

## **A Critical Hermeneutics of Subjectivity: Cultural Studies as Critical Social Theory**

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The claim that the research practices commonly labeled as “cultural studies” are the productive continuation of the epistemic interests of the early Frankfurt School may surprise those who consider Adorno’s culture-pessimistic essays as classic examples of bourgeois cultural elitism, especially in analyses concerned with so-called ‘mass-culture.’ In contrast, if not open opposition, to Adorno’s dismissal of the ‘Kulturindustrie,’ cultural studies appear to represent the reflexive and creative diversity of agents engaged in everyday practices; they thus emphasize that resistant and non-conformist attitudes are to be found in even the most standardized ‘entertainment-products’ and their respective consumption.

However, if we take a step back from that (not irrelevant) dissensus, we will soon realize that an underlying commonality defines their epistemic and ethical perspectives. Both critical theory and cultural studies are interested in culture as the medium in which power and subjectivity intersect. For both, the analysis of symbolic forms of culture is not positivistically conceived as a value in its own right, but is much rather motivated by the objective of critical reflexivity with the intent at political transformation. For the two paradigms, then, the central question is how social practices of power influence, by means of producing meaning, the self-understanding of subjects, and how those subjects themselves are in turn capable of influencing and changing the respective cultural and social practices. The question of the cultural construction of selves through power, which provides us also with the guiding thread in our current analysis, constitutes for both the research-orienting focus: how is power ‘anchored’ in the internal life of subjects? How can we explain that individuals accept and even identify with life conditions that are disadvantageous and oppressive for them? How, finally, can we conceive of the resistance of subjects against the exercise of power, if we argue both that power is crucially effective in establishing subjective self-understandings and yet do not want to buy into any self-refuting form of social reductionism?

My contribution to the research logic of cultural criticism attempts to clarify the extent to which the early Frankfurt School and the currently flourishing cultural studies

conceive differently the determination of culture through power. To be sure, both paradigms assume that objective social processes and practices have a structuring impact on subjective self-understanding, without, however, reducing the self-consciousness of the subjects to an epi-phenomenon of power or economy. Yet the conceptualization of the realm of mediation, which is supposed to both allow for an analysis of effects of power on consciousness (say as ‘ideologically distorted consciousness’) and still retain the relative autonomy of selves, is utterly different in both. Critical theory explains ideological schemes through recourse to depth psychology, and then grounds the force of criticism in the agent’s capacity to make conscious such implicit and hidden schemes. In contrast, cultural studies, or so I will argue, conceive of mediation in terms of the symbolic dimension of language, on the basis of which subjects make sense and interpret themselves. The power for critical reflexivity as well as the capacity for creative social action emerges as a potential built into the interpretive cultural practices as such.<sup>1</sup>

My thesis is that the symbolic paradigm of cultural studies constitutes a substantial progress in comparison to the grounding of cultural criticism in a depth psychology of consciousness, yet a complete and satisfying theory of symbolic mediation requires socialpsychological elements. The quasi-archaeological reconstruction of the epistemic frameworks of critical theory and cultural studies will reveal that, for one, the move from a depth psychology of understanding to a symbolic theory of cultural meaning can free us from the aporias of the early Frankfurt School. However, a truly adequate conceptualization of symbolic mediation—that is, one that can both detect power effects in self-understanding and yet ascertain the potential for creativity and reflexivity—asks for a critical hermeneutics of subjectivity that can fuse symbolic forms and psychic aspects of meaning.

The analysis will proceed along the following path: to begin, I will introduce Horkheimer’s early project of a critical social theory, according to which depth-psychological mechanisms explain the (power-determined) integration of selves into (a

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<sup>1</sup> Due to the fact that cultural studies represent a highly heterogeneous and complex field of research, ranging from the effects of globalization to audience reception of mass media, from social power struggles to ‘race, class and gender’ studies, the following analysis of methodological premises of cultural criticism must abstract from many particular issues. The emphasis I place on the *symbolic* mediation is by no means intended to downplay the importance of bodily practices, as defined, say, by Foucault or Bourdieu;

highly stratified and unjust) society. The need for social recognition and integration illuminates how ideological distortions of experience can gain hold of subjective consciousness, while the existence of the psychic mediation entails the possibility that agents become reflexive and critical with regard to internalized ideological schemes. (1). At the time of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, however, the earlier hope for resistance and critique has disappeared. Now convinced that in late capitalism individuals have become unable to build up the psychic autonomy necessary for reflexive thought, the ground for resistance and critique is lost. Yet with that result, the original project of a critical theory of society aiming at a reflexive understanding of power by the agents themselves becomes aporetic; the ‘end of the subject’ thesis thus drives critical theory into deep and devastating contradictions (II). In order to point to a way out of that pessimistic impasse, I claim that the aporias resulting from the conceptual elimination of the psychic dimension can be overcome if we turn to a hermeneutically inspired theory of symbolic mediation. Such a conception, as we will see, can *both* integrate the argument concerning a power-shaped schematism of experience *and* do justice to the specific utopian and ethical intuitions of openness to otherness and subjective critical reflexivity which early critical theory introduced into the discussion. (III). In the next step, I will show that the project of cultural studies, as conceived and practiced by Stuart Hall and many others, is indeed the institutional realization of precisely that perspective. The core problem of cultural studies consists in a non-reductive mediation of agency and power, while its methodological imperatives are based on the most advanced tools concerning symbolic forms and social practices (IV). However, the conception of cultural studies thus introduced, attractive as it might be, still lacks a developed conceptual framework. I thus present the sketch of a theory of linguistic understanding which allows for the methodological reconciliation of power-shaped sense with reflexive and creative modes of interpretation (V). The basic idea behind that perspective consists of the claim that a socio-psychic need for social recognition leads to the power-influenced pre-schematization of a potentially infinite and open symbolic meaning; yet, due to the inherent openness and indeterminacy of symbolic world-disclosure, schemes of

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however, the possibility of reflexive criticism and informed resistance, as much as the full cultural meaning of social practices, are based upon the linguistic dimension of our experience.

understanding can always be challenged and overcome by reflexive and creative practices. Thus, while cultural studies are analyses of power emphasizing that subjective self-understanding is embedded in power-shaped contexts, the potential to reflexive self-determination and creative self-interpretation is equally represented.

### *I. Horkheimer's Early Program of a Critical Theory*

According to Horkheimer's opening address at the Institute for Social Research, critical social theory should attempt to bring social philosophy and social research in fruitful contact with one another.<sup>2</sup> The aim is to reconstruct the constitution of subjective experience in the general societal context without abandoning the self to social forces. Philosophical questions—such as the relation between individual and society, the significance of culture, the formation of social solidarity, and the structure of social life in general—are to be renewed in an empirical research context. While Kantian and Mannheimian social philosophies are divorced from social reality, empirical research is fragmented into so many positivistic endeavors. A renewal of social philosophy has to reunite philosophical questions and social research in a way “that philosophy—as a theoretical understanding oriented to the general, the “essential”—is capable of giving particular studies animating impulses, and at the same time remains open enough to let itself be influenced and changed by the concrete studies.”<sup>3</sup>

Horkheimer's claim for such an integration is motivated by the concern for a non-reductive yet socially-situated theory of experience. In order to define the methodological premises of that project, which needs to be pragmatically laid out rather than in a priori fashion, we need to distinguish three levels: (1) the economic dimension of society, (2) the psychic dimension of individual experience, and (3) the dimension of culture. According to Horkheimer, the essential question for critical social theory consists of the analysis and determination of the relations between those dimensions. At stake is “the question of the connection between the economic life of society, the psychical development of individuals, and the changes in the realm of culture in the narrower sense

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<sup>2</sup> See, “The Present Situation of Social Philosophy and the Tasks of an Institute for Social Research,” Max Horkheimer, in: *Between Philosophy and Social Science. Selected Early Writings*, Cambridge: The MIT Press 1995, p. 1ff.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

(to which belong not only the so-called intellectual elements, such as science, art, and religion, but also law, customs, fashion, public opinion, sports, leisure activities, life-style, etc.).”<sup>4</sup>

However sketchy this might appear, we can detect three essential claims here. First, in contrast to orthodox Marxist positions, economy, while an important factor, is not granted full determining force. Horkheimer equally rejects a ‘bad Spinozism’ that explains the social in terms of its spiritual expressions and a ‘misunderstood Marxism’ that would deduce the psychic and cultural dimensions directly from economic life. Second, culture is not to be identified with ‘high culture.’ Horkheimer accepts the late Dilthey’s fusion of Hegel’s absolute with the objective spirit, thus acknowledging the equal importance of all cultural practices. Finally, and this will turn out to be crucial for our discussion, a distinction between individual psyche and culture is introduced. Putting emphasis on the psychic dimension as a mediator between culture and economy indeed defines the major (yet controversial) contribution of the Frankfurt School to social criticism.

It is important to understand properly the role of the psychic dimension in Horkheimer’s early project. The psychic level gets introduced as the *mediation* between the economic ‘base’ and the cultural ‘superstructure.’ According to Horkheimer, culture cannot be connected directly with economy because “such dogmatic convictions... presuppose a complete correspondence between ideal and material processes, and neglect or even ignore the complicating role of the *psychic links* connecting them.”<sup>5</sup> Yet culture is nonetheless not to be idealized as a purely autonomous realm of subjective self-expression. True, the reference of thought is the concrete individual: “Thought, and thus concepts and ideas, are modes of functioning of human beings, and not independent forces.”<sup>6</sup> Accordingly, we have to take into account the psychological perspective. However, since the self is itself socially situated, “economic (rather) than psychological categories are historically fundamental.”<sup>7</sup> The rejection of an abstract isomorphism between economic life and cultural forms leads to the concrete, thinking and speaking

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p.11.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid., p.12.

<sup>6</sup> “History and Psychology,” in: Max Horkheimer, *Between Philosophy and Social Science*, p. 116.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 118.

individual, and thus to psychology. Yet because the individual is itself situated in the context of economic social forces and its historical expressions, economic categories take precedence over the psychological level.

At first, it might seem that Horkheimer is entangled in a problematic circle here. On the one hand, economic reductionism is rejected by referring to the irreducibly subjective acts of understanding which originate in the individual. Thus the necessity of the psychological perspective. Yet on the other hand an abstract universalistic psychology is equally rejected, because the individual is unavoidably situated in a concrete economic-historical constellation, and thus subject to economic forces. The way out of this circle is provided by the *dialectical function* that depth-psychology plays for Horkheimer. Psychological explanations of cultural beliefs and practices are necessary because only they can account for how agents accept otherwise intolerable and overtly absurd social conditions. The individual act of thought has to be seen as mediated by a psychic apparatus in order to ‘make sense’ of the smooth adjustment of individuals: “That human beings sustain economic relationships which their powers and needs have made obsolete, instead of replacing them with a higher and more rational form of organization, is only possible because the action of numerically significant social strata is determined not by knowledge but by a drive structure that leads to false consciousness.”<sup>8</sup>

The reference to a “drive structure” should not be construed as an unsophisticated biological essentialism, but rather as the indication of co-determining emotive and affective factors in experience. Horkheimer’s model of how socially situated experience takes shape involves the following steps. To begin, we have to see that accounting for ideological distortions of reality and experience requires the explanatory help of a depth-psychological perspective. Obvious contradictions, counter-evidence and false generalizations remain inexperienced and undiscovered by the situated selves—thus forcing us to assume that a particular mode of experiencing reality that systematically overlooks those distortions is involved.<sup>9</sup> In order to account for this phenomenon, we have, in a second step, to introduce the idea of an implicit pre-structuration of thought and perception. Obviously, reality must be *constructed* in a certain manner of disclosure

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<sup>8</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> These early assumptions have later been supported by analyses with regard to American antisemitism. See T. W. Adorno et al., *The Authoritarian Personality*, New York, London, 1950/1982, esp. p. 297 ff.

so as to adjust agents to otherwise problematic social conditions. Naming Kant's concept of schematism, Horkheimer claims that capitalist society preconstructs experience differently for differently situated social individuals: "On the basis of their psychological apparatus, human beings tend to account of the world in such a way that their action can accord with their knowledge... Psychology must explain that particular preformation, however, which has as its consequence the harmony of worldviews with the action demanded by economy."<sup>10</sup> And he adds: "it is even possible that something of the 'schematism' referred to by Kant might be discerned in the process." The deeper source of acceptance of such interpretive schemes is, finally, taken to be located in a basic need for social recognition and acceptance. The concept of need is not, again, to be reduced to mere bio-sexual functions, but includes instead truly social wants like security in the group and social recognition.<sup>11</sup> Basic survival or self-preservation, then, becomes the question of one's social integration in the collective which requires the adjustment to the symbolic as well as practical structures that define one's concrete environment.

I want to emphasize the dialectical tension with which that model attempts to capture how social power gets internalized and reproduced on the subjective-experiential level. The depth-psychological analysis gives us a tool for understanding how subjects can adapt to objectively challenging and problematic situations. However, the mediating dimension of the psyche equally entails the possibility of a reversal and displacement of the objective socio-economic structure. Horkheimer's theory, which looks at times like an anticipation of Bourdieu's conception of social habitus, precisely foregrounds the psychic in order to avoid and reject a complete isomorphism between subjective agency and social fields.<sup>12</sup> Such an isomorphism would deliver the individual entirely to social formations, while the existence of a psychic mediation entails the seeds for a political subversion, the potential for the expanded establishment of subjective and rational autonomy: "The disclosure of psychical mediations between economic and cultural

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<sup>10</sup> Horkheimer, "History and Psychology," p. 122, 123.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 120 ff.

<sup>12</sup> Indeed, Horkheimer even refers to the concept of 'l'habitude' in (contemporary) French sociology. However, Horkheimer's discussion remains extremely sketchy at this point, and will need to be specified. In particular, there is no clear distinction between (a) the need to identify with one's social situation so as to accept one's objective social chances by being socialized into a specifically constrained social identity (as woman, as Jew, as worker) as defined by the whole society; and (b) the need to be accepted and recognized

development... may lead not merely to a critique of the conception of the functional relations between the two, but instead to a strengthening of the suspicion that the sequence may be changed or reversed in the future.”<sup>13</sup>

Indeed, the very distinction between “traditional” and “critical” theory is modeled on the promise that the (ideologically necessary) construction of culture through psychic adjustments also entails the hope for a critical reversal, for a resistance and ‘dis-entanglement’ from existing economic and social conditions.<sup>14</sup> The possibility, as we have seen, for such a critique and resistance is grounded socio-ontologically in the psychic mediation of experience.

## *II. Dialectic of Enlightenment/Dialectic of Critical Theory*

Experiencing fascism, state-socialism, and mass culture changed the position of the Frankfurt School theorists. Instead of a social-philosophical synthesis undertaken in revolutionary spirit, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1944/47) now projects a skeptically-distanced, somewhat withdrawn theory of total reification. Instead of the empirical analysis of relations between economic power, psychic attitudes, and symbolic forms, we now encounter an analysis of the master concept of “instrumental reason.” To be sure, classifying thought itself is now supposed to exercise the functions of social power and the organization of subjective experience. We also find the idea of a correlation between socially schematized experience and the need for social recognition acknowledged at the very core of the introduction: “The dutiful child of modern civilization is possessed by a fear of departing from the facts which, in the very act of perception, the dominant conventions of science, commerce, and politics— cliché-like—have already molded; his anxiety in none other than the fear of social deviation.”<sup>15</sup> Yet the very suggestion of the identity of cognitive and social conformism already indicates that the social-psychological perspective has given way to the historical-philosophical meta-narrative of “identifying thought.”

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as a member within one’ concrete social environment, and thus to have to adjust to the specific norms, values, practices, rules of conduct that are essential for one’s social group.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 120.

<sup>14</sup> See Max Horkheimer, ‘Traditional and Critical Theory,’ in *Collected Writings*, Vol., 4.

<sup>15</sup> Max Horkheimer, Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, New York: Continuum 1996, p. xiv.

The basic principle of identifying thinking consists in the synthesis, or better, subsumption of anything particular under a general concept. Early traces of mimetic experiences in magical contexts (that imitated the other instead of subsuming it under a general category) get reduced and integrated into mythological, metaphysical, and positivistic systems of thought. According to this “negative dialectic” of Western cultural history, the complete eradication of the “Non-Identical” leads to the complete subsumption of the particular under the general. Yet the materialist source of total symbolic classification is to be found in the need for dominating nature. Objectifying thought derives its structure from the subjugation of nature, the unity of which it discloses and constitutes in the same breadth. The control of external nature through labor (which indeed was essentially supported by scientific reasoning—Bacon!—) excludes, besides the negation of mimetic attitudes toward the concrete other, the free development and expression of one’s own ‘inner nature.’ The domination of objective nature, which is the condition of possibility for subjective freedom, thus produces the domination of subjective freedom, for the sake of which the domination of nature would make sense. The condition of subjective self-realization, the domination of outer reality, thus undermines its very ‘raison d’etre’ of subjective freedom, and thus turns into the ‘dialectic of Enlightenment.’

The (nowadays fashionable) rejection of that ‘pessimistic turn’ of critical theory can easily hide the true conceptual change from the early to the mature position. The concept of “schematism,” borrowed from Kant and reinterpreted as a category of symbolic reification of experience, is central for both positions. In the early paradigm, as shown, schematism is meant to designate a depth-psychological process that (a) explains the conformist adjustment and socialization of individual agents to a stratified social reality, and (b) allows, due to its mediating function in-between economic position and cultural expressions, for the possibility of a critical break from the quasi-determinism of existing power relations. In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* the concept of schematism undergoes a twofold transformation.

On the one hand, the psychological idea of an experiential scheme is redefined in terms of a cultural category of the symbolic construction of experience. This move is justified with reference to the pervasive character of late-capitalistic mass culture which

erased any difference between individual-psychological and social-symbolic mechanisms: “Kant’s schematism still expected a contribution from the individual, who was thought to relate the varied experiences of the senses to fundamental concepts; but (culture) industry robs the individual of his function. Its prime service to the customer is to do the schematizing for him.”<sup>16</sup> Economic processes (we shall return to that point) are now seen as undermining the possibility of autonomous ego-identities. “The stunting of the mass-media consumer’s powers of imagination and spontaneity does not have to be traced back to any psychological mechanisms”<sup>17</sup> — and this because there is no longer any relatively autonomous psychic level. The force of experiential synthesis, once (however unconscious) achieved by the subject, is now exercised by stereotypical cultural production.

On the other hand, the cultural sphere is now totally identified with the conformist pre-schematization of experience. Schematism not only becomes the category of culture, it now becomes its only essential feature whatsoever. The cognitive mode of the paranoiac, introduced as the ideal type of fascist world disclosure, is taken to exemplify the conceptual totalitarianism permeating every intentional act. Its basic feature is the endless repetition of the ever-same pattern without any capacity at reflexive thematization or mimetic openness toward the concrete experiential content: “Since the paranoaic perceives the world about him only as it corresponds to his blind purposes, he can only repeat his own self which is denatured into an abstract mania. The naked pattern of power as such, which dominates all around it as well as its own decomposing ego, seizes all that is offered to it and incorporates it, *without reference to its specific nature*, into its mythic fabric.”<sup>18</sup> Symbolic world disclosure, which due to the psychic mediation allowed for a potentially open and reflexive relation to the world, is now fully determined by reification. Experience has become schematism without a gap.

For our discussion, it is important to see how this reinterpretation of the schematism of experience leads to the dialectic, or even self-dissolution, of critical theory. In contrast to a widespread assumption, holding that critical theory’s aporias stem from its radical break with the early model, the problem rather derives from an

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<sup>16</sup> Ibid. p. 124 (translation modified)

<sup>17</sup> Ibid, p. 126.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., p. 190, (my emphasis).

underlying continuity. Indeed, the contradiction results from the assumption that resistance needs to be grounded in the psychic autonomy of subjects while the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* equally holds that the exclusive source of resistance, the autonomous individual, has been eradicated by late capitalism. Precisely by clinging to the idea of a “psychic center” as basis for resistance, Horkheimer and Adorno lead their early project into a deadly impasse.<sup>19</sup>

Indeed, early as well as mature critical theory hold that resistance and critique require support in an autonomous ego-identity. The unquestioned assumption is that only the psyche can function as stronghold against social power. Empirically, given that outlook, we then need to analyze the extent to which the economic-historical situation (see part I) allows for the construction of such autonomous and resisting structures of selfhood. Faced with the almost unconstrained fascist and capitalist power, Horkheimer and Adorno draw their radically pessimistic conclusions with regard to the modern psyche: in fact, the very *level* of autonomous psychic mediation is now seen as eliminated: “Psychology is nothing but the folly to believe that we can change the individual, or that we can change society, if we concern ourselves with that which the individual has become by being the monad of this society... the individual is merely a battle field.”<sup>20</sup>

Confronted with the explanation of the pervasive standardization of culture (as well as with the lack to any substantive resistance to fascism), Horkheimer and Adorno propose the hypothesis of the ‘end of psychic mediation of experience.’<sup>21</sup> (In this regard, we are of course witnessing a theoretical break from the early conception). Drawing on Freud’s triad of ego, super-ego, and id, the amazing lack of resistance is explained with the elimination of the level of super-ego. Internalization has come to an end in late capitalism,<sup>22</sup> meaning that the macro-structural constellations of late-capitalism have

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<sup>19</sup> I am aware that at several points in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, usually at the end of the chapter, the hopeful resources of human reason are invoked. However, the unmediated, abrupt nature of those pleas, which are as desperate as they are unreconciled with the rest of the text, rather support the impression of a utterly pessimistic work. See also Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*, (1947), Continuum: New York 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Collected Writings*, Vol. 12, “Ursprung und Ende des Individuums,” discussion with Th. W. Adorno, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt 1987, p. 440.

<sup>21</sup> Max Horkheimer, “Autorität und Familie in der Gegenwart,” in: *Collected Writings* Vol. 5, p. 377ff

<sup>22</sup> See Jessica Benjamin, “The End of Internalization: Adorno’s Social Psychology,” in: *Telos* 32, (1977), p. 42 ff.

effectively undermined the micro-structural conditions necessary for the (familial) development of ego-strength. The family provided, as it were, a socializing threshold, a lifeworldly buffer-zone against an all-too-pervasive influence of social power on self-constitution. Through identification with a strong father and a loving mother, the constitution of internalized authority, which could oppose external authority and influence, has been possible: “There was a force in the life of the child which allowed her to develop, inasmuch as she adjusted to the external world, her unique individuality as well.”<sup>23</sup> The internalized institution of self-control via the super-ego provided ego-strength, because it allowed the self to control its desires and thus to conduct herself autonomously, to practice self-control. According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the destruction of (male) economic independence in late-capitalism, in the course of which the familial autonomy of the father gets dissolved, leads equally to the deconstruction of the micro-constellation necessary for successful socialization. Self-governed ego-identity—and thus resistance against power—have now become impossible.

There are two versions of this theory. In the stronger account, the ‘end of internalization’ suggests the end of psychic mediation as such. Fascist propaganda as well as “Kulturindustrie” have now direct and unmediated access to the desires, emotions, and dispositions so as to employ the individual for their strategic purposes. In the less radical version, the development of an internalized super-ego is still assumed, but a weakened ego is now taken to be fully determined by an overpowering and strong super-ego; ideals of leadership and star-cult are seen as hooking onto the internalized authority-schemes of a weak ego, which the child—again because of the lack of strong parental identification—internalized at an early age.<sup>24</sup> To be sure, while only the first version presents a full break with the early conceptual framework of psychic mediation, both theories lead to the factual elimination of a socially-constructed ego-strength, and thus to

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<sup>23</sup> Horkheimer, “Autorität und Familie in der Gegenwart,” p. 386.

<sup>24</sup> See Jessica Benjamin, “The End of Internalization” and “Authority and the Family Revisited, or: A World without Fathers,” in: *New German Critique* 5, (Winter 1978), p. 35-57; Deborah Cook, *The Culture Industry Revisited—Th. W. Adorno on Mass Culture*, London 1996, esp. p. 13-22 and 53-56. Since our analysis has unearthed the importance of implicit schemes of understanding, the second thesis would make more sense. Also, it is compatible with the earlier version that presumes the psychic mediation between economy and culture. According to that move, we can preserve the theoretical continuity with Horkheimer’s earlier social ontology, while the capacity to reflexively thematize and challenge existing social structure is now empirically questioned. The super-ego and the individual ego thus merge into one interpretive schematism, and thus lack any reflexive break or distancing between the two levels.

the reduction of any socially-situated potential for critique and resistance. Moreover, both version lead to the following two aporetic implications:

1. Given that the analysis of the breakdown of the family-based constitution of ego-strength is true—which has been challenged empirically<sup>25</sup>—resistance and critical reflexivity have now lost any identifiable location in sociopolitical reality. Due to the fact that the psychic dimension was introduced as the essential source of resistance, the negative assessment with regard to autonomous subjectivity must effect the project of a critical theory as a whole. Critical theorists cannot address themselves any longer to really existing subjects who could understand and take up the subversive messages delivered by critical theory.
2. However, even if the internalization of paternal authority (and the conjoined constitution of self-control) would still be possible, there would arise a contradiction between the related ideal of ego-strength (which is based on the construction of internalized power) and the use of that model for resistance. After all, the ‘dialectic of enlightenment’ consists precisely in the repression of one's own inner nature through the processes of the domination of outer nature, which were initially supposed to set the human being free. Accordingly, ‘inner repression’ gets employed as the necessary condition for resisting power, even though it is, as just seen, itself a form of domination. Critical theory has indeed arrived at its own, devastating dialectic, since the source of resistance is dependent on the power against which one attempts to resist.

That double dilemma of critical theory, which consists in seeing the psyche as both eliminated (which leaves the theory without addressees) and as a normative ideal (which contradicts its own analysis of subjugated subjectivity) forces us to take up the basic question of social criticism once more: how can we reconstruct the internalization of power in subjective experience without eliminating conceptually the possibility of critical reflexivity and transformative resistance?

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<sup>25</sup> Jessica Benjamin, “Authority and Family Revisited.”

### *III. The Necessity to Turn to Symbolic Mediation*

Faced with such aporias, the need for an alternative framework theorizing resistance must have suggested itself. And indeed, Marcuse attempts to place hope in an emphatically interpreted libido, while Adorno and Horkheimer replace their vision of ‘inner-worldly transcendence’ with either aesthetic or negative-theological reflections.<sup>26</sup> However, in these perspectives the utopian dimension of social criticism remains unmediated and indeed utterly alien with regard to social reality, which itself is understood in terms of a totalizing framework of an all-pervasive power. I submit that in order to point a way out of this impasse, it is helpful to turn to the productively ambiguous function that pertains to the linguistic mediation of reality. Language, as the master-medium of cultural experience, entails traces and trajectories of power without ever becoming merely its instrument or expression. Openness toward new experience, reflexivity with regard to experience, and the dialogic dimension of intersubjectivity are all inherent in language, or better, in our concrete linguistic practices; I will argue that these aspects, in conjunction with a theory of symbolic power, can serve as a guiding thread for social criticism.

In order to substantiate our claim that a theory of symbolic mediation can serve as successor-paradigm of critical theory, we have to specify carefully its relation to Horkheimer and Adorno. At first, it seems clear why such an alternative might never have seriously been considered: experience and culture appear here as fully determined by “identifying thought.” In light of an almost desperate reversal of Hegel’s claim concerning the absolute mediation of the particular by the universal, no escape from totalizing thought seems possible. Thought as well as speech are taken to be fully dominated by a will to total subsumption, according to which the individual exists only as the case of the universal law.<sup>27</sup> The refusal or even incapacity to see more than a late-capitalist will to power in our linguistic practices is even more startling since, as Habermas has shown, the identification of symbolic thought with power creates an

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<sup>26</sup> Max Horkheimer, *Eclipse of Reason*; Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, Herbert Marcuse, *One-Dimensional Man*, Boston 1964.

<sup>27</sup> “Die Sprache läßt das Neue als Altes erscheinen, sie beweist, das alles im Rahmen des je Bestehenden sich begibt. Die Sprache stempelt ab... Sobald man spricht, wird ein Besonderes als ein Allgemeines bezeichnet,” Max Horkheimer, “Kopula und Subsumption,” in: *Collected Writings*, Vol. 12, p. 70, 71. With regard to Hegel, it is explicitly stated that “even Hegel’s Logic is subservient to the philosophy of identification,,” p. 72. For a subtle defense of Hegel’s conception of normative critique, in particular

additional impasse for social criticism. Critical theory takes itself to be the *reflexive* analysis of power in light of its practical overcoming. If, however, thought as such becomes identical with power, and if thus no distinction is possible between reified meaning and critical modes of understanding, then the project of a reflexive transformation loses any normative ground. The (abstract) utopian referral to a pre-symbolic mimesis, or to a trans-symbolic aesthetic or theological dimension (all of which resist conceptual explication) remain indeed mere gestures—and are thus insufficient to guide critical reflection of social controversies.<sup>28</sup>

Why, then, have Horkheimer and Adorno never really pondered the alternative of a symbolic theory of resistance? That question is, I need to emphasize, not arbitrarily posed. Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno have, while working on the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, intensively reflected upon the possibility of a new philosophy of language. The goal in mind was to develop a theory of experience that can both capture and transcend the effects of totalizing power. According to that perspective, we have to acknowledge the force of schematism that denigrates and instrumentalizes language as an expression of identifying thought, but also consider that language just as much constitutes a mode of transcending power, a mode, remarkably, that is even independent from the psychic constitution of the speaking individual. As Horkheimer put it: “Independent from the psychological intention of the speaker, language points toward a universality that we have usually attributed to reason. The interpretation of that universality leads to the idea of the just society.”<sup>29</sup>

According to Horkheimer—yet emphatically supported by Adorno—‘language’ is by no means identical with identifying thought. Linguistic practices are rather characterized by an in-built tension which shows itself by indicating, through the filters of encrusted and crystallized meanings, to alternative forms of existence. On the one hand, to speak means to give expression to existing power relations, and thus to reproduce that power by conforming to the available schemes and expectations regarding

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comparison to Adorno’s criticism, see Andrew Buchwalter, “hegel, adorno, and the concept of transcendent critique,” in *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. . . .

<sup>28</sup> The utopian or normative dimension, which aims at reconciliation in spite of a reified and alienated experience, thus becomes ineffable. Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action*, Vol. 1, Beacon Press: Boston 1987.

<sup>29</sup> Max Horkheimer, Letter to Th. W. Adorno, Sept. 14<sup>th</sup> 1941, in: *Collected Works Vol. 17*, p. 171.

correct and comprehensible self-expression: “There is a tendency that all sentences, whatever they might say, just express the very same meaning. That tendency comes right along with, and is actually the same, as schematization.”<sup>30</sup> Yet in another dimension language also points, and here it is independent from the individual intentions, to a trans-empirical, and more utopian form of meaning: “To address someone in speech really implies that we recognize him as a possible member of a future association of free human beings. Speech presupposes a common relationship to truth, and thus entails the deepest assertion of the alien existence to whom one speaks, indeed of all existences as possibilities.”<sup>31</sup> Language thus is to be understood dialectically, inasmuch as it is always embedded in forms of power, and yet, as relating to ‘truth,’ indicates a transcending move beyond such power-saturated crystallizations: “The contradiction would always be the one between the service (of language) to the existing praxis and its necessary intention toward a just universality.”<sup>32</sup>

Now, especially given Adorno’s participation, it seems clear that we are not asked to think of ‘truth’ in an ahistorical or transcendentalist manner, say as the abstract recognition of universal validity claims, or of general rational features of speech or language as such.<sup>33</sup> Rather, a true community of speakers would have to entail the quasi-mimetic openness toward concrete otherness as well as the critical reflexivity of situated subjects. As we shall presently see, both aspects, in combination with the power-structuration of meaning, define the linguistic conception of cultural studies. The undeniable fact, however, that Horkheimer and Adorno never developed their project of a ‘dialect of linguistic world disclosure’ (they never wrote the planned successor to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*), indicates ultimately a clinging to the paradigm of psychic autonomy: speech acts are, after all, expressions of the individual subject, who, since the end of internalization, lacks the resources to achieve true autonomy. To be sure, the consequence of that reduction of speech to deprived subjectivity is a methodological

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid., p. 172.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid., p. 171.

<sup>33</sup> At this point, we can clarify a major point of difference between a hermeneutic foundation of cultural criticism and the theory of communication by Habermas. Habermas reconstructs the “linguistically intended universality” in a Neo-Kantian manner in terms of universal validity claims, while cultural studies and its conception of meaning emphasize the intersectedness of schematizing power and subjective

blindness with regard to the creative and reflexive potentials inherent in everyday linguistic practices, which would have allowed to break free from the pessimism of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

Followers of Horkheimer and Adorno could object here that the thesis about the end of subjective critique and cultural creativity is induced by sociological dogmatism, but rather derived from a close study of stereotypical consumerism and administered mass politics itself. However, thorough and expansive studies of popular culture have presented a much more diversified picture.<sup>34</sup> In light of an astonishing complexity and differentiation of everyday culture, we have to infer that the description of culture as a monolithic power-block might itself be due to a pretty mono-dimensional scheme of interpretation. It certainly overemphasizes the standardizing effects of cultural *production* and underestimates the diversified contexts and attitudes of cultural *reception*.<sup>35</sup> Interesting for us is that we can nonetheless derive the essential components of a critical cultural analysis (one that leads us out of the mentioned aporias and into a framework for cultural studies) from the schematism-thesis of the early Frankfurt School. I suggest to develop such a model of situated reflexivity in the context of the newly introduced platform of symbolic mediation.

Central to the theory of experience, as developed in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, is the necessary pre-schematization of any subject-object relation. The pessimistic radicalization of such “projections” consists in the anti-mimetic closure of any subjective experience with regard to new or challenging encounters: the ossification or ‘crystallization’ of experiential schemes can then be understood as the loss of any reflexivity of one’s own participation in this process, which amounts to the unconscious

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self-understanding; in such a power-embedded hermeneutics, the situated and intertwined relation between universal and particular are the focus of attention.

<sup>34</sup> Representative for numerous studies, see John Fiske, *Television Culture*, Routledge: London/New York 1987; the classic study by Ien Ang, *Watching Dallas*, Routledge: London/New York 1985; and the collection of 40 (!) essays *Cultural Studies*, ed. Larry Grossberg, Cary Nelson, Paula Treichler, Routledge: London/New York 1992.

<sup>35</sup> A good example for this is Adorno’s reception of Jazz. Instead of discerning in the soli and improvisations a creative play with pre-given rhythms and melodies, the whole genre as such is dismissed. Differentiations with regard to pieces or styles or a more nuanced analyses of the dialectic between scheme and innovation are never undertaken. See Th. W. Adorno, “Über den Fetisch-Charakter der Musik und die Regression des Hörens,” in *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Vol. VII, (1938); “Perennial Fashion—Jazz,” in *Prisms*, Cambridge: The MIT Press 1971; and the important review essay about the books “American Jazz

fixation of the subject to (its own yet unacknowledged) interpretive schemes. Horkheimer and Adorno assume that every perception is constructed, since the basic will to survival will necessarily project its needs onto the environment so as to discern the relevant features for self-preservation: “In a certain sense all perception is projection... In human beings projection has been automatized, like other attack or defense behaviors which have become reflexes.”<sup>36</sup> In order to criticize distortions and pathologies which exist in form of rigid schematizations of reality, we can thus not simply invoke an ‘undistorted’ or objective point of view; rather, what is required is the reflexive consciousness of the conceptual contributions to world disclosure so as to make a more adequate understanding of reality possible: “In order to reflect the thing as it is, the subject must return to it more than he receives from it.”<sup>37</sup> Since in the constructive project produced by the imagination the object is formed inasmuch as the subject is distinguished from it, the denial of the constructive dimension of world disclosure constitutes a pathological distortion; in contrast, its acknowledgement allows for a self-reflexive relation to the world.

That difference between subject and object, which presents itself in the knowledge about one’s own contribution to world disclosure (and precisely because of this allows for openness toward new experiences), provides us with the *implicit normative ideal* of critical theory. While reflexive consciousness can differentiate itself from the object, and is thus capable to see its own disclosing perspective as what it is, pathic consciousness remains imprisoned within its ‘self’-constructed schemata, which are accordingly experienced as ‘reality-in-itself.’ The subject has thus become incapable toward a reflexive openness toward the concrete other: “True madness lies primarily in immutability, in the inability of thought to participate in the negativity in which thought—in contradistinction to fixed judgment—comes to its own.”<sup>38</sup> I believe that this attractive model between a critically-reflexive and a pathically-fixated consciousness becomes aporetic only because it is not placed in the context of a theory of symbolic mediation. Because the capacity to reflexivity as such is seen as anchored in psychic

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Music” (H. Widerich) and “Jazz Hot and Hybrid” (L. Sargent), in: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, Vol. IX:I (1941).

<sup>36</sup> Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 187, 188.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188.

autonomy, which in turn is taken to be eradicated by late capitalism, transcendence can only be posited in (aesthetic or theological) spheres beyond the mundane capabilities of situated and potentially reflexive selves.

In contrast, it is much more plausible to transfer the critique of ideology into a theory of symbolic mediation according to which the critical reflexivity and creative potential inheres in linguistic world disclosure, and not in the subject. This move allows for the reconstruction of a non-totalizing experience of the other which does not have to resort to a pre-symbolic myth of mimesis. Instead of identifying “linguistic world disclosure” in toto with the identifying logic of subsumption, we have to understand that the very experience of something as something, and thus as something concrete and different, is a process made possible by linguistic means. “Mimesis” is not pre-symbolic, or even disrupted by symbolic mediation, but rather exemplifies itself in a superbly articulated and expressed experience of the phenomenon, in the stylistically adequate use of formulations, in the openness and adequacy of choosing the right word. The idea of the hermeneutic circle, at the heart of any symbolic understanding of the world, is a far cry from any totalizing or reductive tendency; it instead entails that language reads and discloses the particular being which shows itself in the to-and-fro movement between its material concreteness and the projected interpretive frame. It thus encompasses a permanent relationship as well as the differentiation between the subjective and the objective side of meaning.<sup>39</sup>

Furthermore, we can now easily reconstruct the loss of reflexivity in situated agents without having to abandon the potential for critical reflexivity altogether! According to Horkheimer and Adorno, the essential aspect of modern power is the coupling of interpretive schemes to power mechanisms, without any psychic links that fraction the connection between symbolic meaning and social power in a synthesizing consciousness: “In the world of mass series production, stereotypes replace individual categories. Judgments are no longer based on a genuine synthesis but on *blind*

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 194.

<sup>39</sup> See Hans-Georg Gadamer, *Truth and Method*, Continuum: New York 1990; especially the third (and often neglected) part, in which the structural openness of linguistic concept formation with regard to experiences is emphasized.

*subsumption*...The perceiver is no longer present in the process of perception,”<sup>40</sup> However, the schematism with which Kant attempted to mediate intuitive forms and categories with the concrete sense perception is equally no conscious achievement. Instead, as Horkheimer himself points out at several places by discerning the ‘schematism of experience’ we are dealing with a “hidden art in the depth of the human soul.”<sup>41</sup> Accordingly, *any* mode of conscious experience—reflexive or pathic—is dependent on some implicit background schematism.

It is thus misleading to oppose harshly the real or conscious process of synthesis with “blind subsumption.” Rather, the reflexivity of (situated) agents is in general to be understood as mediated by a cultural preunderstanding, with regard to which it is in a more or less conscious attitude. The hermeneutic model of a preunderstanding necessary for explicit conscious acts can provide the context for a less violent mediation of power-saturated schemes and reflexive agency.<sup>42</sup> As shown by numerous cultural studies, conscious acts are embedded in power-shaped frames of meaning, without, however, disempowering the agents fully or disarming them of any possible reflexive attitude. In other words, the turn to a theory of symbolic mediation allows us to detect and analyze the pervasive features of power by preserving a level on which to locate the potential for critical reflexivity and political transformation.<sup>43</sup>

The thought concerning the dialectic of conscious speech acts and implicit social power leads directly to the methodological self-reflection of cultural studies. We are thus able to pose as the basic problem of social criticism, (without entering into an aporetic situation), the analysis of the subjective competence to ‘mimetic’ (or hermeneutic) openness and critical reflexivity in comparison to the underlying schemes of symbolic power. More precisely: how do symbolic schemes structure the conscious experience of subjects? To what extent are the relevant forms of meaning shaped by power relations, and what is their function in the economy of reproducing symbolic and material

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<sup>40</sup> Horkheimer/Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, p. 201, 202, my emphasis.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 188; the same passage is quoted in Horkheimer, “History and Psychology,” p.122, where it reads “Kant spoke of a hidden art in the depths of the human soul ‘whose real modes of activity nature is hardly likely ever to allow us to discover, and to have open to our gaze.’ ” See I. Kant, *Kritik der reinen Vernunft*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., *Werke*, Vol. III, pp. 180f.

<sup>42</sup> I have developed such an account of a power-saturated yet non-reductive preunderstanding in *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press 1996, Part One: “The Preunderstanding of the Interpreter.”

domination? Finally, to what extent are subjects aware of the existence of power-influenced schemes of meaning, and are they capable of critical examination and practical transformation with regard to them?

#### *IV. The Project of Cultural Studies*

According to Stuart Hall, precisely this problem (of the relation between power and subjective meaning) defines cultural studies. His influential paper “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms” reconstructs methodologically how, first, the culturalist conception of experience in British criticism can be corrected through discourse-theoretic insights, and how, in turn, the structuralist tradition can be improved through integration into a Gramscian conception of meaning and power. The dialectic argument attempts to balance the necessity of structural analysis with an orientation at competent and critical agency. It is central to that perspective to understand the symbolic mediation of the objective situation with the subjective capabilities to critically re-act.<sup>44</sup>

Indeed, the symbolic mediation of everyday practices, which are materially defined mainly by economic circumstances, is at the heart of British cultural theorists such as Raymond Williams (or Hoggart and E. P. Thompson). At stake is the importance of the relative autonomy of symbolic forms (that Horkheimer, too, defined as the realm of culture) without, however, losing sight of the real social conditions and their impact. Especially Williams’ concept of culture attempts to fuse both aspects of social life into one. Culture means, on the hand, “the sum of available descriptions through which societies make sense of and reflect their common experiences.”<sup>45</sup> Culture consists thus of the knowledge and meaning-systems in the scope of which the self-understanding of subjects can articulate itself. On the other hand, culture also refers to “the whole way of life” in order to avoid any reduction to texts and thus be able to include all relevant practices, that is, the non-symbolic ones as well. The arch-paradigm of culture studies, so Hall, defines “‘culture’ as *both* the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and classes, on the basis of their given historical conditions and

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<sup>43</sup> These issues are taken up and developed further in the final part of this essay.

<sup>44</sup> See Stuart Hall, “Cultural Studies: Two Paradigms, in: *Culture, Ideology, and Social Process*, Tony Bennet et al., eds., Open University Press 1981.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 21.

relationships, through which they ‘handle’ and respond to the conditions of existence; *and* the lived traditions and practices through which those ‘understandings’ are expressed and in which they are embodied.”<sup>46</sup> According to Hall, however, this model only thematizes the mediation between symbolic forms of self-understanding and the actually ‘lived culture’ from the perspective within. Williams’ concept of the “structure of feeling” as well as Thompson’s emphatic concept of experience finally cling, despite all effort at inclusion of actual circumstances, to an intentionalistic and finally ‘humanist’ perspective: “Whatever the terms, both positions tend to read structures of relation in terms of how they are ‘lived’ and ‘experienced’... the *experiential pull* in this paradigm, and the emphasis on the creative and on historical agency, constitutes the two elements in the *humanism* of the position outlined.”<sup>47</sup>

The related danger of an essentialist reduction of cultural experiences and actions to a basic ‘structure of feeling,’ which would leave the specific relations between the levels of experience unspecified, can be overcome by incorporating structuralist and discourse-theoretic concepts into cultural studies. The second master-paradigm is, then, not only characterized by the use of a semiotically explicated theory of symbolic mediation, thus allowing for the scientific analysis of symbolic-constructive aspects of subjective experience.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, the structuralist perspective focuses explicitly on the ‘relative autonomy’ of the respective cultural dimensions, and thus allows (just as Horkheimer had claimed) to pose the question concerning their interrelations. The substitution of an essentialist holism of culture with what we might call ‘relational holism’ has the considerable advantage of enabling us (to know and understand) how specific practices (articulated around contradictions which do not all arise in the same way, at the same point, in the same moment) can nevertheless be thought together.”<sup>49</sup> The concept of “articulation,” which Hall introduces in this context, is supposed to grasp both the ideological relation between discourses and social reality (inasmuch as subjective experiences are expressed in symbolic forms); and the general connections and

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., p. 26.

<sup>48</sup> See in this context Hall’s important paper “Signification, Representation, Ideology: Althusser and the Post-Structuralist Debates,” in which Hall further develops his critical appropriation of structuralist/poststructuralist themes, in: J. Curran, D. Morley, V. Walkerdien (eds.), *Cultural Studies and Communications*, London, New York, Auckland 1996, p. 11-34.

interdependencies of diverse social and symbolic practices and institutions (insofar as they are functionally related to each other). The analyses of ‘networks of articulation’ is then, similar to the concept of ‘dispositive’ in Foucault, oriented at the cultural relations between symbolic forms of experience and social power relations. At the same time, however, articulation keeps alive the connotation of expressing thought, and thus reminds us of the ideological functions of discourses as screens, as filters of social reality.

Yet, in order to fully delineate the methodology of cultural studies, we need to emphasize that neither culturalism nor structuralism can (in the sense in which Horkheimer called for a synthesizing renewal of social thought) provide an adequate paradigm. The virtues of structuralism, which consist most of all in the scientific analysis of functional relations between cultural practices, are equally its vices. To begin with, a rigidly employed structural symbolism, according to which meaning systems are based on a definite set of rules accessible only to the theorist, cuts off our connection to the situated self-understanding of agents: “In this sense, culturalism properly restores the dialectic between the unconsciousness of general categories and the moment of conscious organization.”<sup>50</sup> In addition, the unconstrained application of functionalism, in light of which each meaningful system reproduces power and state, eliminates the very possibility to think resistance: “From this position, it is indeed impossible—as culturalism would correctly argue—to conceive of ideologies which are not, by definition, ‘dominant’, or of the concept of struggle.”<sup>51</sup> In order to point to an alternative, Hall suggests, albeit in more than vague sketches, the position of Gramsci (as well as Laclau). Clear is only that according to that perspective, cultural criticism is supposed to remain ‘organically’ tied to the concrete convictions and experiences of situated subjects, and nonetheless transcend their limited horizons by reconstructing discourse and power. More specifically, as I will argue by leaving Hall’s reflections behind, we can detect four basic features that would define a third, neither structuralist nor culturalist, paradigm of cultural studies.

1. The methodological identity of cultural studies consists first and foremost in the assumption of *the symbolic construction of reality*. This is what prompts Hall to

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., p. 32.

<sup>50</sup> Ibid., p. 33.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.

integrate aspects of structuralism and semiotics into cultural studies, and this is what paved the way for the central place that Foucauldian discourse analysis today occupies in cultural criticism. The symbolic perspective provides a common frame, since power relations ‘articulate’ themselves always through interpretive schemes; at the same time, that vision provides a truly inter-disciplinary orientation because the theme of power-shaped meaning is dealt with according to the methods and concepts of the particular disciplines, and yet is integrated into a common theoretical structure.<sup>52</sup>

2. In order to prevent any academic ossification into a sterile semiotic discourse cut-off from social praxis, research has to be tied immediately to the ongoing political life. Especially Larry Grossberg supports that pragmatist self-understanding of cultural studies.<sup>53</sup> The ‘research logic’ of cultural studies should never become autonomous or automatic; it always needs to be linked to political issues such as Aids, xenophobia, sexual and gender identities, globalization, etc. The symbolic perspective thus ‘networks’ the specific disciplinary orientations (art-historical, sociological, communicational, anthropological) with regard to concrete problems.<sup>54</sup>
3. The envisioned connection of symbolic theory to political praxis is undertaken in a spirit indebted to the situated self-understanding of the subjects. Awarding to the Gramscian version of popular Marxism, we have to reject any elitist conception of culture. Culture is, in the words of Raymond Williams, ‘ordinary’—and as such needs to be defended against any denigration from above. At the same time, however, we should also avoid a naïve leftist populism that celebrates any existing cultural practices and identities as de facto legitimate and self-chosen. Precisely the adoption of the concept of ideology commits us to a position equally beyond an ‘elitism of

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<sup>52</sup> In this context, the dialogic conceptions of language and communication by Bahktin and Voloshinov, the conception of cultural practices by de Certeau, and the Marxist philosophy of language by Gramsci, have been used to infuse into Foucault (and recently into Bourdieu as well) more open and flexible conceptions of meaning and agency.

<sup>53</sup> See Lawrence Grossberg, *Bringing it all back home: Essays on Cultural Studies*, Durham, London 1997.

<sup>54</sup> Especially the ‘politics of representation,’ in which the symbolic self-understanding with regard to basic interpretive concepts is at stake, has thus become highly relevant for critical theory. Indeed, ‘meaning’ and ‘sense’ are now seen as controversial and contested political goods, the ‘definition’ or even ‘conquest’ of which presents one of the most important aims of any critical intervention into politics. Stuart Hall himself has intervened in such a way into the politics of Great Britain in the 80ties with his book *The Hard Road to Renewal: Thatcherism and the Crisis of the Left*, London, New York 1988.

high culture’ or a ‘populism of low culture.’ At stake is rather the reconstruction of reflexive and creative potentials in the discursively and socially limited contexts of experience.<sup>55</sup>

4. That symbolically mediated, politically motivated and culturally situated model finds its final fulfillment in the analysis of the *cultural construction of subjective identity*. Implied already in the discourse analysis of media experience, and yet even more pronounced in studies concerning race, class, and gender, this perspective questions the symbolic (and social) constructions implicit in subjective experiences.<sup>56</sup> We have now come full circle with regard to the methodological program of cultural studies, since the general thesis of the symbolic mediation of reality is applied concretely to the lived experience of situated selves. The problem consists in showing how we can, within the framework of one methodological perspective, reconstruct the impact of social power on self-understanding without, however, eliminating conceptually the capability of subjects to critical reflexivity and resistance.

The point mentioned last is the central issue, since if we cannot account for the possibility to engage in reflexive self-determination, the other methodological features of cultural studies lose their meaning as well. Similarly, we cannot simply assume creativity and reflexivity as socially given, but have to consider the influence of power on self-understanding. Unsurprisingly, then, this issue has taken center stage in recent discussions concerning “cultural identity.”<sup>57</sup> As Stuart Hall argues, the problem can be tackled by reference to the concept of ‘identification.’ In general usage, ‘to identify an object’ means to name the features that are essential to its being. Horkheimer’s and Adorno’s critique of identifying logic can be productively continued here, because the very idea of an ‘essentializing identification’ implies the reduction of something to a

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<sup>55</sup> These dialectic formulations are intended to indicate a position *beyond* the elitist criticism of Adorno and any unreflected populism. While the Frankfurt School frequently overlooked the traces of subversion in the reception of mass culture, in cultural studies we find tendencies toward an uncritical acceptance of consumerist hedonism. The following discussion tries to overcome those two alternatives.

<sup>56</sup> Precisely that problematic has recently become a new central focus of discussion in cultural studies. Stuart Hall himself reflects on this issue in the context of the neo-existentialist writings of late Foucault, and considers, following Lacan and Butler, the reintegration of psycho-analytic models into discourse analysis. My contribution relates directly to that discussion. See Stuart Hall, “Introduction: Who Needs Identity?” in: *Questions of Cultural Identity*, St. Hall, P. du Gray (eds.), SAGE: London, Thousand Oaks, New Delhi 1996, p. 1-17.

<sup>57</sup> See the essays in Hall/du Gray, *Questions of Cultural Identity*, 1996.

fixated substance, and thus, especially with regard to subjective existence, the negation of interpretive complexity and open possibilities. The task of discourse analysis consists accordingly in the reconstruction of the social logic of essentialist identifications (as ‘woman,’ as ‘foreigner,’ as ‘homosexual’) by revealing both their intention to name the essence and their symbolic construction. To be sure—and here Hall implicitly takes up the very question of early critical theory—what really asks for explanation is how the agents themselves come to identify their own being with and through the symbolic orders. The real issue with regard to power is that subjects internalize subordinating self-images and transform socially constructed conceptions into their innermost identity. It seems thus almost unavoidable, so Hall, to include psychological or psychoanalytical considerations in a discussion hitherto dominated by Marxism and poststructuralism. Psychoanalysis re-enters, somewhat as the return of the repressed, into Foucauldian discourse analysis.

Althusser’s concept of ‘interpellation’ can provide the concrete starting point for an analysis of ‘identifying power.’ The concept captures the process by means of which a subject identifies herself as the intended or ‘fitting’ subject of power. For if power is to get a hold of the subjects, they have to identify themselves as the ones correctly and ‘legitimately’ designated by the symbolic acts. If a policeman calls on me, I do have to understand myself as the one correctly identified and accept such an identification. Yet as Judith Butler has pointed out with regard to Althusser’s example, the psychic logic that undergirds such an acceptance of self-identification, either as a mere call on the street or in the wider sense of symbolic self-designation, remains entirely unspecified in Althusser.<sup>58</sup> In order to find the point of correlation between psychic and discursive identifications, Hall takes up both Lacan’s psychoanalysis and Foucault’s discourse analysis; he attempts to show that both approaches point dialectically toward each other, without however being able to fully grasp the merging point between psychic and symbolic self.

Lacan’s psychoanalysis interprets the entry of the subject into the symbolic order as the interruption of an imaginary, primordial identity with oneself. Even after the subject has learned to master language, this pre-symbolic and immediate self-identity

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<sup>58</sup> See Judith Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, Stanford: Stanford California press 1997.

continues to exist underneath the symbolically constituted self as a feeling of lack, as a source of fantasies. The problem in Lacan's conception of self-constitution with regard to discursive self-understanding, however, consists in the fact that the subject's identification with the symbolic order already requires a subject that is capable of such an self-identifying act, while the conscious act of self-identification can only emerge and exist in a symbolically constituted world. Lacan thus presupposes a mysterious pre-symbolic self-identity prior to symbolic self-constitution, the relation of which to the symbolic medium and its mode of self-identification remains unclear. Foucault's discourse analysis encounters problems of mediating (or 'articulating') discursive subject formation and psychic self relation somewhat from the other angle. Sketched in a radically social constructionist framework, the classic works by Foucault that relate subject formation to social power simply leave open how exactly *the subjects themselves* come to identify with the socially induced self-conceptions. To be sure, the late works on the 'hermeneutics of self' and the 'aesthetics of existence' attempt to reconstruct subject constitution as an active and autonomous process employing technologies of self; yet the specific relations between creative and reflexive forms of self-understanding and the power-based forms of identification and typification still remain theoretically unexplained, not even discussed. Thus, while Lacan cannot make plausible how the psychic self-identity extends and attaches itself to the symbolic medium, Foucault cannot really show how a discursively constructed self comes to identify with and internalize the discourses into self. How, then, can we understand the self-identification of subjects in the discursive medium?

In order to prepare a solution, Hall comes up with the basically sound proposal to overcome (or at least tone down) the aporias of psycho- or discourse analysis by introducing supplementary hypotheses. With regard to psychoanalysis, we should be wary of a strict and undialectical conception of a before or after regarding the accomplished constitution of subjectivity: "The assertion that subjectivity is not fully constituted until the oedipal crisis has been 'resolved' does not require a blank screen, a tabula rasa, or a before/after conception of the subject, initiated by a 'coup de theatre'."<sup>59</sup> The idea of a smooth and ongoing growing into the symbolically formed self-identity has

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<sup>59</sup> See Hall, "Introduction: Who Needs Identity?", p. 9.

the advantage to capture the open, contingent, and never fully accomplished or fixed character of the self: “Identifications viewed as a whole... are in no way a coherent relational system. Demands coexist within an agency like the super-ego, for instance, which are diverse, conflicting, and disorderly. Similarly, the ego-ideal is composed of identifications with cultural ideals that are not necessarily harmonious.”<sup>60</sup> With regard to discourse analysis we should emphasize that even a relatively stable cultural identity is based on an order of symbols and sentences, which as such can never be fully controlled or determined: “Though not without its definite conditions of existence, including the material and symbolic resources to sustain it, identification is in the end conditional, lodged in contingency. Once secured, it does not obliterate difference... identification is, then, a process of articulation, a saturation, an over-determination, not a subsumption. There is always ‘too much’ or ‘too little’—an over-determination and a lack, but never a proper fit, a totality. Like all signifying processes, it subject to the play, the difference.”<sup>61</sup> Yet the affirmative reference to Derrida’s ‘play of signifiers’ alone indicates that the question of a power-determined self-identification, that is, how the self experiences itself as mediated through a discursive order as essentially characterized subject, remains unanswered after all. Hall, as an engaged advocate of resistance and agency, refers to the insurmountable gap between desiring fantasies and discourse as well as to the basic indeterminacy of meaning itself—without, however, providing a conceptual bridge between a power-symbolic self-identification and a reflexive-creative projection of self.

#### *V. Critical Hermeneutics as Implicit Paradigm of Cultural Studies*

We can tentatively prepare such a mediation by going back to Horkheimer’s concept of social recognition in order to integrate it into a hermeneutically developed theory of symbolic self construction. According to such a perspective, the developing self slowly takes on social schemes of identification since it has to assure itself of the recognition and solidarity of its social environment. The will to recognition, consisting in a deep-seated longing to be accepted and supported, can be satisfied only by more or less conscious acts of adjustment to the symbolically structured world. The encounter of the self with the

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<sup>60</sup> Hall, p. 3.

<sup>61</sup> Hall, p. 2,3.

other, in the course of which one's identity takes shape, crystallizes in the adaptation of typical self images; those schemes are projections of the other onto my being, and they become, inasmuch I adopt the other's stance toward myself, my own modes of self-understanding. This process already begins in the pre-symbolic phase of the mother or parent relation, and continues in the later, symbolically mediated—and thus determined by a discursive logic of identification—phase of life. However, since neither the attachment of one's deepest fantasies to discursive structures nor the symbolic self itself are fixated, as Hall has shown, any self-identification in the context of socially established schemes of interpretation essentially remains an open project.

While we thus require the concept of recognition as an explanatory mechanism for the power-induced adjustment to discursive schemes, we equally need to emphasize the idea of reflexive self-realization. Yet the task is now to do so without succumbing to a Kantian model of self-ruling, since it led, as we saw, early critical theory into one of its aporias by introducing an authoritarian model of subjectivity as grounds for resisting power and authority. The normative intuition of a self-governed existence is indeed crucial for any life opposed to power; nonetheless, such an intuition cannot be explicated by reference to the heterogeneity of presymbolic drives, nor is it to be derived from interpretive openness of meaning alone. With regard to prediscursive desires, Judith Butler has rightly emphasized that the clivage between desire and discourse is not sufficient to ground a socially progressive resistance. This is because such a 'resistance from below' seems to be capable only of destabilizing and shaking-up established meanings, while its rootedness in presymbolic drives do not allow for a discursive reformulation of our cultural self-understanding.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, the Derridean play of differences entails no valid model for reflexive self-determination. In this model, interpretation seemingly traverses the symbolically disclosed realm of meaning without any limits and constraints; yet such a never-ending, never consummated process of understanding might even work in support of existing social and institutional divisions, since their impact on schemes and content of subjective self-understanding gets denied in

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<sup>62</sup> "What do we make of a resistance that can only undermine, but which appears to have no power to rearticulate the terms, the symbolic terms—to use Lacanian parlance—by which the subjects are constituted, by which subjection is installed in the very formation of the subject?" J. Butler, *The Psychic Life of Power*, p. 88.

its course.<sup>63</sup> If we thus can ground critical reflexivity neither in the desire/discourse gap nor derive it from interpretive indeterminacy, the question remains: How are we going to reconstruct the conditions of possibility of critical self-reflexivity without losing sight of the empirical structuration of meaning through power?

We can conceive of a solution to this issue if we replace, as consistently argued in this paper, the thesis of a psychic mediation of experience with a theory emphasizing the symbolic nature of understanding. In contrast to the early Frankfurt School, this approach refutes any conceptual relation between the capability to creative interpretation or reflexive self-determination and the development of a certain psychic structure; instead, creativity and reflexivity are seen as structural aspects of symbolic world disclosure itself. Such reflexivity is exemplified through the manifold interpretive practices in everyday life, without, however, already presenting us with a fully developed reflexive understanding. In a critical hermeneutics of language, the symbolic (that is, non-causal) relation of speech acts to their meaning is rather seen as a resource which can be unfolded in terms of a both socially situated and yet theoretically informed self reflection. Linguistic world disclosure encompasses the possibility of a reflexive self relation, and thus can be developed into a conscious explication of the underlying symbolic forms of meaning. This is because language not only discloses entities within the world, but equally allows to represent such a representation itself. This reflexive structure of symbolic relations to the world is logically independent from the intra-psychic control of drives.

This move allows for the reconstruction of the normative-practical orientation of critical theory since the addressees of the reflexive messages are now *eo ipso* equipped with the tools necessary for such criticism. The problem of the loss of situated agents capable of being addressed by cultural criticism, which emerged from the thesis of the end of the autonomous individual, thus dissolves. Similarly, we can now do away with the aporetic justification of the source of resistance against authoritarianism in a psychic structure itself authoritarian. If reflexivity is an in-built feature of symbolic

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<sup>63</sup> For a similar criticism of a merely interpretive or symbolic multiculturalism that ignores the social and economic factors operative within and behind cultural forms of meaning, see Martin B. Matustik, "Ludic, Corporate, and Imperial Multiculturalism," in Cynthia Willett (ed.), *Theorizing Multiculturalism*, London: Blackwell 1998, p. 100-117.

understanding, then there is no need for an additional theory of psychic self-domestication, that is, for a conception of authoritarian self-discipline in one's psychic economy.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, reflexive self-determination now need not be conceived in opposition to sensuous experience: the subject qua speaker can draw on the reflexive resources of language without having had formerly to subject one's desires and wishes to repressive control. Indeed, the conceptual separation between reflexive acts, enabled by symbolic means, and psychic autonomy, grounded in the repression of drives, might open up a perspective of a reflexive yet non-repressive relation between understanding and sensuality.<sup>65</sup> Finally, insofar as symbolic understanding takes place in the context of dialogic interaction between self and other, this model also captures the normative intuition of openness and recognition with regard to the radical other. As indicated above, hermeneutic experience thrives through the open dialectic between the general and the particular; accordingly, the other or 'non-identical,' is never to be subjected to the subsumption under a pre-established general concept, but always presents a challenge to one's taken-for-granted beliefs and prejudgments. Such a methodology entails the normative respect for the culturally, sexually, and socially other.<sup>66</sup>

Crucial in the context of a critical hermeneutics of subjectivity is, however, that the symbolic emergence of the reflexive self takes place against the background of power-influenced structures of meaning. We are thus dealing with the twofold thesis that the need for social recognition explains the internalization of power-saturated schemes, yet that linguistic meaning entails the potential for transgression and the critique of power. In contrast to the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I argue that linguistic world

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<sup>64</sup> That reflexivity is entailed in our linguistic practices as a normative orientation can be seen by our attitude to ask agents for reasons for strange or unusual actions or for acts that run counter to established norms or habits of behavior. We thus assume the potential of a reflexive self-relation to be built into our shared practices by holding people accountable to give reasons for their actions. Reflexivity can be considered a meta-value of our communicative practices since we would consider a person that refuses to give any reason for their action 'irrational' in a more basic way than a person that would give an unconvincing or insufficient one.

<sup>65</sup> The harmonious relation between understanding and the senses is also normatively relevant since repressed characters might be more inclined to (racist, sexist, nationalist) projections others as beings that can realize what they themselves are forbidden to do, and that are 'therefore' to be hated (without consciousness of that deep-psychic structure, of course).

<sup>66</sup> See H. H. Kögler, "Ethical and Methodological Recognition of the Other," in: *The Power of Dialogue: Critical Hermeneutics after Gadamer and Foucault*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press 1996, p. 141-157. The basic point is that the normative recognition of the other as a dialogic self is derived from within the

disclosure, by its very nature of being a symbolic (that is, non-causal) relation to the world, contains the seeds for a creative and reflexive thematization. This potential, however, is ‘domesticated’ by numerous and pervasive social practices of normalization, standardization, and stereo-typification of experiences and the experiencing self.<sup>67</sup> The basic idea of fusing a theory of symbolic mediation with a social psychology of recognition states that the potential infinity of experience and expression is constrained by the need for social recognition (and yet is never fully controlled by it). Subjects thus adjust themselves, by means of the habitualized pre-schematizations of their symbolic competence, to the thought, perception and action-schemata of their group. That process provides them with recognition and self-esteem as a group member, which they require for their social-symbolic survival; at the same time, the acceptance as a member of ‘general society’ (Gesamtgesellschaft) is granted solely on the subject’s conforming attitude toward the expected, usually gender, class and ethno-specific schemes.<sup>68</sup>

The dialectic of symbolic power ties the self, through recognition needs, to socially normed patterns of self-understanding which form the horizons of self-evaluation and self-esteem. Studies ranging from feminine body culture, the self-experience of ethnic minorities, or the cultural hegemony of social classes have shown the extent to

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interpretive encounter itself, and thus can be justified by means of an explication of the normative dimension that is already implicitly present in our interpretive practices.

<sup>67</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish, The History of Sexuality, Vol. 1*. I have argued elsewhere that Foucault’s thesis concerning the power-based construction of selfhood makes sense only in the context of a subjective theory of experience that can treat the internalization of power in a non-behavioristic manner. See Hans Herbert Kögler, “The Self-Empowered Subject: Habermas, Foucault, and Hermeneutic Reflexivity,” in: *Philosophy and Social Criticism*, Vol. 22, 4 (1996). Here I shall further develop the concept of internalization.

<sup>68</sup> We thus employ Horkheimer’s early conception of a need for social recognition in order to explain how subjective acceptance and internalization of power-saturated schemes becomes possible. We thus preserve the social-psychological dimension, which gets productively combined with discourse analysis, insofar as it illuminates the constitution of socially constructed subjective experience. Similarly, we replace the idea of subjective autonomy as the source of resistance with a theory of linguistic meaning that entails the potential for reflexive criticism and creative meaning. Subjectivity, then, is rather the goal than the unavoidable starting point. This argument applies also to poststructuralist discussions of subjectivity, insofar as we should not see those analyses as destroying the possibility of autonomy, but rather as showing how non-autonomous forms of subjectivity are socially created, and how we can, without relying already on the autonomous self, nonetheless develop and create new forms of self-understanding and self-realization. This move of theorizing is crucial, because it could show how oppressed selves can in fact overcome and re-create themselves from their oppressed position (see Fanon on colonized selves), without having to be ‘autonomous’ already.

which subjects experience themselves through such prescribed standards and schemata.<sup>69</sup> Tied to such schemes by fear of social exclusion or even ‘symbolic death,’ the subjects adopt those modes as their own.<sup>70</sup> Members of non-integrated groups are forced to something like a permanent reflection on the symbolic violence inherent in language, if labeled as “foreigner,” “negroe,” “prostitute,” etc. They are, if I may say so, dialectically integrated by being both part of the general symbolic order—which amounts to the sense of shame and self-denigration such groups might experience—and through their ties to particular social lifeworlds, which makes them outcasts. While that situation may put them in a more natural position to question and reject the existing modes of evaluation, over-adjustment or self-denial as well as self-destructive tendencies may also surface. Such an alienated or split attitude, however, can reveal the truth about all of our symbolically constituted identities, which express themselves in seemingly natural expressions like “woman”, “worker”, “intellectual”, etc., and which represent equally constructed and constraining schemes of identity.

The concept of a ‘schematism of experience,’ which constitutes the deep-psychological (or better: deep-symbolical) relais between the need for social recognition and social power relations, can be explicated through the hermeneutic model of understanding meaning. In particular, the idea that subjective speakers necessarily rely on a meaning-constitutive background proves helpful here.<sup>71</sup> Indeed, as speech act theory as well as semiotics have pointed out, speaker and hearer can communicate about something only insofar as they employ shared symbolic means, as they follow shared conventions

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<sup>69</sup> See Irene Diamond, Lee Quinoy (eds.), *Feminism and Foucault*, Boston: 1988; Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, New York 1967; Pierre Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*. For black youth, it may be the sports career, as suggested in the documentary movie *Hoop Dreams*.

<sup>70</sup> I have analyzed the relationship between female identity and the need for social recognition with regard to practices such as female excision and abortion in “Explaining the Other? Language, Power, and Reflexivity in Critical Hermeneutics,” forthcoming in *The Habermas/Gadamer Debates*, ed. Gaonkar, G. Calhoun (eds), Minneapolis: U. of Minnesota press, forthcoming.

<sup>71</sup> Both Heidegger with regard to a ‘circumspective understanding’ of being-in-the-World, and Wittgenstein in his crucial reflections “On Certainty,” have shown that our explicit understanding of something as something is based upon an implicit preunderstanding. That preunderstanding defines the meaning of explicit expressions while not being thematically present as such. The language-hermeneutic reflections of Gadamer and Searle have extended those insights directly to the realm of linguistic meaning. Methodical control in the human sciences is never complete, as Gadamer argues, since the interpreters’ comprehension is subject to a historical horizon the scope of which lies beyond individual consciousness. In everyday communication, as Searle argues, any clearly defined sentence is intersubjectively understood only because the communicators possess a shared practical horizon of understanding the situation.

that regulate the common use of signs.<sup>72</sup> In order to be grasped by B as y, the communicative intention of A to communicate y to B has to rely on shared rules followed by both communicators. Whether something can count as a question, a statement, an order or an emotional expression depends on the communicative or ‘illocutionary’ force, the sense of which is learned by being socialized into language games. Now, for our context it is crucial that the shared understanding between speakers is not fully determined by such rules. Indeed, the mutual understanding of communicators is only given if the ‘hermeneutic background’ sufficiently overlaps in order to establish shared conceptual and practical understanding. The ‘background’ is not fully explicable in terms of rules; it is acquired through socialization, and as such tied to the particular cultural and social context.<sup>73</sup> In other words, social differences and distinctions that prevail in the respective contexts are likely to leave its impression on preunderstanding. Subjective intentions in communication are thus not only shaped by communicative needs, but also by a “horizon of intelligibility” which defines a socially situated scope of understanding; insofar as that social context is pervaded by power relations, they will appear indirectly on the level of meaning.<sup>74</sup>

That process leads, on the one hand, to the internalization of the power structures, because the objective opportunities for self-realization are unevenly distributed among different social groups. The pre-schematization of experience adjusts the reflexive and creative potential to the socially accepted schemes, and thus helps to reproduce, symbolically as well as practically, existing structures of domination.<sup>75</sup> Yet on the other

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<sup>72</sup> John Searle, *Speech Acts*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1969; Jürgen Habermas, *Theory of Communicative Action, Vol. 1*, Beacon Press: Boston 1987. This position is contested by Davidson in “A Nice Derangement of Epitaphs,” where Davidson argues that contextually invented ‘passing theories’ can account for intersubjective understanding. However, the communication breakdown between speakers who speak the same language yet coming from radically different social or cultural milieus suggests something like a hermeneutic background as a source of shared meaning.

<sup>73</sup> John Searle, “Literal Meaning,” in: *Meaning and Expression*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; “The Background,” in: *Intentionality*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 1983, p. 141ff.

<sup>74</sup> Pierre Bourdieu’s sociolinguistics of the symbolic habitus, which is grounded in the social habitus and thus points back to the social status based on recognition, can serve such a critical reconstruction as a guiding thread. However, as I have shown in the target essay of a recent discussion of Bourdieu, we have to integrate Bourdieu’s conception is a more refined hermeneutics including reflexivity and innovative self-interpretation. See P. Bourdieu, *Language and Symbolic Power*, Cambridge, Mass 1991, and for the critique at Bourdieu, the special issue “New Directions in the Sociology of Knowledge,” *Social Epistemology*, Spring 1997.

<sup>75</sup> The ‘domestication’ or ‘reduction’ of our reflexive and creative powers, that we as speaking beings always potentially possess, is brought about by a will to social recognition; the need to be integrated makes

hand, the fact that those experiences are symbolically mediated implies that subjects—as speakers—are never totally determined by objective power structures. The medium of language entails the possibility of infinitely many expressions and interpretations, which thus can only be constrained empirically, and never absolutely.

The task of cultural criticism is thus to make explicit the hidden contexts that implicitly shape our conscious understanding, and thereby to push reflexivity and self-understanding onto a higher plane. Despite the fact that the hermeneutic background is permeated by power, it nonetheless remains ‘hermeneutic;’ as such, it is in principle accessible to the agents themselves, and remains always a negotiable part of the agents’ own self-understanding. Interpretive schemes are not as fixed and static as the classical structuralist or discourse-analytical models assume; especially in struggles concerning the cultural, political, social and ‘gendered’ identity of groups, the meanings of basic terms are up for grasp and targets of ongoing re-negotiation.<sup>76</sup> With regard to the power-induced socialization into symbolic forms, we are fortunately dealing with an ambiguous process. True, the symbolic schemes often demarcate relatively rigid boundaries for individual self-expression; yet the situated self-understanding is still never fully delineated by the socio-symbolic logic of identification. This is not so much, as Hall argued, because of the desire/discourse gap or the indeterminacy of the signifier. If we want to relate symbolic identification to reflexive agency, we should rather emphasize that the self-reference of the first person can never be fully inscribed into a definite description. This is because the act of self-reference—as an act of *self*-identification—is here dependent on the spontaneous act of the subject itself, and can thus never be ossified

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us constrain, usually unconsciously, the open horizon of interpretive possibilities in order to allow us to participate in the acceptable and socially established rules of meaning. Foucault defends a similar conception of discourse, albeit more inspired by Bergsonian and surrealist themes, in “The Discourse on Language,” in: Michel Foucault, *Archaeology of Knowledge*.

<sup>76</sup> Such ‘re-negotiations’ are well described by John Fiske, *Media Matters: race and Gender in U.S. Politics*, Minneapolis, London 1996. To be sure, we have to ask further what aspects of the social background can be immediately expressed in the language and ‘world view’ of the situated selves, and what features require an objectifying theoretical framework. In any event, the interpretive schemes that agents themselves have access to and that they can understand as their meaning have to be kept in mind by every objective analysis. It has to be shown how these schemes derive from or are related to objective functional mechanisms or structures. To show this, I think, might also help situated agents to understand the meaning and the relevance of abstract theoretical languages.

by a general classification or typification.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, every interpretive self-image is, just as much as it is defined by linguistic meaning, also embedded in complex practical contexts and thus dependent on a host of implicit background assumptions. Since that background understanding is complex and diversified, and thus cannot be circumscribed in a definite set of rules, the very ‘identity’ of the ‘identified’ self must equally remain open. The self-reference as well as the background dependency thus imply that self-understanding withstands a rigid fixation in definite interpretations.

Yet by turning to symbolic mediation, we can also avoid the complementary mistake consisting in the excessive over-estimation of the reflexive and creative powers of situated selves. While we need to emphasize the transcending potential inherent in interpretive practices, we need not overlook the actual—power-shaped and constraining—contexts of meaning constitution. From its inception, being socialized into practices of speech and communication is associated with practices of evaluation, normalization, and adjustment, which agents obey for the sake of social recognition. The deep-seated need for social acceptance moves subjects to internalize the expected patterns of behavior and expression, which crystallize into the agent’s second nature. We thus reject a model that takes agents, as it were, to stand as free and reflexive subjects ‘before’ a host of social possibilities. Rather, the *situated* subject is always already embedded in its social positions which in turn shape the outlook of its interpretive endeavors. It is because of that situatedness of experience that a more radical reflexive break—by means of semiotic and discourse-theoretic tools—with the agent’s self-understanding is necessary.<sup>78</sup>

Accordingly, *pace* Horkheimer and Adorno, the reflexivity and creativity that is entailed in our linguistic practices can provide the situated springboard for a critical attitude. Cultural Studies have to be understood as the theoretically-informed continuation of an everyday potential for reflexivity, and as such are the legitimate heir to the initial intentions of the Frankfurt School. The task is to enhance our understanding of

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<sup>77</sup> Here, the relation between an internalized social ‘me’ and a transcending, reflexive and creative ‘I’ as suggested by George Herbert Mead helps for theorizing internalized power and reflexive criticism. See G. H. Mead, *Mind, Self, and Society*, Chicago: U. of Chicago Press 1934.

the implicit mechanisms of power, and thus to lead to a less constrained unfolding of our creative capabilities.