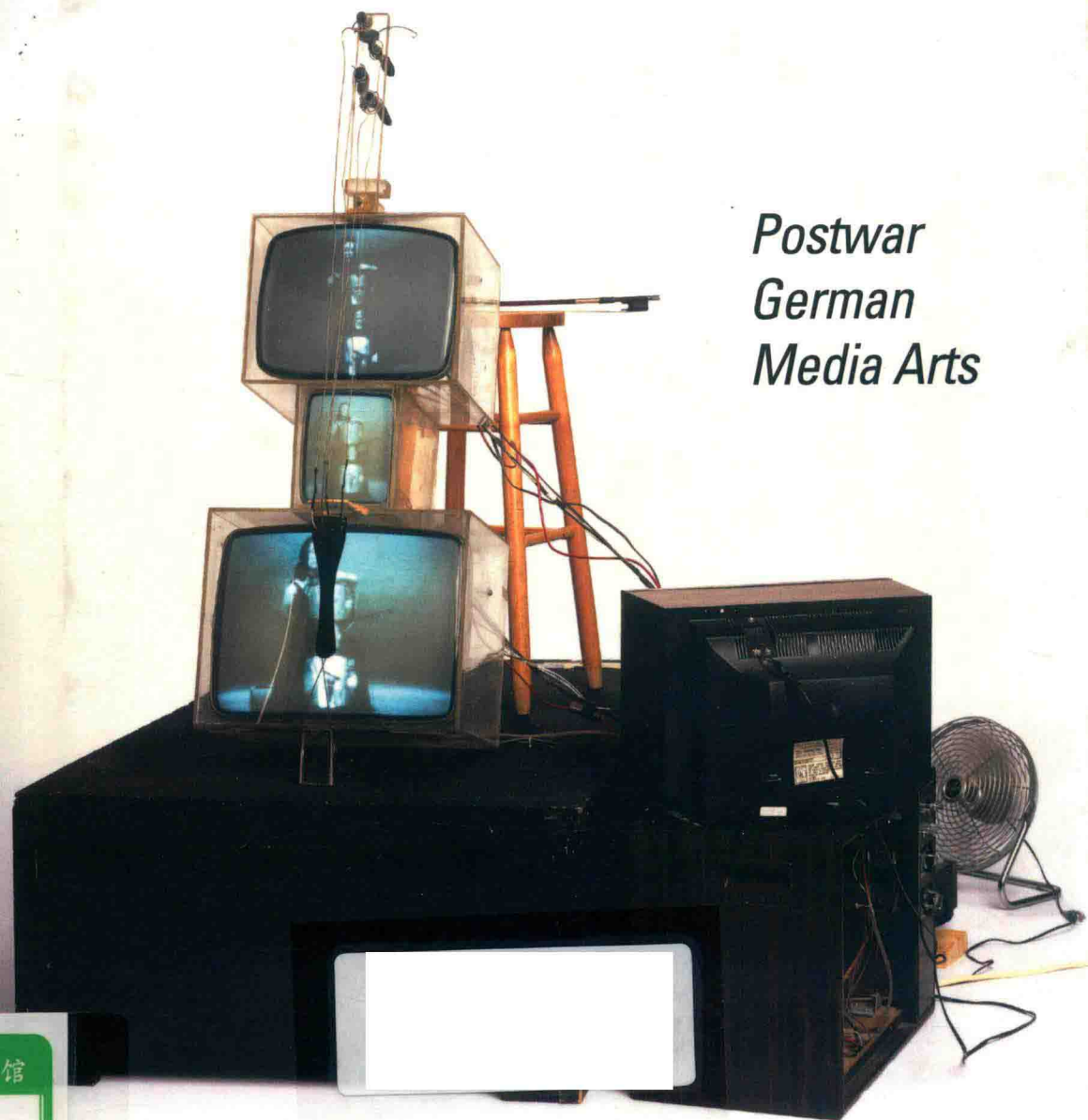


THE DIFFERENTIATION OF MODERNISM

*Postwar
German
Media Arts*



LARSON POWELL

The Differentiation of Modernism

Postwar German Media Arts

Larson Powell



CAMDEN HOUSE

Rochester, New York

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Introduction

HAS THE POSTWAR PERIOD, its last outburst of utopian energies since exhausted, come to be our modern antiquity?¹ Current popular nostalgia for that age, especially among the younger, might remind one of the aura around the golden twenties, when, as Adorno put it, "as once again briefly after 1945, it looked like the open possibility of a politically freed society."² Despite warning against this idealized image as more wishful projection than reality, Adorno had to admit that "its own delicacy and fragility presupposed a reality that had escaped from barbarism" (502). The same might be said of the period from 1945 to 1980. Our present is separated from that postwar era by postmodernity, in its own way a traumatic experience, if not as harrowing as 1933 to 1945. Thus, as once before in 1945, the antitraditional "tradition" of modernism "is broken off, and half-forgotten tasks remain" (503). It is, however, paradoxically the amnesia surrounding some of the art of this period that may allow the latter to be more than an aureatic myth or an academicized -ism. If Godard and Pollock have become canonical, the same cannot be said of other figures once prominent, such as Stockhausen, or of now-forgotten movements like cybernetics. Only with the passing of postmodernism,³ which contributed to consigning so much of the postwar period to oblivion, is it possible to look back at that time with fresh eyes.

If one were to write a history of the period, it would not be hard to sketch in defining characteristics: the renewed influence of phenomenology, especially in literature (*nouveau roman*, *tel quel*), resulting in what Philippe Sollers called "le passage d'une écriture aliénée à une écriture traçante,"⁴ something one finds also in Stockhausen's notion of the composer as a radio receiver; the abandonment of the high modernist project of metaphorical and mythopoietic metalanguage typical of surrealism, Joyce, Mann, or Eliot (myth would only return in the 1980s, after the end of this period of late modernism, simultaneously with a rediscovery of Wagner); a turn from purist medium specificity to impure intermedial couplings; interest in phenomena of feedback and cybernetic self-regulation; and, in the background, the increasing omnipresence of broadcast television. The beginning of the period would be marked by the Macy Conferences from 1946 to 1953; its end would come with the marketing of personal computers in the late 1970s and 1980s, with deregulation and cable television, the sales of video recorders (in the 1970s), the end of auteurist or arthouse cinema, and new technologies, such as MIDI and

Dolby stereo, that enabled the return of the Hollywood blockbuster to economic dominance (and put an end to the brief transitional period of New Hollywood in the 1970s).

This is all accurate enough, and hints at this kind of periodization will not be entirely absent from what follows. Yet this book does not claim to be an overall history of its period, and therefore abstains from naming its object with a unifying term—although candidates are not wanting; one of the most suggestive would be the period of “cybernetic anthropology.”⁵ In an essay devoted to the problem of defining epochs within a theory of evolution, Niklas Luhmann noted that functionally differentiated social systems “have such a novel form of unity and difference, that up to now no appropriate semantics has been developed for them.”⁶ Semantics can be taken here to mean also culture. Late modernism’s relative disinterest in putting forward a metalinguistic alternative to modernity finds here an appropriately abstract explanation. If for Baudelaire art was a “Suche nach einer Art Gegeninstanz, die dem modernen Kontingenzbewusstsein Halt gibt,”⁷ this is no longer true for art after 1945, which accepts contingency and seeks to build it into its forms. It is thus also appropriate that Luhmann himself, whose work will be taken here for a self-description of a central aspect of this period (albeit with the delay of Hegel’s owl of Minerva), should have come to place increasingly more emphasis on social structure than on semantics—or on form over medium. (We should not forget that Luhmann saw his work as a step beyond Parsons’s “structural functionalism”; thus his later interest in autopoiesis, Spencer Brown’s *Laws of Form*, and “form and medium” came to take the place earlier held by the binary “social structure and semantics.”) Traditional notions of structure were thus abandoned together with culture; as this book will argue, this opposition would be occluded by form and medium.

Thus, rather than a unitary period characterization, what this book will offer is—to quote Luhmann again—“an image of overlapping sequences.”⁸ Its three main sections correspond to three forms of electronic media art: radio, film music, and electronic music. Yet there are links across the sections: electronic music by Stockhausen has kinship to a radio play, a filmed opera may be indebted to radiophonic aesthetics, and a radio play may in turn borrow musical forms. The constitutive intermediality typical of the works discussed here necessitates a paratactical form in its analysis. Such a form was already found in Adorno’s *Ästhetische Theorie* and was taken even further by Deleuze and Guattari (*Anti-Oédipe, Mille Plateaux*).⁹

Yet what follows will remain in some ways still close to Adorno, in its attention to close readings. For the works to be discussed here *are still artworks*, even when they come close to the work’s negation (as with Stockhausen’s *Aus den sieben Tagen*). These are not yet installations or multimedia; they do not yet dissolve authorship and its authority into the

performative or interactive. Rather, the intermediality in question may be described with Adorno's term *Verfransung*, which may in turn be worked out in more detail through a systems-theoretical conception of intermediality. The combination of Adorno with Luhmann is a matter of more than the usual academic eclecticism. First: as earlier noted, Luhmann was himself less interested in the semantics of culture, including that of individual artworks; his own aesthetic inclinations leaned increasingly toward the classicizing than the modernist (as Harry Lehmann has noted). Second: the persistence of the artwork in this period means that these works *cannot be reduced to any one unified culture*. Works (*Werke*) are, as Dirk Baecker has argued, the counterpart to values (*Werte*) within the force-field of culture.¹⁰ The artwork marks also the limit to any new historicist or Geertzian reading of art as mere culture (just as it does to Parsonian functionalism). On this, Adorno and Luhmann were in considerable agreement. New historicism and Geertzian anthropological readings of art are, relative to this insight, only a dedifferentiation and simplification of the aesthetic. (So is Bourdieu's notion of cultural capital, which only falls back behind the much more sophisticated Marxian aesthetic of Benjamin or Adorno.) Interestingly, the problems of culturalist or new historicist approaches to art were foreseen in the 1970s by the musicologist Carl Dahlhaus, who was then criticizing the notion of a "social history of art" (*Sozialgeschichte der Kunst*). "To the thesis that a grouping of music-historical facts first becomes a *history* of music in its social-historical context," wrote Dahlhaus, "is opposed the antithesis that such a history thereby ceases to be one of *music*." Dahlhaus even noted a tendency to "aesthetize" the function of art—read now: history as text—by viewing "artifacts as tools."¹¹ In the terms of this book, such approaches one-sidedly valorize values over works.

Yet Adorno's own old-modernist view of modernism as (political) negation is also, by itself, inadequate to describe the (in part media-driven) differentiation of modernism typical of this period; hence the need for recourse to systems-theoretical sociology. Media do not fit the old Marxian binary of sub- and superstructure, but rather stand in an orthogonal relation to them. (Nor do they fit the other central Adornian dialectic of material and subjectivity.) One can hardly negate, let alone protest against, a medium once it exists, but only rework it from within—as even Karl Kraus implicitly understood with his antijournalistic publication *Die Fackel*, and as Alexander Kluge has recently done with his anti-TV. Cultural criticism, as practiced by Adorno, has its blind spot in media, and cannot step outside of itself to observe itself.¹² For the same reason, attention to media and sociology means also that aesthetic structures cannot be reduced to rhetoric, either (marking therefore a difference from classical Derridean deconstruction with its characteristic pathos of the double-bind, therein cognate to the Adornian paradox). Rhetoric

is one medium among others, and its erstwhile dominance is inherently undermined, or remediated, by that of electronic media.¹³

Culture's blind spot is, however, not only a technological one, but also a functional one. Culture cannot observe its own values—the *Werte* that are, for Baecker, the complement to works (*Werke*). This may be paradigmatically observed in Adorno's culture criticism, which—as Andreas Huyssen was one of the first to note¹⁴—could not leap over its own Weberian shadow of values, however much the specific analytic insights of Adorno's own readings of art pulled against them. It is Adorno's linkage to a certain historically defined culture of the educated bourgeoisie (*Bildungsbürgertum*) that now most dates him. (The same could be said of Lacan, and explains the subsequent turn against these thinkers more effectively than any supposed refutation of their “errors.”) The authority of that culture, along with that of the modernist subjectivity of the author, have since been dissolved by “performatism,” interactivity, and above all by the authorlessness of the Internet.¹⁵ Authority and authorship turn out to be themselves historically circumscribed notions, or perhaps values. The forgetting of late modernity effected since 1980 itself may be seen as an effect of the digital, which has produced not only an amnesia of its immediate late-modernist predecessors, but also—as some have argued—of modernism itself.¹⁶ This amnesia can be felt in the very definition of the term “electronic media” or “electronic media arts,” which most would now associate with the digital, with installations or performance and multimedia, and not with their ancestors, artworks from 1945 to 1980. Relative to more recent authorless or participatory (“interactive”) artforms, these older works appear Egyptian in their archaism, particularly in that of their authority—an authority we would have to see as in part “cultural,” and with which younger consumers are often no longer comfortable. (This discomfort then takes the guise of denunciations of modernism and its subjectivity as “authoritarian” or, more crudely, “elitist,” under which the recurring American dislike of old-European high culture and its distinctions can then legitimize itself.) Much of the controversy around Stockhausen's strange comments on September 11, 2001 can be understood as a problem of an old-European (or even: “high-priestly”) conception of the great modernist artist and the quasi-religious authority of his subjectivity—an authority that had moreover lost contact with the present.

The real distinctiveness of the present book lies, however, as much in its approach as its object. A diagnosis in some ways cognate to what has just been sketched in may be found in Jameson's *A Singular Modernity*, which also sees Luhmann's differentiation as key to this period, even if Jameson is more skeptical than the present author about Luhmann. Jameson notes: “what seems . . . genuinely productive for the cultural and historiographic area . . . is precisely this other face of the process

Luhmann chose to theorize as an unremitting dynamic of interminable scissiparity¹⁷—that is, what this book terms the “differentiation of culture” itself. Jameson, too, like Luhmann, recognizes that “as differentiation descends into the smallest pores of the social substance”—a process effected in large part by media—“it may well no longer be accompanied by the production of ever more autonomous or semi-autonomous levels or domains, such as those we can observe in the earlier periods of modernization.” This is the same idea as that formulated in our earlier quote from Luhmann on the difficulty of formulating an “appropriate semantics,” that is, a culture, for modern functionally differentiated societies. In fact, late modernism insists precisely on the break between art and culture, between *Werke* and *Werte*: “The autonomy of the aesthetic . . . is achieved by the radical disjunction of literature and art from culture.”¹⁸ What distinguishes this book is that it neither maintains the unity of art and culture (as even Adorno, however dialectically, had still to do, in the paradoxical practice of *Kulturkritik*), nor does it simply subsume art reductively back under culture (as do practitioners of cultural studies, new historicism, or anthropology), nor does it absolutize the break between them, as did the high priests of modernist aesthetic autonomy. Rather, it sees art and culture as independent yet necessarily coupled with each other, in a systems-theoretical sense (explained in detail in chapter 1).

One of the ways in which art and culture are coupled is through values, whether aesthetic, moral, or political. (Value might thus be called, with a Luhmannian formulation, the *unity of the distinction* of art and culture.) The term has been making a peculiar comeback in recent years—peculiar, since it is itself partly the result of yet another marketable turn in the academic wheel of fortune and fashion, which each time risks conveniently forgetting all the lessons learned by its predecessors. Among the strange *revenants* visiting the age after postmodernity are a spate of “neos” or attempted restorations of what postmodernity thought to have buried: neo-Marxism, neo-Frankfurt School, neo-ideology critique, neo-critical realism, and so on. Most symptomatic of all is the return of the catchword *value*,¹⁹ which—as this book will argue—had been deliberately and systemically elided from sociological and cultural theories of post-war modernity, whether by Geertz or Luhmann (both students of Talcott Parsons). It is as if we were experiencing a return to Weber’s old theomachy or war in heaven—a “heaven” that is not only cosmic, but above all one of airwaves and electronic media and their theorization.

The Differentiation of Modernism is thus also, on one level, an attempt at a theoretical inoculation against such a literal return of the term “value.” In this respect, it still agrees with Luhmann’s Erasmus-like skepticism about moralizing fundamentalism.²⁰ Precisely by showing how, where, and why value was taken out of sociological thought after 1945, and through a careful consideration of its latent place in that

thought, we may avoid a massive collapse back into value-absolutism or fundamentalism—what Talcott Parsons already saw, at the time of McCarthyism, as “deflation” of trust in the modern social system. The long academic vogue for “identity”—as in mechanically predictable reaction to the previous popularity of “difference”²¹—was similarly legible as a symptom of such a deflationary absolutism. Similarly, the so-called ethical turn in literary studies, with its clarion calls for a revived humanism, appears to have entirely forgotten a half-century of literary theory in its naïve appeals to an eighteenth-century aesthetics of representation: “The form of a literary text . . . expresses its value system . . . A literary text imitates a world that precedes the text.”²² One wonders how such an approach could make sense of the fact that Drieu La Rochelle and Céline both shared fascist “values” and yet produced such widely differing literary results as the realist novel *Gilles* (1939) and the near-Joycean linguistic opacity of *Guignols Band* (1944). Literature and the other arts are indeed structurally coupled with Parsons’s cultural pattern-maintenance system, and may make use of value-commitments as a medium, as this book will argue, but they are hardly a mere mimetic “expression” of the latter. Even Luhmann was aware that art could not depend solely on self-reference, any more than any other system can; it is only the pop shorthand version of deconstruction (i.e., pop variants of postmodernism)—with its simplistic notions of “free play,” language as inescapable “prison house,” or pure “performativity” without referent—that has generated a not-so-new moralism as its inevitable, and just as unreflected, backlash.

Even beyond this purely negative or cautionary dimension, however, what follows can also hardly avoid doing for this period what it could not do for itself: namely, constitute something of a semantics for it, however differentiated or differential this may be. In Germany, volumes have already appeared with titles like *Medienkultur der sechziger Jahre*,²³ although these are still more descriptive approaches than those of the present book. Paradoxically, though, what emerges from this book is less a global description of culture (through its implicit values) than a revision of the concept of the artwork, which certain versions of modernism, along with postmodernism after them, had seemed to jettison. (A canonical statement of this would be the “Kritik am Schein und Spiel” that Adorno’s *Philosophy of New Music* found in the Second Viennese School.) This return to the artwork has been seen as a characteristic of “second modernity;”²⁴ a good example might be the work of the leader of musical new complexity, Brian Ferneyhough, who has sought to incorporate the chance procedures to which Stockhausen mystically abandoned his own compositional choice in the 1960s into the conscious reflexivity of the compositional process itself. Thus Ferneyhough stated in the context of a discussion of his own *Fourth String Quartet* (1992): “The other day, someone spoke about the processes utilized by Stockhausen, about his

excitement at certain things coming to pass almost without his personal participation, once he had set them in motion. I imagine the 'dialogic' relationship as being somewhat along these lines, *but with a great deal of additional, momentary and context-bound subjective input.*"²⁵

Ferneyhough is arguing for an aesthetic equivalent of Ulrich Beck has called "reflexive modernization," which requires something other than the disappearance, in the familiar Hegelian *Furie des Verschwindens*, of author and work. Yet Ferneyhough still connects this to a faint reminiscence of Adorno's artwork-as-critique: "the sickness of western society may only legitimately be resolved by the flesh of those social and intellectual perspectives of which it is composed" (207). The formulation is characteristically oblique; yet we might specify this metaphorical "flesh" as being made of—once again!—*Werke* and *Werte*, works and values. These are indeed in a relation, even if it is not necessarily Adorno's paradoxical or dialectical one. For specific negation, as opposed to a merely abstract one, can only take place in the specificity of works that, rather than merely demonstrating a gadget or a slogan (as so many installations or performances do), are capable of practically—and thus also culturally (in the medium of values)—reflecting on them.²⁶

That reflection must necessarily include the theoretical models deployed in this book as well. In Germany, the influence of Luhmann, who seemed the height of (late) modernity in the 1980s and 1990s, has been somewhat diminished relative to American culturalist imports (and an apparently endless series of "turns," spatial or otherwise), but still remains an enduring acquisition, and not just in literary or cultural studies. The blend of Luhmann with culturalist impulses found in this book was already being developed in critiques of his work in the late 1990s in Germany. Yet the lack of reception of Luhmann in the United States (with a few important exceptions, such as David Wellbery and Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht) means that much American humanities work operates with extremely simplistic notions of "society," often merely rhetorical (or moralizing) in nature; nowhere is this more true than in the tired mantras of "social constructionism," which have come in for severe criticisms in recent years from philosophers in England and the United States as well.²⁷ Correcting this sort of simplification is necessary for any more complex understanding of the medial phenomena analyzed here and is thus not merely backward. Moreover, from our current vantage point, Luhmann now appears himself very much part of the cybernetic society he himself analyzed; in light of the frequent comparisons made between him and Hegel, we may see the metaphor of the owl's nocturnal flight (watched over by Norbert Wiener's missile tracking instruments) with which he ended *Soziale Systeme* as a Minervan end to this historical period—one that had begun with the young Luhmann's forced service as a *Flakhelfer* in 1944 to 1945. Whether the form of that postwar society, which has shown increasing signs of strain or

even catastrophic breakdown since 2001, is about to become itself a thing of the past is not yet clear.²⁸

The first chapter serves as a programmatic theoretical prelude to the rest, touching on some of the larger themes and topics and setting them in a broader theoretical context, between systems theory, aesthetics, and cultural theory. Through this reflection, the subject of the book is seen also to be a metareflection on the conditions of art production during the postwar period. The next three chapters then turn to radio, still a dominant medium in the 1950s, although increasingly challenged by television, and begins with another programmatic chapter on Adorno's diagnosis of the medium's effects not only on classical music, but also on its conditions of distribution and reception, thus on musical culture in the broadest sense. Two further chapters (3 and 4) go on to look at radio plays by two (Austrian) women writers, Ingeborg Bachmann and Elfriede Jelinek, whose works in and around the medium roughly correspond to two different phases of radiophonic production, namely, the classical Hörspiel of the 1950s—still very much the inheritor of the poetics of inwardness that had marked German radio plays already in the Nazi period—and the *Neues Hörspiel* of the late 1960s. Questions of gender and modernism are here aligned with psychoanalytic (Lacan) as well as systems-theoretical concerns.

Chapter 5 goes on to film music, a mixed or hybrid form that has received increasing attention in recent years, often with the help of Adornian analytic categories. Here too, a theoretical preamble sets up parameters for analysis. There follows chapter 6, on a transitional film from the late 1950s, on the cusp between "Papap Kino" of the Adenauer period and what would become the Oberhausen movement, or young German cinema. Here, film music is itself read as an allegory of changed conditions in aesthetic production, to changes in management and economic practices at the time (then already diagnosed by a still young Luhmann in his first published works), and to a shift from radio to television. Chapter 7 takes a look at the music films of Jean-Marie Straub and Danièle Huillet, seen again in an intermedial context, as both heirs to radiophonic aesthetics and as referring to televisual practice.

Chapter 8 moves on to the music of Karlheinz Stockhausen, arguably the single dominant figure in European music after 1945, at least until the popularity of minimalism in the late 1970s and 1980s (which lies outside the period covered by this book).²⁹ As no other composer of the period, Stockhausen was able to renew himself repeatedly, moving from strict post-Webernism to theater pieces, radiophonic works for the Westdeutscher Rundfunk, aleatoric or chance compositions, and improvised "intuitive music." Although his work was, in its day, so influential that it was even imitated by rock musicians, it has—again since the 1980s—been largely forgotten by the broader musical public, especially

in the United States, where the phrase “electronic music” evokes house music or techno-pop more than the musical avant-garde of the 1960s. No one else, not Berio nor Nono, so decisively laid out the terms of the debate about electronic music as did Stockhausen. If one were to imagine a painterly equivalent, one would have to imagine a visual artist who united Pollock or De Kooning and Jasper Johns or Robert Rauschenberg in one person. In Germany in particular, the chief compositional rival to Stockhausen would have been Hans Werner Henze, a composer who moved from conservative, Berg-influenced lyricism in the 1950s to a leftist engaged music at the end of the 1960s, skipping over the questions of media and avant-garde that were central to Stockhausen.

Although the book is grouped into three larger sections—chapters 2–4, 5–7, and 8–9—corresponding to radio, film, and electronics (a trinity that could be seen as a late modern *hommage* to Kittler’s early modern trias of gramophone, film, typewriter), there are many transversal or diagonal cross-resemblances or lines of filiation between these medial units, as befits the intermedial aesthetic of the period. Sketching in historical practices of intermediality is also one of the book’s aims. And although a separate chapter is not devoted to it, the implicit presence of television is a constant one throughout. Almost as the urban masses were, for Benjamin, a continuous backdrop to the work of Baudelaire,³⁰ the television—in its older, pre-cable, broadcasting mode—is ever-present in the postwar period, although it is rarely overtly thematized before postmodernity; an exception would be the ironic video installations of Nam June Paik (such as the one on the present volume’s cover, or the 1993 *Piano Piece*), which already point prophetically to a time beyond that of this book. Paik’s abrupt juxtaposition of traditional instruments such as cello or piano with TV screens is as apt an iconic representation of the intermedial aesthetics of the postwar period, caught between the hermeneutical richness of the artwork and the mediatized installation or performance, as one could imagine. It stands for a transitional period when traditional art craft had uneasily to coexist with new medial forms, until the latter—in Paik’s installation, the television screen, and digitalization in its wake—succeeded in entirely effacing the subjectivity of the older pianoforte or cello on the base of which it was propped.

In that wake of television and digitalization, it is not only popular cultural memory but also that of scholarship that have changed, to the point where interest in this period—developed moreover in a deliberately systematic perspective, something no longer fashionable in North America—might seem a little archaic. As Noel Burch already commented in the introduction to *Life to Those Shadows*: “In the present period of triumphant empiricism, anything suggesting . . . systematisation and theorization seems irredeemably ‘old hat.’”³¹ Yet the often merely descriptive tacks now *en vogue* (moralized identity politics, various “turns,” visual,

spatial, et al., or the biologicistic reductivism found in some cognitivist work) could hardly offer viewpoints complex enough for this subject. All of these popular approaches represent, in theoretical terms, a simplification, perhaps even a de-differentiation, of method relative to older and now-disdained “grand theories”—or even relative to the synthetic and synoptic views of postmodernity offered by Huyssen and Jameson in the mid-1980s, which still engaged with systemic views of modernism. The suspicion is hard to avoid that, just as the various distinct media of modernism were swallowed up in toto by computerized digitalization in a kind of medial entropy (as Kittler has argued), this leveling has been extended to scholarly reflection as well. But even for modern societies, culture is also in part a form of memory. “There seem to be no more binding ‘primary distinctions’—neither of being and nothingness, neither of logical truth values, nor of morality. *But this does not mean that one can do without distinctions.* The consequence is only that one is obliged to observe who is using what distinctions, in order to give the past a future.”³² The media arts discussed in this book also had their own “utopia” (although this book will tend to avoid that term in the interests of distinguishing post-1945 art from its high modernist predecessors), namely, that of a melding of modernism and the mass media—something even Adorno sensed, although his aesthetic was not fully able to encompass it. It is this medial imagination that is recalled here. For even though the aesthetic and emancipatory dreams of postwar media art may since have been swallowed up by subsequent digital developments, it is precisely the artworks they have left in their wake that may be resistant to amnesia, becoming “a kind of fragile, even ephemeral monument to an unrealized Utopia.”³³

Notes

¹ “Already the modernist past is a ruin, the logic of whose architecture we do not remotely grasp. . . . Modernism is our antiquity, in other words . . . a world, and a vision of history, more lost to us than Uxmal.” T. J. Clarke, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes from a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 2, 3, and 6.

² Theodor Adorno, “Jene zwanziger Jahre,” in *Eingriffe: Neun kritische Modelle*, vol. 10.2 of *Gesammelte Schriften*, ed. Rolf Tiedemann, with Gretel Adorno, Susan Buck-Morss, and Klaus Schultz (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1999), 501. Hereafter cited parenthetically (*Eingriffe*, page number). Translations from GS are mine unless otherwise noted.

³ There is little consensus yet as to just what is supposed to have replaced the postmodern: if Harry Lehmann finds a return to realism in his proposed “second modernity,” Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin Van Acker see neoromanticism as typical. Harry Lehmann, *Die flüchtige Wahrheit der Kunst: Ästhetik nach Luhmann* (Munich: Fink, 2006); Vermeulen and Van Acker, “Notes on Metamodernism,”