

## Immanuel Kant's Manifesto for Dad Rock

Christian Thorne

*Williams College*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>



Part of the [American Studies Commons](#), [Comparative Literature Commons](#), [Education Commons](#), [European Languages and Societies Commons](#), [Feminist, Gender, and Sexuality Studies Commons](#), [Other Arts and Humanities Commons](#), [Other Film and Media Studies Commons](#), [Reading and Language Commons](#), [Rhetoric and Composition Commons](#), [Social and Behavioral Sciences Commons](#), [Television Commons](#), and the [Theatre and Performance Studies Commons](#)

Dedicated to the dissemination of scholarly and professional information, [Purdue University Press](#) selects, develops, and distributes quality resources in several key subject areas for which its parent university is famous, including business, technology, health, veterinary medicine, and other selected disciplines in the humanities and sciences.

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

### Recommended Citation

Thorne, Christian. "Immanuel Kant's Manifesto for Dad Rock." *CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture* 22.3 (2020): <<https://doi.org/10.7771/1481-4374.3913>>

This text has been double-blind peer reviewed by 2+1 experts in the field.

The above text, published by Purdue University Press ©Purdue University, has been downloaded 0 times as of 11/15/20.

This document has been made available through Purdue e-Pubs, a service of the Purdue University Libraries. Please contact [epubs@purdue.edu](mailto:epubs@purdue.edu) for additional information.

This is an Open Access journal. This means that it uses a funding model that does not charge readers or their institutions for access. Readers may freely read, download, copy, distribute, print, search, or link to the full texts of articles. This journal is covered under the [CC BY-NC-ND license](#).

**CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture**

ISSN 1481-4374 <<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb>>  
Purdue University Press ©Purdue University

*CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture*, the peer-reviewed, full-text, and open-access learned journal in the humanities and social sciences, publishes new scholarship following tenets of the discipline of comparative literature and the field of cultural studies designated as "comparative cultural studies." In addition to the publication of articles, the journal publishes review articles of scholarly books and publishes research material in its *Library Series*. Publications in the journal are indexed in the Annual Bibliography of English Language and Literature (Chadwyck-Healey), the Arts and Humanities Citation Index (Thomson Reuters ISI), the Humanities Index (Wilson), Humanities International Complete (EBSCO), the International Bibliography of the Modern Language Association of America, and Scopus (Elsevier). The journal is affiliated with the Purdue University Press monograph series of Books in Comparative Cultural Studies. Contact: <[clcweb@purdue.edu](mailto:clcweb@purdue.edu)>

---

**Volume 22 Issue 3 (September 2020) Article 5**  
**Christian Thorne,**

**"Immanuel Kant's Manifesto for Dad Rock"**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/5>>

---

Contents of **CLCWeb: Comparative Literature and Culture 22.3 (2020)**  
Special Issue: **A Symposium on Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. Edited by Mathias Nilges.**  
<<http://docs.lib.purdue.edu/clcweb/vol22/iss3/>>

---

## Christian THORNE

### Immanuel Kant's Manifesto for Dad Rock

If there is one point that should be reasonably clear to anyone who has read "The Culture Industry," it is that Adorno and Horkheimer do not reject popular culture. That essay, it is true, gives us reasons to question any number of things that we typically hold dear: free time (for being unfree time, nearly as programmed as the work from which it nominally releases us) (104), laughter (for being the consolation prize you get for not having a life worth living) (112), style (for funneling all social and historical content into a pre-arranged matrix or inflexible scheme of aesthetic quirks and twitches; for holding out the promise of artistic individualism—the personal signature in literature or music—and then transposing this into its opposite, the iterative, unresponsive art-machine) (100ff.). Most of us remember "The Culture Industry" as anti-pop's *cahier de doléance*, its encyclopedia of anathema, the night in which all *bêtes sont noires*. But alongside the essay's admittedly austere bill of grievances, it is easy enough to compile a second list, an inventory of things that Adorno and Horkheimer say they like and suggest we might admire: Charlie Chaplin, the Marx Brothers (109), Greta Garbo (106), the circus (114), old cartoons, Felix the Cat (maybe), Gertie the Dinosaur (perhaps), Betty Boop (for sure, because they name her) (106).

Just to be clear: "The Culture Industry," Exhibit A in any case against critical theory's Left elitism, is also the essay in which Adorno attacks Mozart while praising "stunt films," which we might more idiomatically translate as "Jackie Chan." One can thus cite authentically Adornian precedence for an attitude that distrusts classical music and celebrates kung fu movies, and this will be hard to believe only if you prefer a critical theory shorn of its dialectics,

***Brown seems to hold that art escapes commodification by being twofold. But that simply is the structure of the commodity. A Thomas McCarthy novel has no advantages in this regard over a tube sock or a travel mug, and Brown can only believe that it does by arguing repeatedly, contra Marx, that it is usefulness, and not doubleness, that makes something a commodity. This error is baffling, since twenty minutes spent reading Capital would have been enough to correct it.***

stripped of the contradictory judgments that thought renders upon contradictory material—only, that is, if you prefer the Adorno of joke Twitter feeds and scowling author photos: bald, moon-faced, a Central European frown emoji inexplicably mad at his own piano. One suspects that readers have generally refused to take seriously the essay's central category. For *the culture industry* is neither an epithet nor a gratuitously Marxist synonym for *popular culture*, but rather a different concept, distorted every time we paraphrase it in that other, more comfortable idiom, as a calumny upon pop culture or pop. There is plenty of evidence, in the essay itself, that Adorno and Horkheimer were drawing distinctions between forms of popular culture, and not just pitting the Glenn Miller Orchestra against Alban Berg.

Such, then, is one way of taking the measure of Nicholas Brown's *Autonomy*. This is one of those books that you might have thought no-one could write anymore: four chapters that mean to restate the old, left-wing case for art, unapologetically named as such, as *the artwork*—and not as *text* or *culture* or *cultural production*—the idea being that art represents the survival of independent human activity under conditions hostile to such a thing. No longer homogenized under those master terms, art can again take as its rival *entertainment*, a word whose German equivalent derives from the verb *unterhalten*, which even English speakers can tell means "to hold under," as though movies and TV shows existed to keep us down, as though R&B were a ducking or a swirlie. That the English word borrows the same roots from the French only confirms the point: *entre + tenir*, to keep amidst or hold in position. *Entertain* used to mean "to hire, as a servant."

*Autonomy* is also the book in which a next-generation American Marxist out-Mandarins Adorno, who, after all, begins his essay by insisting that the cultural conservatives are wrong. There has been no decline of standards, no cultural anarchy let loose by the weakening of the churches and the vanishing of the old, agrarian societies, hence no permissive culture in which anything goes. Just the contrary: Magazines and radio and Hollywood form a system with its own rigidly enforced standards, a highly regulated domain in which almost nothing goes. Adorno's way of saying this is that there is no "cultural chaos" (Adorno and Horkheimer 94). But Nicholas Brown prefers the chaos thesis, endorsing the position that Adorno has preemptively rejected as both reactionary and implausible: "The culture industry," Brown writes, couching in Frankfurtese his not-at-all Adornian point, is "the confusion in which everything worth saving is lost" (Adorno and Horkheimer 135).

Similarly, readers are usually surprised to find Adorno writing in defense of "mindlessness." His hunch is that Kantian aesthetics might find its niche among the lowest art forms and not, as we more commonly expect, among the most elevated. Sometimes I encounter an object and find it beautiful, and in that moment of wonderment, my attitude towards the object is adjusted. I stop trying to discern what the thing is for or how to use it. Where a moment ago, I was still scanning its instruction manual, I am now glad for the thing just so. Perhaps I am even moved to disenroll the beautiful thing from the inventory of useful objects, or find myself doting on it even having ascertained that it is not good for much. But then sometimes this purposiveness without a purpose is going to strike me not as beautiful, but as stupid, and Adorno's point is that the stupid can do the work of the beautiful, that the *beaux arts* are if anything outmatched by the imbecile kind. The activities that we do for their own sake, for the idiot joy of our own capacities, are the ones that our pragmatic selves are likely to dismiss as dopey: someone you know can play two recorders at once with her nose; a guy you once met could burp louder than a riding mower; you have heard about people who can vomit at will and recreationally. Kantian *Zweckmäßigkeit ohne Zweck* enters the vernacular every time we mutter "That was pointless." It is in this spirit that Adorno sticks up for "entertainment free of all restraint," "pure entertainment," "stubbornly purposeless expertise," and "mindless artistry." His claim, in fact, is that the culture industry is hostile to such "meaninglessness," that Hollywood is "making meaninglessness disappear" (Adorno and Horkheimer 114). It might be enough here to recall the difficulties that the major studios have in making comedies that are funny all the way through, preferring as they do to recruit their clowns from improv clubs and sketch shows, to promote them to the rank of movie star, and then to impound them in the regularities of the well-made plot, complete with third-act twists and character arcs, gracelessly telegraphed in the film's final twenty-five minutes, to make up for all the time squandered on jokes, and tending to position the buffo's comic persona as a pathology to be cured, scripting a return to normalcy whose hallmark is a neutralized mirthlessness. Hollywood's comic plots model the supersession of comedy and not its vindication.

But Nicholas Brown is not on the side of meaninglessness. "In commercial culture," he writes, "there are no works to critique and no meanings to be found"—and he does not mean this as praise (10). In *Autonomy*, there is no liberating nonsense, but only the English professor's compulsion to discern meaning, his impatience with any art for which one could not readily devise an essay prompt. Whatever independence the book's title is offering us, it is not the freedom to stop making sense. It feels bracing, in fact, to read a book so willing to discard the institutionalized anti-elitism of cultural studies and 200-level seminars offering to "introduce" 20-year-olds to horror movies. When Brown rolls his eyes over *Avatar* because of some dumb thing its director once said in an interview, or when he calls off a wholly promising reading of *True Detective* by announcing that it is "nothing more than an entertainment," we need to see him as turning his back on the aging pseudo-Gramscians of the contemporary academy, all those populists without a movement, the media-studies scholars who imagine themselves as part of a Cultural Front that no-one else can see, a two-term alliance consisting entirely of Beyoncé fans and themselves; the shopping-mall Maoists of the 1990s who couldn't tell the difference between *aller au peuple* and *aller au cinema* (71). Adorno, of course, was concerned that the desires and tastes of ordinary audiences could be manipulated or even in some sense produced. "The Culture Industry" prompts in its readers the still Kantian project to figure out which of the many pleasures they experience are authentically their own. Which are the pleasures that will survive your reflection upon them, and which are the ones that you might reject for having made you more thing-like, for having come to you as mere stimulation or conditioning? The autonomy that Adorno is trying to imagine is therefore ours, in opposition to a mass media that muscled in to tell us what we want before we have had a chance to consider what else there is to want or how a person might want differently, to work out not just different objects of desire, but different modes of desiring and of seeking satisfaction. Brown, by contrast, complains repeatedly that artists more than ever have to make things that people like. The autonomy that he is after is thus not our autonomy from an insinuating system but the artist's autonomy from us. It is no longer surprising for a tenured literature professor to disclose, in writing, that he's been listening to early Bruno Mars records. The unusual bit comes when Brown says he doesn't think they're any good (24).

• • •

Rather than summarize Brown's findings, it might be more instructive to think of his book as having been constructed, modularly, out of four blocks:

**1) A Marxist problem:** The problem that drives Brown's thinking arrives as a question: What is the condition of art in the era of the universal market? The very concept of art promises that there exists a special class of objects, objects that we intuitively set apart, that are exempt from our ordinary calculi,

that indeed activate one of the mind's more recondite and less Newtonian faculties. But it is the premise of the universal market that there exist no such objects. Art might thus seem to be one of the things that a cyclically expanding capitalism has had to eliminate, as rival and incompatibility, like late medieval guilds or Yugoslavia. And yet art plainly still exists. I swear I saw some last Sunday. What, then, is the status of art when it can no longer dwell, nor even pretend to dwell, outside of the market, when its claim to distinction can no longer plausibly be voiced, when we've all come to suspect that the work of art is just another luxury good? One way of thinking about *Autonomy*, then, is to read it as refurbishing the theory of postmodernism, thirty-five years after Jameson first put that theory in place.

**2) A Kantian solution:** Maybe "refurbish" is the wrong word, though. Perhaps it would be more accurate to say that Brown means to call off the theory of postmodernism, to soothe readers steeped in Jameson by explaining how art survives even once, in the latter's words, "aesthetic production ... has become integrated into commodity production generally" (4). *Autonomy* amounts to a set of reassurances that aesthetic autonomy remains possible even within the market; that artworks can come to us with ISBN numbers and still elude the constraints of the commodity form. One can fruitfully read Brown's book as a list of the techniques available to contemporary artists for performing this feat. This is an argument that can be broadcast in different frequencies. Most often, it arrives in Kantian form, to the effect that there still exist non-instrumental objects, objects that, in some sense yet to be defined, display an anomalous relationship to purpose or use. At the same time, the argument can be modulated to carry a certain Marxist content. It was Marx's claim, after all, that capitalism was bound to produce its own enemies, that bosses and investors were fated to produce a class of persons who would simultaneously serve and oppose them. One way of engineering the splice between Marxism and Kantian aesthetics is just to swap in the word *objects* where the last sentence had "persons." Marx held that labor power was the commodity that did not behave like all the others. –Perhaps art is a second such. –And maybe *work* is the word that holds the two together. If we grant this point, postmodernism might reveal itself to have been a false problem all along. For which faithful Marxist ever thought we had to look outside of market society for solutions? Not Jameson, at any rate, whose mantra in the 1980s was that there was no advantage in opposing postmodernism, that the task for an emancipatory aesthetics was to cut a path through postmodernism and out the other side. Nicholas Brown, meanwhile, is more interested in what came before postmodernism than in what might come after it. In literary-historical terms, his argument is best understood as vouching for the survival of modernism within its successor form. Indeed, Brown is such a partisan of early twentieth-century art that he writes a chapter on *The Wire*, hailed by all and sundry as the great reinvention of Victorian social realism for the twenty-first century, and calls it "Modernism on TV" (152). The theorist's attachment to the old modern is easiest to sense whenever the book's readings reach their anti-utilitarian and aestheticist apotheoses. Brown thinks he can explain why, when presented with two versions of the same photograph, we should prefer the one with the class conflict left out (58-9). He also praises one white, Bush-era guitar band for negating the politics implicit in its blues rock, for achieving a pop formalism so pristine that it successfully brackets the question of race (145).

**3) A high-middlebrow canon:** That the band in question is The White Stripes lights up the next important feature of *Autonomy*, which is that it has assembled a canon of high-middlebrow art from the last forty years: Caetano Veloso, Jeff Wall, Alejandro Iñarritu, Ben Lerner, David Simon, Jennifer Egan, Richard Linklater, Cindy Sherman. That Brown shares the last-named with Jameson's postmodernism book is a reminder that this set of objects could be variously named. The mind swoops in to say that the high-middlebrow is nothing but postmodernism itself (E.L. Doctorow, Andy Warhol, *Blade Runner*)—that the book's dexterity is therefore to be redescribed as neo-modernist what we had previously known only as pomo—but then pauses. If we follow the classic account, then one of the foremost characteristics of postmodern art—the first box to tick if you are in a museum carrying the checklist—is the collapsing of high and low, or what Jameson often identifies as elite art's unwonted interest in its downmarket rival, its willingness to mimic trash, pulp, schlock, or kitsch. But it has never been obvious that the latter really and truly triggered the former—that the mere quoting of popular media was enough to abolish the class-boundedness of art or even to weaken our habituated sense that cultural goods sort out into a hierarchy of distinction. If I am sitting in a concert hall listening to a string quartet, then this setting alone will be enough to frame the music as high even when the composer briefly assigns the cello the bass line from Stevie Wonder's "Superstition." One wishes to say, then, that the middlebrow—and not the citational—is the mode of art in which the distinction between high and low most fully collapses, which should make of Midcult the form of a perfected postmodernism, except that the doubling of the concept will now raise some puzzles of its own. For did the middlebrow not precede the postmodern? Was there no middlebrow art before there was postmodern art? And if yes, then why was such art not postmodern when it combined high and low in 1940? Were high and low commingling differently in 1980

than they had in *The Old Man and the Sea*? And does not middlebrow art have its own, more or less direct way of reaching the median, its own styles and forms, without having to assemble itself afresh every time from pieces borrowed from high and low? So perhaps we would need after all to distinguish the middlebrow from the splicing-of-pop-and-art, for which we would continue to reserve the word *postmodernism*. At this point, watching those terms grow unwieldy, one casts about for new ones, and looking back over Brown's list of autonomous artists, discerns the outlines of what until recently we were calling *indie culture* or *alternative*: small-label rock albums and small-studio features, supplemented by *New Yorker* fiction and the more accessible reaches of gallery art. If you are persuaded by *Autonomy*, you are going to say that it is a thoughtful Gen X'ers riposte to Jameson, thirty-five years his senior, a careful explanation of why he has never experienced the art of his generation as all that broken. If you are unpersuaded by the book, you are going to say that it is Immanuel Kant's manifesto for dad rock.

**4) The methods of the literature seminar:** It now becomes important to identify the first of two ways that Brown has modified the Kantian arguments that he makes often and by name. The third *Critique* is at pains to explain that you are doing something unusual every time you call something beautiful. First of all, you are judging without interest; when you experience something as beautiful, you stop caring what it is for, or what it can do for you, or what it is worth. And if you are judging without interest, then it follows directly that your judgment should hold universally, since all other people equally capable of bracketing their interests should judge as you do. And yet the universality in question will be a fractured one even so. When I call this painting beautiful, I demand that everyone agree with me while knowing in practice that not everyone will. My claim is thus universalizing but not genuinely universal. Beauty is the occasion for what Kant innocuously names our "subjective universality"—our failed and spectral commonality, which is, of course, the fate of all universalisms thus far, unusual here only because raised to consciousness.

Brown follows this argument closely, but has nothing at all to say about beauty, which is the term one might have thought a Kantian aesthetics could not forego. His revision goes like this: I know I am in the presence of art not when I experience an object as beautiful, but when I know it to be meaningful, and I discern its meanings even having admitted that I can never know what it was that the artist meant. Deliberating about art, Brown says, has to involve the "public ascription of intention," and it is worth taking the time to extract the Kantian structure of this claim (13). Intention is merely ascribed, something that I have to posit. But this ascription is necessarily public; I posit meaning while expecting others to co-posit it alongside me. Meaning is subjective but not private and in this sense the successor to Kant's beauty. Brown's niftiest trick is thus to get meaning to do the work of the beautiful, and we can accordingly read *Autonomy* both as the making-hermeneutic of the philosophy of art and as the making-aesthetic of meaning, hence as philosophical aesthetics revenge upon semiotics for having once taught us to talk about art in de-aestheticized ways.

"The public ascription of meaning" is also Brown's big proposal for authenticating an object as real art even when it comes to us as a commodity. It is his bite test and dropper of nitric acid. Can I generate public meanings around *x* (Alison Bechdel, Gus Van Sant, Yeah Yeah Yeahs)? In practice, this is bound to mean: Can I teach a class on *x* (St. Vincent, Wes Anderson, Cormac McCarthy)? Will it work in seminar? We know something to be art, Brown says, when it "solicits close interpretative attention," and *Autonomy* is most convincing when modeling such attention (22). Brown is a first-rate exegete, and his book tosses off one illuminating reading after another, repeatedly vindicating the program of an older criticism: why *Boyhood* is not really a coming-of-age movie; why the second season of *The Wire* is Greek rather than Shakespearean tragedy (and why that distinction matters); the particular way in which bossa nova bridges the divide between popular and art music (and what this has to do with developmentalist politics in the global South). Readers might nonetheless be disappointed to learn that postmodern art's paths to autonomy are the ones they already knew about. The book's point, in fact, seems to be that the old paths still work, that new ones are not needed. Brown likes art when it displays a degree of self-consciousness about its own procedures and historical situation, and especially when an artwork includes a version of itself which it then subjects to critique. Simple self-referentiality is his most basic requirement: that art not reproduce without comment the inherited imperatives of its genre or medium, always glossed as market imperatives. He sticks up for "framing" and "citation" because of the meta-questions that these provoke; some guitars do not just play rock songs, but get you to reflect on the condition of rock songs. All three of the novels he recommends are thus *Künstlerromane*, or at least readable as such, but these are only the clearest instance of *Autonomy's* fundamentally didactic preference for literature when it interrupts our naïve attitude to fiction and instead makes us think afresh about same. The White Stripes are congratulated for having turned "fun" into an "inquiry" (149).

This position is no more perspicuous than it has ever been. A person might finish *Autonomy* still wondering how it is that irony in this accustomed mode is able to "suspend the logic of the commodity" (34). The question is difficult: When irony comes to us in the form of the commodity, can we be sure that the commodity always loses? What keeps the self-ironizing commodity from functioning as commodified irony? In order to be convinced of Brown's position, do I have to believe first that irony is the one uncommodifiable thing? Or that a work that confesses its dependence on the market has thereby neutralized that dependence? In *Autonomy*, autonomy sometimes withers back to my ability to name my subordination. Brown, moreover, is altogether inured to one version of clientage, which is the continued dependence of art upon the critic, who, after all, is the only one who can ratify it as art, via that public ascription of meaning. Artists forward works to the marketplace without knowing whether they will even count as art, generating instead a kind of proto-art, obliged to wait for the critics who produce the aftermarket meanings that classify some works as not-just-commodities. If you are an artist, then autonomy apparently means marking time until somebody else certifies that you have successfully described your heteronomy.

• • •

A Marxist quandary, a Kantian path out—that's *Autonomy*. If I say now that the path out is poorly blazed, and maybe even a trick, then you need not be disappointed, because it will also turn out that the quandary was not one and that it did not need solving. You need not worry, I mean, that Brown's account of art is unconvincing, and indeed disheartening, because the situation to which this art putatively responds is a non-problem. I will explain each in turn:

**The non-problem:** "The work of art is not *like* a commodity," Brown writes. "It is one" (34). That sentence is admirably hard-headed—but is it also correct? Are music and film and such available to us only as commodities? Do we never encounter art without having bought it first? It will be enough to consult your own experience to see that you are, in fact, surrounded by non-commodified art. Works of art are the only items that governments still routinely take out of the marketplace, amassing large collections of books, movies, and symphonies that citizens can access for free. Public libraries make of the arts the only remaining occasion for the otherwise atrophied traditions of municipal socialism. But when we start surveying our contemporary reserves of non-commodified art, we are talking about rather more than some picturesque Fabian survival. There was a period around the year 2000 when the new technologies more or less destroyed the market for recorded music. Even neoliberals concede that markets are not natural or spontaneous—that they have to be created and politically sustained—and the political economy of pop is a case in point. For the market in recorded music to have survived the rise of digital media, the governments of the capitalist states would have had to intervene massively to counter the wave of illegal downloading—the Moment of the MP3—when in fact they were largely content to let that market stop functioning. Brown is telling a story about the ever-intensifying logic of commodification, even though he has lived through the near decommodification of an entire art form, its remaking as a free good. If we are no longer talking much about media piracy, then this is only because filesharing has since been nudged back into a drastically redesigned marketplace, in the form of streaming and subscription services, which are the *Aufhebung* of the commodity form and its opposite: the non-market of free goods, available for a fee: Napster + the reassurance that you will not get sued. But then is the Spotify playlist a commodity? It might be, though it seems wrong to say that I have bought such a thing, and we still lack a proper account of the new cultural economies and their retailoring of the commodity form: Art in the Age of the Platform and the Deep Catalog. There is, of course, one position on the Left that has become totally contemptuous of the new technologies and especially of social media. The claim here is that we are gullibly creating free content for the new monopolies; we are writers and filmmakers and photographers—and we upload our work: our labor! our creativity!—and the companies make money (via advertising and the hawking of our data), and we do not get a cut (e.g., Lowery).<sup>1</sup> We are thus all in the position of the 1990s-era pop star who has seen her royalties tank; against every expectation, Shania Twain has become the representative figure of our universal exploitation. This argument is worth hearing out, but it remains important even so to recall the situation that gives rise to this misgiving in the first place, which is that the creative Internet involves much more than people Instagramming their dinners. It produces Twitter essays, Ivy League professors anatomizing authoritarianism, lots of short movies, 15-second TikTok masterpieces, and song—

<sup>1</sup> See for instance the writings of Cracker's David Lowery, collected at The Trichordist, a collective of "artists for an ethical and sustainable Internet." [thetrichordist.com](http://thetrichordist.com), last accessed November 12, 2019.

everywhere song. To the anti-corporate line that calls me a chump for posting a video of myself playing Weezer's "Hash Pipe" on the ukulele, the necessary Marxist rejoinder is that an arts communism is already in view—or at least that we have all the evidence we will ever need that people given the opportunity will gather without pay to fashion a culture together. Our snowballing insights into surveillance capitalism co-exist with the unforeclosed possibility that social media is the opening to socialist media. But then one wonders how new any of this is—wonders, indeed, whether the culture industry was ever tethered to the commodity form, since network television and pop radio in their canonical, postwar incarnations were already free goods, generating one of the great unremarked contradictions of twentieth-century arts commentary. Already in 1980, the art forms that a Left criticism excoriated under names like "corporate rock" and "consumer culture" were the ones that a person could readily watch or hear without buying them. Before the advent of the full-scale Internet, it was alternative culture that existed only as a commodity, like that Sonic Youth CD I was once desperate to buy because I knew I was never going to hear it during morning drive time. (Only as a commodity? Almost only? Surely a friend might have hooked me up with a dub. Was I nowhere near a college radio station?) *Indie* used to be our name for music more-than-ordinarily dependent on the market, for art that one encountered mostly as commodity.

That's one way of understanding why *Autonomy* is trying, in vain, to solve a non-problem: The commodification of art is by no means complete. The relation of music, image, and story to the commodity form remains inconsistent and contradictory. But there is a second way of getting at this point, and it goes back to the book's fundamental misunderstanding of Marx and the commodity form. Brown's promise, again, is that even in an era when we can no longer posit a distinction between the commodity and the non-commodity, we can still learn the subtler business of telling the mere commodity from the commodity-plus. Contemporary art might be a commodity, but it is not *just* a commodity. But in Marx, there is no such thing as the mere commodity. The very first point that Marx makes in *Capital Volume 1* is that commodities have a twofold character; it is, in fact, this doubleness that makes them commodities: Objects "are only commodities because they have a dual nature"—they are simultaneously objects of use and objects of exchange, themselves as well as their fungible selves (Marx 138). Brown seems to hold that this condition is the special accomplishment of the neo-modernist artwork—its ability to escape commodification by being twofold. But that simply *is* the structure of the commodity. A Thomas McCarthy novel has *no* advantages in this regard over a tube sock or a travel mug, and Brown can only believe that it does by arguing repeatedly, contra Marx, that it is usefulness, and not doubleness, that makes something a commodity: "An experience is immediately a use value, and therefore in a society such as ours immediately entails the logic of the commodity..." (49). "Since the display value of a picture is a use value, there is nothing in the picture as an object that separates it from its being as a commodity" (68). This error is baffling, since twenty minutes spent reading *Capital* would have been enough to correct it, but it is also the predictable outcome of trying to get Marx and Kant to speak in the same voice. Marx's argument has two steps: 1) It is exchange that makes something a commodity, and not use; useful objects obviously predated market society and will outlive it. 2) But then equally, use is not negated by exchange; the exchangeability of the object coexists with its usability, even though these require contradictory standpoints. It is thus impossible to understand why Brown thinks that art would stop functioning as art just because it's for sale. Brown's way of claiming this is to say that "the structure of the commodity excludes the attribute of interpretability" (22). If a movie comes to me as a commodity, I should not be able to interpret it, and if I am against all expectation able to discern meaning in it, I can congratulate it for having slipped free of its commodity shackles. But why would that be the case? A commodified rice cooker does not stop functioning as a rice cooker. Commodified soap does not stop cleaning your face. Why would artworks alone lose their particular qualities when commodified, such that we would wish to solemnize those putatively rare examples that achieve the doubleness that is in fact the commodity's universal form?

**The fake solution:** Brown's argument gets itself into trouble by superimposing Kant on top of Marx, and yet its Kantianism is itself a mess. I should explain first why this matters. A critical theorist spots on the new arrivals shelf a book called *Autonomy* and cannot know at a glance what it is about, since its title exists in two registers at once. She might expect to find a book about the autonomy of art—a book, in other words, that belongs in the tradition of Gautier, Pater, Greenberg, and Rancière. But she might equally expect a book about the autonomy of workers, a book about *autonomia*, about the ability of workers to direct their own activity and set their own political goals without the superintendence of political parties and big trade unions. Anyone who notices that the book's author is carrying a Duke-Literature PhD has got to expect this second autonomy, an Englishing of *Potere Operaio* and *Lotta Continua*; one might well be grateful for such a thing, since American Marxists still require the help of the Italians to make militant the cozily Jeffersonian program of "participatory democracy." That Nicholas

Brown holds no brief for the Italian Marxists is thus one of the book's bigger surprises; if anything, the baldness of the book's title seems designed to wrest the word *autonomy* away from the autonomists and to deliver it back to the aestheticism that historically predated Tronti and Virno. But the matter is more complicated than that. A certain workerism continues to inform Brown's writing even so, if only because he so often makes about artworks arguments that we are used to hearing about proletarians. His biggest claim is that the artwork is wholly inserted into capitalism while also opposing it. "Art as such does not preexist capitalism and will not survive it; instead, art presents an unemphatic alterity to capitalism; art is not the before or after of capitalism but the deliberate suspension of its logic, its determinate other" (88-9). Or again: "The artwork is not an archaic holdover but the internal, unemphatic other to capitalist society (9). No Marxist should be surprised by this figure, though one might well marvel that it has taken the aesthetes so long to come round to it. It was the modernists, in this respect like the Third Worldists, who thought that the struggle against capitalism would have to come from some uncontaminated outside, from people who had wrenched free of the market or managed to avoid entering it in the first place. Brown's project is to correct this bit of modernist doctrine by borrowing from Marxism its most basic dialectical motif, and in the process to get artworks to play the role formerly assigned to the working class. Brown's artwork accordingly rumbles with otherwise diminished proletarian energies, though this has contradictory effects, since it is unclear in this scenario whether autonomous art comes to us as the ally of working people or as their rival. Brown is nowhere closer to a conventional Marxism than in his discussion of *The Wire*, where he offers some cogent remarks on the disappearance of the American working class, on casualization, the vanishing of jobs hitherto thought immune to mechanization, and the persistence of the category *worker*, as quasi-ethnic identity, even after work has disappeared. In this context, he has earmarked one line from the second season: "Modern robotics do much of the work" (qtd. 174). But this last is a historical development that Brown's argument emulates in the process of opposing, as his book palpably assigns to objects a set of historical tasks that were once thought proper for workers. *Autonomy* is accordingly stalked by automation, with the position of the working class—its superseded position? its only ever putative position?—now filled by quality television and smart novels. Robots do the work of capitalism; art does the work of "suspending" capitalism and is to that extent a second robot, the robot of negation: the nay-robot.

At the same time, however, the artwork will continue to serve as the anticipatory figure for a free and self-determining humanity. If I cannot figure out how to be autonomous, I can delegate art to be autonomous in my stead. This is the not-so-secret use of those special objects to which we do not assign uses. The autonomy that we ascribe to the artwork will therefore say a lot about the independence that we wish for ourselves, and it is for this reason that the book's explanation of Kant's aesthetics matters, since it is from his third *Critique*—and not from his moral philosophy, nor from his overtly political essays—that we are expected to extract this political criterion and aim.

The problem, then, is that Brown parses Kant's theory of aesthetic autonomy in at least three different and incompatible ways.

1) Sometimes, though not often, Brown cites Kant's most distinctive formulation. Some objects strike me as manifestly designed—organized, patterned, not random—even though I cannot tell what they are for or, indeed, whether they are for anything at all. This *Autonomy* knows to call "purposiveness without purpose," design without function (12, 179). Anyone aspiring to this condition is aiming for a kind of idleness, or at least an un-work, a kind of busy leisure. If lack of purpose is how we recognize autonomy, then we will ourselves only gain independence once we have resolved never to achieve anything—to swear off goals and undertakings and weekend to-do lists.

2) But then Brown also praises some detective fiction for its ability to produce cognitive maps—for its "making connections" across "multiple milieux and classes," and at that point one notices that he is not hostile to purpose after all (70). He has violated the Kantian stricture by assigning a purpose to Raymond Chandler and endorsing that purpose as worthy. *The Big Sleep* does not just hum with needless pattern; it provides us with a service for which we might feel grateful (and for which we might pay Random House). What stands out at this point is that Brown has proposed a formulation of his own, which he prefers to "purposiveness without purpose"—namely, "immanent purposiveness," a refusal, that is, of imposed or extrinsic ends (13). Sometimes he refers in this regard to "the self-legislating work": "A work's assertion of autonomy is the claim that its form is self-legislating. Nothing more" (182). For any Kantian, of course, autonomy is precisely something more—a rejection of all ends, and not just of "external" ones (31)—though the phrase "self-legislating" has a Kantian ring of its own, and we might soon conclude that Brown is silently correcting the third *Critique* by smuggling in a key concept from the second, in order to re-introduce purpose into a landscape forbiddingly devoid of it. He is putting the

self-legislating subjects of Kantian moral philosophy in the place of the aimless objects of Kantian aesthetics.

3) But when is an end "immanent" to a work of art? And when is it "external"? Are we confident that we know the difference between inside and out? Early in *Autonomy*, Brown lists among his goals a defense of the category of "intention" (10-11): We will not even be able to regard artworks as intelligible if we treat them as non-intentional—if, that is, we stop conceiving of them as somebody's attempt to say something. This claim is plainly incompatible with a rigorous Kantianism, since whatever intention I ascribe to the artwork will be a purpose, and Kant's whole point is that artworks have no such purposes. But Brown's retrieval of intention is no less damaging to the loose Kantianism he prefers. He instructs us to think of autonomy as "self-legislating," but he also wants us to consider the intentions that activate a work of art, and the latter generates all sorts of ambiguity around the former, simply by introducing the problems of authors and artists. Where before we had one term, the artwork, now we have two, the artwork and its intender, and now we have to wonder which of them gets to be self-legislating. If we allow the artist to give herself the law, then the artwork will presumably be secondary, the vehicle and working-out of the poet's chosen code, the telegram of her intention. Sometimes, however, Brown sidelines the artist and lets the movies choose their own ends: It is the job of the viewer, he writes, "to figure out what [the artwork] is trying to do" (31). And from this second perspective, one is compelled to distrust the artist's intention as an externality—just another imposed demand: The artwork, if it is to be autonomous, should get to do what *it* wants, where this desire is usually understood as an inherited formal project, requiring that all new artists solve hitherto unsolved formal problems or that they re-do old aesthetic experiments in radicalized form. But in this second scenario, the autonomy of the artwork plainly comes at the expense of my autonomy. The artwork that I had hoped would secure my independence instead ends up bossing me around. It was Adorno who observed that modernism, which we typically describe to undergraduates as an emancipated anti-traditionalism, a discarding of the old conventions, an experimental drive to make art otherwise, actually amounted to a "canon of prohibitions": an ever-expanding list of Things You Could Not Do: paint figurally, compose with triads, end your novel with a marriage (Adorno 36-7).

But then do artworks really get to choose their own ends or give themselves the law? Brown sometimes writes as though they did, but mostly confesses that they do not preferring the following, thrice-repeated hedge:

- "The novel presents itself as simply following a logic that is already present in the material, as though the novel were not written by an author" (99).
- In the domain of art, all legitimate politics must "appear to emerge as if unbidden from the material on which these artists work" (38).
- For an artist, one important skill is "the capacity to produce the conviction that what we are seeing belongs to the logic of the material rather than to some external, contingent compulsion" (59).

This last sentence makes Brown's point with special force: The artwork cannot, in fact, achieve autonomy; its glory is not to negate command, but merely to mask it, to produce in us a belief that the artwork was self-generating even when it was not. *Autonomy* begins by recommending to us art as the undiminished paradigm of self-determination and free activity, and ends up enrolling it in that list of calculated things we misapprehend as spontaneous—consumer choice, electoral democracy, Spinozist consciousness—and this it does without ever admitting how dolefully it has dickered down its offer: We search art for the possibility of our freedom and walk away persuaded only that some things expertly disguise their subservience. They step forward "as though" unbidden. *Autonomy*... as if.

#### Works Cited

- Adorno, Theodor. *Aesthetic Theory*. Translated by Robert Hullot-Kentor, U of Minnesota P, 1997 [1970].
- Adorno, Theodor, and Max Horkheimer. "The Culture Industry: Enlightenment as Mass Deception." *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, translated by Edmund Jephcott, Stanford UP, 2002 [1944].
- Brown, Nicholas. *Autonomy*. Duke UP, 2019.
- Jameson, Fredric. *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism*. Duke UP, 1991.
- Kant, Immanuel. *The Critique of Judgment*. translation by Werner Pluhar, Hackett Publishing, 1987 [1790].
- Marx, Karl. *Capital Volume 1*. Translated by Ben Fowkes, Penguin, 1992 [1867].

**Author's profile:** Christian Thorne is professor of English at Williams College and the author of *The Dialectic of Counter-Enlightenment*. Email: <[cthorne@williams.edu](mailto:cthorne@williams.edu)>