a theory of argumentation.<sup>12</sup> What is quite striking about this sketch is the absence of an aesthetic view of language and reason, and in its place a formal argumentative one. It is this view, and its aesthetic implications (the fate of aesthetics), that will be investigated in this study.

## 1.2 The public sphere and the role of art

Habermas made his *début* in the German intellectual life with the publication of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, in which he explores the historical and normative evolution of the

public sphere since the Enlightenment. The public sphere is, according to him, an institutional location for practical reason and for the valid, if often deceptive, claims of formal democracy. Holub writes: 'What attracted Habermas to the notion of a public sphere then and now is its potential as a foundation for a critique of society based on democratic principles.'<sup>13</sup> In this sense Habermas follows Kant as a theorist who offered the fullest articulation of the ideal of the bourgeois public sphere through his concept of procedural rationality and its influence on 'our views in the three areas of objective knowledge, moral-practical insight, and *aesthetic judgment*'.<sup>14</sup> In his study Habermas proposes to develop a critique of the public sphere, on the one hand, and to intimate its possible element of truth and emancipatory potential, on the other. This section starts with the latter aspect – reconstructing the important transition from the representative public sphere (feudal era) to the bourgeois public sphere (modern era). An important issue here is the role that art and culture play in the communicative relationships between participants in the public sphere. In the next section Habermas's sketch of the decline of the socio-cultural and political functions of the bourgeois public sphere will be examined. Although this shift is indebted to some extent to Adorno and Horkheimer, it is executed in a less pessimistic fashion.

Habermas describes feudal society as a historical phase wherein art and culture are 'represented' in public.<sup>15</sup> It is a sphere in which the public and private spheres are not separated, making representation in a democratic sense impossible.

Representation in the sense in which the members of a national assembly represent a nation or a lawyer represents his clients had nothing to do with this publicity of representation inseparable from the lord's concrete existence, that, as an 'aura,' surrounded and endowed his authority . . . As long as the prince and the estates of his realm 'were' the country and not just its representatives, he could represent it in a specific sense. They represented their lordship not for but 'before' the people.<sup>16</sup>

In other words, through art and culture the higher classes established their right and higher authority to represent themselves in the public sphere on behalf of the people. Habermas continues that the transformation of the feudal public sphere into the modern bourgeois public sphere is the outcome of a change in power relations between the monarch and his or her subjects and also of early capitalist commercial economy. This leads to a situation wherein the society (public

sphere) is separated from the ruler (state) and the private sphere.<sup>17</sup> Through this enormous influential change, the public sphere is characterized by a conflict between those of the bourgeois civil society, on the one hand, and those of the state, on the other. The free citizens of the 'bourgeois society' in the public sphere soon debated this conflict over the rules of exchange of social goods and ideas.<sup>18</sup>

In the next step of his argument Habermas indicates that the members of the bourgeois public sphere did not just defend their interests against the state; they also institutionalized a range of rational-critical practices whereby reasonable (*räsonierende*) citizens could critically challenge the political norms of the state and its monopoly on interpretation and institutions. This is the historical moment when validity claims become more important than power claims in the public sphere. It is also the moment when public discussion becomes the cornerstone and medium of debate through the press, political parties and parliament. Only in a power-free discussion, according to this line of thought, can the strongest argument triumph in the struggle of private and public opinions – and can *voluntas* proceed to ratio.<sup>19</sup> Two processes helped, according to Habermas, to institutionalize this concept of the public sphere: the reconstitution of the family as an intimate sphere represented by the patriarchal head in public and the emergence of the world of letters, or literary public sphere, which paved the way for the political public sphere. In both cases an essential humanness is involved, one that no economic or other kind of interest could remove.<sup>20</sup> Novels like those of Richardson, Rousseau and Goethe reinforced this. Habermas writes: 'The relation between author, work, and public changed. They became intimate mutual relations between privatised individuals who were psychologically interested in what was "human", in self-knowledge, and in empathy.'<sup>21</sup>

Habermas continues that the value of the literary public sphere was advanced not only through the construction of modern subjectivity, as the result of a distinctly modern idea of an autonomous art and culture, but also through the development of certain institutions in the political public sphere. He provides the following concrete examples of places where literary and other matters were publicly debated: English coffee houses, French salons, and German table societies (*Tischgesellschaften*).<sup>22</sup> According to Habermas, all of these institutions operated with a similar rationale: they constitute a public sphere that disregards status (*Takt der Ebenbürtigkeit*). By suspending the laws of the state and the market (for the duration of the debate), they render official prestige, power and economic status absent, in

principle at least. Secondly, rational argument is the sole arbiter of any issue. Everything is open to criticism in the literary public sphere. Thus philosophical and literary works are no longer 'represented' by the Church, court or authorities. Private citizens, to whom cultural products become accessible, are able to interpret aesthetic and philosophical issues independently. Thirdly, the literary public sphere is conceived as a universal auditorium. Anyone with access to cultural products – books, plays and journals – has at least a potential claim on the attention of the culture-debating public. In this way the public sphere is not simply the forum of an insulated power clique, but is rather part of a more inclusive public (read: educated private citizens) comprising all those who are qualified to participate in an independent, critical discussion.<sup>23</sup>

These institutions of the literary public sphere also contributed, according to Habermas, to the practice of literary and art criticism. He describes the relationship between the public and the art critic (*Kunstrichter*) as one of communicative reciprocity.<sup>24</sup> The critic both influences and depends on the public. Persuasion here succeeds on the basis of the better argument. Although the critic exposes dogmas and fashionable opinions in public, his or her expertise holds only as far as it is not contradicted. Habermas writes: 'The *Kunstrichter* retained something of the amateur; his expertise only held good until countermanded; lay judgment was organized in it without becoming, by way of specialization, anything else than the judgment of one private person among all others who ultimately were not to be obligated by any judgment except their own.'<sup>25</sup> The first part of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* thus portrays a positive picture of the role of art in opening up critical discursive practices in early modern society. The *Empfindsamkeit* (empathic identification) with the characters in the bourgeois novel and drama, the importance of a rational-aesthetical debate in salons, journals and newspapers, and the educational role of the art critic all contribute, in Habermas's view, to the institutionalization of the literary public sphere as a kind of *Vorform* of the political public sphere. All of these aspects thus institutionalized a form of rational-critical discourse about objects of common concern, which flowed over into political discussions.

According to Habermas, this evolution of the world of letters into the world of politics used the vehicle of public opinion to 'put the state in touch with the needs of society'.<sup>26</sup> But this evolution could only happen on the basis of a new economic order. This order was capitalism, and its crucial contribution to the public sphere was the

institutionalization of a new, stronger sense of privacy and free control of productive property. In Europe it was reflected in the codification of civil law, in which basic private freedoms were guaranteed. A fundamental parity among persons was thus established, corresponding to owners of commodities in the market and educated individuals in the public sphere. Although not all people were full legal subjects at this stage, all subjects were joined in a more or less undifferentiated category of persons. The extension of these notions into the doctrines of *laissez-faire* and even free trade among nations brought the development of 'civil society as the private sphere emancipated from public authority' to its fullest extent. Habermas argues, though, that this moment lasted for only 'one blissful moment in the long history of capitalist development.'<sup>27</sup> In the second part of his book he changes his argument, almost like Horkheimer and Adorno, by arguing that the aesthetic-communicative and political model of the bourgeois public sphere was undermined by historical and economic developments in the latter part of the nineteenth century.

### 1.3 The decline of the public sphere

Habermas interprets the decline of the public sphere, in the second part of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, as a shift from rational discourse (*Räsonnement*) to consumption. This shift took place, according to him, in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, when liberal competing capitalism was transformed into the monopolistic capitalism of cartels and protectionism. The classical function of public opinion – namely, the free debate of matters of general interest – was from then on undermined by the state's and other interest groups' intervention in the social life-world and the public sphere. Even institutions such as parliaments could not prevent this erosion of a free public sphere.<sup>28</sup> 'Discussions, now a "business" becomes formalized; the presentation of positions and counter positions is bound to certain prearranged rules of the game, consensus about the subject matter is made largely superfluous by that concerning form.'<sup>29</sup> Against this background, the relationship between the private and public spheres and their relation with the state changed. State and society, once distinct, became interlocked, leading to the refeudalization of the public sphere.<sup>30</sup> The public (literary) sphere thus changed from a forum for critical and rational debate to an instrument for the manipulation of public discourse, in which bureaucratic and economic actors use advertising, marketing

and 'public relations' to create a perfect 'social engineering' of voter behaviour and cultural consumption.<sup>31</sup>

At this historical moment, according to Habermas, the literary Enlightenment and the cultural emancipation of the masses failed. In this process the public (literary) sphere changes from a forum for critical and rational debate to an instrument in the manipulation of discourse by powerful bureaucratic and economic interests. Following Horkheimer and Adorno, Habermas describes the decline of the literary public sphere into a minority of art connoisseurs (high art), on the one hand, and a large mass of art consumers (cultural industry), on the other. Art gradually distances itself from involvement, while the cultural industry manipulates the critical discussion for political purposes.<sup>32</sup> The arrival of new technologies, leading to lower book prices, did not enhance cultural life either. Mass media such as the press (and later radio and television) became the commercialized instruments of powerful advertising interests. Habermas's argument is that these new forms of media, which have become so powerful since the latter part of the nineteenth century, speak directly to the consumer and ignore the idea of a rational discourse between participants in a critical public sphere.<sup>33</sup>

With the arrival of the new media the form of communication as such has changed; they have had an impact, therefore, more penetrating . . . than was even possible for the press . . . They draw the eyes and ears of their public under their spell but at the same time, by taking away its distance, place it under 'tutelage', which is to say they deprive it of the opportunity to say something and to disagree. The critical discussion of a reading public tends to give way to 'exchanges about tastes and preferences' between consumers.<sup>34</sup>

Where works of literature had previously been appropriated through individual reading, group discussion and the critical discourse of literary publications, modern mass media and the modern style of appropriation made this impossible. Thus, the world of the mass media is a public sphere in appearance only. With the expansion of access, the form of participation is significantly altered. 'Serious involvement with culture produces facility, while the consumption of mass culture leaves no lasting trace; it affords a kind of experience which is not cumulative but regressive.'<sup>35</sup> Habermas refers here to both the depoliticization of the public sphere and its impoverishment by the removal of critical discourse. Nothing remains of the cultural circumstances in which Richardson's *Pamela* was once

read by the entire public – that is, by ‘everyone’ who could read at all. This structural change involves not only segmentation of audiences but also the transformation of the once intimate relationship between cultural producers and consumers. It is precisely at this point that intellectuals begin to form a distinct stratum of those who produce culture and those who critique it.<sup>36</sup> Habermas also cites the social and psychological effects of consumption on the members of the bourgeois family. This comes to the fore in a loss of individuality and moral autonomy in this important socializing institution. ‘To a greater extent individual family members are now socialized by extra familial authorities, by society directly.’<sup>37</sup>

These arguments on the structural change of culture and individualization have clearly been influenced by Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of contemporary society in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>38</sup> This is reflected in Habermas’s use of concepts like ‘mass culture’, ‘objectification’ and ‘manipulated culture’. But Habermas does not fully endorse their defence of autonomy against a fully instrumentalized public sphere. Rather, he sketches a more complex picture of the relationship between emancipation and consumption. His disagreement with Horkheimer and Adorno is revealed in the following words:

Conflict and consensus (like domination itself and like the coercive power whose degree of stability they indicate analytically) are not categories that remain untouched by the historical development of society. In the case of the structural transformation of the bourgeois public sphere, we can study the extent to which . . . the latter’s ability to assume its proper function determines whether the exercise of domination and power persists in a negative constant . . . of history – or whether as a historical category itself, it is open to substantive change.<sup>39</sup>

In contrast with the first generation of Critical Theorists, Habermas’s reading of the ‘dialectics of Enlightenment’ focuses on the contradictions in liberal capitalism, rather than on the instrumental nature of historical development. *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* thus challenges the argument of an instrumental public sphere in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Habermas’s work on the transformation of the public sphere has been read critically from various perspectives.<sup>40</sup> His liberal critics are sceptical about the historical comparison between the ideal-typical liberal public sphere and its decline in late capitalism, while Luhmann (from a system-theoretical position) judges the communicative social function of public opinion as unsuited to

contemporary societies characterized by specialized systems.<sup>41</sup> From a Marxist perspective, Habermas's sketch of the decline of the bourgeois public sphere is accepted, while the idealistic and communicative-rational suppositions of his normative model of the public sphere find less favour.<sup>42</sup> More recently, Habermas's treatment of the public sphere has become important for debates on the politics of identity. For some commentators, the very emphasis on rational-critical debate implies an inability to deal adequately with 'identity politics' and concerns of difference. This criticism is also implicit in the whole rethinking of the boundary between public and private broached by feminist discourse. The argument runs that although Habermas's initial discussion of the literary public sphere shows how fiction serves to facilitate a discussion about selfhood and subjectivity and to reinforce a vesting of primary identity in a newly constructed intimate sphere, his position eventually imposes a neutralizing logic on differential identity by establishing a qualification for publicness entailing abstraction from private identity.<sup>43</sup>

The remarkable aspect of Habermas's *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, though, remains its (early) discussion of the role of the literary public sphere. This discussion points to a stage in early bourgeois capitalism when a democratic exchange of aesthetic-political values was important and possible prior and adjacent to the wider debate of political issues in public. The fascinating aspect here is the importance granted to artworks and institutions in contributing to the rational exchange of ideas in the public sphere. Unfortunately, Habermas's sketch of the decline of the public sphere took his ensuing work in another direction. The point is that whereas his early work on structural transformation located the basis of practical reason in the historically specific social institutions of the public sphere, his subsequent work shifts to the trans-historical, intersubjective and communicative capacities of reason. In this process Habermas's account of the decline of the public sphere (in the second half of his book) serves as the basis from which to recover the normative ideal of formal democracy from early bourgeois political theory and practice.<sup>44</sup> The details of this argument (and its implications for aesthetics) will be explored in chapter 3.

#### 1.4 Towards a normative and rational public sphere

In this section I will argue that the aesthetic potential of Habermas's first study receded into the background of his work in the

1960s and early 1970s (thereby contributing to the fate of aesthetics in the first phase of his career). In this period Habermas started with an ambitious project to ground the formal-rational requirements for the public sphere, thereby taking leave of the more socio-historically informed strategy that played such an important role in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*. Habermas now sought a more formal-normative (transcendental) and less historically informed basis for democracy. This shift to a more formal understanding of public reason is perceptible, for example, in his study of Weber's account of the rationality of political decision making and the influence of elites on public opinion.<sup>45</sup> Even though Habermas sided with Adorno in the so-called positivism debate of the early 1960s, he was already well on the way to developing an alternative to Horkheimer and Adorno's concept of instrumental reason.<sup>46</sup> His strategy in this regard was to defend practical reason against the close link between modern social philosophy and the natural sciences.<sup>47</sup> The point is that science's illusion of pure knowledge hides its interests, thereby contributing to a one-sided form of knowledge, 'objective science' (scientism), which inhibits understanding of the social dimension of knowledge.<sup>48</sup> At this early stage Habermas argued that the complex, sophisticated, technical nature of science should not affect the fine balance between scientific knowledge and social interest (common sense). This critique of positivism's exclusive understanding of knowledge led to a differentiated model of reason in *Knowledge and Human Interests* (1968), in which empirical-analytical, historical-hermeneutical and critical-social science each has a role to play.<sup>49</sup>

Following broadly in the footsteps of Kant's three Critiques, Habermas's study sketches a differentiated model of knowledge and reason in which empirical-analytical, historical-hermeneutical and critical-social science each has a role to play in a self-reflective style. The first outline of this epistemological model is already included in Habermas's inaugural lecture at the University of Frankfurt (1965), where he states that while the first mode of knowledge (empirical-analytical) is geared toward 'expanding our power of technical control', and the second (historical-hermeneutical) seeks to facilitate 'action-orientation in the context of shared traditions', the last mode of knowledge (critical-social) pursues the goal of releasing 'the subject from dependence on hypostatized powers'.<sup>50</sup> Habermas continues that when clarity is gained regarding the changeable nature of social standards or traditions, their hold can be broken, leading to practical emancipation.<sup>51</sup> Finally, the three modes of knowledge

originate, according to Habermas, 'in the interest structures of a species which is tied essentially to distinct means of socialization: work, language and power' (where work and power appear as non- or extra-linguistic categories).<sup>52</sup> In other words, whereas natural or empirical science has a technical interest in the causal and controlled explanation of (unconscious) natural processes, and the human sciences have a practical interest in understanding cultural or symbolic meanings (a process important for aesthetics), critical-social science has an emancipatory interest in analysing structural and social deformations in the hope of promoting more equitable arrangements through self-realization.<sup>53</sup>

It is with this latter point in mind – the emancipatory interest of the social sciences – that Habermas introduces psychoanalysis, a model that could recover the impaired ego and superego structures through the interaction and therapeutic exchanges between analyst and patient.<sup>54</sup> Once a patient finds an explanatory proposal that is applicable to his or her case, according to Habermas's proposal, it is assumed that the deformed inner nature is healed in favour of self-understanding and a restored ego identity. In contrast to Adorno, Habermas seems to see therapy as capable of resolving the conflict between the instinctual-libidinal and societal norms (including linguistic norms) and thus being able to sublimate inner nature in reflective rationality. Building on this construal, Habermas's subsequent writings further mitigated libidinal factors and the impact of psychoanalysis in general by subordinating the latter progressively to formal-pragmatic and 'reconstructive' modes of analyses. As a corollary of this shift, Habermas explicitly limited the role of psychoanalysis to individual experience and private 'self-reflection', while integrating critical social inquiry more closely than before with general societal and linguistic structures and with the basic 'rationality claims' embedded in such structures – a point that will be critically discussed in the context of Whitebook's interventions in chapter 5.

In the early 1970s Habermas expanded his reflections on the rational nature of the public sphere. In *Legitimation Crisis*, a work that builds on *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, he provides a critical discussion of extensive state intervention in the public sphere through new educational curricula, urban planning, medical insurance, the scientization of professional practices and the administrative regulation of social interaction. For Habermas, all of these interventions lead to the legitimation, motivational and rational crises of late capitalism.<sup>55</sup> The point is that state intervention disrupts those

critical traditions that are needed for broad democratic legitimization and leads to the promotion of a kind of means–end rationality in the communicative and cultural spheres of society. Legitimation crises stem, for Habermas, ‘from the fact that the fulfilment of governmental planning tasks places in question the structure of the depoliticized public realm and, thereby, the formally democratic securing of the private autonomous disposition of the means of production’.<sup>56</sup> Motivational crises, on the other hand, stem from a weakening of the cultural tradition and an exhaustion of the central aspects of bourgeois ideology. In an argument that is very similar to that of *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, Habermas argues that interaction between the political system (state) and the sociol-cultural system, which relies on the mass loyalty of the bourgeois in market liberal capitalism, breaks down in modern monopoly capitalism. When the interaction becomes frozen as a result of a shortage of motivation, the legitimacy of the political system falls away, thereby endangering a critical and rational public sphere.

This is the point in Habermas’s intellectual career when he seriously started to search for a way to meet these public crises. In *Legitimation Crisis*, Habermas finds a way through the discursive standards embedded in science, universal morality and (interestingly enough) post-auratic art. With regard to these cultural spheres Habermas comments that: although science creates the appearance of objectivity (by means of depoliticization), it also contains critical elements that can be used against technocracy. The normative standards of a universal morality can also be used, in a similar way, against the demands of the political and economic sub-systems of late capitalism.<sup>57</sup> Finally – and this is important for the first phase of Habermas’s aesthetics – he emphasizes a role for post-auratic art in contributing towards a rational-critical public discussion. ‘Bourgeois art, unlike privatised religion, scientific philosophy, and strategic-utilitarian morality, did not take on tasks in the economic and political systems. Instead it collected residual needs that could find no satisfaction within the “system of needs”. Thus along with moral universalism, art and aesthetics (from Schiller to Marcuse) are explosive ingredients built into bourgeois ideology.’<sup>58</sup> This reference to the role of post-auratic art in a rational-democratic public sphere, should be qualified, though. Habermas did not elaborate on the ‘explosive ingredient’ of aesthetics, but rather cautioned against a surrealist integration of art into everyday life, where art destroys ‘the shell of the no-longer-beautiful illusion in order to pass desublimated over into

life'.<sup>59</sup> Habermas is thus ambiguous at this point about the possible contribution that modern art can make in addressing the crises of late capitalism in a rational-democratic public sphere.

Habermas's ambiguity about the possible public role of art must be seen in the context of the development of his philosophical reflections from *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* up to the early 1970s. Although he provides a role for post-auratic art, together with science and moral universalism in *Legitimation Crisis*, he did not elaborate on the possible role of art and culture in contemporary society. Despite a brief discussion of Benjamin's aesthetics (see next section), his intellectual interests shifted during the rest of the 1970s in the direction of a formal-discursive account of communicative reason that allowed even less of a role for aesthetics in public reason.

### 1.5 An aesthetics of redemption: Habermas's Benjamin essay

Habermas's remarkable essay on Benjamin (1973), 'Consciousness-raising or rescuing critique', in which he still regards aesthetics as offering a possible way to deal with the dilemmas of modern reason, also contains the outlines of his concept of communicative reason. It is this concept of communicative reason, and its normative-critical role in the public sphere, that eventually direct aesthetics to a more marginal position in his work, thereby contributing to its fate. Habermas's Benjamin essay, which remains one of his most focused writings on aesthetics, can also be interpreted as the end of the first phase of his aesthetics (where aesthetics still has a critical role) and the beginning of the second phase (where there is a less critical role for aesthetics). In discussing the potential public role of art in this essay, Habermas makes an important distinction between the 'consciousness-raising critiques' of Marcuse and Adorno, on the one hand, and the 'rescuing critique' of Benjamin, on the other. Against this background, the difference between the critique of Marcuse and Adorno (which he criticizes) and that of Benjamin (which he appreciates) is addressed with reference to four areas: (i) criticism, (ii) symbolism, (iii) the avant-garde and (iv) technical reproduction.<sup>60</sup> In the final part of the essay Habermas discusses the relevance of Benjamin's aesthetic understanding of experience and language for his own emerging model of communicative reason.

(i) Habermas describes Marcuse's position on art (and Adorno's by implication) as a 'consciousness-raising critique' – a critique whereby the subject uses self-reflection to arrive at some 'aesthetic truth' about reality.<sup>61</sup> In this process autonomous artworks (like Kafka's novels and Beckett's dramas for Adorno) provide the concrete material for consciousness raising and the political transformation of society by opposing ideal to reality. Autonomous art thus unmasks material relationships of life and initiates a self-reflective overcoming of everyday culture. Habermas describes Benjamin's rescuing critique, by contrast, as a procedure that transposes what is worth knowing from the medium of the beautiful (its truth) into the world and thereby rescuing it.<sup>62</sup> Here modern artworks lose their autonomy through new technology (such as the gramophone, film and radio) that operates through accessibility and shock.<sup>63</sup> Benjamin's theory of aesthetic experience thus rescues its objects – whether baroque tragedy, Goethe's dramas, Baudelaire's poetry, or Soviet films – for present-day purposes.<sup>64</sup> Such a rescuing critique is further explained in terms of Benjamin's philosophy of history, where the emphasis falls not on the continuity of time, but on its interruptions. It is the moment in which art forces 'progress' to a standstill and exposes the utopian experience of the 'new-in-the-always-same'. Habermas holds that Benjamin's criticism aims, in contrast with that of Marcuse (and Adorno), to rescue a past charged with *Jetztzeit* – to redeem the past in the 'now'. Benjamin's concept of the de-ritualization of art is, in Habermas's language, part of a world-historical process of rationalization caused by a revolutionary change in the mode of production.<sup>65</sup>

(ii–iii) Habermas relates Marcuse's emphasis on happiness, freedom and reconciliation to the classical symbolic work, such as the novel and the bourgeois drama, in the tradition of Idealist aesthetics. Benjamin's aesthetics, on the other hand, is linked with the non-affirming, non-totalizing, allegorical nature of artworks. In Benjamin's investigation of the baroque tragic drama (*Trauerspiel*) the allegory is contrasted with the individual totality of the transfigurative work of art. It is thus a contrast between the unreconciled and the reconciled – a contrast that has been questioned. It is, for example, an open question whether Marcuse, but definitely Adorno, is in favour of a reconciled artwork.<sup>66</sup> Habermas sketches the third difference between Marcuse and Benjamin in terms of their positions on autonomous art and the avant-garde. He writes: 'Marcuse spares the transformation of bourgeois art by the avant-garde from the

direct grasp of ideology critique, whereas Benjamin shows the process of elimination of autonomous art within the history of modernity.<sup>67</sup> Habermas seems to suggest at this point that the elimination of autonomous art in Benjamin's materialistic aesthetics leads inevitably to an appreciation of the avant-garde wherein the urban masses play an important, critical role in renewing and transforming the traditional concept of bourgeois art.

(iv) On the issue of the technical reproduction of art, Habermas also sides with Benjamin. In this context he faults Adorno's argument that mass art and the new techniques of aesthetic reproduction lead to cultural consumption and degeneration in twentieth-century capitalism.<sup>68</sup> Habermas interprets Adorno's specific historical interpretation as one in which the dissolution of traditional images of the world is countered by an attempt to establish a mimetic relation with inner and outer nature – the need for solidarity removed from the imperatives of public deliberation.<sup>69</sup> Consequently, Adorno defends a position in which the hermetic dimensions of modern art (the novels of Kafka and the music of Schönberg), and not the secular enlightenment of mass art, allow an aura-encapsulated experience to become public. Habermas finds Adorno's position to be 'a defensive strategy of hibernation', such that formal-modern artworks exist only as individual reading practices (literature) and contemplative listening experiences (music) – both being examples of bourgeois individualization. Habermas's problem here is that there is no place in Adorno's aesthetics for collective art forms such as architecture, drama and popular literature.<sup>70</sup> It is also precisely amongst such collective artworks, where repeatability replaces uniqueness, that Benjamin feels himself at home and where post-auratic aesthetic objects move closer to the masses.<sup>71</sup> This is the case in the cinema, where the experiences of film audiences are influenced by the constantly changing images – a situation that Habermas, as opposed to Adorno, and in concert with Benjamin, judges favourably.

Habermas's appreciative reading of Benjamin's hope for secular illumination allows him the opportunity to place Benjamin's emphatic notion of *experience* in the openness of the public sphere. Such a form of experience (which needs to be critically conserved and appropriated if the 'messianic promise of happiness' is ever to be redeemed) must overcome the esoteric and cultic access to the autonomous artwork. The collapse of the aura, on Habermas's reading of Benjamin, opens up the chance of universalizing and stabilizing the experience of happiness. In this context a field of surprising correspondences between animate and inanimate nature

appears where things appear to us in the form of vulnerable intersubjectivity. Benjamin's position, according to Habermas, is thus 'a condition in which the esoteric experiences of happiness have become public and universal, for only in a context of communication into which nature is integrated in a brotherly fashion, as if it were set upright once again, can human subjects open their eyes to look in return'. This is also the point at which Benjamin turns against the esotericism of private fulfilment, happiness and solitary ecstasy.<sup>72</sup> Benjamin's theory of aesthetic experience is thus, unlike that of Marcuse and Adorno, not an example of ideology critique and linked to subjective reflection. In Benjamin's concept of secular illumination, the experience of aura has burst the productive auratic shell and become exoteric. In the next part of his essay Habermas links this reading of Benjamin's concept of experience to language.

The original source of meaning for Benjamin is, according to Habermas, a mixture of mimetic and expressive language wherein words are not related to reality accidentally.<sup>73</sup> There is an intimate link between words and names in Benjamin's theory of meaning. Naming is a kind of translation of the nameless into words, a translation from the incomplete language of nature into the language of humans. Habermas continues that it is not the specifically human properties of language that interest Benjamin, but its links it with animal languages, thereby meaning that the oldest semantic stratum is the expression. Benjamin, on this reading, is attracted to the combination of expression and mimesis, because it precedes the break between subject and object, as in the Schillerian motive of reconciliation. The interesting question here, though, is how Habermas responds to Benjamin's theory of language and meaning. On the one hand, he agrees that if the dependence on nature should be liquidated, leading to a blocking of the powers of mimesis and the streams of semantic energies, it would be a loss to the poetic capacity to interpret the world in the light of human needs.<sup>74</sup> The conservation of these mimetic linguistic experiences, according to Habermas, constitutes for Benjamin the centre of the *promesse de bonheur* of art – humans need these semantic potentials if they want to interpret the world in terms of their needs. It is only in such a context that the appeal for a happy and good life can succeed.<sup>75</sup> On the other hand, Habermas has problems with a theory of experience based on a mimetic theory of language. He expresses his reservations by confronting Benjamin's messianic conception of history and his mimetic view of language with historical materialism and the idea of politicized art.

It is an open question for Habermas whether the theologian in Benjamin succeeds in putting the messianic theory of experience and his mimetic theory of language at the service of historical materialism.<sup>76</sup> Habermas continues that although Benjamin found the politicizing of art ready at hand, he also admitted that an immanent relation to praxis could not be gained from his theory of experience: the experience of shock is not an action, and secular illumination is not a revolutionary deed. Consequently, the intention to 'enlist the services' of historical materialism for a theory of experience ends in an identification of ecstasy and politics that Benjamin, according to Habermas, could not have wanted. The liberation from the cultural tradition of semantic potentials that is sacrificed to the messianic condition is not the same as the liberation of political domination from structural violence. Benjamin's relevance for Habermas is thus not his theology of revolution, but the applicability of his theory of experience for historical materialism.<sup>77</sup> On this note Habermas returns with appreciation to Benjamin's reminder that emancipation without happiness and fulfilment is senseless. In other words, the claim to happiness can be made good only if the sources of the semantic potentials we need for interpreting the world, in the light of our needs, are not exhausted.<sup>78</sup> In this context Habermas asks the following remarkable question at the end of his essay: 'Is it possible that one day an emancipated human race could encounter itself within an expanded space of discursive formation of will and yet be robbed of the light in which it is capable of interpreting its life as something good?'<sup>79</sup> The danger of such a 'discursive formation of will' is that right at the moment of overcoming age-old repressions, it harbours no violence but also no content.

In the final twist of his Benjamin essay, Habermas states that a theory of linguistic communication that wants to bring Benjamin's insights back into a materialist theory of social evolution should consider the following two theses – the possibility of a proper sphere of mutual linguistic understanding, on the one hand, and the non-linguistic and dangerous trust in technology, on the other – at the same time. This is the interesting way in which Habermas ends his essay on Benjamin. One of the most fascinating aspects of the essay is the way in which he attempts to construct a model in which there is a kind of role for aesthetics in communicative reason, yet without deepening this insight. At the same time, though, Habermas was starting to steer his intellectual work towards a theory of communicative action and rationality – a theme that will be further explored

when we come to the second phase of Habermas's aesthetics (see chapter 3).<sup>80</sup>

## 1.6 Habermas's early reflections on aesthetics

If one studies Habermas's career in the 1960s and early 1970s (the first phase of his aesthetics), a distinctive shift becomes clear. It is one where aesthetics moves from the foreground to the background. In Habermas's first work, *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, aesthetics (in the form of a historical and institutional construction of a literary-public sphere) still has an important role to play in the process of democratic will formation. The fascinating aspect of the first part of this work is the importance given to artworks and cultural institutions in contributing to the rational exchange of ideas in the public sphere. Even the more pessimistic analysis of the public sphere, in the second part of the work, still allows space for critical aesthetic interventions in an era of consumption. The process of modernization and rationalization is thus, in opposition to Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, not interpreted exclusively in terms of reification, alienation and instrumental rationality.<sup>81</sup> Although some aspects of the first generation's vision of the culture industry are acknowledged here, Habermas disagrees with Horkheimer and Adorno's interpretation of the public sphere in the contemporary era. Although Habermas agrees in this work that it is impossible to return to a liberal public sphere, as it once existed, he is also unwilling to sacrifice the conceptual and normative aspects of public rationality. Such a move, for Habermas, would threaten public emancipation. Already at this early stage of Habermas's intellectual career, it is clear that the dark side of the Enlightenment does not cancel out the hope for a non-foundational modern ideal of freedom, justice and happiness.

It has also been argued in this chapter that Habermas's concern to develop a rational and normative concept of the public sphere (in the 1960s and early 1970s) contributed to a weakening of aesthetic interests in his work. In this process the inherent potential of a concept such as the literary public sphere fell by the wayside. Clear examples of Habermas's shift on aesthetics are detectable in his works of the late 1960s and early 1970s. In *Knowledge and Human Interests*, for example, he links the idea of emancipation with psychoanalysis as a critical social science leading to critical self-reflection. Although one might expect Habermas to explore themes

such as the libido and inner nature here (themes that have rich aesthetic potential), instead he interprets psychoanalysis as the communicative interaction between analyst and patient recovering the unimpaired ego and superego structures. In this process critical social inquiry is closely linked with general societal and linguistic structures. In *Legitimation Crisis* Habermas deepened his study of a rational public sphere by focusing on the manner in which extensive state intervention in the economy leads to legitimation, motivational and rational crises in late capitalism. Habermas's alternative to these crises was interesting at this stage, because a certain kind of scientism, universal morality and post-auratic art were mentioned as examples of cultural resources that could counter the encroachment of planned systems in the cultural life-world. Unfortunately, Habermas did not elaborate on the possible role of art in the public sphere.<sup>82</sup>

Habermas's Benjamin essay, which brings the first phase of his aesthetics to a close, is in many ways remarkable. First, it is Habermas's most substantive essay on aesthetics to date. Secondly, it provides a clear outline of the differences between his position and the aesthetic legacy of Critical Theory (an issue that will be explored in greater detail in the next chapter). Thirdly, Habermas defends Benjamin's rescuing critique against the consciousness-raising critique of Marcuse and Adorno. The point is that criticism is not the result of artworks that raise consciousness, but a form of activity that rescues various aesthetic experiences for public debate. The interest in Benjamin's aesthetics also stems from Habermas's view that theoretical and normative dimensions can be expanded by developments in popular culture such as photography and film. Fourthly, Habermas's defence of Benjamin is further explored in terms of the Benjaminian concepts of experience and language. I have already indicated that Habermas seems to agree with Benjamin that without the influx of semantic energy, with which Benjamin's rescuing criticism is concerned, practical discourse is weakened. At another juncture in the essay, however, Habermas is cautious about a theory of experience grounded in a mimetic theory of language. In this context he questions Benjaminian concepts such as mimesis, ecstasy and shock in the public sphere. This qualified critique of Benjamin allows Habermas, in the fifth place, to defend a view of the public sphere that includes material and communicative aspects. At the end of the essay, though, Habermas acknowledges that a model of linguistic communication seeking to bring Benjamin's insights into a materialist theory of social evolution must deal with the complex ambiguity of communication and technology.

The discernible shift in the first phase of Habermas's aesthetics (from the 1960s to the early 1970s) has been mentioned. It is a shift from the institutional construction of a public sphere as the basis for democratic will formation in *The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere* (via a model of self-reflection in psychoanalysis) to the validity claims that are universally implicit in all speech. This shift can also be described as a turn away from a historically specific grounding of democracy (in his early work) towards reliance on the trans-historical and intersubjective evolving communicative capacities of reason.<sup>83</sup> This shift, which inaugurates the second phase of his aesthetics, is a further refinement of the final paragraph of his essay on Benjamin's aesthetics, where Habermas states that the challenge is to deal with the problem of universal human communication in light of the danger of a non-linguistic technology. Already at this juncture of his career it is clear that aesthetics finds only a reduced and specified position within communicative reason. This motive is also one of the driving forces behind Habermas's main philosophical accomplishment – *The Theory of Communicative Action*. Before discussing the aesthetic implication of Habermas's theory of communicative action (which forms the heart of the second phase of his aesthetics), in chapter 3, we will focus on the relationship between Habermas and the first generation of Critical Theorists, in the next chapter. We have seen that aesthetic arguments fulfil an important role in the works of Horkheimer, Adorno, Marcuse and Benjamin. In the development of his own project of Critical Theory in the direction of a more formal understanding of reason, and before he could launch the second phase of his aesthetics, Habermas had to deal with this aesthetic legacy.