

to all. The view trumpeted in unison by Westerners and Stalinists of the incomprehensibility of modern art for the most part holds true descriptively; what is false in this view, however, is that they treat this reception as a fixed entity and ignore the interventions in consciousness of which incompatible works are capable. In the administered world, artworks are only adequately assimilated in the form of the communication of the uncommunicable, the breaking through of reified consciousness. Works in which the aesthetic form, under pressure of the truth content, transcends itself occupy the position that was once held by the concept of the sublime. In them, spirit and material polarize in the effort to unite. Their spirit experiences itself as sensually unrepresentable, while on the other hand their material, that to which they are bound external to their boundary, experiences itself as irreconcilable with the unity of the work. Kafka's writings are no more artworks than they could ever have been religious documents. The material—according to Benjamin, the language in particular—becomes desolate, starkly conspicuous; spirit is imbued with the quality of a second-order abstractness. Kant's doctrine of the feeling of the sublime all the more describes an art that shudders inwardly by suspending itself in the name of an illusionless truth content, though without, as art, divesting itself of its semblance character. The enlightenment concept of nature contributed to the invasion of the sublime into art. Along with the critique of the absolutist world of forms that made nature taboo as monstrous, boorish, and plebeian—a critique that was itself part of the general cultural-historical movement of the late eighteenth century—artistic practice was penetrated by that which Kant had reserved for nature as sublime and which came increasingly into conflict with taste. The unleashing of the elemental was one with the emancipation of the subject and thus with the self-consciousness of spirit. This self-consciousness spiritualized art as nature. Art's spirit is the self-recognition of spirit itself as natural. The more art integrates into itself what is nonidentical, what is immediately opposed to spirit, the more it must spiritualize itself. Conversely, spiritualization for its part introduced into art what is sensually displeasing and repugnant and what had previously been taboo for art; the sensually unpleasant has an affinity with spirit. The emancipation of the subject in art is the emancipation of art's own autonomy; if art is freed from consideration of its recipient, its sensual facade becomes increasingly a matter of indifference. The facade is transformed into a function of the content, which derives its force from what is not socially approved and prearranged. Art is spiritualized not by the ideas it affirms but through the elemental—the intentionless—that is able to receive the spirit in itself; the dialectic of the elemental and spirit is the truth content. Aesthetic spirituality has always been more compatible with the *fauve*, the savage, than with what has already been appropriated by culture. Spiritualized, the artwork becomes in itself what was previously attributed to it as its cathartic effect on another spirit: the sublimation of nature. The sublime, which Kant reserved exclusively for nature, later became the historical constituent of art itself. The sublime draws the demarcation line be-

tween art and what was later called arts and crafts. Kant covertly considered art to be a servant. Art becomes human in the instant in which it terminates this service. Its humanity is incompatible with any ideology of service to humankind. It is loyal to humanity only through inhumanity toward it. By its transplantation into art the Kantian definition of the sublime is driven beyond its boundaries. According to this definition, spirit, in its empirical powerlessness vis-à-vis nature, experiences its intelligible essence as one that is superior to nature. However, given that the sublime is supposed to be felt in the face of nature, the theory of subjective constitution implies that nature itself is sublime; self-reflection in the face of its sublimity anticipates something of a reconciliation with nature. Nature, no longer oppressed by spirit, frees itself from the miserable nexus of rank second nature and subjective sovereignty. Such emancipation would be the return of nature, and it—the counterimage of mere existence—is the sublime. Though the traits of domination evident in its dimensions of power and magnitude, the sublime speaks against domination. This is touched on by Schiller's dictum that the human being is only fully human when at play; with the consummation of his sovereignty he leaves behind the spell of sovereignty's aim. The more empirical reality hermetically excludes this event, the more art contracts into the element of the sublime; in a subtle way, after the fall of formal beauty, the sublime was the only aesthetic idea left to modernism. Even the hubris of art as a religion, the self-exaltation of art as the absolute, has its truth content in the allergy against what is not sublime in art, against that play that is satisfied with the sovereignty of spirit. What Kierkegaard subjectivistically terms "aesthetic seriousness," the heritage of the sublime, is the reversal of works into what is true by virtue of their content. The ascendancy of the sublime is one with art's compulsion that fundamental contradictions not be covered up but fought through in themselves; reconciliation for them is not the result of the conflict but exclusively that the conflict becomes eloquent. Thus, however, the sublime becomes latent. Art that is compelled toward a truth content that is the locus of unarbitrated contradictions is not capable of the positivity of negation that animated the traditional concept of the sublime as the presence of the infinite. This corresponds to the decline of the categories of play. Even in the nineteenth century a famous classicist theory defined music, in opposition to Wagner, as the play of sounding, moving forms; the similarity of the process of musical events with the optical patterns of the kaleidoscope, a brooding Biedermeier invention, was frequently underscored. This similarity need not be denied out of the desire to hold culture pure: The collapsing constellations of symphonic music, as in Mahler's works, have their true analogue in the kaleidoscopic patterns in which a series of slightly varying images collapses and a qualitatively transformed constellation emerges. It is just that in music what is conceptually indeterminate, its flux and articulation, is exceedingly determinate, and in the totality of these determinations that it itself establishes it achieves a content ignored by the concept of the play of forms. What parades as sublimity rings hollow, whereas

what plays imperturbably regresses to the triviality from which it was born. Admittedly, as art became dynamic, as its immanent determination became that of being an action, its play character also secretly intensified; thus, a half century before Beckett, Debussy entitled his most important orchestral work *Jeux*. The critique of profundity and seriousness, which once took aim at the overbearing presumptions of provincial inwardness—in that it justifies an industrious and mindless participation, activity for its own sake—is no less ideological than what it criticizes. Indeed, the sublime ultimately reverses into its opposite. To speak of the sublime with regard to specific artworks is at this point impossible without the twaddle of culture religion, and this results from the dynamic of the category of the sublime itself. The dictum that the sublime is only a step removed from the ridiculous pronounced by Napoleon at the moment when his luck turned has been overtaken by history and fulfilled in all its horror. At the time the dictum referred to a grandiose style, a pathos-laden discourse that, as a result of a disproportion between its high claims and its pedestrian reality, had a comic effect. But the targeted faux pas actually transpires within the concept of the sublime itself. The sublime was supposedly the grandeur of human beings who are spiritual and dominate nature. If, however, the experience of the sublime reveals itself as the self-consciousness of human beings' naturalness, then the composition of the concept changes. Even in Kant's formulation it was tinged with the nothingness of man; in this nothingness, the fragility of the empirical individual, the eternity of his universal destiny—his spirit—was to unfold. If, however, spirit itself is reduced to its natural dimension, then the annihilation of the individual taking place within it is no longer transcended positively. Through the triumph of the intelligible essence in the individual who stands firm spiritually against death, man puffs himself up as if in spite of everything, as the bearer of spirit, he were absolute. He thus becomes comical. Advanced art writes the comedy of the tragic: Here the sublime and play converge. The sublime marks the immediate occupation of the artwork by theology, an occupation that vindicates the meaning of existence one last time by virtue of its collapse. Against this verdict art is powerless. Something in Kant's construction of the sublime resists the objection that he reserved it exclusively for a feeling for nature because he had not yet experienced great subjective art. Unwittingly his doctrine expresses that the sublime is incompatible with the semblance character of art, in a way reminiscent perhaps of what Haydn implied in his reaction to Beethoven when he called him the Great Mogul. As bourgeois art stretched out its hand toward the sublime and thereby came into its own, the movement of the sublime toward its own negation was already implied. Theology for its part resists aesthetic integration. The sublime as semblance has its own absurdity and contributes to the neutralization of truth; this is the accusation of art in Tolstoy's *Kreutzer Sonata*. In any case, what is presented as evidence against the aesthetics of subjective feeling is that the feelings are illusory. Yet the feelings are real; the semblance is a quality of the aesthetic objects. Kant's asceti-

cism toward the aesthetically sublime objectively anticipates the critique of heroic classicism and the emphatic art derived from it. However, by situating the sublime in overpowering grandeur and setting up the antithesis of power and powerlessness, Kant directly affirmed his unquestioning complicity with domination. Art must find domination a source of shame and seek to overturn the perdurable, the desideratum of the concept of the sublime. Even Kant was by no means unaware that the sublime is not quantitative grandeur as such: With profound justification he defined the concept of the sublime by the resistance of spirit to the overpowering. The feeling of the sublime does not correspond immediately with what appears; towering mountains are eloquent not as what crushes overwhelmingly but as images of a space liberated from fetters and strictures, a liberation in which it is possible to participate. The legacy of the sublime is unassuaged negativity, as stark and illusionless as was once promised by the semblance of the sublime. This is however at the same time the legacy of the comic, which was always nourished by a feeling for the diminutive, the ludicrously pompous and insignificant, and which, for the most part, shored up established domination. The nonentity is comic by the claim to relevance that it registers by its mere existence and by which it takes the side of its opponent; once seen through, however, the opponent—power, grandeur—has itself become a nonentity. Tragedy and comedy perish in modern art and preserve themselves in it as perishing.

What befell the categories of the tragic and the comic testifies to the decline of aesthetic genres as such. Art has been caught up in the total process of nominalism's advance ever since the medieval *ordo* was broken up. The universal is no longer granted art through types, and older types are being drawn into the whirlpool. Croce's art-critical reflection that every work be judged, as the English say, *on its own merits* raised this historical tendency to the level of theoretical aesthetics. Probably no important artwork ever corresponded completely to its genre. Bach, from whom the academic rules of the fugue were derived, wrote no transition section modeled on sequencing in double counterpoint, and the requirement to deviate from mechanical models was ultimately incorporated even in conservatory rules. Aesthetic nominalism was the consequence, which Hegel himself overlooked, of his doctrine of the primacy of dialectical stages over the abstract totality. But Croce, who tardily drew the implied consequences, dilutes the dialectic by simply dismissing, along with the genres, the element of universality rather than seriously undertaking to transcend it. This is in keeping with the general tendency of Croce's work to adapt the rediscovered Hegel to the reigning spirit of his age by means of a more or less positivistic doctrine of development. Just as the arts as such do not disappear tracelessly in the general concept of art, the genres and forms do not merge perfectly into the individual art forms. Unquestionably, Attic tragedy was also the crystallization of no less a universal than the reconciliation of