

Encountering Others, Imagining Modernity:  
Primitivism in German Ethnology, Art, and Theory

by

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There was also something known as Expressionism. Nobody could say just what it was, but the word suggests some kind of squeezing-out; constructive visions, perhaps, but inasmuch as the contrast with traditional art revealed them as being destructive, too, we might simply call them destructive, which commits one to nothing either way, and a destructive outlook sounds pretty good.

—Robert Musil, *The Man Without Qualities*

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*for mom, in memory — a frolic*

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## Introduction

In the early 1900s, the German sociologist Max Weber looked at his world and found it disenchanted. It was a world that, to Europeans such as Weber, was breathtakingly “modern”—everything seemed to be new, changing rapidly, and careening into the future. New technologies, from steam power to electricity, were transforming the ways people lived, traveled, and worked. New ways of thinking and scientific discoveries were undoing old ways of seeing the world. And while all this newness could be liberating, it also produced a profound sense of anxiety and alienation. Many Europeans felt as though they had lost their sense of community—they felt disconnected from each other, their beliefs, and even from themselves. It seemed to many that they were living through a time of historical crisis.

Yet not everyone seemed to be experiencing this transformation. Europeans were becoming increasingly aware of people on the periphery of the “civilized” world, people who had not yet endured the drastic changes of modernization. Weber was writing in the wake of an unprecedented burst of imperialism in the late nineteenth century, an imperialism that had unfolded over the last few hundred years, as European nations relentlessly colonized much of the globe. Europeans brought back gold, rubber, and other goods, fueling and financing Europe’s industrial revolution and imperial expansion. They also brought back other treasures—artwork and masks, utensils and ceremonial objects. To Europeans, these objects and their makers seemed curiously “primitive.” Europeans imagined the people from such places as

Africa, Oceania, and the Americas as natural, timeless, instinctual, and somehow more authentic—everything that modern Europe was not.

This encounter with otherness revolutionized European art, laid the foundations for anthropology and the social sciences, and transformed philosophy; it also shaped what it meant, for Europeans, to be human. In most accounts, this encounter has been understood from the perspective of people like Weber, or the contemporary avant-garde artists who, like him, were intrigued by the people from these exotic lands and their “primitive” ways of life. For these Europeans, it seemed obvious that their own modern world—whether they embraced it as the achievement of rational progress, or cursed it as the onslaught of an alienated modernity—was the source of their fascination. The following study contends that, on the contrary, Europeans developed their understandings of modernity through this exchange itself, and the set of ideas and interpretations that developed to make sense of it—that is, through the discourse of primitivism. This study is an exploration of this set of primitivist ideas and concepts, the relationships that exist between what are usually posed as disparate cultural or disciplinary fields, and the role of primitivism in producing an imagined modernity.

Primitivist ideas circulated, and continue to circulate, through all facets of modern culture, yet existing studies of primitivism have treated it in isolated domains—as a provocative feature of modern art, or an embarrassing former trait of anthropological writing. This compartmentalized vision has occluded the ways in which these discourses work together to create a pervasive set of identities and interpretive strategies. Moreover, this tendency has bolstered a consensual view in which primitivism is theorized as a projection. In studies on the

early texts of anthropology, for example, the often derogatory descriptions of naïve and benighted savages are seen as a result of the anthropologist's sense of living in a civilized modern society built on science and progress; in the history of art, primitivism is depicted as a romantic longing for primitive authenticity, the inevitable result of modern autonomy, power, and knowledge, along with its Faustian price, alienation. This study highlights connections between primitivism in anthropology, avant-garde art, and theoretical writing to argue that the discourse of primitivism itself has historically produced this experience of civilized "modernity." Modernity has multiple meanings—I maintain specifically that primitivism has been productive of what political theorist Jane Bennett has described as the "disenchantment narrative" of modernity, in reference to Weber.<sup>1</sup> Weber is simply one prominent voice of a widespread "critique of modernity"—the belief that such forces as capitalism, rationalization, secularization, urbanization and bureaucratization have led to the "disenchantment of the world."<sup>2</sup>

Critics such as Bennett, Bruno Latour and others, belonging loosely to the school of thought known as new materialism, have persuasively argued that this notion of a disenchanted world is simply one of the myths of the moderns; yet the narrative has been a

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<sup>1</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001). Frederick Cooper has recently drawn attention to the numerous problems with the popular use of the concept of modernity in postcolonial studies. As I discuss in Chapter One, my own argument is not concerned with whether different types of modernization in the colonial context should be described as modernities (modernity as an analytic category), but rather with the historical construction of a particular (and culturally prominent) understanding of modernity. It is, moreover, an attempt to draw attention to the ethnocentric framing of the concept. See Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005).

<sup>2</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), 35.

difficult one to dislodge.<sup>3</sup> I contend that this is in part due to treating it as a theoretical rather than historical problem. What has been left out of this work is the history of the disenchantment narrative, and specifically its fundamental relationship to primitivism.<sup>4</sup> In the prevailing view, the critics of modern society, from the eighteenth-century Romantics through the nineteenth- and twentieth-century social and economic theorists (such as Weber or Georg Simmel), seized upon the idea of an authentic “primitive” society as a means of negotiating the new “realities” of alienation and autonomy produced under modernity. I maintain that while there is no denying a history in which technological and social change are evident, the evaluation of these changes as moments of historical crisis for the “modern” subject was contingent. Technological and social change could have been experienced differently—the fact that they were *not* is a complex product of imperialism and primitivism.

Combining theoretical analysis, archival research, and aesthetic interpretation, this study critiques the colonial discourse model to frame primitivism as an international and transcultural discourse of alterity in modernity, then focuses on specific instances of primitivism in German ethnology, avant-garde art, and critical theory. In doing so the work demonstrates the historical ways in which individuals in the colonial era worked together to create a “modern” subject identity in opposition to an imagined “primitive” other, how this contingent

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<sup>3</sup> Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Latour, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010). See also Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>4</sup> Victor Li has persuasively argued that primitivism continues to permeate contemporary critical theory, yet his critique similarly treats the “primitive” as an ahistorical concept rather than a contingent historical discourse. See Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006); and Li, “A Necessary Vigilance: A Response to Torgovnick and Kuper,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 557-563.

process produced an imagined, disenchanted “modernity.” The second principal argument of this study is that some examples of primitivism in fact call the discourse of primitivism into question, and in doing so, undermine the disenchantment narrative of modernity. These examples of self-critical primitivism are drawn from German ethnology and German Expressionism, and constitute the second part of the dissertation. Before explicating the individual chapter arguments, it will be useful to begin with an example from primitivist modern art.

In 1905, a group of young artists in Dresden joined together, calling themselves the Brücke (the “Bridge”). The Brücke was the first group of German artists to take a pronounced aesthetic interest in “primitive” art—a loose term for the colorful masks, statues, weapons, carvings, architectural designs, and so on, which originated primarily in particular regions of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas, and which the Brücke artists and other Europeans encountered in anthropology museums, curio shops, the pages of popular newspapers, local bars and artists’ ateliers. Europeans had long had an interest in foreign, exotic, or “primitive” others, but the Brücke members were among a handful of artists in Europe, primarily in France and Germany, who, in the early years of the twentieth century, acquired a particular fascination with the aesthetic creations of these imagined “primitive” people. They gradually began to incorporate these images, ideas, and forms into their own artistic work, as well as their everyday lives, in the form of carvings and studio decorations.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> In this study I have generally used quotations when primitive is used as an adjective (“primitive” art) or noun referring to people (the “primitives”), to prevent the implication that there is such a thing as “primitive” art or “primitives.” However, for ease of reading, quotation marks will not be used to designate the primitive when used

The consensus in the scholarship on the Brücke is that, in such artworks as *Bathers Throwing Reeds* (1909), by Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, and *Standing Child* (1911), by Erich Heckel, the Brücke artists expressed a simple primitivism, in which the figure of the “primitive” represented a freedom from bourgeois civilization and its societal constraints (see figs. I and II). Their interest in the “primitive” is said to belong to a more general interest in nudity, sexuality, and playfulness, in contrast to rigid norms and mundane superficiality. On the other hand, the occasional association of the “primitive” with children in their work is said to present an ideal of unspoiled innocence. Finally, the rough quality of the Brücke aesthetics—their starkly carved figures, rough-cut etchings, and rapidly executed sketchwork—are interpreted as an attempt to achieve a kind of “primitive” immediacy in terms of artistic creation. Subsuming these various facets, the “primitive” is thus said to represent a kind of authentic mode of being and creating, in contrast to a modern world ravaged by anxiety and alienation. As Reinhold Heller, one of the leading Brücke scholars, writes, “the Brücke members had a naïve, idealistic perception of a utopian, ‘primitive’ life in which modernity’s central conflict—humanity, industry, and civilization versus nature—did not exist.”<sup>6</sup>

This prevalent interpretation has been too quick, however, to take the primitivism of the Brücke at face value. Rather than offering a simple romanticization of the primitive, the Brücke developed a mode of primitivism which in fact calls into question the common distinctions between primitive and civilized (distinctions, for example, between culture and nature,

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abstractly (without appending it as a trait to particular people or societies). For example: the Brücke were interested in the primitive; they were inspired by the “primitive” art of Africa and Oceania. This of course is not unproblematic. I’ve employed this as a guide, not a mandate, and sometimes style and sense have rendered uniform quotations awkward and unnecessary.

<sup>6</sup> Reinhold Heller, “Brücke in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913,” in *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller, on behalf of the Neue Galerie New York (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 27.

foreword progress and ahistorical time, alienation and authenticity). As Heller's comment makes clear, it is widely assumed that these distinctions are a defining feature of modernity. This view is founded upon a belief that modernity represents a moment of historical crisis, the apex of a process of civilization, in which rationalism and technology have produced unprecedented autonomy, but at the price of alienation and the loss of authenticity. I argue that, rather than reading the Brücke's primitivism as an expression of this view, we might read their aesthetics as a paradoxical critique of primitivism; and moreover, that if the Brücke were subtly undermining the discourse of primitivism, they were accordingly also undermining this particular view of modernity.

If we look more closely at Kirchner's *Nude with Mirror and Man* (1912), we find a more complicated primitivism at work (see illustration, next page). A large painting, about five feet tall and two and a half feet wide, with bold colors and strong outlines, the canvas features a posterior view of a nude female, whose length occupies nearly the entire height of the canvas. We see her body, but her face is turned away from us, the viewer. She stands before a full-length mirror, while a fully dressed male seems to observe or perhaps be communicating with her. Although earlier works by Kirchner feature naked women and men together, cavorting in the studio or frolicking outdoors, the pair here seem detached, almost inhabiting separate worlds. The woman is likely a prostitute, the man a client, although the identities remain ambiguous. Kirchner, who had moved from Dresden to Berlin in 1911, became increasingly interested in the figure of the prostitute; the figure emerged as the focal point of Kirchner's most famous series of paintings, known as the Berlin Street Scenes (1913–15). Much has been written on the significance for Kirchner of the relationship between prostitution, desire, and





**E.L. Kirchner, *Rückenakt mit Spiegel und Mann* (Nude with Mirror and Man), 1912.** Oil on canvas, 160 x 80 cm. Brücke-Museum, Berlin. Reproduced in Jill Lloyd and Magdalena M. Moeller, eds., *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003).

urban modernity, but the consensus is that the prostitute functioned as a symbol of modern alienation. Deborah Wye, for example, writes that “Kirchner’s scenes bring the viewer face-to-face with figures who symbolize the dehumanizing urban environment and its effect on the individual psyche.”<sup>7</sup> Wye suggests that Kirchner’s view of prostitution and modernity paralleled that of the German sociologist, Georg Simmel, whose popular lectures “discussed not only the pervasive effects of the money economy as it dominated city life, but also the mentality of detachment that was needed to cope with crowded conditions and an over-abundance of stimulation. . . . Such disengagement is personified in Kirchner’s symbol of the streetwalker, in whom objectification reaches its acme.”<sup>8</sup>

This entrenched interpretation is based upon a prevalent misreading of Kirchner’s attitudes about modernity. Wye’s comment does not address Kirchner’s primitivism; yet this interpretation provides the framework in which the primitive is routinely understood. In contrast to the “negativity and depersonalization”<sup>9</sup> of the modern urban environment, the primitive is seen as a panacea—the natural and authentic. Yet if we attend to the significance of the primitive in Kirchner’s *Nude*, it becomes clear that Kirchner’s work undermines this interpretation of the primitive, and in doing so, repels Wye’s attempts to read a certain understanding of modernity into the picture.

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<sup>7</sup> Deborah Wye, *Kirchner and the Berlin Street* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2008), 25. For a similar perspective, see Rosalyn Deutsche, “Alienation in Berlin: Kirchner’s Street Scenes,” *Art in America* 71, no.1 (January 1983): 64-72. For an exceptional revisionist reading that dovetails in important ways with my own, see Charles W. Haxthausen, “‘A New Beauty’: Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s Images of Berlin,” in *Berlin: Culture and Metropolis*, eds. Charles W. Haxthausen and Heidrun Suhr (Minneapolis and Oxford: University of Minnesota Press, 1990), 58-94. Haxthausen notes that the image of Kirchner as “a deeply alienated artist who viewed the city with anxiety and foreboding” has been the consensus at least since Donald Gordon’s monograph, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968). Haxthausen adds that “this new interpretation was based neither on new evidence nor on a more exacting reading of the source material, which to a large extent has evidently been ignored or dismissed as irrelevant.” (62)

<sup>8</sup> Wye, *Kirchner and the Berlin Street*, 26.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

If the theme in this image is male sexual desire, the operations of that desire are ambiguous. The naked body of the woman fills the canvas, yet the viewer significantly cannot see her from the front, as can her male guest. Her sexuality is thus present to the viewer, yet hidden, not fully disclosed. If the viewer looks to the man, he appears to be looking obliquely in another direction. Moreover, as he stands there hovering in a nebulous blue field, he seems hardly a part of her reality, the reality of her room with its ornately carved dresser and swirling rug, out of which she seems to blossom organically, or to be sculpted, in an echo of the Corinthian columns framing the mirror.

The mirror, to which the viewer might look next, offers however only the same view of her posterior. The single new detail that the mirror allows the viewer to see, which was not visible before, is the woman's face. The woman does not look out at the viewer, however, but at herself, in the mirror. She sees what the viewer sees. Thus, in looking to the mirror, rather than achieving a voyeuristic view of the woman's frontal nudity—the viewer sees the woman's face, contemplating her own body, just as the viewer has been doing. The viewer's perspective aligns with that of the woman. It begins to become clear that whatever kind of sexual desire is at work here, it is endlessly mediated, and endlessly postponed.

Moreover, if the image creates desire, it does so only to unleash it upon things: as the gaze of the viewer faces the impossibility of immediate desire, it is drawn effortlessly to the dynamic swirls of the carpet, the curves of the dresser, the "thingness" of the woman's shoes in contrast to her nakedness; the gaze seems to lose itself in the richness of the hues, the sharp contrast of the pinks and blues, the back and forth between the client's reality, there, cool and detached, and the woman's reality, here, warm and vital; and finally, the gaze seems to stop

and consider something which has been present all along, but somehow not quite present to the understanding, not quite available to interpretation: the carved “primitive” head.

Mirrors are of course a favorite subject for artists, contemplating the complexities of representation, and Kirchner’s painting might well be making a comment on the mediation of desire. But the analysis so far fails to account for this mysterious head, which occupies so prominent a place on the center of the dresser. Indeed, the position of the carved head echoes the head of the woman, and the head of the man. It seems somehow to refer to both, positioned in her world, yet with its blue contours and pale flesh it is more akin to the man. The head somehow unites their worlds, yet it also doesn’t quite fit. It poses the fundamental ambiguity here, the presence of otherness.

This head is where the encounter with the “primitive” enters into this image.<sup>10</sup> A common interpretation would be that the presence of the primitive serves to suggest that beneath the superficiality of civilized life, there thrives a primitive sexuality, teeming if uncontrollable—as though the gaze of the head were taunting the depersonalized modern world around it. Critics might point to the woman’s shoes, for example, as a symbol of this superficial civilization. Kirchner indeed frequently painted his nudes with shoes or in hats, items that, although certainly useful, were also a shorthand for fashion, often serving more aesthetic, decorative purposes. The man in the corner, meanwhile, through his relationship to sex as a

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<sup>10</sup> In 1912 Kirchner was increasingly interested in sculpture from Cameroon, a possible source of inspiration for the image of the head. A similar style can be seen in Kirchner’s *Nude Seated with Crossed Legs* (1912) and the cover for the 1912 exhibition at the Galerie Fritz Gurlitt, Berlin (figs. III and IV). The head in this image may derive from Bangwa sculpture, which the Ethnological Museum in Berlin had in its possession at the time (fig. V), or possibly Mangbetu sculpture, which was characterized by elongation of the head. See Wolfgang Henze, “The Sculpture of Ernst Ludwig Kirchner,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 33-37; Lorenz Homberger, ed., *Cameroon: Art and Kings*, with contributions by Christaud M. Geary and Hans-Joachim Koloss (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2008).

commodity that can be purchased, is alienated from sexuality, from the woman, from life. He is thus seen as a symbol for modern man, reduced to a phantom, longing for the authentic, primitive sexuality, from which he is severed.

However, if we follow up on the operations of desire I sketched above, another interpretation comes into view. It is significant that the head's gaze does not confront the viewer, but looks off in other direction altogether. The figure's gaze is not focused on us, as we are on it. It has its own reality, its own perspective, although not one to which we are privy. If before, sexual desire was in pursuit of the woman, whose sexuality remained elusive, now the unleashed desire is directed at this mysterious presence—desire transformed from the sexual into the interpretive. However, just as before, as the sexual desire went unfulfilled and displaced, the desire here to understand the presence of the head and its signification is thwarted.

In echoing the position of the woman's head, the carved head seems caught up in a similar dynamic of self-interpretation. As she contemplates herself, the head gazes inward, contemplating itself. Just as the woman's face, in turning towards the viewer, calls attention the fact that her body remained out of sight, the sculpture here exists without a body. The primitive, as before, is present, but also hidden, not fully disclosed.

A primary interest of such "primitive" carvings for Kirchner and the other members of the Brücke was that they were not carved in the naturalist mode with which they were familiar, but rather appeared overtly stylized. While such objects signified, they did not aim to imitate an object according to the norms of nineteenth-century European aesthetics, in which artistic objects (whether carved or painted) aimed at similitude to the original. For the avant-garde

painters, the exciting thing about much of the non-European art they were discovering was that the beauty was in the style itself, the forms, the shapes, the contrasts. Art did not have to mimic something else; it could inhabit an awareness of itself as art. In other words, a carved head seemed to declare itself as a play of surfaces and significations. It did not attempt to reproduce its object, but rather abided in the state of both signifying an object and manifesting itself as object.

If this head, then, is understood to be the pivot of the painting, the focal point of interpretive desire, it both thwarts that desire, and sets it free, by offering up the play of surfaces for the delight of the viewer. The carved head merges with the shoe in the mirror, suggesting an equivalence, not with “pure” sexuality, but with the “superficial” ornament. If the significance of the sculpture is in its features, not what they represent, the same now applies for the shoe as well. The “superficial” objects of civilization—shoes, the rug, the carved dresser, Corinthian capitals—these decorative surfaces become the essential. The surface, in other words, is not superficial, divorced from the authentic.

The woman’s contemplation of herself in the mirror, accordingly, is not directed at her “pure” nakedness, but at nakedness wearing red heels, and the stylized curve of her leg, which it turns out is different from how it appears to the viewer. Her own view of herself is stylized; her sexuality is stylized. The man in the distance, opposite the viewer, could at first appear as the mirror image of the viewer, alienated and alone. Now it begins to appear that he is not in fact the viewer’s reality; he is, rather, the viewer’s projection. The lack of “things” around him underline his existence as a phantom. If the woman represents the viewer’s desire, the man represents his fear. The man may be alienated and alone, but the viewer, however, is not in his

world; the viewer stands here, in the liveliness of the woman's boudoir, surrounded by the animated objects, the texture of things, contours, the volume of shapes, spherical buttocks and cylindrical thighs. This is a world of stylized things, but the viewer is not alone or separated from them, but rather caught up in the play of surfaces and significations. Stylized sexuality is not alienated sexuality.

It becomes clear that there is no "authentic" primitive here, in opposition to a "superficial" and "alienated" modernity. The primitivist imagery in Kirchner's image evokes such oppositions, but at the same time calls the set of oppositions into question. In this sense, it is a type of primitivism that undermines the primitivist discourse. The act of interpretation, which begins with a mixture of desire and fear, leads to the mystery of the "primitive" carving and its significance, the symbol of otherness. From this encounter, the interpretation then turns back, like the reflection in the mirror, and leads to a reconsideration of the interpretation of civilization as it was presented by critics such Wye and others. Kirchner's painting thus provides an example of how a work of primitivism can undermine its own discourse. Moreover, through an understanding of the workings of such self-reflexive or self-critical primitivism,<sup>11</sup> it becomes possible to see how the primitive has played a fundamental role in the imagining of a disenchanted modernity.

The aim of the following study, in short, is to follow this trail of significations, to expose connections between ideas across different fields, and to demonstrate the mutually constitutive relationship between primitivism and modernity. The study is divided into two

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<sup>11</sup> Neither term, self-reflexive or self-critical, is entirely accurate, and for this reason I have introduced the concept of the aporetic; see below.

sections, which represent the two principal arguments. In the first, I show how primitivism has been interpreted in recent theory as the longing for the simple, unsophisticated, natural, and authentic, in response to a modern society seen as alienating and artificial. I argue instead that the experience of society as alienating and artificial is predicated upon the discourse of primitivism. I demonstrate that this discourse of primitivism was not the obvious or inevitable projection of “civilized” Europeans onto the others they “discovered” in the age of imperialism. Through an examination of salient and revealing moments, not framed as central historical events, but as parts of a network,<sup>12</sup> a conception of civilization as modernity was defined defensively, in response to power differentials in conjunction with tensions in the interactions of the discourses of race, gender, and class; in particular, in imperial encounters where experiences of ambiguity or liminality were produced by crossings of race, gender, or class, the primitive/civilized distinction offered one method of attempting to stabilize difference.

The second section argues that this primitivist discourse was also challenged from within, in the form of primitivist works which both theoretically and aesthetically called the discourse and its categories into question. The two sections of the dissertation are thus

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<sup>12</sup> I have adapted here Latour’s concept of the network, stretching its synchronic application to cover a historical, diachronic connectedness as well. The concept of the network in this sense allows for a history of primitivism that locates connections across time and space, without positing a master narrative, a unilinear, teleological development over time, or a simplistically causal narrative. As Robert Young argues in *White Mythologies*, historicism itself bears the traces of imperialism; he therefore set out “to develop an epistemological critique of the West’s greatest myth—History.” He adds, “I was less interested in the question of imperial ideologies, the limits of which were obvious enough, than in examining the ways in which the West’s most radical dissident, critical perspectives shared the same assumptions. After that, my project was to look at the ways in which recent non-European theorists had explored how history might be retheorized as multiple, in the torsions and tensions of different, sometimes incompatible, perspectives, stories, times.” Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 2-3. For Latour’s concept of the network, see Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005). On the importance of avoiding master narratives and teleological accounts in the context of German history, see Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).



devoted to separate analyses of two types of primitivism at work—one that reifies the discourse of primitivism, and hence the disenchantment narrative, and another type that undermines it. I have termed these alternative modes of primitivism the *apotropaic* and *aporetic*. The first chapter presents the theoretical framework linking the concepts of primitivism, disenchantment, and modernity. The second explores how recent theoretical writing on primitivism has reified the discourse of primitivism rather than illuminate it, and can therefore be described as apotropaic. The third chapter introduces the theme of imperialism at a conceptual level, in order to shift the analysis of the disenchantment narrative away from questions about rationalism and towards the encounter with cultural difference.

The second section turns to examples of primitivism that undermine the primitivist discourse—what I have termed the aporetic. The art of the Brücke, as I examined in the reading of the Kirchner painting, offers an example of the latter, as does the nineteenth-century ethnology of Adolf Bastian. These case studies have not been chosen at random. Both Bastian and the Brücke constitute leading figures in their respective fields of anthropology and art. Moreover, the choice of anthropology and art as fields of focus is itself not arbitrary. One could have explored primitivism in music, film, advertising, and popular culture. The fields I have chosen represent the most important terrains in which primitivism was articulated in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and they are deeply interconnected. Primitivism is a discourse that is part science, part aesthetics. It makes claims about the world and its people, but those claims are structured according to aesthetic principles. Anthropology and art represent two sides of the same primitivist coin. Anthropology established itself as the expert

authority on the primitive in the nineteenth century; the visual arts became the primary way in which primitivism became a subject of aesthetic contemplation in the twentieth.

Finally, the examples of aporetic primitivism I have chosen are exceptional. The reason I have not examined the primitivism of the Blaue Reiter, or the anthropology of Felix von Luschan or Friedrich Ratzel, is that these figures, like the majority of primitivist theorists and artists, reaffirmed the disenchantment narrative. The Brücke and Bastian, on the other hand, constituted the most powerful and exciting challenges (in terms of cultural prominence) to the discourse of primitivism during the period in question.

Chapter One presents the current state of the historiography on primitivism and its theorization, in order to prepare the foundations for my own theoretical revision. The chapter begins with an introduction to primitivism as a mode of twentieth-century aesthetics, as this is the form with which most readers will be familiar. The study of aesthetic primitivism has been informed in recent decades by colonial discourse analysis, which provides the basis for my own critique as well. The model of colonial discourse presents an interpretive pitfall, however, in that primitivism is routinely characterized as a projection. The problem with the projection model is that it tends to set up an ontology in which the “ailments” of modernity and the West are seen as the “reality,” in contrast to a primitivist discourse that merely reflects that reality; it thus perpetuates an ethnocentric narrative of modernity.

To combat this assumption, I argue that primitivism should be retheorized, not as a projection of the West, but, to borrow from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as a refrain.<sup>13</sup> The notion of refrain is intended to underline that the entrenched habit of primitivism is not simply

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<sup>13</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

a matter of poor theory, which some amount of greater discipline or more rigorous self-reflection will ameliorate. Primitivism understood as a refrain reveals its role as part of a cultural hermeneutic of experience, a discourse which produces a recognizable territory, the territory of an imagined modernity. This also helps account for the fact that primitivism keeps returning, taking on new shapes, sometimes serving the same ends, sometimes new ones. The refrain foregrounds the aesthetic aspects of discourse, aesthetic understood here as sensuous—it is language, combined with music, combined with bodies. The sonorous quality of the refrain stresses the imbrication of the aesthetic and the physical and the symbolic. Discourse is sometimes envisioned as the product of historical institutions and representations. The refrain, however, creates a shelter, a territory; its essence is shaped by desires and fears; it orders, organizes, and orients, but also provides the springboard for disorientation, and deterritorialization.

If the concept of the refrain provides the basis for writing about seemingly disparate examples of primitivism as participating in the same discursive field, the first chapter also argues against the idea that primitivism is homogenous. The distinction between apotropaic and the aporetic is presented to call attention to those modes of primitivism that accept the distinction between primitive and civilized—those that bolster the discourse of primitivism—and those that question it. Insofar as primitivism is sutured to the disenchantment narrative, these contrasting modes of primitivism either perpetuate the narrative's vision of an alienated modernity, or undermine it.

Chapter Two applies this new theoretical model of primitivism to recent scholarship on the topic, in anthropology, art, and theory. The chapter is thus on the one hand an in-depth

historiography, while on the other, an analysis that takes this recent work as its subject matter, to interpret and diagnose the persistence of primitivism in contemporary theory. The chapter opens with the historiographical development of the theory of primitivism as a projection. The critical insights of Edward Said (in postcolonial theory) and Johannes Fabian (in the history of anthropology), in conjunction with critical responses by James Clifford and others to the controversial 1984 Museum of Modern Art “Primitivism” exhibition, provided the crucial theoretical foundation for both the ensuing critique of primitivism in anthropology and in modern art. After drawing attention to the unique field of meanings evoked by the “primitive,” a field more specified and more fundamental than Orientalism or colonial discourse, I argue that cultural studies of primitivism have been shaped by the drive to link primitivism to modernism, and this has reinforced the notion of primitivism as a product of modernity. I then examine Victor Li’s argument in *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*, that in spite of recent anti-primitivist scholarship, primitivism has not disappeared but continues to shape contemporary theoretical discourses.<sup>14</sup> While I agree with Li, I argue that he himself has absorbed the confusion of the “projection” narrative, leading him to accept that alterity and culture can only be conceived in terms of a primitive-civilized distinction. Focusing on Li’s discussion of two leading figures from anthropology and cultural studies (Marshall Sahlins and Marianna Torgovnick), I argue that their use of such concepts as alterity and culture are not necessarily primitivist, but only contingently so. It is only when such concepts are posed as counters to modernity that they resuscitate the primitivist discourse. The reason for this lingering primitivism is that the discourse of primitivism is not simply a “mirror,”

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<sup>14</sup> Victor Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

reflecting the reality of modernity, but should be seen, rather, as productive of it. On the one hand, the discourse of primitivism has played a fundamental constitutive role in the disenchantment narrative of modernity. On the other, the problem extends beyond the domain of theory; at its root the problem is about an experience of modernity. The reason primitivism hasn't been dislodged from contemporary critical theory is that it hasn't been dislodged as a hermeneutic of aesthetic experience.

Chapter Three develops the argument that modernity is an imagined community that has resulted from the historical encounter with otherness. Through an analysis of Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I argue that the disenchantment narrative has been produced historically, the result of many conflicting forces, but principally through the discourse of primitivism. On the one hand, this central work of critical theory provides the theoretical tools for a critique of primitivism; on the other, I argue that it recapitulates the primitivist discourse, and therefore perpetuates the narrative of disenchanted modernity.

In their argument that "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology," Horkheimer and Adorno provide the grounds for a dialectical critique of reason.<sup>15</sup> As it is usually understood, this work poses a mythic "primitive" in opposition to a "rational" enlightenment, and reveals that that two in fact exist dialectically, or are co-constitutive of each other. This critique ensures that the primitive is not figured simply as a projection. Applied to primitivism, Horkheimer and Adorno's work can serve to demonstrate the mutually constituting relationship of primitivism and modernity.

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<sup>15</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

However, the text perpetuates the primitivist discourse and the disenchantment narrative, through its moral critique of a Western modernity identified with a particular form or reason, what they refer to in their critique as “enlightenment.” It will be noted that by enlightenment, Horkheimer and Adorno do not mean the particular *historical* set of philosophical discourses (the European Enlightenment), but rather a particular mode of rationality, which, they argue, informs classical Greek myth no less than it does Enlightenment thought. They write: “Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity.”<sup>16</sup> In other words, the focus of their critique is instrumental reason, a type of reason aimed at both demythologization and power over nature. They discern the operations of instrumental reason in both classical Greek myth as well as twentieth-century positivism.

This would seem to undermine the conventional notion of modernity as a moment of historical crisis. Yet the critique that Horkheimer and Adorno launch against contemporary society is nevertheless premised upon 1) the notion that instrumental reason indeed has eclipsed Western thought and society, and 2) a discourse that makes use of the primitive/civilized distinction. Horkheimer and Adorno, to be sure, would reject the idea that their work, in critiquing the objectification and identity-thinking of enlightenment, are suggesting that humanity is alienated from an “authentic” state as a result. Indeed, Adorno, in such works as *The Jargon of Authenticity*, explicitly critiqued the concept of authenticity.<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

<sup>17</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity*, trans. Knut Tarnowski and Frederic Will (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1973).

However, their critique in *Dialectic of Enlightenment* primarily indicts contemporary society for a particular mode of thinking; while this mode is not framed as “inauthentic,” it is presented as “a new form of barbarism,” and posed in opposition to a utopian concept of reason that would be liberated from the dialectic.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique is not intended to abandon the concept of reason altogether. “The critique of enlightenment,” they write, “is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement to blind domination.”<sup>18</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno’s concept of a dominant form of Western reason as instrumental rationality, which aspires to mastery over nature, but suffers from alienation in the process, is, I argue, a product of the discourse of primitivism. Instrumental reason is counterpoised to a utopian image, a longing for the humane as opposed to the barbaric, for liberated knowledge as opposed to fetishism. “What we had set out to do,” Horkheimer and Adorno write in the 1947 preface, “was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”<sup>19</sup> The moral cogency of their critique requires this “human” utopia, from the perspective of which the present civilization appears mired in savagery.

Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that the problem with modern “Western” society is the dominance of instrumental rationality—a view that perpetuates an ethnocentric understanding of modernity as defined by a unique synthesis of knowledge and power. I argue that through their focus on reason, they fail to recognize the constructive role of empire. The concept of instrumental rationality, as something which aims at domination and mastery of

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<sup>18</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

nature, but which therefore alienates itself from nature, must be seen *not* as an ahistorical product of “rational” thinking, but as a contingent product of the discourse of primitivism as it developed under imperialism. In other words, the dialectic of enlightenment is a product of the dialectic of empire.

To demonstrate in greater detail the lingering presence of primitivism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I analyze Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation of Homer’s *Odyssey*, which they present as “one of the earliest representative documents of bourgeois Western civilization.”<sup>20</sup> I argue that, contrary to their reading Odysseus as a symbol of “self-preserving reason,” he should be read as a symbol of reason in thrall to empire. The primitivism of Horkheimer and Adorno’s theoretical framework leads them to misread the *Odyssey* as merely expressive of the “dialectic of enlightenment,” when in fact it can be read as *critical* of it. I argue that Homer’s text condemns Odysseus—not on account of his rationalism, but for his failed relations with alterity (the strange humans and creatures he encounters on his journey). Homer’s text therefore offers a *critique* of Odysseus’s primitivism, and links that primitivism not to rationality, but to empire.

The *Dialectic of Enlightenment* presents the reader with the co-presence of the two forms of primitivism that I have termed the apotropaic and the aporetic. Part of the philosophical power of this text, I argue, is its ability to oscillate between these two conflicting tendencies. My analysis aims to show that while Horkheimer and Adorno theoretically articulate the oppositional dialectic between modernity and primitivism, they simultaneously reconstruct it on an affective level, and thus reinforce the discourse of modernity.

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<sup>20</sup> Ibid., xviii.



The second section of the dissertation turns to examine internal critiques of primitivism in ethnology and avant-garde art. The focus here is on works which paradoxically make use of the primitivist discourse, yet call that discourse into question. Whereas the first section treats primarily the apotropaic examples of primitivist discourse (moments where the discourse defensively reifies the distinction between modernity and the primitive), this section examines aporetic primitivism. Aporia is a term designating a type of interpretive impasse; it represents a moment through which a discourse cannot pass. In diagnosing cases of aporetic primitivism, I argue that these moments reveal the constructedness of an imagined modernity—an insight that can be empowering, yet also radically disorienting and therefore threatening.

I begin this section with a study of Adolf Bastian, the nineteenth-century founder of German ethnology.<sup>21</sup> The argument is framed as a response to Johannes Fabian’s important critique in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, that anthropology has been consistently marred by a denial of coevalness (which Fabian defined as the denial that the anthropologist and the subject of anthropological writing exist in the same time and the same history—that they are “coeval”).<sup>22</sup> As Fabian writes, “Anthropology emerged and established itself as an allochronic discourse: it is a science of other men in another Time. It is a discourse whose referent has been removed from the present of the speaking/writing subject. This

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<sup>21</sup> I use the term ethnology here to designate the German *Ethnologie*, a discipline that resembles what today is commonly referred to as cultural anthropology. In nineteenth-century Germany, *Ethnologie* was distinct from *Anthropologie*, or physical anthropology. In what follows I occasionally use the English term “anthropology” as an umbrella term encompassing both fields of study.

<sup>22</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, with a new foreword by Matt Bunzl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; 2002).

‘petrified relation’ is a scandal. Anthropology’s Other is, ultimately, other people who are our contemporaries.”<sup>23</sup>

Bastian employs a primitivist discourse, using the accepted nineteenth-century categories of German ethnology that distinguish between *Kulturvölker* (cultural people) and *Naturvölker* (natural people); this would seem a stark example of allochronic distancing, in which the ethnographic other is confined not only to another time but to the natural world. I argue, however, that Bastian’s theory and his textual practices have the startling effect of collapsing the distinction between these ethnographic categories. In Bastian’s model of ethnology as a kind of universal psychology, he presents both *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker* as equally natural and cultural. Both are shaped by historical and natural forces. At the same time, in his unusual writing style, Bastian employs paratactic textual practices in which the subject-object dichotomy breaks down; the privileged allochronic standpoint of the ethnographic authorial subject is submerged in a flow of ideas and images in which sign and referent are dislocated. Temporal boundaries dissolve as it becomes increasingly difficult to locate what is self and what is other. Bastian’s theory and quasi-modernist writing, examined aesthetically, constitute an aporetic primitivism.<sup>24</sup> Bastian’s work, I argue, challenges the allochronism of anthropological primitivism, and in doing so, undermines the subject position of modernity.

In Chapter Five, I examine the complex primitivism at work in the aesthetics of the German group of avant-garde artists known as the Brücke, especially Kirchner. As the first group of German visual artists to be categorized as Expressionists, the Brücke were also among

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid., 143.

<sup>24</sup> My approach here follows in some respects the model set forth in Dorothy Ross, ed., *Modernist Impulses in the Human Sciences, 1870-1930* (Baltimore & London: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1994).

the first artists of the century to take a new interest in “primitive” art and aesthetics. Interpretations of the Brücke have routinely characterized their primitivism as a romanticization of the primitive, an inversion of nineteenth-century anthropological primitivism. The Brücke’s unique mode of primitivism was not in fact an expression of the romantic belief in an “authentic” or “unalienated” primitive, in opposition to a fragmented modernity. The existing literature has overwhelmingly interpreted the Brücke through the lens of various contemporary critiques of modernity, principally Georg Simmel’s critique of metropolitan life, art historian Wilhelm Worringer’s defense of aesthetic abstraction as a transcendental response to spiritual anxiety, and Julius Langbehn’s strident denunciations of rationalization, materialism, and mass culture. Contrary to these entrenched associations, the Brücke’s primitivism is best understood in the context of a *Jugendstil*-inspired vitalism and a vital materialism that comes close to the poetic orientation of the American poet Walt Whitman, who served as an inspiration of the Brücke artists.

The argument of Chapter Five is rounded out by a more focused reading in Chapter Six of the aesthetic strategies deployed by the Brücke. Through a juxtaposition of the Brücke’s aesthetics with the poetry of the German poet Georg Heym and the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, the chapter demonstrates that the Brücke’s primitivism, rather than expressing a critique of modernity’s ailments, calls into question the opposition of primitive and modern. Although the Brücke’s aesthetics emerged from a ubiquitous discourse of romantic primitivism, in which the “primitive” commonly signified authenticity and unalienated existence, their own artistic creations, through such techniques as parataxis, montage, and a modernist self-

reflexivity and attention to matters of mediation and representation, in fact dismantled such significations.

The historical relevance of this argument is that, even before the “Dada Cyborg,” the artists of the Brücke were preparing the way for post-human and new materialist critiques.<sup>25</sup> Bruno Latour was awarded the prestigious 2013 Holberg Prize for having “undertaken an ambitious analysis and reinterpretation of modernity, challenging the most fundamental categories such as the distinction between modern and pre-modern, nature and society, human and non-human.”<sup>26</sup> These instances of aporetic primitivism, in the art of the Brücke or the ethnology of Adolf Bastian, can be seen as linked to the contemporary theoretical efforts of new materialists and others to rethink and dismantle the distinctions between modern and primitive, nature and society, human and non-human.

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<sup>25</sup> Matthew Biro has recently argued that the Berlin Dadaists should be understood as developing an iconography of the cyborg that in some ways prefigured contemporary post-human critiques, such as that of Donna Haraway. I contend that certain features of the Brücke’s primitivist aesthetics can be said to anticipate the self-reflexive and aesthetically deconstructive aspects of Dadaist montage. See Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009). See also Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

<sup>26</sup> Holberg Prize Academic Committee, “Bruno Latour: Holberg Prize 2013,” Holberg Prisen, <http://www.holbergprisen.no/en/bruno-latour>.

## Section I.

### Conceptual Paradigms: Primitivism, Disenchantment, and Modernity

I. A child in the dark, gripped with fear, comforts himself by singing under his breath. He walks and halts to his song. Lost, he takes shelter, or orients himself with his little song as best he can. The song is like a rough sketch of a calming and stabilizing, calm and stable, center in the heart of chaos. Perhaps the child skips as he sings, hastens or slows his pace. But the song itself is already a skip: it jumps from chaos to the beginnings of order in chaos and is in danger of breaking apart at any moment. . .

II. Now we are at home. But home does not preexist: it was necessary to draw a circle around that uncertain and fragile center, to organize a limited space. Many, very diverse, components have a part in this, landmarks and marks of all kinds. This was already true of the previous case. But now the components are used for organizing a space, not for the momentary determination of a center. The forces of chaos are kept outside as much as possible, and the interior space protects the germinal forces of a task to fulfill or a deed to do. . .

III. Finally, one opens the circle a crack, opens it all the way, lets someone in, calls someone, or else goes out oneself, launches forth. One opens the circle not on the side where the old forces of chaos press against it but in another region, one created by the circle itself. As though the circle tended on its own to open onto a future, as a function of the working forces it shelters. This time, it is in order to join with the forces of the future, cosmic forces. One launches forth, hazards an improvisation. But to improvise is to join with the World, or meld with it. One ventures from home on the thread of a tune. . .

. . . These are not three successive moments in an evolution. They are three aspects of a single thing, the Refrain (*ritournelle*).

—Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, “1837: Of the Refrain”<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 311-312.

**Chapter 1.**  
**On Primitivism and Modernity: Theory, Method, Historiography**

**Part 1. *The “Discovery” of the Primitive: From Modernist Art to Colonial Discourse, from Colonial Discourse to the Critique of Modernity***

In his memoir *Portraits avant décès*, the French painter Maurice de Vlaminck recounts the day in which he first discovered “Negro” art:

One afternoon in 1905 I found myself at Argenteuil. I had just finished painting the Seine, the boats, the quays. The sun was blazing hot. Having put away my paint and brushes, I packed up my canvas and went into a bistro. Sailors and coal-stevedores were gathered around the counter. While sipping my white wine and seltzer, I noticed, on the shelf behind the bar, between the bottles of Pernod, anisette, and curaçao, three Negro sculptures. Two were statuettes from Dahomey, daubed in red ochre, yellow ochre, and white, and the third, from the Ivory Coast, was completely black.

Was it because I had just been working in the bright sun for two or three hours? Or was it the particular state of mind I was in that day? Or did it just confirm some thoughts that were preoccupying me at that time? These three sculptures really struck me. I intuitively sensed their power. They revealed Negro Art to me.<sup>1</sup>

For Vlaminck, “Negro art” was a prime example of what was more generally known as “primitive” art. Europeans had long had an interest in foreign, exotic, or “primitive” others, but Vlaminck was one of a handful of artists in Europe, primarily in France and Germany, who, in the early years of the twentieth century, acquired a particular fascination with the aesthetic

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<sup>1</sup> Maurice de Vlaminck, *Portraits avant décès* (1943), in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), 27. Vlaminck places the event in 1905, though it is now believed to have occurred the following year.

creations of these imagined “primitive” people. The artists gradually began to incorporate these images, ideas, and forms into their own work (see figs. 1.1 – 1.5).

The avant-garde artists had two ambitious goals: to transform the tenets of classical aesthetics, and to critique modern society; the primitive seemed to offer the perfect weapon. For, to most of these artists, the primitive seemed to embody something that had been lost to modern civilization, caught up in the harsh, mechanical grip of capitalism, industrialism, and rationalism. This emerging aesthetics, which goes by the name of primitivism, remained at first confined to a few small but significant groups of artists, but rapidly caught on in artistic circles and grew in public appreciation in the decades after World War 1.

Twentieth-century primitivism exerted a major influence on twentieth-century modernism, primarily through what is seen as a revolution in artistic form.<sup>2</sup> The most iconic work of primitivism in the visual arts is Pablo Picasso’s *Les Femmes d’Alger (O.K. Version)*, painted in 1907 (fig. 1.6) A large, aggressive work in a colorful, stark, fractured plane, featuring five nude prostitutes at a brothel, some of whose faces resemble African masks and Iberian sculpture, the painting is seen a forerunner of Cubist technique and widely heralded as a pivotal moment in modernist painting.<sup>3</sup> Although Picasso’s work is often invoked as the earliest and most striking

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<sup>2</sup> Mark Antliff and Patricia Leighton, “Primitive,” in *Critical Terms for Art History: Second Edition*, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 217-233.

<sup>3</sup> In addition to Picasso, critics identify Wassily Kandinsky (the Russian expressionist painter and founder of abstract art) as perhaps the second most important figure through which primitivism transformed modern art. The primitivism of Kandinsky’s works is less obvious, but abstraction in art developed in part out of the interest in abstract and stylized forms, which were associated with “primitive” art and folk art. The *Blaue Reiter*, the Munich-based artists’ group to which Kandinsky belonged, was deeply shaped by this context of primitivism. On Picasso’s primitivism as a pivotal moment in modernism, see Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725-1907* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995). Connelly writes: “In the *Femmes d’Alger*, Picasso laid the framework for a stylistic language that inverted the ideals of the classical tradition more completely than ever before.” (Connelly, 109) It may be noted that even those who question the categorization of the painting as Cubist describe it as a crucial aesthetic turning point, e.g. William Rubin: ‘While marking the final stage of Picasso’s transition from a perceptual to a

example of modernist primitivism, it was Vlaminck who claimed to have been the first among his colleagues to “discover” African art, in a bistro near Paris, sometime in 1904 or 1905 (although art historians now date his first acquisition of “primitive” art to 1906). Around this same time the primitive caught the eye of a few other French artists, namely André Derain and Henri Matisse (who were associated with a group of painters known as *les Fauves*, “the wild beasts”), as well as the members of the Brücke.<sup>4</sup>

One of my primary aims in the following study will be to argue that the primitivism of these various artists was not uniform—they each responded in unique and individual ways to “primitive” art. However, certain commonalities existed as well, and it is for this reason that I begin with Vlaminck at his moment of “discovery.” Europeans had of course been exposed to “primitive” art before; something happened to initiate the dramatic reorientation of these artists and their critics, who experienced this “discovery” as an aesthetic revolution, as something historically unprecedented—although they themselves were often unsure what lay behind it. Vlaminck, in his recollections, goes into detail about the evolution of a primitivist aesthetics, which offers some insight into how he and his colleagues interpreted their own situation:

Derain and I had explored the Trocadéro Museum several times. We had become thoroughly familiar with the museum, having looked at everything with

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conceptual way of working, and suggesting something of the shallow relief space that would characterize Cubism, this great and radical work pointed mostly in directions opposite to Cubism’s character and structure—although it cleared the path for its development. The *Demoiselles* obliterated the vestiges of nineteenth-century painting still operative in Fauvism, the vanguard style of the immediately preceding years, it is thus more a ‘breakaway’ painting with respect to late nineteenth-century modernism—and post-Medieval Western painting in general—than a ‘breakthrough’ painting with regard to Cubism in particular.” (William Rubin, “Picasso,” in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 253.

<sup>4</sup> Flam and Deutch, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 3; Jean-Louis Paudrat, “From Africa,” in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 137-41.



great interest. But neither Derain nor I viewed the works on display there as anything other than barbarous fetishes. The notion that these were the expressions of an instinctive art had always eluded us.

These three Negro statuettes in the Argenteuil bistro were showing me something of a very different order entirely! I was moved to the depths of my being.

I asked the owner to sell them to me. He initially refused, but I insisted, and after many more refusals and excuses, he gave them to me on condition that I pay for a round of drinks. I finally left with the three statues.

Shortly afterward, I showed my acquisition to a friend of my father's. He offered to give me some of his African sculptures since his wife wanted to get rid of "these horrors." I went to his place, and I took a large white mask and two superb Ivory Coast statues.

I hung the white mask over my bed. I was at once entranced and disturbed: Negro Art was revealed to me in all its primitivism and all its grandeur. When Derain visited and saw the white mask he was speechless. He stammered out an offer of twenty francs. I refused. Eight days later he offered me fifty. That day I was broke, so I accepted. He took the object to his atelier on the Rue Tourlaque and hung it up on a wall. When Picasso and Matisse saw it at Derain's they were absolutely thunderstruck. From that day on, Negro Art became all the rage!<sup>5</sup>

Vlaminck's description is captivating for the countless subtle and not-so-subtle ways in which it reveals the significance these "primitive" objects held for their admirers. At the most obvious level is their construction as "instinctive" arts. More subtle and interesting perhaps, the hot sun (of tropical climes), which deprives one of rational thought; the working men at the bar—a sailor (dreams of travel and adventure?) and the stevedore—both manly occupations (primitivism, gender, and class were often intertwined); the commingling of the statues with alcoholic spirits—a poetic *fin-de- siècle* evocation of the Dionysian, as access to the spiritual. The power of display, walls, the bedroom, a woman's horror. The ironic transformation of "barbarous" fetishes—foreign objects which captivate, hold one captive, and irrationally so—into "works of art" which indeed *continue* to do just that, works which are yet again fetishized.

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<sup>5</sup> Vlaminck, in *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History*, ed. Flam with Deutch, 27-28.

The *barbarous*—the ancient Greek term for those uncivilized “others” who cannot speak—now seems to apply no less to the “stammering” Derain and his fellow artists, who become modern primitives, hence displaced, de-centered. Finally, the narrative (and this is to be found in recollections produced by other artists as well) is noticeably interested in matters of acquisition, purchase, value. There is a beguiling contrast between words evoking the sublime—viewers are “speechless,” “thunderstruck,” “entranced” and “disturbed” by the objects’ “grandeur”—and the desire to, and difficulties of, bringing such powerful and elusive objects into a market, a place for rational exchange, ownership, and contemplation.

Vlaminck’s memoir, Picasso’s *Demoiselles* — these inaugural examples evoke some of the multiple significations these artists associated with the primitive. The most current body of research on primitivism in modern art has made three principal, increasingly specific arguments about this array of significations to explain the emergence of primitivist aesthetics. First, primitivism was not a “discovery” of the primitive, but conditioned by a long history of the primitive other in the European imaginary; second, primitivist aesthetics was shaped by the history of European imperialism, which itself was inseparable from the history of anthropology; and third, the figure of the “primitive” was a discursive construct, a projection, circulating in both the human sciences and popular culture, and this figure was both produced by, and helped sustain, the practices of imperialism.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The major works here include Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Patricia Leighton, “The White Peril and *L’Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism,” *The Art Bulletin* 72, No. 4 (December 1990): 609-30; Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991); Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the ‘Modern’,” in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, 3-85 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Colin Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art* (London: Thames and Hudson,

Before turning to my critique of this literature, I will summarize these three main arguments. To take the first point: primitivism was not simply an artistic movement, nor did it appear out of nowhere around 1906. Although the avant-garde interest in “primitive” art transformed artistic practices at the start of the twentieth century, this fascination with the primitive was not new. The coruscating web of significations we find in Vlaminck’s recollection had already been woven, by different actors in different ways, over the preceding years, decades, even centuries. Indeed, as Vlaminck observes, the art work and objects from “primitive” societies had not suddenly arrived in Europe, but had been accumulating for decades in ethnographic museums, and had been extensively analyzed in ethnographic studies. Moreover, these works and the “primitive” people who produced them had been a part of popular culture for some time: etchings and drawings of “primitive” life could be found in the pages of popular magazines, often accompanying the travel reports of famous explorers sent on expeditions to the “uncharted” regions of the globe, and the works and the people themselves could be found on display at the great colonial exhibitions and the crowd-drawing “human zoos” which were staged in various European cities (fig. 1.7).<sup>7</sup>

This leads to the second point. Primitivism in art was shaped in particular by the history of European imperialism and anthropology. Memoirs such as Vlaminck’s reveal the racist, sexist, and imperialist context in which such ideas took shape. The primitive was a concept that Europeans used to refer to various non-Western peoples indiscriminately. These significations had nothing to do with the realities of blacks, Africans, or other presumed “primitives”; the

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1994); Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995).

<sup>7</sup> Anne Dreesbach, *Gezähmte Wilde: Die Zurschaustellung „exotischer“ Menschen in Deutschland 1870–1940* (Frankfurt am Main: Campus-Verlag, 2005); Cordula Grewe, ed., *Die Schau des Fremden: Ausstellungskonzepte zwischen Kunst, Kommerz und Wissenschaft* (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 2006).

particular “others” were obscured by the tapestry of images, a composite of the imagined “primitive” other. As Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush note in *Prehistories of the Future*: “As for ‘primitives,’ they never existed. Only Western ‘primitivism’ did.”<sup>8</sup> Beginning roughly in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the increased exposure to non-Europeans provoked new questions about the nature of the human, the content and direction of history, and humanity’s place in the cosmos. During this period, grisly depictions of barbarians and cannibals filled not only travelogues but informed philosophical treatises, as did representations of the “noble savage,” a phrase coined by John Dryden in the seventeenth century which would later come to be indelibly associated with the writings of Jean-Jacques Rousseau.<sup>9</sup> The figure of the uncivilized “primitive” populated the philosophical discipline of aesthetics, at least since the eighteenth century.<sup>10</sup> Enlightenment thinkers, such as Immanuel Kant and Johann Friedrich Blumenbach, disconcerted by the physical and cultural differences between the various peoples around the globe, pioneered new schemes of hierarchical racial classification to affirm claims to European moral and intellectual superiority and justify imperial power.<sup>11</sup> The encounters in the

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<sup>8</sup> Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, “Introduction,” in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism*, eds. Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), 2.

<sup>9</sup> John Dryden, *The Conquest of Granada* (1672):

*I am as free as nature first made man,  
Ere the base laws of servitude began,  
When wild in woods the noble savage ran.*

<sup>10</sup> Sander L. Gilman, “The Figure of the Black in German Aesthetic Theory,” *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1975): 373-391. More recently, Tony Brown has argued that the primitive was not merely an object of Enlightenment aesthetic theory but productive of it; examining the writings of Rousseau, Kant, and Daniel Defoe, Brown shows that the “primitive” posed a paradox for Enlightenment thinkers, in that it demanded but precluded an understanding of the relationship of the self to the world. See Tony C. Brown, *The Primitive, the Aesthetic, and the Savage: An Enlightenment Problematic* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2012).

<sup>11</sup> C. Loring Brace, *“Race” is a Four-Letter Word: The Genesis of the Concept* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005); Emmanuel Chukwudi Eze, *Race and the Enlightenment: A Reader* (Oxford and Cambridge: Blackwell Publishers, 1997); Ivan Hannaford, *Race: The History of an Idea in the West* (Baltimore and London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1996). George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 8-45; Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: 1997), 68ff.

New World didn't simply pose new questions for philosophers to contemplate; these theories about human difference were inseparable from the systemic raw violence, theft, exploitation, madness, and destruction which infused the project of imperialism, not as aberrations but as part of its driving force.

This leads to the third point, which is that the figure of the "primitive" can be understood as an discursive construct. As Marianna Torgovnick writes in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives*: "The ensemble of these tropes—however miscellaneous and contradictory—forms the basic grammar and vocabulary of what I call primitivist discourse, a discourse fundamental to the Western sense of Self and Other."<sup>12</sup> More specifically, Torgovnick writes, primitivism works like a projection. She explains:

Those who study or write about the primitive usually begin by defining it as different from (usually opposite to) the present. After that, reactions to the present take over. Is the present too materialist? Primitive life is not—it is a precapitalist utopia in which only use value, never exchange value, prevails. Is the present sexually repressed? Not primitive life—primitives live life whole, without fear of the body. . . . In each case, the needs of the present determine the value and nature of the primitive. The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. . . . For Euro-Americans, then, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other.<sup>13</sup>

My approach in this study accepts the first two of these arguments; my concern is with the third point, raised here by Torgovnick. This is not to say I disagree entirely—I too work with the notion that the "primitive" should be understood as a discursive formation. Yet the framing of primitivism as a projection has been problematic. More specifically I argue that current usage of this concept in studies of primitivism has been under-theorized and incomplete. A new

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<sup>12</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 8-9.

theoretical approach to the concept of discourse analysis and its application to primitivism can offer greater insight into specific examples of primitivism, whether in modern art, ethnography, or contemporary theory. In addition, such an approach can draw to light the way in which primitivism has in fact shaped the way in which many people think about modernity. For on the one hand, Torgovnick accepts the mutually constituting categories of self and other; as she writes, “Euro-Americans begin as controlling subjects, using tropes to describe the primitive Other. But they sometimes end by adopting the tropes in their perception of self.”<sup>14</sup> But at the same time, her analysis reifies these perceptions into a reality: these projections are “reactions” to the present, they “reveal” the self. The problem is not simply a matter of poor word choice<sup>15</sup>; the existing literature on primitivism frames primitivism as the projection of modernity, and has failed to articulate the historical constructedness of the “present” and the “self”—and the historical constructedness of a certain picture of “modernity.”

To clarify this claim, and explain what I mean by a new theoretical approach, it will be helpful to summarize the context in which Torgovnick’s critique and others emerged. Recent work on primitivism in modern art is the product of the convergence of three main currents of academic critique. As Barkan and Bush’s epistemological framing of primitivism and Torgovnick’s concept of “primitivist discourse” suggest, the first important current is

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<sup>14</sup> Ibid., 11.

<sup>15</sup> In her concluding remarks, Torgovnick writes that “primitives” who have been subjected to the “Western” way of life are “an acute ‘test case’ for *processes we are all undergoing*. We record their ‘native’ traditions under the *pressure* of ours. But maybe what we are really doing—though we cannot admit it for a number of reasons—is handling, by displacement, *the series of dislocations* that we call modernity and postmodernity—handling it by studying places where, supposedly, it does not exist and yet does exist. . . In the fears and hopes we express for them, the primitives, we air fears and hopes for ourselves—caught on *a rollercoaster of change* that we like to believe can be stopped, safely, at will.” (Torgovnick, 244, italics added) As this comment makes clear, for Torgovnick, the primitive may be a projection, but modern life is not. Modernity is a time of “pressure,” of “dislocations,” “a rollercoaster of change”—modernity here is presented as fact, not fiction; it is the source and cause of primitivist projections.

postcolonial theory, in particular the legacy of Edward Said's *Orientalism* (first published in 1978) and the technical apparatus of colonial discourse analysis.<sup>16</sup> The second is the current of critical anthropology, which initiated in the late 1960s as the discipline developed a heightened political sensitivity to its relationship to colonialism; these insights merged in the 1980s with the concerns of the "literary" turn, namely postmodernist questions about representation, textuality, and epistemology. These two currents of postcolonial theory and the critique of anthropology were brought together dramatically with a third current, an art historical critique of modernism spawned in the wake of the 1984 exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*.

The organizers of the MoMA exhibition, William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, sought to reconfigure art history's traditional approach to modernist primitivism, which had focused upon the analysis and historical reconstruction of the formal or thematic influences of "primitive" objects upon European artists. Rubin argued instead that modernist primitivism shared "affinities" with the "primitive" art of non-Europeans. Although Rubin was aware of the pre-existing history of the ethnographic collection and study of such objects, this history was "irrelevant" for his study<sup>17</sup>—it didn't matter so much that the artists didn't "discover" these objects—what mattered from Rubin's perspective was that they had in fact discovered an essential "primitive," an instinctual, mystical, authentic mode of being—"a part of ourselves

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<sup>16</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).

<sup>17</sup> William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 1.

that Western culture had been unwilling to admit, not to say image, before the twentieth century.”<sup>18</sup>

Before the MoMA exhibition, it had been possible to argue that modernist artworks and memoirs such as Vlaminck’s revealed a moment when the various European myths about “primitive” others had begun to transition from a primarily negative inflection, an anthropological view of the uncivilized savage, to an inflection of positive admiration.<sup>19</sup> After MoMA, it became apparent that the modernist admiration for the primitive nevertheless perpetuated imperialist context in which such ideas took shape.<sup>20</sup> Studies began to appear which reexamined primitivism in modern art, now in light of the new critical trends emerging in postcolonial theory and the critique of anthropology. This work, as represented most prominently by Sally Price (1989), Torgovnick (1990), Patricia Leighton (1990), and Jill Lloyd (1991), argued that primitivist aesthetics, although it may have reversed the prevailing negative hierarchy of imperial primitivism (the primitive in modern art was now represented as something positive, natural, or authentic), nevertheless preserved the imperial categories of “primitive” and “civilized.”

As mentioned above, in making such an argument, these authors often drew on the postcolonial framework, in particular the notion of “discourse” from the colonial discourse

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 73.

<sup>19</sup> Rubin, for example, writes: “Objections to the adjective ‘primitive’ . . . focus not unfairly on the pejorative implications of certain of its many meanings. These have had no place, however, in its definition or use as an art-historical term. When Picasso, in the ultimate compliment, asserted that ‘primitive sculpture has never been surpassed,’ he saw nothing contradictory—and certainly nothing pejorative—in using the familiar if now-contested adjective ‘primitive’ to identify the art. It is precisely the admiring sense with which he and his colleagues invested the word that has characterized its use in art writing.” Ibid., 5.

<sup>20</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988); Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 45-70.



analysis pioneered by Said. It is worth tracing for a moment the trajectory by which Said's insights were developed and eventually absorbed by the cultural studies of aesthetic primitivism. Said, influenced by the work of Michel Foucault, argued that the entire body of cultural productions dealing with "the Orient" should be conceptualized as a discourse, including therefore not only official academic writing (the historical discipline of Orientalism) but novels, letters, political theory, travel writing and all forms of imaginative production. By demarcating a field of discursive production and the social structures which facilitated discursive practices, Said was able to analyze Orientalism as "the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient."<sup>21</sup>

Said's book intervened in an earlier line of research which had focused on exposing connections between the discipline of anthropology and the practice of colonialism—the critique of anthropology as the "handmaiden" of colonialism. Epitomized by Talal Asad and the other contributors to *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (1973), this work had stressed the ways in which anthropology had been tainted by its association with colonialism.<sup>22</sup> Said, by introducing the concept of discourse, had expanded the field to show that colonialism was imbricated not only in the social science dealing with the colonial other, but that in fact colonialism infused cultural production as a totality. Said's formulation also re-envisioned the more limited one-way causality of earlier critiques; not only did colonialism effect the production of knowledge, but the production of knowledge shaped colonialism. Said

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<sup>21</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

<sup>22</sup> Talal Asad, ed., *Anthropology and the Colonial Encounter* (London: Ithaca Press, 1973).

emphasized not merely practical applications of ethnographic knowledge, or the influence of imperial rule upon knowledge gathering, but rather a deeper level of ideological collusion, in which ethnology as a mode of knowledge was embedded with modes of power. The great insight of Said's work was that, as Fred Cooper writes, "Colonization was no longer out there, in exotic places, but in the heart of European culture."<sup>23</sup>

Said's argument about the complicity of academic knowledge with institutions of power had a major impact on the discipline of anthropology, where it merged with other strains of political and epistemological forms of self-reflexive critique that had been developing since the late 1960s. Whereas Said's book dealt with Orientalism, anthropologists focused primarily on the figure of the "primitive," which since its articulation in the nineteenth-century emerged as the exemplary category of the Other of the Western self. Johannes Fabian, also deeply influenced by Foucault, made an argument about primitivism in anthropology that was similar in intent to Said's claims about Orientalism, equally sweeping in its claims about epistemological hegemony, and yet more specified in its definition of primitivism as a specific type of colonial discourse. In *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object* (1983), Fabian argued that anthropology, since its nineteenth-century origins, was marked by primitivism; this was most evident in cultural evolutionism, but pervaded the history of the discipline. The characteristic feature of primitivism (distinguishing it from Orientalism, for example) was what Fabian terms a "denial of coevalness," which he defined as "a persistent

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<sup>23</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 14.

and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.”<sup>24</sup>

Subsequent work on anthropology, although much of it only obliquely references Said, was nevertheless keenly aware of the essence and import of Said’s critique.<sup>25</sup> Work on anthropological primitivism, represented most prominently by George W. Stocking, Jr. (1987), Adam Kuper (1988), Bernard McGrane (1989) and Henrika Kuklick (1991), revealed the ways in which anthropology and ideas about the primitive created an “other” against which a European civilized “self” took shape.<sup>26</sup> That “self” or subject position was marked by rationalism, history, progress, freedom. The primitive “other” was thus an discursive projection conditioned by imperial power relations. The implication of this work was that the “self”—the idea of the West as rational, historical, etc.—was equally a discursive construction.

The major achievement of cultural studies of primitivism in modern art, such as the work by Torgovnick and others, is that through their absorption of the above critique of anthropology and colonial discourse analysis, they have been able to demonstrate that primitivism is an ideological discourse embedded in the history of imperialism and the history of anthropology, implicated in seeking, creating, and reproducing colonial forms of power,

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<sup>24</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, with a new foreword by Matt Bunzl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; 2002).

<sup>25</sup> For an informative account of anthropology’s reception of Said, see Nicholas B. Dirks, “Edward Said and Anthropology,” *Journal of Palestine Studies* 33, no. 3 (Spring 2004): 38-54.

<sup>26</sup> The literature on the relationship between anthropology and imperialism is vast; I have highlighted here important works that examine in particular the figure of the ethnological “primitive”: George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

instrumental in the cultural production of hierarchies of race and class, visions of sexuality and gender, and conceptions of morality, religion, science and politics.

It is at this point in the historiography, however, that a tension can be discerned. The argument of this dissertation originates in the observation of a contradiction in the corpus of literature on primitivism in modern art. On the one hand, such studies, drawing upon the critique of anthropology and colonial discourse analysis, have emphasized the ways in which primitivism (and colonial discourse in general) worked to create sustaining fictions of empire. Primitivism is understood as a cultural discourse, an institutionalized set of cultural representations, that creates a “primitive” other in opposition to a “civilized” Western self. As implied in the quote from Torgovnick above, just at the “primitive” is revealed to be an ideological construct, so too is the “Western” self. The subject position produced in nineteenth-century narratives of civilization, progress, and rationality is equally understood as an ideological construct. This latter insight, however, originating in postcolonial studies and the critique of anthropology, is undermined by an entrenched theoretical tendency in studies of primitivism in modern art, a tendency in which primitivism is consistently described as something produced by the experience of living in civilization: in the face of the alienating effects of industrialization, technologization, and rationalization, primitivism is presented as the nostalgia for a simpler, more authentic, more natural state—an idealized, pre-civilized state of being. In the existing literature on modernist primitivism, European artists are described as either arriving independently at, or appropriating, primitive aesthetic forms and styles as a way to critique not only the classical aesthetic tradition, but the many problems of European civilization: artificiality, anonymity, and alienation; the disintegration of community; the failures

of rational, secular, scientific society to provide some kind of meaningful fulfillment; the failure of industrialized or bureaucratic society to provide satisfactory modes of employment or an authentic experience of life. In other words, while one line of thought reveals the civilized Western self to be a discursive construct, a counter-current reifies this construct as a reality, namely, as the condition of alienated modernity.

The primary aim of this dissertation is to address this contradiction, by tethering to one another the insights from postcolonial theory, the critique of anthropology, and the critique of modernist art. Through an interdisciplinary analysis, bringing together the disparate strands of argument regarding primitivism in anthropology with that in aesthetics as well as critical theory, new insights emerge. It becomes possible to consider the aesthetic elements of anthropological primitivism. By this I mean not simply that anthropologists were often in fact aware of aesthetics when considering the productions of those people they studied; but also that the discourse of primitivism which developed in anthropology had a particular aesthetics. Second, it becomes possible to embrace the postcolonial and anthropological critique of ethnographic primitivism, which had emphasized the ways in which anthropological primitivism functioned ideologically to produce a sense of a “civilized Western self.” By holding these strands together, I argue that modernity is an imagined community; more specifically, that a particular understanding of modernity (what Jane Bennett calls a “disenchantment tale”) can in fact be understood as a historical product of primitivism.

This enables me, in other words, to tell a new history of the relationship of primitivism to the theory and history of modernity. In the existing scholarship on primitivism, the underlying assertion is that modernity’s problems were experienced as obvious, and that

primitivism offered one useful way of expressing discomfort with a rapidly changing industrial, urban, metropolitan civilization. It was the right tool at the right time. Had there been no encounter with the primitive, other artistic forms or styles would have sufficed. This view is a product of a teleological historical hindsight that should be re-examined; I argue that the experience of modernity's "problems" must not be seen as an obvious or inherent feature of social, political, and economic change, but as in fact a result of the primitive/modern dichotomy, as articulated historically in the discourse of primitivism.

## **Part 2. Defining Primitivism and Modernity**

In the existing literature on primitivism in modern art, primitivism is figured as the product of modernity. As Colin Rhodes writes in *Primitivism and Modern Art*: "The cultural discontent that characterizes Primitivism in modern art must be positioned specifically in relation to the dominant ideas operating in the West in the first half of the twentieth century, represented by materialism in politics and science, and positivism in philosophy."<sup>27</sup> Similarly, as Jill Lloyd writes: "In a positive sense, primitivism could be used to engage with the contradictions of modernity." She admits that "the danger of false reconciliation, of a retreat from the real complexities of history into lazy universalism, remained," but concludes that "Primitivism could be used as a critical tool to question the dominant values of Western bourgeois society—or as a panacea, a cure for all ills."<sup>28</sup> Primitivism, in other words, is described as tool with which to critique modernity. Although recent studies have rejected an

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<sup>27</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 20.

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, vii.

earlier historiography that naively celebrated the European “discovery” of primitive art, these works continue to position primitivism as a discovery of a new aesthetics, which enabled artists to express what was new, and troubling, about modernity. The primary aim of this dissertation is to reject this narrative. I argue, rather, that “modernity” (in the particular sense I will articulate below) is the product of the historical discourse of primitivism. To clarify what I mean in the assertion that primitivism has been productive of modernity, it is necessary to specify how I am using these terms.

At the most basic level, by primitivism I seek to designate the discourse which represents the primitive. It shall be useful, then, to trace the history and meanings of the concept “primitive.” The word “primitive” seems to have first appeared in the English language in the fifteenth century, from the French *primitif*, meaning original, first, early, ancient (all fourteenth-century uses).<sup>29</sup> According to the Oxford English Dictionary, the word has its roots in classical Latin (first century BCE to third century CE), where it also meant first-formed, early, archetypal. In the fourteenth-century European languages it is often used to describe church history (the *primitive* church), sometimes first-born offspring, sometimes ancestors. In this early usage, *primitive* generally means early, but also occasionally, by implication, it suggests purity. By the nineteenth century, the usage has expanded to mean not only that which “recalls an early or ancient period,” but also “simple, unsophisticated, or crude things or people as a class.” Also during in the nineteenth century, “primitive” begins to be used in discussions of art to describe pre-Raphaelite Italian (and also sometimes German gothic) painters (the “primitives”), both in reference to its earliness and its simplicity. Since at least the seventeenth century,

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<sup>29</sup> *Oxford English Dictionary*, 3<sup>rd</sup> ed., s.v. “primitive,” <http://www.oed.com>.

however, the term was also increasingly used to refer to the “uncivilized” inhabitants of non-European lands, usually with darker skin, unfamiliar ways of life, and generally characterized by “isolation, low technology, and simple social and economic organization.”<sup>30</sup> The term *primitiv* in German has had a somewhat different genealogy. It entered German from French during the eighteenth century, primarily carrying a negative connotation, in contrast to the German *ursprünglich*.<sup>31</sup> Thus German usage partially demarcated an ambivalence which persisted in the English in French, such that *primitiv* was generally used to mean rude and undeveloped, while *ursprünglich* designated purity. Nevertheless, it would be incorrect to surmise that this removed ambiguity from the German context, as both words were employed to refer to non-Europeans as well as European ancestors; in addition, German shared with French and English a host of related words which were similarly used to designate “uncivilized” others, such as *Wilden* or *Naturvölker* (“savages” or “natural people”).

This particular constellation of meanings, therefore, is the source of the potency of the discourse of primitivism. It also furnishes the appropriate criteria for the following discussion of primitivism. On the one hand, by primitivism I refer to the use of a set of terms or images by Europeans to describe non-European others (including not only the use of the term “primitive,” but its various correlates). It is in this sense not simply a discourse but an *ethnographic discourse*—a concept which, borrowing from George Steinmetz, I will identify as “any representation, textual or visual, that claims to depict the character and culture of a given

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<sup>30</sup> *OED*. See for example Torgovnick: “When we say ‘primitive’ today, we generally designate certain social formations within relatively isolated areas of Africa, Oceania, South America, and other areas of the world—social formations characterized perhaps most clearly by the absence of tools and technology widely available elsewhere. Such societies have been the traditional objects of ethnographic research.” *Gone Primitive*, 19.

<sup>31</sup> See David Pan, *Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism* (Lincoln and Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 30ff.



sociocultural collective, regardless of whether that collective is described as a race, a culture, a society, an ethnic group, a community, or something else.”<sup>32</sup>

On the other hand, by primitivism I refer to a discourse which posits a binary opposition between “primitive” and “civilized.” Combining these two parameters helpfully circumscribes the field of study. I am not discussing all ethnographic or colonial discourse, but only that which is primitivist, a discourse which can be distinguished from Orientalism and other forms of colonial discourse.<sup>33</sup> Primitivism is a more specified, and in that sense more fundamental, discourse. The Orient, for example, has traditionally been opposed in broad fashion to the West; the primitive is opposed to civilization. The Orient, in spite of its alleged inferiority in the Orientalist discourse, was conceived as an alternative (if abnormal) form of civilization, not as the absence of civilization. The primitive is imagined as subsumed in nature, pre-civilized, pre-writing, pre-technology, and pre-history. This discourse is not neutral but embedded in a set of evaluative perceptions about “civilization”; primitivism therefore is a discourse of alterity which structures ways of thinking about such notions as nature, technology, and rationality as well as conceptions about time and the progress of history.

This set of parameters also excludes primitivism that is not a part of ethnographic colonial discourse. Primitivism, broadly speaking, can be found in numerous places around the world at various times. This broad definition of primitivism forms the subject matter for the pioneering study of primitivism, Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas’s *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (1935), which contains copious primary source examples of primitivism in the

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<sup>32</sup> George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 27.

<sup>33</sup> I examine this distinction in greater detail in the following chapter.

writings of philosophers, poets, and historians of ancient Greece and Rome.<sup>34</sup> Lovejoy and Boas define primitivism as “the discontent of the civilized with civilization, or with some conspicuous and characteristic feature of it. It is the belief of men living in a highly evolved and complex cultural condition that a life far simpler and less sophisticated in some or all respects is a more desirable life.”<sup>35</sup> In the selections of Lovejoy and Boas, the concept of primitivism does not refer to non-Europeans, but is defined simply as a set of reflections upon “the progress of civilization”—“especially, of civilized man’s misgivings about his performances, about his prospects—and about himself.”<sup>36</sup> Primitivist writings tended to imagine an idyllic former age—primitivism in this sense could be said to denote any lapsarian perspective which posits an evaluative difference between the past and the present, whether positive or negative.

Not all instances of primitivism, clearly, produced an experience of modernity, in the sense I shall argue here. There is, I argue, an important difference between the primitivism of, for example, Epicurus, rhapsodizing about the simple, self-sufficient life, and the primitivism of Vlamincq, fascinated by African masks. For the latter, ideas about a “more desirable” or “less sophisticated” age are embedded in an ethnographic discourse within a colonial context. This context produces a particular structure of power relations, knowledge production, and subject positions. The “other” is not simply an idealized former time, but a state of being identified with a particular category of humanity; humans have become the physical embodiment of an

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<sup>34</sup> Interestingly, this first major study of primitivism as a feature of intellectual history also marked the foundation of the “history of ideas” school of thought. Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965). Original: Johns Hopkins Press, 1935. Lovejoy and Boas’s volume was in fact one of a series they edited, *Contributions to the History of Primitivism*, which included: George Boas, *The Happy Beast in French Thought of the Seventeenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1933); and Lois Whitney, *Primitivism and the Idea of Progress in English Popular literature of the Eighteenth Century* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1934).

<sup>35</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas*, quoted in Rhodes, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 20.

<sup>36</sup> Lovejoy and Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas*, ix.

abstract idea. Through the institutionalization of the primitivist discourse in the human sciences, political discourse, and popular culture, beginning roughly in the eighteenth century and accelerating in the nineteenth, the discourse has become authoritative, cohesive, and communal, in a way that would not apply to all of the examples of primitivism collected by Lovejoy and Boas. Colonial discourse analysis, then, provides the key for explaining how the phenomenon of primitivism (a set of evaluative ideas about civilization) can become during the imperial period a discourse specifically wedded to a concept of modernity.

I should like to preemptively address the possible objection that this formulation of the problem begs the question that in delineating the problem as I have, I have set myself up for the solution. The focus on ethnographic discourse limits us to the period of European imperialism, and hence may seem to facilitate my argument that the primitive/civilized dichotomy is the productive of what I am calling “modernity.” I am arguing, rather, that the primitive/civilized dichotomy, although it in fact pre-exists the ethnographic discourse of the imperial period, comes to be wedded to the discourse of modernity during this period, on account of power/knowledge structures fostered by imperialism, and it is for this reason I have demarcated the field as such.

The next point requiring clarification then is the term modernity. In the discourse which I have here designated for analysis, the primitive is characteristically opposed to civilization; a further word must be said, therefore, about how a discourse about civilization becomes a discourse about modernity.

“Modernity,” as Frederick Cooper has observed, is a problematic term, so prevalent and overdetermined that its analytic use is questionable. As Cooper writes, “The word *modernity* is

now used to make so many different points that continued deployment of it may contribute more to confusion than to clarity.”<sup>37</sup> Part of the problem, Cooper notes, is that modernity functions as both a native category (a term used by historical actors to describe their experience) and as an analytic category. In addition to the confusion between these two registers, within the different analytic uses of modernity we find multivalent and often contradictory definitions. As Cooper explains, a confusion exists in the literature between invoking modernity as a *condition* (an identifiable set of economic, political, and social changes), and as a *representation*.<sup>38</sup>

One primary source of this confusion, Cooper argues, stems from the way in which current discussions of modernity have largely absorbed the theoretical framework of modernization theory of the 1950s. Modernization theory was both analytic and normative, celebrating the achievements of industrialization, democracy, and the history of Western secularization and rationalization. The critique that emerged in the 1970s demonstrated the teleological and Eurocentric nature of the theory, but, as Cooper argues, “the telos remains in the form of a burgeoning literature on modernity, colonial modernity, and alternative modernities, the former two with a negative valence instead of a positive one, the latter as the positive, non-Eurocentric reflection of the others.”<sup>39</sup> The concept of alternative modernities, Cooper argues, doesn’t solve the problem: if we are speaking of genuine alternatives, it isn’t clear why they should be called “modernities”; if they do have some factor in common, it is a

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<sup>37</sup> Frederick Cooper, *Colonialism in Question: Theory, Knowledge, History* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), 113.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 114.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

narrative of progress, based on ideas about rationality, history, and capitalism.<sup>40</sup> “The package is still on a pedestal,” Cooper explains, to the detriment of critical analysis. “Debate about a wide range of issues—from the equality of women in society to the desirability of free markets—will be conducted in relation to a presumed distinction between modern and backward rather than in more specific and less teleological terms.” Cooper concludes that it would be best at this point to abandon modernity as an analytic category:

Scholars should not try for a slightly better definition so that they can talk about modernity more clearly. They should listen to what is being said in the world. If modernity is what they hear, they should ask how it is being used and why; otherwise, shoehorning a political discourse into modern, antimodern, or postmodern discourses, or into “their” modernity or “ours,” is more distorting than revealing.<sup>41</sup>

Cooper’s criticism is a valid one. I am not interested therefore in using the concept analytically, to argue for example that primitivist aesthetics is modern (a concern which indeed has preoccupied the existing literature, in response to earlier arguments that it was antimodern). What interests me foremost is modernity as a representation. However, as Cooper points out, a great deal of the recent work, while treating modernity as representation, nevertheless recapitulates modernity as condition: “We seem to be living modernization twice, the first time as earnestness, the second time as irony.”<sup>42</sup> The answer is to explore modernity as a native category, and that is what I do here. At the same time, however, the following argument about modernity is intended as a historical answer to what Cooper poses as a theoretical problem. One of my primary aims here is to chart the history of how a particular native category is

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<sup>40</sup> As Cooper explains, “The ghost of Talcott Parsons hovers over current writings about modernity as much as his personage hovered over the modernization debate. But as soon as one takes apart the fixity of his package of pattern variables and posits multiple trajectories leading to multiple modernities, the intuitive salience of the label modern becomes more problematic. Everything is simultaneously modern; modernity is everything that history made; modernity is everywhere the constructed relationship of the modern to the traditional.” *Ibid.*, 132.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 115.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 148.

transformed into a widely adopted analytic category; I seek to explain how a set of representations has come to be seen as a condition.

In response to Cooper, then, I would suggest that this confusion is not incidental, and not something that can be resolved entirely through theory. One of my aims is to tell the history of this confusion, to help understand why, even where scholarship has embraced the idea of modernity as representation, it has been difficult to shake the idea of modernity as a condition. One of the leading reasons that “modernity” remains popular in theoretical discourse (a “package on a pedestal,” as Cooper terms it), in spite of attempts to critique it or replace it (with “multiple modernities” or “alternative modernities”), is its power as a marker of experience and its seduction as an identity. As Chantal Mouffe observes, “Collective identifications have to do with desires, with fantasies, with everything that is precisely not interests or the rational.”<sup>43</sup> Modernity, I argue, can best be understood as a collective identification, as an imagined community.

Before moving on to clarify what I mean by experience and identity, however, let us resolve the definition of modernity. I am interested here in the ways in which modernity is used to identify a particular response to, and interpretation of, modernization. I am interested in how a set of representations have been attached to a condition. If modernization can be described as a set of social, political and economic changes, namely capitalism, industrialism, urbanization and bureaucratization, I am here focusing on a particular set of meanings given to these changes. These meanings are both interpretive and evaluative. On the one hand, these changes have often been interpreted as the inevitable accompaniment of a mentality or

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<sup>43</sup> Chantal Mouffe, with Rosalyn Deutsche, Branden W. Joseph and Thomas Keenan, “Every Form of Art Has a Political Dimension,” *Grey Room*, no. 2 (Winter 2001): 123.

worldview marked by rationalism, empiricism, secularism and materialism, a worldview often coded as European or Western. On the other, these changes have been the focus of evaluative judgments. They have been coded as historical progress, a gradual increasing of knowledge and power. In terms of knowledge, they have been credited for a greater self-awareness and a new degree of critical thought: the modern period is said to have broken free from a benighted, mythical, or naïve premodern past. These changes have also been said to produce increased individuality and autonomy, and by autonomy is meant greater power over oneself, others, and the world. At the same time, this increase in knowledge and power is often depicted as bringing with it an inevitable set of problems, reflected in the widespread unease about technology, the rapid pace of modern life, disruptive social change. The common conflation of historical changes with cultural crisis can be seen, for example, in the definition proposed by theorist Charles Taylor: “By *modernity* I mean that historically unprecedented amalgam of new practices and institutional forms (science, technology, industrial production, urbanization), of new ways of living (individualism, secularizing, instrumental rationality), and of new forms of malaise (alienation, meaningless, a sense of impending social dissolution).”<sup>44</sup>

My use of modernity, then, is to designate specifically this historical critique—what political theorist Jane Bennett has described as the “disenchantment narrative,” alluding to the phrase of the German sociologist Max Weber.<sup>45</sup> In a series of lectures and publications around the turn of the twentieth century, Weber argued that capitalism, secularization, rationalization, and bureaucratization had produced what he described as the defining feature of modernity,

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<sup>44</sup> Charles Taylor, “Modern Social Imaginaries,” *Public Culture* 14, no. 1 (Winter 2002): 91.

<sup>45</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

the “disenchantment of the world” (*Entzauberung*).<sup>46</sup> Weber is but one prominent voice in this historical discourse, which we might generally designate as the critique of modernity. The disenchantment narrative, Bennett contends, is “a powerful and rather pervasive narrative in contemporary politics and political theory.” She sums it up roughly as follows:

There was once a time when Nature was purposive, God was active in the details of human affairs, human and other creatures were defined by a preexisting web of relations, social life was characterized by face-to-face relations, and political order took the form of organic community. Then, this premodern world gave way to forces of scientific and instrumental rationality, secularism, individualism, and the bureaucratic state—all of which, combined, disenchant the world.<sup>47</sup>

To bring together these two definitions, then, I am arguing that primitivism, understood as an ethnographic discourse operating in the context of imperial relations of power and knowledge, has played a fundamental role in the historical construction of the “disenchantment narrative” of modernity.

### **Part 3. The Disenchantment Narrative and the Encounter with Cultural Difference**

Bennett, in *The Enchantment of Modern Life*, has sought to critique the disenchantment narrative of modernity, arguing that it has had dramatic political and ethical ramifications. As she explains, her “wager” is that, “to some small but irreducible extent, one must be enamored with existence and occasionally even enchanted in the face of it in order to be capable of

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<sup>46</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), 35.

<sup>47</sup> Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 7.



donating some of one's scarce mortal resources to the service of others."<sup>48</sup> The problem, however, is that "in the cultural narrative of disenchantment, the prospects for loving life—or saying 'yes' to the world—are not good. What's to love about an alienated existence on a dead planet?" She therefore reexamines in her work some of traditional "facts" about modernity that are routinely said to disenchant—materiality, calculability, commodity fetishism—and makes the case for an alternative ontology and accompanying ethics, based on "the marvelous vitality of bodies human and nonhuman, natural and artifactual."

Bennett's work belongs to a larger body of new materialist theory, which had critiqued long-held convictions, offering new ways of thinking about agency and autonomy, the human and nonhuman, nature and material.<sup>49</sup> This is an important project, yet one whose success will depend upon a full understanding of the materialist and idealist theories it seeks to displace. The existing literature treats the disenchantment narrative as a product of abstract political and social theory; as Bennett sums up the intellectual history:

Rousseau dreams of a modern form of community governed by a civil religion and a general will; Hegel then imagines a state that would allow citizens to recover their implication in a larger ethical order without sacrificing modern individuality; Marx rejects Hegel's cure but affirms the diagnosis of alienation—later, alienated workers will become subjects of *anomie* and *gesellschaft* (i.e., a "rationally developed mechanistic type of social relationship characterized by impersonally contracted associations between persons"); finally, Weber collects these various claims under the banner of "the disenchantment of the world."<sup>50</sup>

My contention is that the disenchantment narrative is not merely a product of abstract political and social theory, but has been fundamentally shaped by the history of anthropology,

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid.; See e.g. Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993).

<sup>50</sup> Bennett, *Enchantment of Modern Life*, 176n10.

imperialism, and the cultural discourse of primitivism. From Rousseau's account of the state of nature, to Hegel's discourse on Africa as the land without history, to Marx's notion of commodity fetishism, to Weber's ideas about the magic world of the "savage," this political and philosophical critique of modernity has developed hand in hand with representations of the primitive other. If we examine Weber's articulation of disenchantment, to take one example, the primitivist subtext is evident:

Increasing intellectualization and rationalization does *not* mean increasing general knowledge of the conditions under which we live our lives. It means something else. It means the knowledge or belief that *if we only wanted to we could* learn at any time that there are, in principle, no mysterious unpredictable forces in play, but that all things—in principle—can be *controlled through calculation*. This, however, means the disenchantment of the world. No longer, like the savage, who believed that such forces existed, do we have to resort to magical means to gain control over or pray to the spirits. Technical means and calculation work for us instead. This, above all, is what intellectualization actually means.<sup>51</sup>

Weber's disenchantment is posed explicitly in opposition to a primitive world inhabited by magic and myth. A similar discursive primitivist subtext accompanies the other moments in the historical development of the disenchantment narrative, articulations of rationality and progress as well as fragmentation and alienation. Several excellent studies have focused on disparate moments in this discourse, analyzing the role that ethnography (if not specifically

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<sup>51</sup> Max Weber, "Science as a Vocation," in *Max Weber's Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), 35. "Die zunehmende Intellektualisierung und Rationalisierung bedeutet also *nicht* eine zunehmende allgemeine Kenntnis der Lebensbedingungen, unter denen man steht. Sondern sie bedeutet etwas anderes: das Wissen davon oder den Glauben daran: daß man, wenn man *nur wollte*, es jederzeit erfahren *könnte*, daß es also prinzipiell keine geheimnisvollen unberechenbaren Mächte gebe, die da hineinspielen, daß man vielmehr alle Dinge—im Prinzip—durch *Berechnen beherrschen* könne. Das aber bedeutet: die Entzauberung der Welt. Nicht mehr, wie der Wilde, für den es solche Mächte gab, muss man zu magischen Mitteln greifen, um die Geister zu beherrschen oder zu erbitten. Sondern technische Mittel und Berechnung leisten das. Dies vor allem bedeutet die Intellektualisierung als solche." Originally presented as a lecture on November 7, 1917, at the University of Munich, and published as *Wissenschaft als Beruf* in 1919.

primitivism) and imperialism have played in shaping theoretical work.<sup>52</sup> Yet there has not yet been a synthesis of these insights, demonstrating that they share a common critique of modernity in opposition to the primitive; that, in other words, the disenchantment narrative is a historical product of ethnography and imperialism.

In a sense, an inverted doppelgänger of this story has previously been assembled. Fuyuki Kurasawa, in *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity*, has argued that this critique developed as a product of the historical encounter with otherness.<sup>53</sup> Yet Kurasawa writes his history from the perspective that the critique refers to a condition, not representation; in other words, he takes the disenchantment narrative at face value. In his telling, focusing on Rousseau, Marx, and Weber as well as Emile Durkheim, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Foucault, he argues that these theorists' "ethnological imagination" enabled them to develop a comparative perspective, identify cultural differences, and therefore gain a clearer picture of the dynamics of "Western modernity." As Kurasawa writes:

Their encounters with instances of cultural alterity [fueled] their diagnoses of what ails Western modernity or makes it flourish as a sociohistorical constellation. Its distinctive features—the emergence of the individual and the transformation of subjectivity, the control of nature by culture, the idea of history as teleological progress, the rise and conquest of rationalism, and new modes of socioeconomic domination and exclusion—are virtually commonplace by now, yet few people appreciate that such a theoretical understanding would have been impossible without a cultural outside to the modern West.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> See for example, William Pietz, "The Problem of the Fetish, I," *Res 9: Anthropology and Aesthetics* (Spring 1985): 5-17; Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995); Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason: Toward a History of the Vanishing Present* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1999); John H. Zammito, *Kant, Herder, and the Birth of Anthropology* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2002); and the contributions to *Postcolonial Studies* 9, No. 1: Special Issue: *Decolonizing German Theory* (2006).

<sup>53</sup> Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004).

<sup>54</sup> Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination*, x.

Kurasawa positions his account as a demonstration of “cross-cultural” awareness, an attempt at recasting social theory to meet the current “theoretical impasse” of the discipline, caught between postmodern accusations of ethnocentrism and defenses of false universalism; Kurasawa argues that in fact the history of social theory reveals an unexpected cast of “intercultural thought” and “intercultural sensibility.” He writes, “In constantly searching to engage with non-Western and nonmodern ways of thinking and acting, our six theorists have developed cross-cultural modes of interpretation and critique of the social order established in their own times and places.”<sup>55</sup> The problematics of praising Marx for an understanding of African religious practices as fetishism and applying it to a theory of capitalist commodification needs no lengthy comment; Marx achieved an evocative application of primitivist discourse to social theory, but this hardly merits the label of inter-cultural understanding. Kurasawa’s work is useful for its rigorous demonstration of the inseparable connection between the ethnographic encounter and the history of social theory. What remains to be done, then, is turn Kurasawa’s narrative on its head.

#### **Part 4. An Imagined Modernity**

If Kurasawa’s analysis provides a composite picture of the theoretical connections between primitivism and social theory, it does not account for the factors which made this particular critique of modernity so academically and culturally persuasive. Kurasawa assumes that the critical prominence, and popular acceptance, of such theories are simply a result of

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 21.

their utility, their accuracy as descriptions of the condition of Western modernity. If we maintain that such theories are representations that may or may not correspond to their object, we must look elsewhere to account for their traction, to explain how a set of representations comes to be understood as a condition. To do so, we must first re-theorize modernity.

Modernity, then, should not be mistaken for a theoretical construct, a product of social theory, but rather as a cultural construction, or an imagined community, not so different, in fact, from the concept of the nation as outlined by Benedict Anderson in his highly influential work *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (1983).<sup>56</sup> A political scientist influenced by Erich Auerbach, Walter Benjamin, and Victor Turner, Anderson provided a dramatically new way of thinking about nationalism in terms of meaning, subjectivity, and identity. Modernity, I argue, can be understood as imagined in the way that Anderson found nationalism to be imagined: as “an imagined political community—and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign.”<sup>57</sup>

Anderson defines his terminology in some detail. The nation “is *imagined* because the members of even the smallest nations will never know most of their fellow-members, meet them, or even hear of them, yet in the minds of each lives the image of their communion.” The same can arguably be said of modernity. Moreover, modernity is imagined as *limited* because it proscribes insiders and outsiders. Modernity may appear to be ever-expanding, spreading out across the globe, threatening to eclipse all social life; this is the argument familiar from

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<sup>56</sup> Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1983; Revised Edition, 2006).

<sup>57</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

globalization theory; yet modernity requires an outside, a periphery. Its identity depends upon the exclusion of others.<sup>58</sup> Modernity is imagined as *community*, because it is conceived, like a nation, as “a deep, horizontal comradeship.” This is the common understanding that “moderns” share, uniting them against the aforementioned outsiders.<sup>59</sup>

Finally, modernity is imagined as *sovereign*. Anderson uses the term sovereign to suggest that the nation was imagined as *free*, liberated from the “divinely-ordained, hierarchical dynastic realm.” The nation, as a secular invention, is constrained by no higher purpose. He writes:

Coming to maturity at a stage of human history when even the most devout adherents of any universal religion were inescapably confronted with the living *pluralism* of such religions, and the allomorphism between each faith’s ontological claims and territorial stretch, nations dream of being free. . . The gage [sic] and emblem of this freedom is the sovereign state.<sup>60</sup>

Similarly, modernity, as has already been suggested, is imagined as the time of autonomy—free not only from dynastic or church authority, however, but from all modes of authority, including, even, nature itself. Modernity represents critical knowledge and technological power, the two primary sources of modern autonomy.

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<sup>58</sup> See Cooper’s previously mentioned point that the concept of modernity is either exclusive, or devoid of content.

<sup>59</sup> It is worth noting that theoretical discussions of colonial or multiple modernities, in spite of their attempts to critique a singular, Eurocentric concept, nevertheless recapitulate it. Cooper cites for example John and Jean Comaroff, who write in *Revelation and Revolution* (2 vols., 1991 & 1997): “Modernity, as an ideological formation, may have grown out of the history of European capitalism. But, like capitalism, it has not remained there. It has seeded itself, in various and complex ways, across the globe.” Although the Comaroffs attempt to introduce a notion of multiple modernities, there is nevertheless, Cooper writes, “an ‘it’ that is seeded and multiplied, a story of Western capitalism, now with the emphasis on its varied ideological effects, on the richness and variety of its representations. We may not know, in advance, what these representations are, but we already know, it seems, what is being represented. If people have different modernities, the reason the Comaroffs consider these representations to be modernities is that they assume that each person’s narration is linked to theirs: that each person is telling a tale of progress, whose roots are in capitalism and imperialism—even if it takes an anthropologist to point it out.”

<sup>60</sup> Anderson, *Imagined Communities*, 6.

It may be noted that Anderson is using a limited sense of the term *sovereign*; sovereign in political theory denotes not only *freedom* but *rule* over a subject. Modernity, I would argue, is sovereign not simply in its “dream of being free” (in this case, free from the pre-modern or primitive past)—it is also imagined politically as a form of power. Modernity exerts sovereignty over individuals, and over nations, through its normative power. The discourse of modernity exhibits sovereignty over the field of nations, for example, when it is imagined as the “historical” period to which they must attain, through which they must pass.

Modernity is also sovereign over the individual, yet not in the classical sense. It is sometimes forgotten that Anderson articulated this definition of nationalism as an answer to what he found to be “the central problem” posed by nationalism: “Ultimately it is this fraternity that makes it possible, over the past two centuries, for so many millions of people, not so much to kill, as willingly to die for such limited imaginings.” What, he asks, could generate “such colossal sacrifices?” This raises the question: what sacrifices does modernity generate? If not literally, then metaphorically, what do individuals give up, to enter into this community of modernity?

Thus far I have been discussing the disenchantment narrative of modernity; this offers a useful way of characterizing this prominent cultural discourse. The problem, however, with this designation, and accordingly, with attempts by critics such as Bennett to “reenchant” modernity, is that this approach neglects the enchanting aspects already contained within the disenchantment narrative. The narrative compels precisely on account of what it has to offer, to return to Anderson, in terms of subjectivity, meaning, and identity.

Charles Taylor, in *A Secular Age*, offers a helpful if lengthy description of the paradoxical combination of achievement and loss, enchantment and alienation, which characterizes this narrative of “modernity.”<sup>61</sup> In the following quote, Taylor uses the concept of a “buffered” self, which he argues has replaced a more “porous” self in the modern, “secular” era. By buffered he means “bounded”—an image of the self that is protected, because it is imagined as divorced from external forces of nature and cosmos, unlike the “porous” self, which was “vulnerable, to spirits, demons, cosmic forces”—a result of the “anthropocentric” turn in which moral humanist philosophy placed humans at the center of the world. In other words, Taylor, like Kurasawa, accepts the disenchantment narrative, although he has in numerous works developed his own particular history with an emphasis on the moral, political, and religious changes which led to this “transformation of our world.” Taylor writes:

What did (does) this buffered, anthropocentric identity have going for it? Its attractions are fairly obvious, at least to us. A sense of power, of capacity, in being able to order our world and ourselves. To the extent that this power was connected with reason and science, a sense of having made great gains in knowledge and understanding.

But beyond power and reason, there is something else very strong going for this anthropocentrism: a sense of invulnerability. Living in a disenchanted world, the buffered self is no longer open, vulnerable to a world of spirits and forces which cross the boundary of the mind, indeed, negate the very idea of there being a secure boundary. The fears, anxieties, even terrors that belong to the porous self are behind it....

Power, reason, invulnerability, a decisive distancing from age-old fears, of which we all still have some sense, not only from history, and not only from the as yet unenlightened masses, but also because they resonated somehow in our own childhood; all this belongs to the sense of self of those who have made the anthropocentric turn. And there are strong satisfactions which attend this.

Above all, there is a certain pride, and sense of one’s own worth; which is the stronger, the more acutely one is aware of what an achievement this is, of the unreasoning fears from which one has freed oneself. Part of the self-consciousness of modern anthropocentrism is this sense of achievement, of having won through to this invulnerability out of an earlier state of captivity in an enchanted world. In this sense,

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<sup>61</sup> Charles Taylor, *A Secular Age* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2007).



modern self-consciousness has a historical dimension, even for those—who are, alas, many today—who know nothing about history. They know that certain things are “modern,” that other practices are “backward,” that this idea is positively “medieval,” and that other one is “progressive.”<sup>62</sup>

Taylor’s account captures the *enchancements* of the disenchantment narrative. It thus helps answer the question, raised above, of the motivational factors responsible for the “sacrifices” made in order to belong to the imagined community of modernity. Taylor’s account is useful moreover as a prime example of major work of contemporary theory which presents the disenchantment narrative as the inevitable result of a set of philosophical changes in the history of “the West,” and which entirely neglects the role that primitivism has played.<sup>63</sup>

Thus, I argue that rather than framing modernity as simply a product of social theory, it should be theorized as a cultural and discursive construction, an imagined community, much like the nation, or other collectives of participants, who share a shifting yet durable and cohesive set of attitudes, beliefs, and habits. Nations are imagined, but this doesn’t make them any less real. They are territories that both restrict and present new possibilities for movement, for action and interaction. Nations are held together not only by laws, but by languages, rituals, songs, dress, flags, monuments, martyrs, railroads, mountains, and rivers, an array of practices, materials, events, and discourses which make the nation seem obvious, natural, and inevitable. They are defined by ideas about what it means to belong, and who does not belong. Modernity is no different.

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<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 300-301.

<sup>63</sup> Other notable prominent examples of literary, philosophical, and sociological analyses of the history of modernity which are deeply conditioned by the disenchantment narrative, and yet make no mention of the primitive, include Taylor’s *Sources of the Self: The Making of the Modern Identity* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989); Jerrold Seigel, *The Idea of the Self: Thought and Experience in Western Europe since the Seventeenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2005); Stephen Greenblatt, *The Swerve: How the World Became Modern* (New York: W. W. Norton and Company, 2011); Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Modernity in the Late Modern Age* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 1991).

## Part 5. Defining Discourse

The above discussion outlines this dissertation's theoretical formulation of modernity as an imagined community. I argue that an insistence on modernity as imagined helps to break the compulsion to identify it with modernization, confusing the representation with the condition. It remains to be said how primitivism in particular has served as a fundamental discourse in the construction of the disenchantment narrative. To make this argument, I apply the theoretical framework of the colonial discourse model. However, as noted above, current usage of colonial discourse analysis has failed to demonstrate the connection between primitivism and the critique of modernity. The problem, I argue, is that current usage has overly relied on a projection model of colonial discourse, a model that originates in Said's original formulation of discourse in *Orientalism*.

Studies of primitivism routinely invoke the notion of discourse to explain primitivism. The utility of this concept for cultural studies of primitivism has been, primarily, its broad and encompassing scope, as a way of identifying multiple cultural areas of production as participants in the same phenomenon. As Gill Perry writes: "According to this approach, 'primitivism' is seen as a complex network of sociological, ideological, aesthetic, scientific, anthropological, political and legal interests (that is, 'discourses'), which feed into and determine a culture."<sup>64</sup> Second, the notion of discourse provides a way to demonstrate connections between cultural products, academic knowledge, and political power. In Perry's

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<sup>64</sup> Gill Perry, "Primitivism and the 'Modern,'" in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, Gill Perry (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993), 3.

words, “those within Western society who analyze, teach, paint or reproduce a view of the ‘primitive’ would, by this activity, be dominating, restructuring and having authority over that which they define as ‘primitive.’” Simply put, it provides recognition of the fact that primitivism operates in conjunction with imperial projects involving both political rule and knowledge production.

The problem, however, is that Said’s theory of colonial discourse analysis, and its adoption by cultural studies to explain primitivism, has employed a truncated version of the concept of discourse as originally theorized by Michel Foucault, Said’s source of inspiration. Said’s application of discourse analysis to the problem of colonial knowledge and power posed a set of epistemological problems—namely, about the existence of subjects and objects. Foucault’s theory dispensed with subjects and objects, while preserving an account of subjectivity and objectivity.<sup>65</sup> Said, however, in applying the model to the colonial situation, felt an understandable political compulsion to address the historical facts of colonizing subjects and colonized objects. Yet this compelled him to adopt a projection model, in which a colonizing subject is the producer of Orientalist representations. Thus, while colonial discourse brackets the question of how representations correspond to their objects (how does Orientalism relate to the Orient?), it preserves the ontology of the subject (the one doing the projecting).

Discourse in Foucault’s understanding, on the other hand, not only creates representations of the object, the “primitive,” but representations of the subject; in this manner it creates forms of subjectivity. Foucault insisted that discourse be understood in a

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<sup>65</sup> Foucault states in “Truth and Power”: “I would call genealogy . . . a form of history which can account for the constitution of knowledges, discourses, domains of objects etc., without having to make reference to a subject which is either transcendental in relation to the field of events or runs in its empty sameness throughout the course of history.” Michel Foucault, “Truth and Power,” in *Power/Knowledge: Selected Interviews and Other Writings, 1972-1977*, ed. Colin Gordon, trans. Colin Gordon et al. (New York: Pantheon Books, 1980), 117.

biopolitical sense, not as a linguistic force repressing bodies, but as that which produces bodies and desires; this sense is missing from its application in cultural studies.

Foucault's archaeological method was intended to displace the concept of the individual subject; Foucault argued that the subject was a product of discursive formations. He rejected the traditional concept of top-down power (of ruler and subjects); as he put it in *The History of Sexuality*, "In political thought and analysis, we still have not cut off the head of the king."<sup>66</sup> Yet his concept of discourse is commonly understood as merely a dispersion of top-down power across an array of discourses of domination. Rather, power must be understood as constructive as well. Foucault argued that one could read the history of sexuality, for example, in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not as a history of the repression of sexuality, but as the production of sexuality, which is imbricated with the creation of modes of subjectivity:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.<sup>67</sup>

I argue that Foucault's retheorization of power, and the hermeneutical suspicion which he directs at sexuality, should also be applied to primitivism. Cultural studies of primitivism, however, have persisted in applying the notion of the Western subject, whose desires and fears are *expressed* and *articulated* in the discourse of primitivism. Such studies, in other words, embrace the notion of primitivism as a projection of Western fears and desires. Torgovnick, for

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<sup>66</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 88.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 105.

example, in *Primitive Passions* (the follow-up to *Gone Primitive*), describes the twentieth-century “fascination with the primitive” as:

an expression of fears about what the West has wrought in the world, even of white European self-loathing—often with an accompanying utopian impetus for change. Utopian desires are emerging strongly once again at the end of the twentieth century, in movements that envision the primitive as a locus of harmony and a shelter from the dangers and fragmentation of modern life.<sup>68</sup>

As this quote makes evident, Torgovnick has adopted the sense of discourse as theorized by Foucault, in which these desires and fears should themselves be understood *as* discursive products. It is precisely in this recognition, however, that it becomes possible to identify the relationship of the discourse of primitivism to the imagination of modernity. If the fears and desires which are said to be expressed through primitivism, are in fact, following Foucault, products of primitivism, it becomes clear that primitivism is not simply a reaction to “the dangers and fragmentation of modern life”—primitivism is the discourse productive of this representation of modern life.

This recognition allows for a crucial re-framing of existing studies of primitivism. In these studies, European artists are described as either arriving independently at, or appropriating, primitive aesthetic forms and styles as a way to critique not only the classical aesthetic tradition, but the many problems of European civilization. To cite one prominent example, Michael Bell, in his pioneering study of primitivism in literature, writes: “The general implication of this study has been that primitivism denotes, or arises from, a sense of crisis in civilization.”<sup>69</sup> Bell’s account is a causal one: primitivism, he explains, “is born of the interplay of the civilized

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<sup>68</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 18.

<sup>69</sup> Michael Bell, *Primitivism* (London: Methuen, 1972), 80.

self and the desire to reject or transform it. . . . Primitivism, we might say, is the projection by the civilized sensibility of an inverted image of the self.” Moreover, Bell defines this a universal phenomenon:

The nostalgia of civilized man for a return to a primitive or precivilized condition is as old it seems as his civilized capacity for self-reflection. And it is a familiar characteristic of human nature that almost every step towards what would generally be regarded as increased sophistication or progress is accompanied by misgivings frequently leading in turn to doubts about the whole enterprise of civilization.<sup>70</sup>

My argument, put simply, is that this ubiquitous understanding of primitivism (exemplified here by Bell) already assumes too much about the ontological character and existence of “civilized man,” as the causal factor producing primitivism. I want to suggest that primitivism (in the sense of a “nostalgia for return”) should be seen *not* as the obvious product of “civilization,” the nostalgia produced by the stresses of the “enterprise,” but rather, as the discourse producing the subject position of “civilized,” defined by Bell as *self-reflection, sophistication, progress, and misgivings*. In other words, it isn’t civilization that makes one nostalgic for a return, it’s the discourse of primitivism that produces the experience called “civilization.”

I have cited Bell for two primary reasons. First, to observe that Bell’s definition reveals the basic postulates of the disenchantment narrative. Second, to demonstrate that recent studies of primitivism, in spite of their adoption of colonial discourse analysis, nevertheless perpetuate Bell’s conceptualization of primitivism: for Bell as well as the recent studies, primitivism is understood as a projection, which is produced by civilization.

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid., 1.

On the one hand, in recent critiques of primitivism (written in wake of Said and the 1984 MoMA exhibition), Bell's universalism is roundly rejected in favor of a historicization. For Bell, primitivism refers to "a basic human feeling," or "the nostalgia of civilized man for a return to a primitive or precivilized condition"; he envisions it as an ahistorical phenomenon. For recent authors, primitivism is necessarily imbricated with the history of imperialism. Yet recent studies of primitivism have in fact inherited from the earlier tradition of critique (represented here by Bell) the view in which primitivism emerges from the experience of civilization; the singular difference is that recent authors frame primitivism not as a response not to civilization in general, but civilization at its apex, modernity.

For example, Patricia Leighton, who also makes use of the discourse framework, writes: "The modernists' method was to critique civilization by embracing an imagined 'primitiveness' of Africans whose 'authenticity' they opposed to a 'decadent' West."<sup>71</sup> Similarly, Jill Lloyd opens her book on primitivism in German expressionist art by arguing that the key to understanding such art is to see it in the context of the "speed and drama of modernization in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century . . . [and] the dilemmas and contradictions that this involved."<sup>72</sup> She cites the German sociologist Georg Simmel, whose writings on "the conflicting positive *and* negative effects of modernity" have become part of the canon on the topic:

In Simmel's monumental *Philosophie des Geldes* (1900; *The Philosophy of Money*), he explored the workings of the capitalist economy as a metaphor for the psychological experiences of the modern world: by "abstracting" or depersonalizing every aspect of our relations, money allowed simultaneously for greater freedom and greater

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<sup>71</sup> Patricia Leighton, "The White Peril and *L'Art nègre*: Picasso, Primitivism, and Anticolonialism," *The Art Bulletin* 72, No. 4 (December 1990): 610. She continues, "They wanted to subvert Western artistic traditions—and the social order in which they were implicated—by celebrating a Nietzschean return to those imagined 'primitive' states whose suppression they viewed as having cut off a necessary vitality."

<sup>72</sup> Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991), vi.

loneliness. It acted as a liberating agent and yet involved, at the same time, alienation, reification, and inhuman rationalization.<sup>73</sup>

Lloyd and her colleagues collectively argue that primitivism is a response to the ailments of modernity. What for Bell was understood as a general nostalgia for an idealized past becomes in recent writing on primitivist modern art a more specified longing for the ethnographic “primitive” state, in opposition to the perceived alienation of modernity. What should be clear, however, is that this interpretation perpetuates uncritically the disenchantment narrative described above. Applying the notion of subjectivity implied in Foucault’s notion of discourse, I argue that primitivism is in fact productive of the disenchantment narrative, the “fears” and “desires” produced by modernity.

By applying postcolonial theory, colonial discourse analysis, and the critique of anthropology to the discussion of primitivism in modern art, I show that the ideas about civilization and modernity to which these authors give voice were created in opposition, not simply to a former idealized time, but in opposition to the ethnographic primitive other. They offer, on the one hand, an example of how the primitivist discourse posits as cultural universals categories which are in fact historically produced; and on the other, how a set of discursive representations are transformed into a condition, an imagined modernity.

## **Part 6. The Primitive Refrain**

The model of colonial discourse analysis, when applied to the study of primitivism, has failed to articulate the relationship between primitivism and modernity.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., vi.



Although I am adopting the Foucauldian notion of discourse, the consistent failure of cultural studies to make good on the concept's utility suggests that a theoretical corrective is needed. The literature frames primitivist discourse as a projection of Western fears and desires onto the "primitive" other, thus positing the primitive as culturally constructed while reifying the notion of the West. In order to re-emphasize the production of subjectivity, which was entailed in Foucault's theory but has subsequently elided in contemporary studies, I have borrowed the notion of the refrain, as outlined by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*.<sup>74</sup>

The concept of the refrain helps to address a set of problems which have been associated with colonial discourse analysis since its articulation by Said in *Orientalism*. Said's critics were quick to identify two primary problems of his theorization of colonial discourse: the essentializing and the hegemonic aspects. By arguing that Orientalism essentialized the Orient, Said seemed to be essentializing Orientalism; in essentializing Orientalism, in a context in which discourse was identified as culture, Said seemed to be essentializing Eurocentric culture. On the other hand, Orientalism, for Said, was not limited to an academic discipline, but infused Western cultural production about the Orient; it therefore presented a hegemonic view of discourse. As Robert Young writes:

The problem with Said's book was that its historical and theoretical argument was so persuasive that it seemed to allow no alternatives. . . . After his brilliant demonstration that Orientalism as a discourse constructed an all-encompassing representation of, and form of knowledge about, the Orient, we have ever since been looking for chinks in its apparently hegemonic surface.<sup>75</sup>

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<sup>74</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>75</sup> Robert J. C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture, and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 166.

The root of the problem is that Said sought to make an argument about Eurocentric power by beginning with the problem of representation as posed by Foucault. Said began by defining discourse as a system of “determining” representations of the “other”; this discourse he argued should be understood not as designating a real object, “the Orient,” but rather as “a set of constraints upon and limitations of thought.”<sup>76</sup> In order to communicate, and be understood, in regards to the Orient, one had to be a participant in this discourse:

The phenomenon of Orientalism deals principally not with a correspondence between Orientalism and Orient, but with the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient (the East as career) despite or beyond any correspondence, or lack thereof, with a “real” Orient.<sup>77</sup>

At the same time, Said defined this set of representations as Eurocentric knowledge and power. He thus wielded together of a theory of discourse as non-representational representation with a classical theory of political power. Said wrote, “Once we begin to think of Orientalism as a kind of Western projection onto and will to govern over the Orient, we will encounter few surprises.”<sup>78</sup> However, the truth has been just the opposite, as Said’s version of Foucauldian discourse, filtered through the projection model, has led to a host of epistemological problems. On the one hand, the discursive theory of representation problematized the existence of subjects and objects; on the other hand, the problem of Eurocentric power and knowledge seemed to require subjects and objects, in order to address the history of imperial power and violence. Colonial discourse analysis, by applying the concept of discourse to the history of imperial power, has, in Foucault’s sense, not chopped off the head of the king.

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<sup>76</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 42.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

In the first place, Said's formulation of discourse as representation seems to create an unbridgeable gap between sign and referent. Second, by not only demonstrating the complicity of forms of knowledge with institutions of power, but asserting this complicity within the framework of imperial power, Said presented Orientalist discourse as an inescapable, hegemonic totality. As Said writes, "So authoritative a position did Orientalism have that I believe no one writing, thinking, or acting on the Orient could do so without taking account of the limitations on thought and action imposed by Orientalism."<sup>79</sup>

The question then becomes, what are the parameters of the discourse? Are all forms of knowledge implicated in power? As Robert Young asks in *White Mythologies*, "How does any form of knowledge—including *Orientalism*—escape the terms of *Orientalism's* critique?"<sup>80</sup> Just as Said accuses Orientalist discourse of essentializing the Orient, he seems to have essentialized the discourse of Orientalism, in arguing that its fundamental unity was constituted by a form of political power over its object. In addition, by arguing for Orientalism's totalizing nature, Said's conception of Orientalism seems to preclude any possibility of critique from "outside." As Young points out, Said bases his critique of Orientalism on humanist principles, but humanism itself was structured historically through its involvement in imperialism. If theory itself is subsumed in Orientalist discourse, it becomes impossible to dialogue with, or in fact even theorize the existence of, the colonial other—a point made notably by Gayatri Spivak in her essay, "Can the Subaltern Speak?"<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> Ibid., 3.

<sup>80</sup> Young, *White Mythologies*, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Gayatri Spivak, "Can the Subaltern Speak? Speculations on Widow Sacrifice," *Wedge* 7/8 (1985): 120-30.

Another way of putting it is to ask, who is doing the projecting? If colonial discourse is a projection of Europeans onto the colonial “other” (whether Oriental, primitive, or otherwise), this would deny any role played by the colonial subject. It leaves these “others” on the outside looking in. The notion of colonial discourse, although originally designed as a critique of Eurocentric knowledge and power, would seem to reinstate an inevitable Eurocentrism in any form of theoretical critique. As Young puts it: “Said’s revision of Foucault simply takes us back to the problem with which he had begun. . . . Said wants to hang on to the individual as agent and instigator while retaining a certain notion of system and of historical determination.”<sup>82</sup>

In an important sense, however, although these are significant problems for Said’s framing of colonial discourse analysis, they are not terminal problems for applying the theory of discourse to understanding primitivism. The primary objection here is that this theory of discourse, strictly speaking, does not allow for the existence of subjects or objects. As a set of totalizing representations, there can be no position outside of the discourse, either for a subject to critique it, or to assess how the discourse corresponds to its object. I argue, however, that this is not in fact a problem with the theory of discourse, but the result of approaching the concept from the epistemological perspective it aims to critique, namely that of the correspondence theory of discourse. Discourse for Foucault does not preclude the existence of subjects and objects, merely the notion of a *transcendental* subject, or a *material* object.<sup>83</sup> Critics who argue that the notion of discourse leaves no room for a critical subject, are attempting to uphold a notion of agency or autonomy as transcendental (either in terms of the

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<sup>82</sup> Young, *White Mythologies*, 174.

<sup>83</sup> As Foucault writes, “There is no single locus of great Refusal, no soul of revolt, source of all rebellions, or pure law of the revolutionary.” *History of Sexuality*, 95-6.

Kantian subject, or more simply “the individual as agent” as Young puts it), as opposed to a heteronomous subject (that which Kant had rejected). In Foucault’s concept of discourse, however, subjects and objects do exist, but they are created historically and contingently. They are heteronomous, but not in opposition to a transcendental autonomy. Power relations can be established, but these are not fixed or inherent.

The greater problem for Said’s theorization, however, resides in his political framework, the description of Eurocentric power in terms of classical sovereignty. Obviously, such an assertion is necessary, to account for historical colonial political power. Yet in positing colonial discourse as centered in European power, culture, and history, he must necessarily exclude the “objects” of that discourse from playing in role in its existence—and therefore he reinscribes Eurocentrism at the core of his theory. This creates impossibilities, both for the postcolonial critic of Orientalism, and for the colonized subject, in so far as the aim of both is presented as autonomy and resistance. The postcolonial critic has no place from which to stand “outside” the system of discourse. To “participate,” to enter into the discourse, the colonized subject experiences a double alienation: denied recognition by the colonizing subjects, and, from the perspective as a subject within the discourse, condemned to seeking out one’s objectivity but endlessly thwarted from attaining it—the problem as diagnosed powerfully by Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* (1952).<sup>84</sup>

Said’s problem here results from treating discourse as ideology; yet Foucault’s rejection of the notion of the subject equally dispenses with the notion of ideology. Discourse understood as ideology in the classical sense recapitulates a top-down theory of power

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<sup>84</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skin, White Masks*, trans. Charles Lam Markmann (London: MacGibbon & Kee, 1968).

relations; a psychoanalytic picture of the self as an entity upon which ideology acts; and a distinction between a true and a false discourse, which his notion of discourse is specifically poised to undermine.

Therefore, if a return to a Foucauldian understanding of discourse helps alleviate some of the problems of using the colonial discourse model to understand primitivism, I have further introduced the notion of refrain in order to forestall some of these traditional objections. Discourse, especially in its application in current cultural studies, is figured as an ahistorical, abstract, disembodied set of representations, and therefore would be subject to the same criticisms outlined above. The concept of the refrain, I argue, offers the following theoretical advantages: it reemphasizes the production of subjectivity, the aesthetics of the discourse, and its multivocal nature.

Discourse is often understood as a static, ahistorical product (a confusion stemming in part from Foucault's original use of discourse as part of his "archaeological" method, although he subsequently sought to revise this with his "genealogical" approach). The refrain, however, implies existence in time—a repetition, or possibly an alteration of a precedent, a circling back. The notion of refrain helps account for the fact that primitivism keeps returning, taking on new shapes, sometimes serving the same ends, sometimes new ones.

Second, refrain highlights the aesthetic qualities of discourse. Discourse is too often presented as a matter of linguistic representation; the refrain is not simply textual, but aesthetic—aesthetic understood here as sensuous. The refrain is language, combined with music, combined with bodies. The sonorous quality of the refrain entails the imbrication of the

aesthetic and the physical and the symbolic. By emphasizing the aesthetic, the refrain helps account for the compelling forces which call new territories into being, and which alter them.

The refrain therefore helps think through questions about the subject and object, by avoiding the strictly textual or representational field of discourse. Although discourse naturally implies speakers, Foucault's focus on institutional forms of knowledge downgrades individual voices. The refrain allows for a concept of agency without insisting upon autonomy. Similarly, the refrain, for Deleuze and Guattari, has a spatial aspect. The refrain creates a territory; both the subject and the territory (or an object) are constituted through the refrain. The refrain therefore accounts for subjects, but not necessarily human subjects (the Kantian subject, the individual as agent):

As Messiaen says, music is not the privilege of human beings: the universe, the cosmos, is made of refrains; the question in music is that of a power of deterritorialization permeating nature, animals, the elements, and deserts as much as human beings. The question is more what is not musical in human beings, and what already is musical in nature.<sup>85</sup>

Finally, the refrain is better suited to conceptualizing the question of resistance. The refrain opens up onto metaphors such as harmony, counterpoint, fugue—a fugue state? The refrain can be altered by the incorporation of new voices. The refrain for Deleuze and Guattari is not a totality; they juxtapose (rather than oppose) it with music. The refrain is necessarily music, but it is also only a type of music:

It is odd how music does not eliminate the bad or mediocre refrain, or the bad usage of the refrain, but on the contrary carries it along, or uses it as a springboard. . . . What needs to be shown is that a musician requires a first type of refrain, a territorial or assemblage refrain, in order to transform it from within, deterritorialize it, producing a refrain of the second type as the final end of music.<sup>86</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 309.

<sup>86</sup> *Ibid.*, 349.

Together, these features of the refrain provide a theoretical framework in which colonial discourse analysis can be used to understand the operations of primitivism. Unlike Said's model (or those who follow him by adopting a projection model), the refrain resists the dualities suggested by the notion of discourse, by emphasizing the heteronymous, heterogeneous, and contingent forces which shape subjects and objects. The refrain creates a territory, which is in a sense a shelter, a type of protection; it is shaped by desires and fears (and productive of them, as the haunting melody can instill fear); the refrain orders, organizes, and orients, both the subject and its object; but it also provides the springboard for disorientation, and deterritorialization.

I have introduced the notion of the refrain, however, not in the hope of replacing the notion of discourse in theoretical discussions, but because I find it useful to explain the manner in which I use the term discourse in this dissertation. Theoretical work should not deceive itself into believing that concepts are used abstractly and precisely; conceptual work also proceeds metaphorically, therefore it seems necessary to emphasize that although I continue to use the notion of discourse, it should be understood through the concept of the refrain.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>87</sup> It is worth noting that Robert Young, in the critique of colonial discourse analysis he presents in *Colonial Desire* (1995) also argues that the study of colonialism may be enhanced through the theory of Deleuze and Guattari. On the one hand, he makes an argument similar to the one I have presented here, namely that Deleuze and Guattari provide a way of thinking about colonialism not simply as a discourse but as "a form of ambivalent desire." (167) Deleuze and Guattari, he writes, "are thus concerned to break down the conventional epistemological distinction between materiality and consciousness. . . . The general thrust of their work is to deny any differentiation between 'the social production of reality on the one hand, and a desiring production that is mere fantasy on the other'; rather, they maintain that 'the social field is immediately invested by desire, that it is the historically determined product of desire.'" (168) However, Young also argues that *Anti-Oedipus* "redirects our attention towards two obvious but important points that tend to get lost in today's emphasis on discursive constructions—the role of capitalism as the determining motor of colonialism, and the material violence involved in the process of colonialization." While I agree that more attention to material violence is important, Young's fear (in 1995) that capitalism would be neglected has since been proven unfounded. Critiques of empire have not forgotten the place of capitalism, as Cooper points out in *Colonialism in Question*. The greater interpretive danger, which is part of the



## Part 7. Modes of Primitivism: Apotropaic and Aporetic

It may be objected that whether primitivism is described as a discourse or a refrain, my discussion seems to posit primitivism as a monolithic system of representations. My use of the discursive framework should not be seen as essentializing a discourse, however. I adopt a framework of analysis that posits heterogeneity of primitivist discourse. There has been a great deal of excellent work that has done much to pluralize empire and pluralize ethnographic discourse. George Steinmetz, for example, has persuasively argued that the discourse about “ethnographic others” in Germany during this period was in fact eminently diverse and multifaceted, as was colonial policy. As Steinmetz writes:

Ethnographic discourse, colonial subjectivity, and the colonial state were less uniform and more internally complex and heterogeneous than has usually been argued. Except in the most extreme and unusual situations, European representations of non-Europeans were much more layered and fragmentary than theories of “Orientalism” have led us to believe.<sup>88</sup>

That being the case, it could appear retrograde and historically inaccurate to speak, as I do, of a singular primitivist discourse. In the first place, however, I am not here concerned with colonial policy; in the chapter where I do consider colonial policy, this is presented as a bounded test case, to explore discursive relations between a type of primitivism and colonial marriage bans.

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argument I am making in this dissertation, is that critiques of colonialism have indeed been unable to overcome this materialist understanding. Even where they are wholly focused on systems of representations (and pay no explicit attention to economic relationships), this is because it is simply assumed that these representations ultimately serve the purpose of capitalist exploitation. While a critique of capitalism and its relationship to colonialism is vital, at the same time, it is imperative to resist the “disenchantment narrative” which critiques of capitalism almost universally employ.

<sup>88</sup> George Steinmetz, *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 517.

Colonial marriage bans are not presented as emblematic of German colonial policy across the board. Second, although I do posit a primitivist discourse, I am not arguing that all ethnographic discourse is primitivist, nor that all examples of primitivist discourse operate identically. Just as the notion of a singular disenchantment narrative does not preclude variations within the narrative, and changes over time, neither should the concept of primitivist discourse.

Of course, for a concept to have analytic purchase, a certain degree of conceptual cohesiveness is necessary. I have already introduced the general delimiting factor: primitivism that posits a binary difference between the primitive and the civilized. This is rather broad, but in the words of Ludwig Wittgenstein: “Many words in this sense then don’t have a strict meaning. But this is not a defect. To think this would be like saying that the light of my reading lamp is no real light at all because it has no sharp boundary.”<sup>89</sup> It is possible to delineate with some specificity the set of meanings surrounding the opposition between primitive and civilized. I am interested in discourses where the primitive is imagined as pre-civilized, pre-writing, pre-history. I am interested in primitivism that posits, in the formulation of Fabian, a denial of coevalness. At the same time, the binary discourse of primitivism is inherently unstable. The primitive is both embedded in nature and human. The primitive is irrational, but also, insofar as it belongs to nature, is somehow beyond the rational/irrational binary. The primitive is in the past, but also somehow outside of history altogether.

Primitivism, to put it concisely, is a discourse of alterity that structures ways of thinking about nature, rationality, and temporality. Primitivism is a discourse that uses a self-other binary to make statements about such concepts as progress, history, autonomy, authenticity,

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<sup>89</sup> Ludwig Wittgenstein, *The Blue and Brown Books* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1958), 27, quoted in Bell, *Primitivism*, 3.

and alienation. Within this generally defined discourse, however, I will identify a set of salient differences. Before explaining the classifications of primitivist discourse that structure my own analysis, it is necessary to recount the existing classification scheme in studies of primitivism. The literature, to simply things a bit, identifies two basic categories of primitivism. The first, which we might call the anthropological or imperialist primitivism, is a discourse in which “civilization” is defined by progress, rationality, and autonomy, in opposition to a “primitive” other lacking these traits. If this discourse is generally marked by a celebration of civilization’s achievements, and an aversion to the primitive, the second mode of discourse, artistic or romantic primitivism, inverts this set of value judgments; in this mode of primitivism, the primitive is now esteemed for its naturalness, vitality, and authenticity.

This is of course a crude distinction, although a helpful one. Anthropological or imperialist primitivism, in the sense proposed here, does not refer only to the use of primitivism in the academic discipline of anthropology, which was formally established in the nineteenth century, but also encompasses commonplace Eurocentric views of primitive society which have been expressed from the fifteenth century up to the present. These distinctions between the civilized and the primitive, however, acquired not only their clearest articulation but also the aura of scientific truth in the institutionalization of anthropology that took place in the nineteenth century, most profoundly in the theory of cultural evolutionism. Evolutionist thought envisioned a gradual historical progress of “man,” stretching from his origins in the pre-historical past, to the current heights of modern European civilization, defined by unprecedented technological and material progress.

Evolutionist thought, although the dominant theory of nineteenth-century British anthropology, represents a European-wide cultural development. In addition, the primitivist view of anthropologists was not confined to the texts of scholars or specialists, however, but pervaded popular culture as well. To take a prominent example, in 1846, in an essay on the inferiority of sculpture to painting, the French poet Charles Baudelaire remarked: “The origin of sculpture is lost in the darkness of time; it is therefore an art of Caribs. Indeed, we see that all peoples carve fetishes very skillfully long before they take up the art of painting, which is an art of profound reasoning and one whose enjoyment demands a particular initiation.”<sup>90</sup> The “Caribs”—the dark-skinned former inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, believed to have migrated there from South America, and in the popular imagination associated with cannibalism and fetishism—seemed to Baudelaire and his contemporaries an archetype of “primitive man.”<sup>91</sup> Baudelaire here gives voice to the intertwined constellation of concepts

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<sup>90</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse,” *Salon de 1846, Critique d’art*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1965), 166. Translation is adapted slightly from that of Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 29. In French: “L’origine de la sculpture se perd dans la nuit des temps; c’est donc un art de Caraïbes. En effet, nous voyons tous les peuples tailler fort adroitement des fétiches longtemps avant d’aborder la peinture, qui est un art de raisonnement profond et dont la jouissance même demande une initiation particulière.”

<sup>91</sup> Baudelaire’s own relationship to the figure of the “primitive” is a complex one, and although I have used his comment to represent a popular negative view of the primitive, his own view was indeed more subtle, and no doubt shaped by his years-long erotic involvement with Jeanne Duval, a Haitian-born actress and dancer of mixed French and black African ancestry. Flam and Deutsch relate the following anecdote: “Baudelaire [once] visited a naval officer who had recently come back from the South Seas with a number of strange objects. While Baudelaire was examining a small carving, the naval officer, eager to draw his attention to something else, referred to the object in Baudelaire’s hands as ‘merely a Negro totem.’ Instead of putting down the carving and turning to what the officer wanted to show him, the poet raised his hand said: ‘Take care, my friend, it is perhaps the true God.’” See Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), 1; paraphrasing William J. Ivins, Jr. *Prints and Visual Communication* (Cambridge and London; MIT Press, 1953), 147. On Baudelaire’s primitivism see Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985). The Caribs were featured in the travel writings of Amerigo Vespucci and Christopher Columbus, who reported that they ate human flesh; the Carib word for person, *karibna*, may have been the source of the English term “cannibalism.” See Anthony Pagden, *The Fall of Natural Man: The American Indian and the Origins of Comparative Ethnology* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1982), 81ff; Basil A. Reid, *Myths and Realities of Caribbean History*

which, in the course of the nineteenth century, solidified into the imaginary boundaries that separated the European from the primitive: Europeans produce art, primitives had the fetish; Europeans possessed reason, which empowered those who had it and excluded those who were not “initiated” into it, like a secret society; and finally, Europeans belonged to history, whereas the “primitive” existed so deeply recessed in the human past that it was somehow outside of time altogether.

As recent studies of primitivism have shown, it was in the context of this current of anthropologically informed primitivism that the modernist and avant-garde artists of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries “discovered” the art of “primitive” societies. This artistic primitivism sought to reverse the set of hierarchies inherited from the era of European imperialism in which Europeans cast primitives as inferior. The primitive now appeared natural, instinctual, spiritual, and communal—a set of traits which seemed to be missing from wan, rationalized, “civilized” European society. The primitivism of these artists, in this interpretation, be understood as a “romantic” valorization the primitive, a reversed evaluation of that which was formerly denigrated. To quote from Leighten again:

The modernists’ method was to critique civilization by embracing an imagined “primitiveness” of Africans whose “authenticity” they opposed to a “decadent” West. . . They wanted to subvert Western artistic traditions—and *the social order in which they were implicated*—by celebrating a Nietzschean return to those imagined “primitive” states whose suppression they viewed as having cut off a necessary vitality.<sup>92</sup>

The idea of romantic primitivism is used to refer to such early twentieth-century modernists as Picasso or Vlaminck. It is also used more broadly to refer to the primitivism of

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(Tuscaloosa: University of Alabama Press, 2009); Lene Østermark-Johansen, *Walter Pater and the Language of Sculpture* (Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 158.

<sup>92</sup> Leighten, “The White Peril and L’Art nègre,” 610 (italics added).

their precursors, who did not invoke the primitive as part of critique of aesthetics, but who deployed a romanticized image of the primitive to critique society. A leading example here would be Paul Gauguin, whose Post-Impressionist paintings of idyllic Polynesian scenes, with their bold colors and dreamlike quality, were charming Parisian art circles in the 1890s (fig. 1.8). In literature a major figure would be Karl May, who was (and remains) a bestselling author in the German language, had been writing much-loved stories romanticizing Native Americans since the 1880s. (His most well-known series, *Winnetou*, about an Apache chief, was published in four volumes between 1893 and 1910.)

A primary argument of recent studies of primitivism, however, has been that this romantic primitivism, in spite of its admiration for the primitive (or in the case of the avant-garde, in spite of the innovations in artistic form), nevertheless represents a continuation of anthropological primitivism, in its perpetuation of the categories of Eurocentric colonial discourse. This has been the argument unifying the diverse criticisms launched in the wake of the 1984 MoMA exhibition. As Leighton writes, although the modernists were critical of their own society and the norms of bourgeois life,

[they] did not extend this social criticism to a radical critique of the reductive view of Africans that was promoted for colonial justification. Instead, they embraced a deeply romanticized view of African culture (conflating many cultures into one), and considered Africa the embodiment of humankind in a precivilized state, preferring to mystify rather than to examine its presumed idol-worship and violent rituals.<sup>93</sup>

Scholars have noted, in other words, that both anthropological and romantic forms of primitivism involve an inherent imposition of a hierarchy between civilized self and primitive other. The categories remain unchanged: the “West” is imagined as rational, artificial, and

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<sup>93</sup> Leighton, “The White Peril and L’Art nègre,” 610.

historical, while the “primitive” is mystical, natural, transcendent. The difference between anthropological and romantic primitivism is simply that the latter reverses the value judgment of the former; hierarchy and otherness are preserved, casting the other as an object of desire rather than fear.

This analysis has been an invaluable insight of post-MoMA critiques. However, as I hope to make clear, this scholarship *continues* to ascribe a difference between anthropological and romantic primitivism. Whereas the former is depicted as a naïve Eurocentric embrace of civilization, the latter is said to be distinguished by its use of primitivism as a critique of civilization. As Colin Rhodes writes, for example, in *Primitivism and Modern Art*, modernist primitivism is an expression of “discontent with contemporary society.”<sup>94</sup>

My principal argument is that this distinction obscures what is in fact a deeper continuity running through both. Whether nineteenth-century anthropologists (and Europeans in general) enjoyed a sense of their technological, rational, and moral superiority over “primitive” tribes, or avant-garde artists looked to the “primitives” as a means to escape or critique modernity (primitivism as a nostalgic longing or as a utopian contrast to the present), both are *united* in their description of modernity as identifiable by such markers as rationality, positivism, materialism, cultural or intellectual traits which are equated with the development of industrialization, technology, and capitalism.

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<sup>94</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 20. It should be added that a handful of scholars focusing on anthropological primitivism have recently argued that anthropologists, no less than artists, have deployed primitivism as a means of critiquing modernity. See Suzanne Marchand, “Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997): 153-170; Simon Gikandi, “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, 31-50 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005).

On the one hand, there is clearly a shift from anthropological primitivism to artistic primitivism; the former looked positively on the autonomy, self-awareness, power, and progress of modernity; twentieth-century modernists saw a world marked by fragmentation and alienation from self, society, and world. What should be clear, however, is that both accept the categories of primitive and civilized. The only difference, for the recent studies of primitivism, is that the romantic primitivists are said to be critical of civilization. As before, we have only an inversion of attitude in regards to civilization.

The problem, I argue, is that recent work fails to recognize the duality of the primitivist discourse; this discourse posits not only a set of representations about the primitive, but also a set of representations about civilization. Although recent work acknowledges a continuity between anthropological and romantic primitivism in terms of the imperial perception of the primitive other, it does not recognize that a similar continuity exists in the conception of the civilized. To put it clumsily, romantic primitivism occupied in *the critique of civilization* in fact perpetuates *the narrative of civilization* which was produced under the discourse of anthropological primitivism.

I therefore want to introduce a new approach to classifying primitivism: on the one hand, we can identify the primitivism that perpetuates this narrative of civilization, which is to say, the *disenchantment narrative* as I have outlined above; and on the other, that primitivism which calls that narrative into question. To put it another way, this dissertation seeks to make a distinction between modes of primitivism that accept the distinction between primitive and civilized—those which accept the discourse of primitivism—and those which question it. I have termed these alternatives *apotropaic* and *aporetic* forms of primitivist discourse. Apotropaic



discourse refers here to examples of primitivist discourse which reify the distinction between modernity and the primitive; aporetic primitivism, on the other hand, refers to moments of discourse which paradoxically make use of the primitivist discourse, yet call that discourse into question. In diagnosing cases of aporetic primitivism, I argue that these moments therefore reveal the constructedness of an imagined modernity.

The term apotropaic I have borrowed from Hal Foster, who invoked it in his memorable critique of the 1984 MoMA exhibition. Foster opened his critique with a discussion of Picasso's *Les Femmes d'Alger*, "a primal scene of modern primitivism."<sup>95</sup> Foster argued that Picasso's painting presents two encounters simultaneously: one is the depicted encounter in the brothel, the other is Picasso's visit in 1907 to the "collection of tribal artifacts" in the Musée d'Ethnographie du Trocadéro. Foster points out that Picasso, in his later recollection of his visit to the museum, described this moment as the inspirational moment for *Les Femmes d'Alger*. Moreover, Picasso says that he understood the meaning of the objects—they were "weapons"—and that this was in fact how his own artistic creation should be understood:

They were against everything—against unknown threatening spirits.... I, too, I am against everything. I, too, believe that everything is unknown, that everything is an enemy! ... women, children ... the whole of it! I understand what the Negroes used their sculptures for.... All fetishes ... were weapons. To help people avoid coming under the influence of spirits again, to help them become independent. Spirits, the unconscious ... they are all the same thing. I understood why I was a painter. All alone in that awful museum with the masks ... the dusty mannikins. *Les Femmes d'Alger* must have been born that day, but not at all because of the forms; because it was my first exorcism painting—yes absolutely!<sup>96</sup>

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<sup>95</sup> Hal Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious of Modern Art," *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 45.

<sup>96</sup> Quoted in André Malraux, *Picasso's Mask*, trans. June and Jacques Guicharnaud (New York: Hold, Rinehart, and Winston, 1976), 10-11, reproduced in Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious," 46.

Thus, Foster argues, Picasso “intuited” the apotropaic function of these objects—their ability to ward off or turn away evil spirits. Picasso’s oversimplification of these ethnographic art objects is beside the point; what matters, Foster argued, is that Picasso envisioned his own art in terms of a similar apotropaic function. As Foster explains, “In projecting the primitive onto woman as other, *Demoiselles* less resolves than is riven by the threat to male subjectivity, displaying its own decentering along with its defense.”<sup>97</sup> Picasso’s primitivism grasps the decentering power of primitivism—the figure of the “primitive” presents a threat, not simply, I would note, to male subjectivity, but to colonial subjectivity. Picasso’s work displays this decentering power, and yet tries to defend against it, to ward off these threats as if they were evil spirits. Foster concludes:

Picasso conveys the shock of this encounter as well as the euphoria of his solution, an extraordinary psycho-aesthetic move by which otherness was used to ward away others (woman, death, the primitive) and by which, finally, a crisis in phallogentric culture was turned into one of its great monuments.<sup>98</sup>

In Foster’s reading, Picasso’s primitivism, for all its naïve understanding of African ethnographic art objects, is far from a romanticism. It represents, rather, a simultaneous recognition and disavowal: recognition that the concept of the “civilized” is threatened by paradoxes of the “primitive,” and disavowal of that recognition. It is in this sense that I have here employed the term apotropaic; to designate moments of primitivist discourse which reaffirm the categories of the imperialist primitivist discourse; and which reaffirm, therefore, the discourse of modernity.

The term apotropaic is perhaps obscure enough to ward off the likelihood of misinterpretation; the concept of aporia, however, surfaces upon occasion in discussions of primitivist art, and therefore a word should be said about how I am using this term. In most

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<sup>97</sup> Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious,” 45.

<sup>98</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

instances it is used in an untheorized way, to suggest a paradox or contradiction; it represents, as defined by Merriam-Webster, “a logical impasse or contradiction.”<sup>99</sup> Foster, for example, writes that modernist primitivism, as epitomized by the MoMA exhibition, is marked by such a contradiction; it is marked by

a repression of the fact that a breakthrough in our art, indeed a regeneration of our culture, is based in part on the breakup and decay of other societies, that the modernist discovery of the primitive is not only in part its oblivion but its death. And the final contradiction or aporia is this: no anthropological remorse, aesthetic elevation, or redemptive exhibition can correct or compensate this loss *because they are all implicated in it*. Primitivism, then, not only absorbs the potential disruption of the tribal objects into Western forms, ideas, and commodities, it also symptomatically manages the ideological nightmare of a great art inspired by spoils.<sup>100</sup>

Foster’s argument, therefore, diagnoses not only the apotropaic element in the primitivism of Picasso and the primitivism of MoMA, but primitivism in general. This basic observation has been developed into a more specified critique of particular types of primitivism by Victor Li, in *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*.<sup>101</sup> For Li, it is not primitivism in general that is aporetic, but a certain category of primitivism, what he calls “neo-primitivism.” Li’s argument is concerned not with the history of primitivism, but with an examination of the writings of contemporary theorists such as Torgovnick, Marshall Sahlins, Jean Baudrillard, and Jürgen Habermas. Li argues that although this corpus of work “questions the use of terms like ‘primitive’ and ‘primitivism,’ it continues to exhibit a deep primitivist logic that lurks in displaced but related concepts like ‘alterity,’ ‘culture,’ and surprisingly, ‘modernity.’”<sup>102</sup> In other words, although these writers reject the Eurocentric logic of

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<sup>99</sup> “Aporia,” Merriam-Webster.com, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/aporia>.

<sup>100</sup> Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious,” 61.

<sup>101</sup> Victor Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006).

<sup>102</sup> Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn*, ix.

primitivism, and are thus “anti-primitivist,” they use these concepts in a way which Li shows is not neutral, but in fact unintentionally reproduces the primitivism they sought to overcome.

For Li, then, the important contradiction is not in primitivism in general, but in critiques of primitivism. Li uses *aporia* to designate the dilemma in which such critics find themselves, committed to critiquing a Eurocentric discourse, but forced to rely upon that very discourse to make their argument. They are therefore trapped in the discourse which they try to critique. The theoretical writing of the neo-primitivists can thus be described as *aporetic*, as in the sense of being caught up in an irresolvable contradiction—as in, for example: “This sentence is not to be trusted.”

Li’s response, on the one hand, is to urge for “a continuing vigilance against the return of the dismissed or deconstructed ‘primitive.’”<sup>103</sup> At the same time, however, Li concludes that he himself, in his own critique of neo-primitivism, is caught up in this *aporetic* discourse:

I cannot escape from this *aporia* of at once criticizing neo-primitivism and of relying on certain of its theoretical assumptions. I can only acknowledge my dilemma. For who would want to be a neo-primitivist uncritically, when one can at least know critically the *aporia* in which one finds oneself.<sup>104</sup>

Although I agree with Li’s exhortation to vigilance and the first part of his argument, that much contemporary theory does in fact reproduce the primitivist discourse it aims to critique, I disagree fundamentally with his second conclusion. Li ultimately concludes that the “primitive” is necessary for critical thought—that, in the words of Michel de Certeau, “theorizing always needs a savage.”<sup>105</sup> Li writes: “In the course of our study of neo-primitivism, we have come to

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<sup>103</sup> Victor Li, “A Necessary Vigilance: A Response to Torgovnick and Kuper,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 557.

<sup>104</sup> Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn*, 228.

<sup>105</sup> Michel de Certeau, cited by Josette Féral, “The Power of Difference,” in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K Hall, 1980), 88. Quoted in Li, 218. Li states that Féral does not give the source of Certeau’s remark.

understand that theorizing needs the savage especially when it critically examines or theorizes itself. To dismiss the primitive Other is thus to dismiss theory itself, a price we may be unwilling to pay.”<sup>106</sup>

Li’s error is in treating primitivism as a theoretical problem rather than a historical one. He concludes that the opposition between modernity and the primitive provides the unavoidable framing structure, not just of recent theory, but of theory *tout court*. Thus in spite of his call for continuing vigilance, he himself is led to inscribe primitivism indelibly onto critical thought.

I argue rather that primitivism must be understood as a contingent historical discourse. It is indeed the case, as he argues, that theorists who critique primitivism often invoke such as concepts as culture or modernity in ways that reinscribe the dichotomy between primitive and modern; yet their predicament is not the product of theory, but of interpreting theory from *within* the perspective of the primitivist discourse.

To demonstrate what I mean it will be useful to consider Li’s argument. Li, for example, critiques Habermas’s theory of modernity as an example of aporetic neo-primitivism. On the one hand, in Habermas’s depiction of modernity as the “rationalization” of the “life-world” (*Lebenswelt*), he defines modernity against a premodern or primitive condition; on the other hand, his theory of modernity is marked by “a recovery of the prototype of normative consensus and communicative intersubjectivity present in the premodern condition that has been disavowed.” Li concludes:

What Habermas has called “the unfinished project of modernity” can therefore be more accurately re-titled “the aporetic dilemma of modernity.” For, try as it may, modernity’s

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<sup>106</sup> Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn*, 226.

rationalization of the world can never fully dismiss the pre-rationalized, premodern lifeworld's attachment to archaic or primal images of "symbiotic wholeness and nurturing protection."<sup>107</sup>

The problem here, however, is that Li accepts Habermas's identification of modernity as a *condition*, as the time of rationalization. Habermas defines it as such, but my point is that this is not a necessary conclusion. It is, rather, an acceptance of the discourse of primitivism, in which modernity has come to be defined as the time of rationality, progress, and autonomy, in opposition to the primitive. It is, in other words, an acquiescence to the disenchantment narrative, an embrace of an imagined modernity.

Contrary to Li, then, I argue that criticism of primitivism is in fact possible—although I am using the term criticism loosely here, in the sense of negation, not a conscious act of criticism (a point to which I return below). In making this argument, I have used the term *aporia* to an end different from that of Li and Foster. My argument is not that all primitivist discourse is inherently paradoxical (Foster), or that specifically criticism of primitivism is paradoxical (Li). I argue rather that certain types of primitivism are paradoxical on account of the fact that they simultaneously make use of the discourse of primitivism, while undermining its assumptions.

Significantly, therefore, I use "aporetic" to refer to examples of primitivism which successfully challenge primitivist discourse, rather than merely perpetuate it. Li uses *aporia* to define a situation in which the critic of primitivism is stuck or trapped. I use *aporia* here to emphasize its productive potential. Li's usage of *aporia* to suggest simply paradox or contradiction, fails to draw upon a further meaning of the term, the sense it held in classical Greek philosophy and mythology. The word comes from the Greek *aporia*, for difficulty, which

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<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 217.

was derived from *aporos*, “without passage” or “impossible path.” Plato’s early dialogues, for example, are described as ending in *aporia*. The poor target of Socrates’ interrogation is compelled through logical discussion to the realization that he does not know what he initially thought he knew; not because Socrates has argued an alternative, merely because Socrates has managed to demonstrate that the speaker’s own claims are self-contradictory. The *aporia* thus represents the end of the discussion, but also the beginning of knowledge, in that it means the abandonment of a false claim. I use *aporia* here in this sense, to designate a type of interpretive impasse; it represents a moment through which a discourse cannot pass. A moment of aporetic primitivism, therefore, is not faced with the inevitability of primitivism, as Li would have it; rather, it faces the *impossibility* of the primitivist discourse, and makes it known as such.

An important distinction must be made here, between what I am describing as the operation of an aporetic discourse and the theory of deconstructionism, as a mode of literary and philosophical analysis which is also concerned with the aporetic. Deconstruction refers to a wide body of critical thought with roots in the philosophy of Martin Heidegger, although it is above all associated with the work of Jacques Derrida. Derrida’s own manner of deconstructivist analysis was not uniform, but can be said to have shifted between his earlier and later writings, with the former more concerned with the notion of *différance*, the latter more the question of *aporia*.<sup>108</sup> Derrida’s approach to textual analysis proved very influential not only for feminist critique but also for postcolonial analysis, and thus it is imperative to address the relationship of my own project to deconstructionist theory.

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<sup>108</sup> See Spivak’s discussion of deconstructionism in *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*, 423ff.

Crudely put, deconstructionist approaches to analysis seek to demonstrate a contradiction in a text that is inevitable. The aim of deconstruction is not to reveal a particular claim as false, but rather to demonstrate that contradiction is what makes the claim possible. The aporetic element of a deconstructivist reading of a text comes in the recognition of contradiction and the simultaneous recognition of its inevitability. Such approaches have been commonly adopted in literary theory, directed at a specific text or at a set of texts, as well as in philosophy, directed at the logocentrism of “Western philosophical ontology” or at the latter’s conception of radical alterity.<sup>109</sup>

I must make clear that I am not here arguing that the authors or artists upon which I focus are engaged in a deconstruction of primitivism, in the above sense; nor am I myself engaging in a deconstructionist project. In the first place, although I will argue that authors such as Bastian “undermine” or “dismantle” the primitivist discourse, I am not arguing that he engages in a deconstruction of primitivism. Bastian himself would not have described his work as such; nor am I claiming that he unconsciously engaged in an act of deconstruction. I am arguing, rather, that Bastian’s primitivism contained a contradiction; it both inhabited the discourse of primitivism (made use of the categories of primitive and civilized) and undermined the meaning of those categories.

This leads to the second point; it may appear that I am offering a deconstructionist reading of particular works of primitivism. The point however is not simply that a work or text can be both primitivist and anti-primitivist, and is therefore aporetic from the critic’s

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<sup>109</sup> See for example, Emmanuel Lévinas’s argument that “Western philosophy coincides with the disclosure of the other where the other, in manifesting itself as being, loses its alterity. From its infancy philosophy has been struck with a horror of the other that remains other—with an insurmountable allergy . . . . Hegel’s philosophy represents the logical outcome of this underlying allergy of philosophy.” Quoted in Young, *White Mythologies*, 44.



perspective. Nor is it the case that these authors, in undermining primitivism, are calling attention to a paradox. The particular way in which an author, text, or artwork can be said to undermine the meanings of the discourse will vary according to the work. Bastian's theoretical work, for example, does not call attention to an inevitable contradiction in primitivism; it undermines the discourse of primitivism specifically by negating the denial of coevalness. Although he adopts the disciplinary theoretical framework of *Naturvölker* and *Culturvölker*, he develops a theory in which both categories are equally shaped by history and nature, the contingent and the inevitable; at the same time, although he participates in the genre of anthropological writing, with the implied authorial perspective of the anthropological expert providing knowledge of the object, he develops a literary technique that disrupts the privileged subject position of anthropological discourse. In these senses, then, he undermines the discourse of primitivism. As a form of primitivism that is also undermining primitivism, his discourse can be called aporetic.

## **Part 8. Interventions**

To summarize, then, I am interested here in assessing two types of primitivist discourse. By apotropaic primitivism I refer to modes of primitivism which reify the distinctions between the primitive and the modern; apotropaic primitivism thereby supports an imagined modernity, defined in terms of the disenchantment narrative (assuming we use that phrase as shorthand, aware of the enchantments of the narrative). By aporetic primitivism I refer to modes of primitivism which, although they participate in the primitivist discourse (whether as

anthropological or romantic primitivism, for example), they also critique that discourse.

Moments of aporetic discourse critique primitivism not from an external vantage point, but by making manifest the paradoxes of the primitivist discourse.

This interpretive framework makes it possible to analyze instances of primitivism in ethnography, art, and theory in such a way that existing debates about the significance of primitivism can be not so much solved as repositioned. Instances of apotropaic primitivism can be discerned in both anthropological primitivism and romantic primitivism; the same goes for aporetic primitivism.

In studies of ethnology, for example, critical scholarship has focused on how primitivism has constructed the subject position of civilization. As Johannes Fabian has argued, anthropological discourse has historically been marked by a denial of coevalness. I shall argue that this neglects the fact that some forms of anthropological primitivism in fact can be described as aporetic—this argument forms the basis of chapter four on the German ethnologist Bastian.

In the realm of aesthetics and avant-garde art, the scholarly debate has centered on the following questions: whether primitivism should be seen as a flight from modernity (a position running from Georg Lukács up to T.J. Clark's *Farewell to an Idea*), or an engagement with modernity (from Ernst Bloch to recent scholarship by Jill Lloyd and Mary Gluck)<sup>110</sup>; and whether avant-garde artists were influenced by non-European artistic styles (thus suggesting a

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<sup>110</sup> Georg Lukács and Ernst Bloch, "Presentation 1," in *Aesthetics And Politics: Ernst Bloch, Georg Lukács, Bertolt Brecht, Walter Benjamin, Theodor Adorno*, ed. Ronald Taylor (London and New York: Verso, 1977; 2007); T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999); Lloyd, *German Expressionism*; Mary Gluck, "Interpreting Primitivism, Mass Culture and Modernism: The Making of Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy*," *New German Critique*, no. 80, Special Issue on the Holocaust (Spring – Summer, 2000): 149-169.

multicultural or trans-cultural description), or found the artworks of non-Europeans interesting only because they had already arrived, independently, at an aesthetics that made it possible for them to appreciate that art.

Regardless of which side of these debates one takes, primitivist movements in late-nineteenth and twentieth-century art are widely understood as a critique of modern life. The classification I have proposed makes it possible to observe a distinction, however, between modes of primitivism that view the primitive as desirable—that is, which envy the primitive life for its supposed naturalness, freedom, community, for its incarnation of an unalienated, authentic existence—and modes of primitivism which emerge from the encounter with the primitive with questions—primitivism which asks, what is natural? what is freedom? What is authentic existence? Put simply, the distinction here proposed is between modes of primitivism which preserve these distinctions, and those which cultivate aporia. This argument forms the basis of chapters five and six, on the aporetic primitivism of the Brücke.

Third, this framework enables a critical perspective on recent theoretical statements on primitivism. Rather than arguing, as Li does, that all writing which critiques primitivism necessarily perpetuates the discourse, I posit that we can distinguish between the apotropaic and the aporetic in contemporary theory. To return to Foster: after diagnosing the apotropaic in *Demoiselles*, he argued that the MoMA exhibition itself served a similar apotropaic function. The exhibition, in positing the “primitive” as a timeless, transcendent mode of being, recapitulated the same recognition and disavowal that marked Picasso’s painting. Foster writes:

The show pretends to revise the MoMA story of art, to disrupt its formal and narrative unity but only so as to reestablish it: the transgressive is acknowledged only to be again repressed. . . . This maneuver also allows it at once to contain the return of its repressed and to connect with a neoprimitivist moment in contemporary art: MOMAism is not

past after all! In all these ways, the critique posed by the primitive is contravened, absorbed within the body of modern art.<sup>111</sup>

Post-MoMA critiques have sought to distance themselves from MoMA's version of primitivism by critiquing the imperialist projection of the "primitive." I argue, however, that these critiques, in spite of their self-reflexive awareness and their critique of the complicity of imperialism, anthropology, and art, nevertheless perpetuate the discourse of primitivism through their commitment to describing primitivist art as a critique of modernity. In other words, just as Foster argued that the MoMA exhibition was apotropaic, I argue that this body of contemporary scholarship on primitivism is apotropaic. This analysis forms the subject of chapter two.

Finally, this classification system allows for an important distinction to be made between aporetic primitivism and two other modes of primitivism that seem to negate the distinction between civilized and primitive, but which in fact reinscribe the difference on a more subtle level. I am referring here to two types of arguments, frequently encountered in writing on primitivism in modern art: one, which we can call the "savage within" or "inner savage" argument, the second which we can call "savage civilization."

The first case refers to critics' arguments that primitivist artists have used primitivism as a means of describing or drawing attention to a "universal" feature of human psychology; the implication is that beneath the civilized surface of "modern man," is a primitive self, an "inner savage." This argument comes in two variations; either the "inner savage" is imagined as the authentic, natural, mystical self, which modern life has repressed, and which should therefore

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<sup>111</sup> Foster, "The 'Primitive' Unconscious," 58.

be recuperated; or the “inner savage” is pictures as the bestial, amoral, irrational inner self, which is present in all of us, but which civilization manages to keep in check.

Critics have argued that such examples of primitivism effectively negate the distinction between primitive and civilized—that by universalizing the distinction (everyone has an “inner savage”), such works collapse the distinction between the two. On one hand this is a bit of a dodge, as the argument in most cases is clearly directed at identifying the “savage” within the “civilized” Westerner, and is rarely used to describe non-Westerners; nevertheless, even were the argument to be applied universally, however, the terms in which it is made perpetuate the civilized—primitive distinction. The “savage within” interpretation, although at first seeming to suggest an undermining of difference, does not dismiss the categories of primitive and civilized. In fact, not only does it re-impose their binary opposition, but posits a relationship which can only be hierarchical (the civilized mastery of the primitive self). Through the notion of the repressed “primitive,” the “civilized” subject is defined by rationalism and regularity, its struggle to control the forces “beneath the surface.” The universalizing aspect of the argument, therefore, far from collapsing the distinction, insidiously reifies the historical, imperialist discourse of primitivism into a normative psychology.

A related argument is the concept of “savage civilization.” If the above argument constitutes an application of primitivism to human psychology, this latter form constitutes an application to human society. I use the concept to refer to examples of primitivism which suggest that civilization itself is primitive. Most commonly, the argument is framed something like the following: that modern civilization, which had been thought, in the nineteenth century perhaps, to be rational, progressive, a movement toward freedom and enlightenment, is in fact

riven with violence, irrationality, mindlessness and servitude (to bourgeois norms and the insidious forces of capitalism). This argument, I suggest, characterizes some of the work produced by the members of the Frankfurt School, for example Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer's critique of contemporary society in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As they write in the preface (1944/1947), "What we had set out to do [in this work] was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism."<sup>112</sup> It is generally held that Horkheimer and Adorno reveal the dialectical construction of the primitive and the civilized; the work, after all, is devoted precisely to analyzing the dialectical opposition between myth and enlightenment. The categories of their analysis do not, however, simply overlap: myth is not identical with the primitive, enlightenment with civilization. For Adorno and Horkheimer, the distinction between myth and enlightenment is collapsed (myth, they write, "is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology"); but this collapsed state itself is identified as a specific historical crisis of civilization.

Adorno and Horkheimer argue that civilization has succumbed to barbarism, but unlike their analytical negation of opposition between enlightenment and myth, this binary of civilization and barbarism (which is a form of the primitive/civilized discourse) remains intact. The force of their argument, as evidenced from the above quote, is premised precisely on the critique of contemporary society, a critique which is made from the standpoint of humanism. Enlightenment, in their telling, in asserting its own positive mastery of nature and self by excluding myth, deceived itself about the existence its own mythmaking propensity. Based on

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<sup>112</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), xiv.

the terms of their argument, we might argue that civilization similarly repeats this move vis-à-vis the barbaric; but to collapse this distinction would vitiate the grounds of their own argument. They do not wish to demonstrate that all civilization reverts to barbarism, and that all barbarism is already civilized; they wish to argue that modern Western society in particular has succumbed to barbarism—to violence, exploitation, mindlessness, and the destructive forces of capitalism and rationalism.

In conclusion, then, critics have commonly argued that types of primitivism of the “inner savage” or “savage civilization” variety collapse the distinction between primitive and civilized. These critics have concluded that, unlike simple romantic primitivism, as presented above, these types of primitivism therefore represent a break with anthropological, imperialist primitivism. This is not the case, however, as these modes of primitivism in fact shore up the binary opposition between primitive and civilized; they therefore should be grasped as examples of apotropaic primitivism.

## **Part 9. The Significance for German History**

Thus far I have been speaking of primitivism as a phenomenon not confined within any particular national boundary, but as part of an international discourse. This is because, as I have argued, representations of the primitive in different national traditions often share certain features and are used to discuss common concerns, such as nature and alienation. I have resisted designating this a European or Western discourse, however, because these terms are problematic for several reasons. Of course, on the one hand, the designation “Western” makes

sense, in that primitivism, as a colonial discourse, was a feature of European imperialism. On the other hand, the discourse of primitivism often emerges in “non-Western” voices (individuals that the discourse meant to exclude). Moreover, as I argue for a relationship between primitivism and the critique of modernity, it is no longer tenable to argue that the critique of modernity, or the social and political theories of the Enlightenment, should be seen as somehow only European, or Western, in origin.<sup>113</sup>

I have therefore demarcated this as a study of primitivism in modernity. This definition is no doubt circular, since part of my aim is to demonstrate that just as primitivism is a discourse of modernity, modernity is produced in and through that discourse. However, I believe this particular circularity needs emphasizing. As typified in the quote from Torgovnick above, the current theoretical consensus understands primitivism *as a projection* of “Western” fears and desires onto the “primitive” other. Such a view denies the circularity which I am asserting, by positing modernity as a historical condition, the product of modernization in the West.

Second, by defining primitivism as a discourse of modernity, rather than a discourse of the West, or Europe, I seek to avoid reinscribing the lingering ethnocentric conceptions

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<sup>113</sup> See for example the growing body of excellent work on the transnational or global production of “the West”: Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117, No. 4 (October 2012); Paul Gilroy, *The Black Atlantic: Modernity and Double Consciousness* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Susan Buck-Morss, *Hegel, Haiti and Universal History* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2009); Laurent Dubois, *A Colony of Citizens: Revolution & Slave Emancipation in the French Caribbean, 1787-1804* (Chapel Hill and London: University of North Carolina Press, 2004); Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998); Frederick Cooper and Ann Laura Stoler, eds., *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1997).



which identify the West in terms of rationality, freedom, power, etc., in opposition to the ethnographic other; this is, after all, a product of the primitivist discourse which I aim to critique.

Accordingly, the following chapter maintains this broad scope, treating primitivism as an international discourse. I begin with an examination of how primitivism has been theorized in contemporary scholarly writing since roughly 1984 (the year of the Museum of Modern Art's controversial exhibition on "Primitivism"). Here I argue that the insight provided by the theorization of primitivism as a *projection* has been undermined in studies of modernism by also framing primitivism as a *project* (the critique of modernity).

After this initial argument, however, I narrow the field of analysis to the German case; having presented the necessary theoretical and historiographical context, I am able to offer new interpretations of several important texts, figures, and moments in German studies. I begin with a new reading of a canonical text of German studies, Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. I offer a new reading of Adolf Bastian, the leading figure of German ethnology in the nineteenth century, distinguishing him from the antihumanist strain in the German tradition, in order to show that contrary to Johannes Fabian, not all anthropology from the period was marked by a denial of coevalness. Finally, I take a revisionist look at the primitivism of the Brücke, arguing that the group's artwork should not be understood as a critique of modernity, but as, in effect, a critique of primitivism and the disenchantment narrative to which it is enthralled.

This combination, then, of an international context with a set of national case studies is intended to demonstrate German participation in a broader, perhaps a global, history.

Therefore, although I have chosen to focus on Germans, one could also have chosen to explore the aporetic discourse of “non-European” figures, such as the writings of Chinua Achebe, or the performative practices of Bushmen intending to re-enact “primitive” conceptions for European tourists and documentary filmmakers.<sup>114</sup>

This international or transnational framework is not intended to deny the presence of different national inflections of primitivism, however, just as there are differences between, say, German and British anthropological traditions, or the German and French variations of modernism. In a historiography that has traditionally been preoccupied with questions about peculiarity, discussions about national difference necessarily raise questions about German exceptionalism. The interdisciplinary framing of my project presents a set of overlapping questions in regards to German exceptionalism—broadly speaking, questions about the relationship of colonial discourse to culture, anthropology to culture, and colonialism to culture.

As I am principally concerned with the discourse of primitivism, which is to say, representations of the colonial other, I engage with a complicated historiography concerning Germans’ conceptions of cultural and racial difference. Analysis of these issues is of course deeply colored by the calamity of the Holocaust and the National Socialist racial state. Bracketing for the moment the question of Germany’s colonial (or precolonial) past, it should be noted that an older body of literature had argued that German history revealed a deep

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<sup>114</sup> See for example Robert J. Gordon, “‘Captured on Film’: Bushmen and the Claptrap of Performative Primitives,” in *Images and Empires: Visuality in Colonial and Postcolonial Africa*, eds. Paul S. Landau and Deborah D. Kaspin (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 212-232.

cultural disposition towards ethnocentrism and *völkisch* or racial thought.<sup>115</sup> This tradition, while the target of substantial and sustained critique, has nevertheless found recent exponents. As Geoff Eley has observed, “This gesturing towards a deep cultural sociology of backwardness is perhaps the least adequately theorized or historicized part of the Sonderweg thesis, although it remains in many ways fundamental to the scaffolding of a continuing tradition of Anglo-American historical interpretation.”<sup>116</sup> Eley cites recent work by George Williamson, Dominic Boyer, Kevin Cramer, Isabel Hull, and Helmut Smith.<sup>117</sup>

This general tendency has, moreover, found some support in recent studies on the relationship of colonialism to German culture.<sup>118</sup> The historiography here is not entirely new, but has roots in Hannah Arendt’s *Origins of Totalitarianism*, in which she argued that German colonialism can be understood as the breeding ground for National Socialism.<sup>119</sup> Arendt’s suggestion remained largely undeveloped, primarily on account of the lingering sense that Germany’s short experience with colonialism limited any possible effects of colonialism on German society. More recently, Suzanne Zantop re-opened the discussion with her examination of Germans “colonial fantasies,” allowing her to consider a German colonial imagination even in

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<sup>115</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Howard Fertig, 1964).

<sup>116</sup> Geoff Eley, “Clearing the Ground: German Continuities,” unpublished paper.

<sup>117</sup> George S. Williamson, *The Longing for Myth in Germany: Religion and Aesthetic Culture from Romanticism to Nietzsche* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Dominic Boyer, *Spirit and System: Media, Intellectuals, and the Dialectic in Modern German Culture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); Kevin Cramer, *The Thirty Years’ War and German Memory in the Nineteenth Century* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2007); Isabel V. Hull, *Absolute Destruction: Military Culture and the Practices of War in Imperial Germany* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2005); Helmut Walser Smith, *The Continuities of German History: Nation, Religion, and Race Across the Long Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2008).

<sup>118</sup> Hull’s work could perhaps be mentioned here rather than in the general category just mentioned, yet it is a matter of debate whether her research demonstrates more precisely a peculiarity of Wilhelmine politics and publics (allowing for a “hothouse” of Germany’s military culture, in which colonial violence could be absorbed), or that the colonial encounter had transformative effects on German culture.

<sup>119</sup> Hannah Arendt, *The Origins of Totalitarianism*, New Edition with Added Prefaces (San Diego and London: Harcourt Inc., 1968).

the absence of physical colonies.<sup>120</sup> Although Zantop cautioned against “reading German history backward from the Holocaust,” she suggested a historical link between Germany’s “colonial fantasies” and twentieth-century genocide. Subsequent work, including the edited volumes *The Imperialist Imagination* and *Germany’s Colonial Pasts*, expressed reservations about the idea of a colonial Sonderweg; in both cases the editors expressed their desire to emphasize German heterogeneity and normalize Germany’s colonial history in international perspective (even if not all of the contributors shared the same approach).<sup>121</sup>

While such work has been vital for drawing much-needed attention to German colonialism, it has had the effect of reintroducing questions of deep continuities in Germans’ conception of otherness. In linking nineteenth-century colonialism to German culture, this work has often linked nineteenth-century German culture to twentieth-century disaster. As H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl write:

A number of scholars have attempted to show that there was a long, colonialist engagement between Germans and non-Europeans that might, in Zantop’s words, explain “that racist, xenophobic and sexist models for action did not emerge in a vacuum but were firmly implanted in the imagination of “precolonial” Germans.”<sup>122</sup>

This body of work on German colonialism has been an important foundation for my own; the notion of colonial fantasies supports my application of colonial discourse to a nation which only maintained colonies from the mid-1880s through World War 1 (and moreover, to a German-

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<sup>120</sup> Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1997).

<sup>121</sup> Sara Friedrichsmeyer, Sara Lennox, and Susanne Zantop, eds., *The Imperialist Imagination: German Colonialism and Its Legacy* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); Eric Ames, Marcia Klotz, and Lora Wildenthal, eds., *Germany’s Colonial Pasts* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2005); Nina Berman, *Orientalismus, Kolonialismus und Moderne: Zum Bild des Orients in der deutschsprachigen Kultur um 1900* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1997).

<sup>122</sup> H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl, eds., *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 28n42.

speaking community which pre-existed nationhood). It also supports my contention of a relationship between colonialism and culture.

Nevertheless, my project is intended to reject arguments for German exceptionalism based upon a framework of cultural essentialism (of the “German mind” or “German nation” variety), as well as upon notions of continuity in general and teleology in particular. Two possible objections emerge here: first, it may appear that in bringing together anthropology, art, and theory under the concept of colonial discourse, I run the risk of reifying conceptions of a collective “German mind”; and second, that in linking examples of primitivist discourse from Georg Forster through to Adorno, I could be seen as positing continuity across time, adopting the *longue dureé* approach characteristic of genealogies of German racial, national, and *völkisch* thought.

My theoretical framework, as well as the selection of studies, is meant to demonstrate that German history offers ample examples of both apotropaic and aporetic primitivism. There is not a singular “German” conception of the primitive persisting through time, nor is there a collective consciousness to be discovered. If “homologies” can be said to exist between instances, these should be understood as the product of historical contingency; intellectual traditions exist, but they only acquire utility in the moment they are put to use, by a particular author, for a particular reason. Traditions are only ever continually reinvented in the moment.

I have tried therefore to draw attention to contingencies, whether personal (agency), societal (events), or institutional (structural). The personal level of explanation helps account for the uniqueness of Bastian, whose personal skills, ambitions, desires and experiences combined to position him as one of the prominent leaders in German ethnology, as opposed to

someone like Gustav Klemm, and which moreover led him to develop an idiosyncratic form of primitivism. At the level of societal events, transformative occurrences such as World War I effected anthropology as well as aesthetics. Structural features, such as class, economic relationships, political systems, educational frameworks, all played a role in shaping instances of primitivist discourse.

On a theoretical level, in order to posit connections and relationships while resisting teleology, I borrow from Bruno Latour the metaphor of network.<sup>123</sup> Latour uses the concept to replace the “social” as a process of interactions between actors, both human and non-human; the concept of the social, understood as a zone of human interaction divorced from nature, for example, is itself a product a set of distinctions between nature and society, and therefore is unsuitable as the framework for analysis. The network itself represents the outcome of transformations of “unstable states” into a system, although the process is continual and the network ever changing. I should like to use the term network here not only synchronically, however, but also diachronically, across space and time. A network in this sense implies connection between locations (a tug on one node of the net can trigger movement in the others), but not totality (there are gaps in the net, it is not connected to everything) nor singularity.

More specifically, by arguing for the existence of an aporetic primitivism, and locating it in such prominent voices as Bastian and the Brücke, I demonstrate the inadequacy of a deep genealogy of German racism or *völkisch* ethnocentrism. However, it should be noted that my conceptual approach differs from a separate current of recent studies of Germans’ conceptions

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<sup>123</sup> Bruno Latour, *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

of cultural and racial difference, as exemplified by Russell Berman's *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (1998) and Todd Kontje's *German Orientalisms* (2005).<sup>124</sup> As with the historiography on Germany's "imperialist imagination" mentioned above, these works focus on German cultural production in relationship to colonialism—Berman more broadly, on and literature, travelogues, geography, missionary writings, and psychoanalysis, Kontje more specifically on literature. Berman argues that "the German intellectual tradition also contains moments of genuine openness to foreign cultures and significant cross-cultural exchange," a conclusion shared by Kontje.<sup>125</sup>

On the one hand, both monographs offer nuanced readings of important texts, demonstrating that "many of the figures deemed central to the German national literature were themselves products of border zones and contested identities, and that they write about these conflicts in their most famous works," a claim with which I agree.<sup>126</sup> Both are justly critical of the hegemonic aspects of Said's argument, and hence press the case for plurality (Kontje's *Orientalisms* replaces Said's *Orientalism*). However, their refusal to engage with the important theoretical questions raised by Said's critique leads to an un-theorized notion of discourse, a practice which ends up minimizing political context; positive representations of the colonial or Oriental other are misconstrued as moments of "cross-cultural exchange." Berman's framing of the problem as one of "Enlightenment or empire" suggests an easy delineation between the two which obscures a far more complex fusion, as if a text's Enlightenment pedigree prevented its participation in imperialist modes of knowledge production. By adopting the frame of

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<sup>124</sup> Russell Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire: Colonial Discourse in German Culture* (Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1998); Todd Kontje, *German Orientalisms* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan, 2004).

<sup>125</sup> Berman, *Enlightenment or Empire*, 9.

<sup>126</sup> Kontje, *German Orientalisms*, 244.

colonial discourse, and the concepts of aporetic and apotropaic primitivism, I demonstrate that empire was already Enlightenment, and Enlightenment already empire. The concept of apotropaic primitivism entails that primitivism was a discourse simultaneously the product of both empire and Enlightenment. At the same time, resistance is possible from within the discourse, in the form of aporetic primitivism.

If the above demonstrates how my approach can productively reframe discussions about the relationship of colonialism to culture, my approach makes possible a related intervention in the historiography on the relationship of anthropology to culture. In light of Nazi racial science, there has been an understandable interest in assessing the relationship of the history of anthropology to National Socialism. Benoit Massin's pioneering work offered insight into the growing tendencies toward racial determinism, in the history of physical anthropology in particular.<sup>127</sup> However, as Penny and Bunzl caution, "Reading the discipline's trajectory through latter-day National Socialists is bound to produce a deep genealogy of Nazi thought qua anthropological race science."<sup>128</sup> The most important recent work on German anthropology has resisted implications of teleology; as Penny and Bunzl argue, "no clear trajectory can be drawn from the complex and multiple constellations that characterized imperial anthropology to the race science of the Nazis."<sup>129</sup>

In making their case, however, Penny and Bunzl must place a heavy stress on the liberal humanism and cosmopolitanism of nineteenth-century anthropologists such as Bastian and Rudolf Virchow. German anthropology was, they argue, "a self-consciously liberal endeavor,

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<sup>127</sup> Bennoit Massin, "From Virchow to Fischer: Physical Anthropology and 'Modern Race Theories' in Wilhelmine Germany," in *Volkgeist as Method and Ethic: Essays on Boasian Ethnography and the German Anthropological Tradition*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr., 79-154 (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1996).

<sup>128</sup> Penny and Bunzl, eds., *Worldly Provincialism*, 28.

<sup>129</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.



guided by a broadly humanistic agenda and centered on efforts to document the plurality and historical specificity of cultures.”<sup>130</sup> However, as I argued above against Berman and Kontje, this paints too rosy a picture of German anthropology in the nineteenth-century, a century that, if we accept the work by Zantop and others, offered ample evidence of racism and ethnocentrism, not only in the culture at large but within the field of anthropology. Bastian’s ethnology, for all its humanism, was nevertheless marred by a set of common ethnocentric assumptions, such as the cultural “simplicity” of “primitive” primitives. Anthropology, in spite of its humanism, nevertheless was not isolated from the imperial world, the “colonial fantasies” to which Zantop drew attention.<sup>131</sup> The significant feature of Bastian’s thought is not simply his humanism, which Penny and Bunzl present in opposition to “biology, hierarchy, and invariance.” If we take seriously the claims of colonial discourse analysis, the inseparability of humanism from imperialism and ethnocentrism becomes an unavoidable conclusion; to suggest otherwise is to echo Berman’s simplified dichotomy of Enlightenment and empire. Bastian’s thought was permeated as much by “biology, hierarchy, and invariance” as it was by “culture, plurality, and plasticity.”

If this line of thinking is correct, it complicates the primary analytic narrative presented in Penny and Bunzl’s volume, which argues that the discipline was marked by a turn to race in the twentieth century, and a corresponding “shift from culture, plurality, and plasticity to

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<sup>130</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>131</sup> Andrew Zimmerman has made a related argument, stressing the antihumanism of German anthropology in the late nineteenth century. Although I disagree with his classification of Bastian as antihumanist, his argument is otherwise a compelling one. Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001).

biology, hierarchy, and invariance.”<sup>132</sup> On the one hand, I would not dispute what they refer to as the “basic facts”:

that most German anthropologists and ethnologists abandoned the liberal humanism of Virchow and Bastian after the turn of the century, and that they embraced an increasingly *völkisch* vision, dominated by the various “struggles” for Lebensraum, both outside and within Europe instead.<sup>133</sup>

While there was a discernible shift in anthropological outlook from the late nineteenth to the early twentieth century, it would be a mistake to characterize the history of German anthropology as a trajectory of “Herder to Hitler,” as Penny and Bunzl phrase it, even though they qualify the by noting that the trajectory “does not provide us with an obvious path from the first to the second.”<sup>134</sup> On the one hand, anthropology in imperial Germany cannot simply be classed as humanist and pluralist. Andrew Zimmerman calls attention, for example, to the *Schulstatistik*, a survey conducted by the German Anthropological Society in the 1870s, headed by Virchow, which directed German states to record the hair, eye, and skin color of German schoolchildren. The anthropological knowledge produced by the study confirmed that “Germans were a blond, blue-eyed, and white-skinned ‘race,’ which was contrasted to brunet ‘races,’ particularly Jews.”<sup>135</sup> As Zimmerman writes, “Perhaps even more importantly, it taught the more than 6 million students whom it studied, as well as the teachers who collected the data, that Germanness could be perceived through ‘racial’ characteristics that were publicly perceivable by any layperson.” The study Zimmerman argues, therefore contributed to a discourse of nation and race in Wilhelmine Germany, and anthropology “represented an

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<sup>132</sup> Penny and Bunzl, eds., *Worldly Provincialism*, 21.

<sup>133</sup> *Ibid.*, 17.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 11.

<sup>135</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 135.

attempt to displace—or at least supplement—the humanist political traditions of Imperial Germany with a culture of natural science in which concepts of race played an important role.”<sup>136</sup>

If the notion of a turn-of-the-century “shift” to nation and race misrepresents nineteenth-century anthropology, Penny and Bunzl’s narrative also threatens to obscure a more complicated history, inseparable from an imperialist context, yet marked by more than one “shift”; it is a history better characterized as infused with oscillations. By focusing on examples of primitivism from the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to the writings of Adolf Bastian to the artwork of the Brücke, I aim to resist the simplified picture of a slippery slope, from “Herder to Hitler.” Although Penny and Bunzl suggest there is “no clear trajectory,” it would perhaps be best to resist the notion of trajectory here altogether.

If the thematization of a “shift” is problematic (perhaps “intensification” would be more appropriate), the fact of a disciplinary change is undeniable. The contributions to Penny and Bunzl’s volume offer an excellent set of well-researched alternative explanations for the change, including: a changing social world (the public sphere, mass culture), the ideology of objective science, colonial politics, eugenics, and the exigencies World War I. My own argument offers an alternative account, which is that there are both internal discursive factors responsible for the change, as well as external factors. To return to the image of oscillation, Bastian’s aporetic ethnology was eventually replaced by diffusionism, a theory of cultural movement and struggle which proved more apotropaic. (In the field of aesthetics, the Brücke’s aporetic primitivism was quickly eclipsed by the apotropaic primitivism of the Blaue Reiter.)

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<sup>136</sup> Ibid., 146.

There is a sense in which these alternating perspectives can be seen as reactions operating within the field of discourse, in response to destabilization. This is not to suggest that history has followed a neat dialectical path, in which conditions manifest a thesis that is met by an antithesis, producing a synthesis, and so on. On the other hand, strong positions can, in the right circumstances, provoke reactions, and part of my argument has been that the aporetic primitivism of Bastian and the Brücke was a strong, indeed disorienting, position.

In terms of external causes, I argue that we should consider further the ways in which the colonial encounter produced ambiguities—liminal states, to borrow Victor Turner’s terminology, or unstable states, as described by Latour—which worked as both a threat and an incitement to discourse production.<sup>137</sup> Liminality and instability can help us account for how discourse, through attempts to create systems of classification, produced liminal and unstable states, and how these instances of ambiguity compelled transformations in the discourse. By instances of ambiguity, I refer to human individuals, whether colonizers or colonial subjects, or to objects and artifacts, such as the ethnographic art objects collected by German ethnographic museums. This suggests that it wasn’t simply scientific “objectivity” or a “modernizing” society that led to an emphasis upon nation and race, but rather the particular ways in which encounters generated liminality in the colonial field.

If the above arguments undermine the case for German exceptionalism in the history of German anthropology, it would be a mistake to deny that that the discipline followed a unique national trajectory in the nineteenth century. Although national traditions in the post World

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<sup>137</sup> Victor Turner, *The Forest of Symbols* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press), 1967. I am drawing primarily upon Carroll Smith-Rosenberg’s articulation of Turner’s liminal states. See Carroll Smith-Rosenberg, “Sex as symbol in Victorian purity,” in *Culture and Society: Contemporary Debates*, eds. Jeff Alexander and Steven Seidman, 160-170 (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990).

War II world have been marked by a “loss of distinctiveness,”<sup>138</sup> during the period I examine national differences remain discernible. In spite of a common cosmopolitan orientation, and an awareness of developments across national boundaries, national traditions were noticeably the shaped by the personalities, institutional frameworks, and political contexts involved. If after 1858, British anthropology, “which for decades had focused on the problem of human unity, was now refocused on the problem of the origin of human civilization,”<sup>139</sup> the same cannot be said of the German tradition. Moreover, Bastian’s approach to the question of human universals bore a unique cast; while British anthropology absorbed a positivist philosophy and attempted to reconstruct human history in “scientific” terms, Bastian approached the question of human universals through the lens of Kantian epistemology, applied to the study of the artifacts of human cultural production. Bastian’s humanist universalism, however, although based on a Eurocentric perspective in which the *Naturvölker* offered the best objects of study on account of their “simplicity,” framed anthropology not as the study of the other *qua* other, but rather as a form of self-knowledge.

Colonial discourse (and the theoretical critique of colonial discourse) has framed as its central problem how to represent the “other”—as Young writes, postcolonial theory in the wake of Said has set itself “the theoretical problem of how the other can be articulated as such. How can we represent other cultures?”<sup>140</sup> Bastian, however, did not set as his task the problem of representing the “other”; or, to put it another way, the “other” in his work was not imagined as the primitive, it was the fundamental structure of human psychology, of which both

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<sup>138</sup> Fredrik Barth, “Britain and the Commonwealth,” in *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 56.

<sup>139</sup> George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987), 76.

<sup>140</sup> Young, *White Mythologies*, 42.

primitive and civilized were examples, and which, through an analysis of the relationship of particular to universal, might gradually be approached (even if knowledge of the other as such could never finally be achieved, as Bastian eventually came to suspect). In order to theorize, and represent, the truth of human universals, therefore, Bastian was not engaged in translating foreign meanings into recognizable categories, of representing the other; rather, his own textuality represented an obstacle, if also the only avenue, on the path toward knowledge. As a result he felt himself compelled toward a genre of writing that decentered the authorial perspective, and accordingly greatly puzzled his colleagues.

Bastian's primitivism was a radical revision of the self-other problem through the framework of anthropology; yet Bastian, for all his prominence in the field, was not largely understood by his colleagues, especially as his work grew more idiosyncratic. Thus it would not be correct to say that Bastian represented the "German" understanding of the "primitive"; yet at the same time his theoretical approach was a product of the German institutions, politics, and intellectual tradition out of which he grew.

My study, therefore, is an argument for particularity, yet not peculiarity. I see this project contributing to the cause of decentering, pluralizing, and normalizing German history, both in a colonial and metropolitan sense. As Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer write in their coauthored volume *Shattered Pasts: Reconstructing German Histories*: "There is no single master narrative to be told, no *Weltgeist* to be discovered, no national character to be indicted or, at long last, absolved."<sup>141</sup>

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<sup>141</sup> Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

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To circle back to where we began, it is clear that the twentieth-century artists who “discovered” the primitive drew upon a pre-existing, multivalent, and contradictory discourse of primitivism. It was, in this sense, a primitive refrain. Moreover, the value they found in this art was not in the insights it offered into specific other cultures—while artists had their favorite primitives (Picasso was inspired by African sculpture; Gauguin admired the Polynesians), the term referred indiscriminately to a variety of different cultures and artistic styles, contemporary and historical, and occluded the differences between them. The value of the primitive, as it has been theorized in the corpus of existing scholarship, was that it offered a mirror, a fragmented mirror perhaps, but like Picasso’s canvas, reflecting back the fears and desires of Western artists. But, as I will argue, primitivism isn’t just a mirror. The discourse of primitivism did not merely reflect modern subjects’ fears and desires, but was productive of them: in encountering others, they imagined modernity. The “discovery” of the primitive was in this sense hardly a discovery; it was if anything a rediscovery, more akin to the unearthing of a time capsule that former generations had buried, for the *thrill* of discovery, no less than the *fright* of what it might portend.

## Chapter 2. Primitivism as Projection and Project in Contemporary Theory

The idea that Europe is an idea is one whose time has come.

—Christopher Miller<sup>1</sup>

### Introduction

Research on primitivism has flourished in recent decades. This research has pursued two distinct, though deeply intertwined, lines of argument. The first has explored the ways in which primitivism has functioned as a *projection*—an array of images and tropes reflecting the fears and desires of the Western subject, projected onto the “primitive” other. The second has theorized primitivism as a *project*. The primitivist “project” has a different connotation in critical anthropology and modernism studies, but ultimately these two theoretical strands work together to cast primitivism as a product of modernity.

The first line of thought, which has its roots in Edward Said’s version of colonial discourse analysis, has argued that primitivism can be understood as a projection—an ideological construct produced by, and sustaining the processes of, imperialism.<sup>2</sup> This line of

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher L. Miller, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985), xi.

<sup>2</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979).



thought can be broken down further into two sub-currents, critical anthropology and modernism studies. Historians of anthropology in particular have deployed Said's theoretical framework to argue that anthropologists and imperialists in the nineteenth and twentieth century used primitivism as a discursive tool of political domination and knowledge production.<sup>3</sup> This scholarship, which grew out of discussions about Orientalism, has not typically focused on primitivism *per se*, but on anthropology as a discipline which authorized and institutionalized the Western discourse on the colonial other, a practice in which primitivism played a fundamental role. Critical anthropology embraced the notion of the primitive as a projection of the West, and sought to show how the "primitive" other reinforced nineteenth-century notions of historical progress, rationality, and moral, racial and spiritual superiority.

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<sup>3</sup> I am referring here to such prominent works as: Fabian, *Time and the Other*; George W. Stocking, Jr., *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 1988); Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989); Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988). I include Clifford here as he is generally seen as instrumental in the development of a critical anthropology, but due to the highly interdisciplinary nature of his work he is one of the few to legitimately straddle the distinction I am drawing here between the critique of anthropology and the critique of modernism. This body of literature on the history of anthropology relies upon a relatively straightforward notion of Saidian colonial discourse analysis. It should be noted however that a sizable amount of recent work on anthropology has not been concerned with colonial discourse analysis, and is therefore beyond the focus of this study. In addition, among postcolonial scholars of imperialism, some have dispensed with the model, while others have engaged to a greater extent with the subsequent critique of Said, most notably through the work of Homi Bhabha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. George Steinmetz, for example draws upon the work of Bhabha in *The Devil's Handwriting: Precoloniality and the German Colonial State in Qingdao, Samoa, and Southwest Africa* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007); Andrew Zimmerman relies upon Spivak and Jacques Derrida in *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001). This body of work has compellingly demonstrated that "all parties played active roles in anthropological and colonial encounters. . . . There was no inside or outside, no pure *before* or fallen *after*" (Zimmerman, 253n26). These studies therefore disengage from the projection model I discuss here. They have not however attended to the way in which primitivism as a discourse produced the subject position of modernity, nor how some examples of primitivism engaged in a form of aporetic self-critique.

At the same time, in the study of modernism, a separate but related body of work developed which was anchored in an analysis of primitivism in the arts, but which worked outward from there using the insights of colonial discourse analysis to think about primitivism as a broad cultural discourse of “othering.” This body of research adopted the same framing of primitivism as a projection which had been developed in colonial discourse analysis and in the critique of anthropology. This scholarship has above all been interested in linking primitivism to modernism, understood as a particular set of aesthetic principles and artist practices, originating sometime in the nineteenth century and stretching well into the twentieth. This “critique of modernism” has made primitivism its explicit focus (unlike the critique of anthropology, which targeted colonial discourse more generally). This work has richly contextualized primitivism in reference to the history of anthropology, as well as devoted attention to the many manifestations of primitivism in popular culture.<sup>4</sup>

These two lines of thought, although I seek to distinguish between them conceptually, are in fact deeply intertwined in the cultural studies literature. With a common origin in colonial discourse analysis, running through both critical anthropology and the critique of

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<sup>4</sup> Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989); Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990); Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997); Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (New Haven & London: Yale University Press, 1991); Gill Perry, “Primitivism and the ‘Modern’,” in *Primitivism, Cubism, Abstraction: The Early Twentieth Century*, eds. Charles Harrison, Francis Frascina, and Gill Perry, 3-85 (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1993); Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1995), Sieglinde Lemke, *Primitivist Modernism: Black Culture and the Origins of Transatlantic Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998). It should be noted that the critique of modernism, having in some sense separated itself from the critique of anthropology, thereby provided a new basis from which to re-examine anthropology, leading to few excellent, if not widely noted, critiques of anthropology/colonial discourse in terms of modernist aesthetics (an approach I adopt in my later analysis of German anthropology). See Suzanne Marchand, “Leo Frobenius and the Revolt against the West,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 32, no. 2 (1997):153-170; Simon Gikandi, “Africa and the Epiphany of Modernism,” in *Geomodernisms: Race, Modernism, Modernity*, eds. Laura Doyle and Laura Winkiel, 31-50 (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2005); as well as James Clifford’s much earlier piece, “On Ethnographic Surrealism,” *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 23, no. 4 (Oct., 1981): 539-564.

modernism, these two lines both share an emphasis on the notion of the primitive as a projection, an argument which has had major implications: it has fostered a greater awareness of the ideological constructs influencing scientific and art historical scholarship; it has bolstered efforts at more ethical forms of anthropological and art historical scholarship; and finally, it has initiated a better understanding of the constructedness of the “Western self.” Yet this last point has been curiously, and prematurely, truncated by a third line of thought, running counter to the first two, in which primitivism is understood as a “project.” The thematization of primitivism as a project is found in both the critique of anthropology and the critique of modernism, although, since both are motivated by a different set of disciplinary questions and concerns, the particular framing of primitivism as a project is different in each field; but the result, in both cases, is that primitivism is figured as a product of modernity.

The critique of anthropology, for example, has focused on primitivism as a discursive tool of political domination and knowledge production. As Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush write in *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist Project and the Culture of Modernism* (1995):

A powerful fixture of contemporary Western thought, the primitivism produced by Europe in the latter half of the nineteenth century supplied the necessary “Other” against whose specter embattled Victorian society reinforced itself. This construction was the defensive expression of a specific moment of crisis—the prehistory of a future whose unsettling shadow had just crossed the horizon.<sup>5</sup>

The “shadow” here is the “impending cultural transition” to modernity. As nineteenth-century social theorists such as Max Weber or Emile Durkheim “searched for the ills of modern society,” the discourse of anthropological primitivism provided them with a theoretical tool, the

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<sup>5</sup> Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future*, 2.

“ideal types” of “the primitive and the civilized.”<sup>6</sup> The description of primitivism as a “defensive expression” of an “embattled” society reveals that “the crisis” is not figured as imagined here, but as a condition, and a precarious one at that. Primitivism only “reinforced” the existing experience of reality “in crisis.” In other words, the anthropological primitivism of the nineteenth-century is seen as a product of modernity. The Other is seen as a “specter,” but the “ills of modern society” are not.

In the critique of modernism, primitivism is also framed as a project, with the same results. The research focus here has been to understand the relationship of primitivism to modernism. Facing a long-standing critical dismissal of the aesthetic and political value of primitivism as an artistic movement, scholars of art history have made an effort to argue that avant-garde artists in fact used primitivism as a tool to critique modernity. In the words of Jill Lloyd, for example, primitivism could be deployed as “a disruptive strategy to challenge the norms and values of European culture.”<sup>7</sup> But this rapprochement between primitivism and modernism is not without theoretical consequences, for modernism has universally been understood as a reaction to “the ills of modern society.” To cite the eminent art historian T.J.

Clark:

Modernism had two great wishes. It wanted its audience to be led toward a recognition of the social reality of the sign (away from the comforts of narrative and illusionism, was the claim) but equally it dreamed of turning the sign back to a bedrock of World/Nature/Sensation/Subjectivity which the to and fro of capitalism had all but destroyed.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

<sup>7</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, viii.

<sup>8</sup> T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 9.

Aware that some of his readers might balk at his leftist leanings (as some did in response to his earlier, highly-regarded work, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers*<sup>9</sup>), Clark generously offers to bracket his foregrounding of capitalism in a revised definition:

Leaving the word “capitalism” aside, is it not the case that the truly new, and disorienting, character of modernity is its seemingly being driven by merely material, statistical, tendential, “economic” considerations? We know we are living a new form of life, in which all previous notions of belief and sociability have been scrambled. . . . It is the blindness of modernity that seems to me fundamental, and to which modernism is a response.<sup>10</sup>

Regardless of whether one inclines to the socialist critique of capitalism or not, modernism is construed as a product of modernity. In this context, primitivism, as simply a type of modernism, is therefore equally framed as such a product.

These two lines of argument have complemented each other, yet I believe that the manner in which they have been intertwined has created a peculiar tension and obfuscation. Namely, that whereas the former tendency has encouraged scholars to embrace the cultural constructedness of the “primitive” other (as a projection), equally implying the constructedness of the “Western self,” the concurrent understanding of primitivism as a project has worked to anchor the relationship of primitivism to a particular monolithic and reified conception of modernity—namely, as the apex or apotheosis of civilization (defined by capitalism, industrialism, urbanization, rationalization—all of those forces which have scrambled “all previous notions of belief and sociability”). As a result, the utility of theorizing primitivism as a

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<sup>9</sup> T. J. Clark, *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984). See for example the review by Hilton Kramer, “T.J. Clark and the Marxist Critique of Modern Painting,” which appeared in *The New Criterion* in March 1985. (Reprinted in Hilton Kramer, “T.J. Clark and the Marxist Critique of Modern Painting,” in *The New Criterion Reader: The First Five Years*, ed. Hilton Kramer, 48-58 (New York: Free Press, 1988).

<sup>10</sup> Clark, *Farewell*, 8.

projection of self/other has been vitiated through the entrenched habit of theorizing this very projection *as a result* of the condition of modernity.

“Entrenched habit” is one way of describing this phenomenon. Another way might be, to borrow from Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, as a refrain.<sup>11</sup> As I use it here, the notion of refrain is intended to underline that the “habit” is not simply a matter of poor theory, which some amount of greater discipline or more rigorous self-reflection will ameliorate. Primitivism understood as a refrain, I will argue, helps emphasize its role as part of a cultural hermeneutic of experience, a discourse which produces a recognizable territory, the territory of modernity. This hermeneutic, I believe, is responsible for the theoretical tension.

I therefore begin this chapter by discussing primitivism as a theoretical problem, leading up to the work of Victor Li, the only theorist to take a critical stance in relationship to the body of work itself which I have just been describing (critical anthropology and critical modernism). Li’s work does not aim to participate in this scholarship but makes it the focus of his own critical analysis. In *The Neo-primitivist Turn*, Li argues that “our awareness of the . . . geopolitics of primitivism . . . has not led to the disappearance of primitivism but to its deeper imbrication in contemporary theoretical discourses that appear to be anti-primitivist and politically progressive.”<sup>12</sup>

I believe that Li is correct about the lingering life of primitivism in contemporary theory, though not for the same reasons, and we come to a different conclusion. Li argues that although this corpus of work “questions the use of terms like ‘primitive’ and ‘primitivism,’ it

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<sup>11</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987).

<sup>12</sup> Victor Li, *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), viii.

continues to exhibit a deep primitivist logic that lurks in displaced but related concepts like ‘alterity,’ ‘culture,’ and surprisingly, ‘modernity.’”<sup>13</sup> In other words, although these writers dismiss primitivism, and are thus “anti-primitivist,” they use concepts such as alterity and culture in a way which Li shows is not neutral, but in fact reproduces the primitivism they sought to overcome.

Yet whereas Li sees this as a problem of theory, I argue it is a problem of history. For Li in fact, it is not only a problem of contemporary theory, but universal, endemic to theory itself. Li concludes that the “primitive” is indeed necessary for critical thought—that, in the words of Michel de Certeau, “theorizing always needs a savage.”<sup>14</sup> Li writes: “The primitive Other, even if it does not exist, has to be imagined in order for us to entertain not only the utopian hope for something different from our present, but also the possibility of critical reflexivity in general.”<sup>15</sup>

I argue that theorizing may need an Other, but that this need not be the “primitive” other. The problem is that Li has himself absorbed the confusion of the “projection” and “project” narratives, leading him to accept that alterity and culture can only be conceived in terms of a primitive-civilized distinction. Focusing on Li’s critique of two main figures from anthropology and cultural studies (Marshall Sahlins and Marianna Torgovnick), I argue that their use of such concepts as alterity and culture are not necessarily primitivist, but only contingently so. Li argues that alterity and culture can only be conceived in terms of a primitive-civilized distinction, but the problem is not with these concepts, but the fact that they are used

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid., ix.

<sup>14</sup> Michel de Certeau, cited by Josette Féral, “The Power of Difference,” in *The Future of Difference*, ed. Hester Eisenstein and Alice Jardine (Boston: G.K Hall, 1980), 88, quoted in Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 218. Li states that Féral does not give the source of Certeau’s remark.

<sup>15</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 221.

by these authors as counter-concepts to modernity. The concept “modernity” is not simply a third term, another form of primitivism in this shell game—one which Li finds “surprising,” as if it wasn’t to be expected; it is rather the primitive-modernity binary which inflects these scholars’ particular uses of alterity and culture into a primitivist discourse.

Li’s acceptance that the only possible Other is the “primitive” other simply reveals the extent to which primitivism has historically come to eclipse the field of alterity in modernity. Li’s intervention is burdened by this same “projection/project” tension, such that the primitive is seen as something which must be “imagined” in order to deal with the reality of a “the present” that is not imagined. The problem with the “projection/project” thesis is that the content of the projection is specified—it is the fears and desires of “the present,” of the “Western self,” that are projected onto the imagined “primitive” other. The projection is therefore more specifically a *mirror*—a reflection of the *condition* of modernity. The mirror is not a window onto the other, but a reflection of the reality of the self.

Thus I will conclude with an argument that primitivism should be retheorized, not as a mirror, but as a lamp—a reference to M.H. Abrams’ 1953 work on Romanticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp*.<sup>16</sup> If we can imagine the discourse of primitivism as a lamp, we can imagine primitivism, not as a product of modernity, but as that which illuminates the territory of modernity, or the territory of the modern self.

In 1979, the year after Said first published *Orientalism*, Richard Rorty’s *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* appeared. Rorty’s anti-representationist argument, rejecting the view of language as the mirror of nature, might be said to resonate through the halls of colonial

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<sup>16</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953).



discourse analysis, in the form of the “projected” other. Yet the implications of an anti-representationist theory of discourse would entail not only recognizing the projection of the other, but the projection of the self. As Rorty once contemplated a “philosophy without mirrors,” I suggest that a “primitivism without mirrors” is possible. Whether this is desirable, as of yet, remains another question.<sup>17</sup>

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The above argument is presented below in three parts. The first part traces the historiographical development of the understanding of primitivism as a projection. I highlight the important theoretical framing work of Edward Said and Johannes Fabian, which, in conjunction with the 1984 MoMA “Primitivism” exhibition, provided the crucial foundation for the ensuing critique of anthropology and the critique of modernism. I also draw attention to the unique field of meanings evoked by the “primitive,” a field which is more specified and therefore more fundamental than Orientalism or colonial discourse more generally.

The second part begins by clarifying the harmful effects of the discourse of primitivism, the desires of critics to overcome this tainted past, and the fleeting hopes that scholarship was finally about to move on. I then turn to assess Li’s argument that primitivism has not faded from critical discourse, but lives on in the form of what he terms “Neo-primitivism.”

The third part examines in greater detail the way in which cultural studies of primitivism have been influenced by the drive to link primitivism to modernism. I argue that in identifying primitivism as a type of modernism, this scholarship has reinforced the notion of primitivism as

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<sup>17</sup> Richard Rorty, *Philosophy and the Mirror of Nature* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1979).

a product of modernity. To demonstrate the consequences of this, I then turn to the key concept of modernity itself, to argue that the discourse of primitivism is not simply like a mirror reflecting the reality of modernity, but should be seen, rather, as productive of it. I argue on the one hand that the discourse of primitivism has played a fundamental constitutive role in “the critique of modernity,” a view of society popularly characterized by Max Weber’s phrase as the “disenchantment of the world.”<sup>18</sup> At the same time, I argue that the problem extends beyond the domain of theory; at its root the problem is about the experience of modernity. The reason primitivism hasn’t been dislodged from contemporary critical theory is that it hasn’t been dislodged as a hermeneutic of aesthetic experience.

## **Part 1. Anthropology, Empire, and Art**

To address this peculiar theoretical tension in the historiography of primitivism, between primitivism as *projection* and primitivism as *project*, it will be useful to follow for a moment the history of the scholarship on primitivism as it has taken shape over the last few decades. A swath of critical writing since the 1980s has demonstrated that the “primitive” is a cultural construction, a projection of the West; it is a discourse that works like a mirror, telling us little if anything about its object, the various “primitive” others, but revealing a great deal about the subject—the Western “self.” As Marianna Torgovnick writes in *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellects, Modern Lives*:

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<sup>18</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), 35.

To study the primitive is . . . to enter an exotic world which is also a familiar world. That world is structured by sets of images and ideas that have slipped from their original metaphoric status to control perceptions of primitives—images and ideas I shall call tropes. Primitives are like children, the tropes say. Primitives are our untamed selves, our id forces—libidinous, irrational, violent, dangerous. Primitives are mystics, in tune with nature, part of its harmonies. Primitives are free. Primitives exist at the “lowest cultural levels”; we occupy the “highest.”<sup>19</sup>

In other words, in any attempt at defining the primitive,

the needs of the present determine the value and nature of the primitive. The primitive does what we ask it to do. Voiceless, it lets us speak for it. . . . For Euro-Americans, then, to study the primitive brings us always back to ourselves, which we reveal in the act of defining the Other.<sup>20</sup>

Torgovnick’s critique is representative of the current scholarly consensus—a consensus that has been driven largely by the developments of postcolonial theory as well as the cultural turn in the humanities. The postcolonial critique that had been developing in the late 1970s and early 1980s, especially through the work of Edward Said (*Orientalism*, 1978) and Johannes Fabian (*Time and the Other*, 1983), revealed the Eurocentric framing of cultural discourse about the non-European other.<sup>21</sup> Said’s focus was the Orient (which he demarcated, roughly speaking, as a loose concatenation of the Middle East and the Arab world), not primitivism *per se*, a distinction to which I will return momentarily. Said deployed Michel Foucault’s idea of discourse to understand the relationship of power and knowledge in the context of imperialism:

Taking the late eighteenth century as a very roughly defined starting point Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient—dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by

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<sup>19</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive: Savage Intellectuals, Modern Lives* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1990), 8.

<sup>20</sup> *Ibid.*, 9.

<sup>21</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 1979); Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, with a new foreword by Matt Bunzl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; 2002).

teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.<sup>22</sup>

The discourse of Orientalism established norms and placed constraints upon any attempt to think the Orient; thus, "political imperialism governs an entire field of study, imagination, and scholarly institutions—in such a way as to make its avoidance an intellectual and historical impossibility."<sup>23</sup>

Said argued that "European culture gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self."<sup>24</sup> The Orient is thus figured as the archetypal discourse of alterity in Said's conception. Yet it is worth observing that although he defines Orientalism as a cohesive set of "stereotypes" made about the Orient, the particular qualities attributed to the Orient are only loosely determined. From some of his more specific comments on the subject it is possible to identify what unites them. He writes for example:

. . . . On the one hand there are Westerners, and on the other there are Arab-Orientals; the former are (in no particular order) rational, peaceful, liberal, logical, capable of holding real values, without natural suspicion; the latter are none of these things.<sup>25</sup>

. . . . The essential relationship, on political, cultural, and even religious grounds, was seen—in the West, which is what concerns us here—to be one between a strong and a weak partner. Many terms were used to express their relation: Balfour and Cromer, typically, used several. The Oriental is rational, depraved (fallen), childlike, "different"; thus the European is rational, virtuous, mature, "normal."<sup>26</sup>

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<sup>22</sup> Said, *Orientalism*, 3.

<sup>23</sup> Said, 14. He continues: "My contention is that without examining Orientalism as a discourse one cannot possibly understand the enormously systematic discipline by which European culture was able to manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively during the post-Enlightenment period."

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>25</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

. . . . One of the important developments in nineteenth-century Orientalism was the distillation of essential ideas about the Orient—its sensuality, its tendency to despotism, its aberrant mentality, its habits of inaccuracy, its backwardness—into a separate and unchallenged coherence.<sup>27</sup>

Although Said claims a coherence and stresses “the internal consistency of Orientalism and its ideas about the Orient,”<sup>28</sup> the only common denominator is the articulation of justified authority and power over the Orient, its perceived inferiority rendering it a legitimate subject of Western rule. As Said writes, “the essence of Orientalism is the ineradicable distinction between Western superiority and Oriental inferiority.”<sup>29</sup> Beyond this determinate power relation, the Orient is characterized simply by its abnormality; attributes are assigned according to the context. The Orient, in the Orientalist discourse, is whatever the West is not. Some attributes are persistent: the Orient is almost always irrational. Others are ambivalent: it is either too civilized (superficial or decadent) or uncivilized (savage); either excessively spiritual (mystical), or heathen (not Christian); either alluringly feminine (in deceptive submissiveness or weakness), or alarmingly masculine (in despotic strength or violence).

The discourse of primitivism works in similar fashion, but is not identical with Orientalism. Primitivism is a more specified, and in that sense more fundamental, discourse. The Orient is opposed to the West; the primitive is opposed to civilization. The Orient, in spite of its inferiority in the Orientalist discourse, was understood as an alternative (if abnormal) form of civilization, not as *the absence of* civilization. The primitive is imagined as pre-civilized,

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 205.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 42.

pre-writing, pre-history. Primitivism therefore is a discourse of alterity which structures ways of thinking about two particular concepts: nature and history.

As nature is opposed to civilization, the primitive is embedded in nature. Civilization is a concept with many referents, yet in so far as it is opposed to nature, it represents mastery or separation from nature, a condition predicated upon, at the most basic level, technology. Technology in this sense refers both to tool-making but also society-making, the “artificial” or human-made constructs and inventions, whether spears or parliaments, which separate civilization from the state of nature. In this area, then, primitivism has historically shaped attempts to think about autonomy, authenticity, and alienation. The primitive is also something that exists outside of history—and thus has informed attempts to think about temporality, progress, and historical consciousness. Primitivism is perhaps most crucially a lapsarian discourse in a way that Orientalism is not. For this reason it has been possible to speak about an “inner savage” but not an “inner Oriental,” and to conceive of the primitive (but not the Orient) as the origin of humanity—as its nadir, or apex, depending upon one’s view.

Primitivism therefore asserts particular qualities about the other. Unlike the “Oriental,” the “primitive” is not *simply* irrational, but irrational on account of being subsumed in nature. At the same time, the binary discourse of primitivism is inherently instable. The primitive is both embedded in nature, and yet also human. The primitive is irrational, but also, insofar as it belongs to nature, is somehow beyond the rational/irrational binary. The primitive is in the past, but also somehow outside of history altogether. The binaries in primitivism are less about clear oppositions of self/other than the confounding of these oppositions—more like an M.C. Escher print. Primitivism is therefore a more limited but also more fundamental discourse of

alterity; Orientalists, in other words, often *deployed* a primitivist discourse (among other discourses and stereotypes) in their descriptions of “the Orient.”

Whereas Said focused on the Orient and cultural discourse more broadly, Johannes Fabian focused in particular on the temporality of primitivism and its construction and pervasiveness in the discipline of anthropology. Fabian’s key insight was that anthropological theory and ethnographic writing worked together to place the object of anthropological science, the primitive other, in a separate and subordinate temporal realm. Fabian found that this displacement of the primitive Other reached its definite articulation in the sense of evolutionary time which was developed and codified in nineteenth-century anthropology:

It promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time.<sup>30</sup>

Fabian termed this anthropological practice a *denial of coevalness*—a refusal to acknowledge the intersubjectivity of the ethnographer and his object of study. Anthropological writing had thus been marked by a cognitive *allochronism* since the emergence of evolutionary thinking. As Matti Bunzl explains in his Foreword to *Time and the Other*:

The discipline’s evolutionary doctrine—constituted at the intersection of scientism, Enlightenment belief in progress, and colonially veiled ethnocentrism—in turn codified anthropology’s allochronic orientation. In this manner, contemporary “scientific” categorizations like “savage”, “barbaric” and “civilized” signified stages of historical development. Conceiving global history in terms of universal progress, this allochronic logic identified and constituted late-nineteenth century “savages” as “survivals”—inhabitants of more or less ancient states of cultural development. At the same time,

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<sup>30</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 17.

anthropology's allochronism established a "civilized" West as the pinnacle of universal human progress, an argument that helped to legitimate various imperialist projects.<sup>31</sup>

Although as we saw, primitivism has a long history, in the nineteenth century it acquired a particular articulation. Anthropology, as the study of non-Europeans, established itself as a scientific discipline with institutional authority over the discourse of primitivism. The image of the primitive solidified as a category of the other which was not simply strange and exotically different, but somehow behind, both in evolutionary time and in mental, moral, or spiritual capability. As Bernard McGrane puts it, in the nineteenth century, "evolutionary time . . . came between the European and the non-European Other,' and gave rise to an anthropology that 'first . . . transformed difference into *historical* difference, and then . . . transformed history into evolution (progressive evolution)."<sup>32</sup> At the same time, generally speaking, the heightened pace of European imperialism and colonialism paralleled a development in which earlier Romantic views of the primitive or natural life were replaced by a view of primitive societies as irredeemably inferior, undeveloped, and, most importantly, as in need of "civilizing."<sup>33</sup>

In this way, through the complicity of anthropology and empire, European individuals constructed a subject identity founded on a belief in civilization, progress, rationality, and autonomy, in opposition to a primitive "other" lacking these traits, and therefore an object of aversion or disgust. This anthropological primitivism increasingly informed popular

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<sup>31</sup> Matti Bunzl, "Foreword to Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other/Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology*," in *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, by Johannes Fabian (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983), xi.

<sup>32</sup> Bernard McGrane, *Beyond Anthropology: Society and the Other* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), quoted in Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 3.

<sup>33</sup> Major works on the history of anthropology and the "primitive" include George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992); Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).



understandings of primitivism throughout the nineteenth century. The ironic result is that even whereas individual anthropologists themselves expressed serious interest in understanding their subject, which often meant trying to account for a people's history or the recognition of "rational" self-governing behaviors, the institutionally and textually reinforced denial of coevalness harnessed such observations into supporting rather than undermining the primitivist discourse. This state of affairs is visible in the mocking comments made by a critic of the British anthropologist T. E. Bowdich's 1819 study of the Ashanti of West Africa: "The 'history' of the Ashantees, to which Mr. Bowdich has dedicated a whole chapter, is, like that of all other savages who can neither read nor write, the history of a day, and little worthy of notice."<sup>34</sup>

Modernist artists, as we saw above, inherited this set of tropes, but reversed the valence. That which had formerly been denigrated was now admired, praised, imitated. It should be clear, however, that both these forms of primitivism involve an inherent imposition of an evaluative and normative difference, a hierarchy of self and other. The difference between anthropological and modernist primitivism is only that the latter reverses the value judgment of the former; hierarchy and otherness are inverted but preserved, casting the other as an object of desire rather than fear. Thus the timelessness which Bowdich's critic despised in the report on the Ashanti becomes in Gauguin's paintings of Polynesian scenes an idealized, desirable, dreamlike state.

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<sup>34</sup> Unsigned review, in *Quarterly Review* 22 (January 1820), 286, quoted in Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725-1907* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 15.

Although modernists saw themselves as overcoming the negative anthropological primitivism, the same forces propelling the critique of anthropology in the 1980s produced a rigorous critique of modernism. Both were a part of the larger current of postmodernism, in which it became clear that modernism's inversion or "validation" of the primitive was in fact primitivism in sheep's clothing. A key catalyst in this history was the highly controversial 1984 Museum of Modern Art exhibition, "'Primitivism' in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and Modern." The MoMA exhibition served as a threshold of sorts—modernism's last hurrah. Conceived in one intellectual climate, it offered a focal point around which the new developments could arrange themselves, a springboard into a new critical understanding of the significance of primitivism.<sup>35</sup>

Previously, most studies of primitivism in the visual arts had focused on identifying the particular ways in which European artists had been inspired thematically or influenced by formal qualities of "primitive" art. Although some elements of the exhibition pursued this line of thought, the organizers, William Rubin and Kirk Varnedoe, also sought to dramatically revise this art historical paradigm. The format juxtaposed works by modern European artists, such as Picasso, with works of "primitive" art (from Africa, Oceania, and the Americas) to demonstrate their essential "affinities" and their shared "formal qualities."<sup>36</sup> (See figs. 2.1 and 2.2)

The exhibition unleashed a virulent flood of criticism. The organizers, although aware they were wading into unsettled waters, imagined that by celebrating modernism and the artists who had been inspired by "primitive" art, and by including alongside these European

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<sup>35</sup> Flam, *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art*, 17-20.

<sup>36</sup> William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 55, 59

artworks the artistic productions of non-Europeans, that they were breaking with a long-standing primitivist discourse which had denigrated non-Europeans and privileged the West. As Rubin sonorously intoned in the catalogue: “The vestiges of a discredited evolutionary myth still live in the recesses of our psyches. . . . I hope our effort will demonstrate that at least insofar as it pertains to works of the human spirit, the evolutionary prejudice is clearly absurd.”<sup>37</sup>

The uncomfortable irony was that the exhibition reproduced the primitivist discourse it pretended to eschew. (It’s revealing enough that Rubin felt the need to qualify his remark – outside of art, he implies, the prejudice may have some traction?) The exhibition’s format, displaying objects identified as “primitive” and “tribal” alongside “modern” works by “Westerners,” effectively essentialized categories that were historical and contextual, and reaffirmed primitivist tropes. James Clifford, in a widely-noted article for *Art in America* (reprinted in *The Predicament of Culture*), unpacked the troubling implications of the exhibition’s allegory of affinity: “The word is a kinship term, suggesting a deeper or more natural relationship than mere resemblance or juxtaposition. It connotes a common quality or essence joining the tribal to the modern.”<sup>38</sup> In search of affinity, Clifford continued (quoting from Rubin), the exhibit picks out a hero:

[Picasso’s] virtuoso work, an exhibition caption tells us, contains more affinities with the tribal than that of any other pioneer modernist. These affinities “measure the depth of Picasso’s grasp of the informing principles of tribal sculpture, and reflect his profound identity of spirit with the tribal peoples.” Modernism is thus presented as a search for “informing principles” that transcend culture, politics, and history.<sup>39</sup>

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<sup>37</sup> Rubin, “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art*, 71.

<sup>38</sup> James Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1988), 190.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 191.

In other words, Rubin and Varnedoe praised twentieth-century primitivist art as a moment in which artists were finally able to recuperate the primitive, the instinctual, the mystical other, a mode of being which Europe/the Western world had lost; and they praised “primitive” art of Africans and others where it was thought to best express this essential primitiveness.

Rubin and Varnedoe made it clear that they had no interest in the particular history or function that the “primitive” art may have held for its creators. As Rubin wrote in the exhibition brochure:

The term “primitivism” does not refer to tribal art itself, but only to modern Western interest in it. Our exhibition thus focuses not on the origins and intrinsic meanings of tribal objects themselves, but on the ways these objects were understood and appreciated by modern artists. The artists who first recognized the power of tribal art generally did not know its sources or purposes. They sensed meanings through intuitive response to the objects, often with a “creative misunderstanding” of their forms and functions.<sup>40</sup>

The MoMA exhibit, in asserting the “timeless” and “transcendent” qualities of art, effaced the cultural context of “primitive” artworks (production, acquisition, display), just as it dismissed the cultural context of primitivist modernist art. As Clifford wrote, it thereby brought to the fore a “disquieting quality of modernism: its taste for appropriating or redeeming otherness, for constituting non-Western arts in its own image, for discovering universal, ahistorical ‘human’ capacities.”<sup>41</sup> This is manifest in the prefatory comment by Varnedoe:

We should recall that modernist primitivism ultimately depends on the autonomous force of objects—and especially on the capacity of tribal art to transcend the intentions and conditions that first shaped it. This phenomenon not only testifies to the inventive power of tribal artists, humbling in its denial of Western presumptions linking human potential to technological progress. It also honors the modernist artists who, subverting

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<sup>40</sup> Rubin, *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art*, quoted by Torgovnick, 122.

<sup>41</sup> Clifford, *Predicament of Culture*, 193.

their received traditions, forged a bond between intelligences otherwise divided by all the barriers of language, belief, and social structure. On the one hand, the power of art to surpass its cultural confines; on the other, the ability of a culture to see beyond, and revolutionize, its established art.<sup>42</sup>

What was admirable in the “tribal” artists was their inventiveness (seen as surprising, in light of their lack of “technological progress”), an instinctual inventiveness which enabled them to transcend their context and create universal art. Modern artists, on the other hand, through their perspicacious recognition of what was valuable in other cultures, were able to “subvert” their society’s traditions. In other words, although the exhibition saw itself as deconstructing the difference between the Tribal and the Modern by demonstrating affinities, what they produced was a vision in which modern artists could be admired for their ability to “recuperate” or tap into the lost primitive, and primitive art could be admired where it revealed its essential “primitiveness.”

Clifford emphasized that the MoMA’s critique of the anthropological approach to “primitive” objects was deceptive. The exhibition’s disinterest in the anthropological understanding of primitive objects was in fact merely the inverse of anthropology’s long disinterest in these objects’ aesthetic qualities. The perceived distinction between the aesthetic and the anthropological interpretation of “primitive” objects was reinforced by the perceived schism between the institutional domains of the art gallery and the anthropology museum: in ethnographic museums, the cultural context of the objects’ production, use, and symbolism was the primary focus; in art museums, the same objects were appreciated solely for their aesthetic qualities. While both could claim to be doing greater “justice” to their material,

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<sup>42</sup> Kirk Varnedoe, “Preface,” in *Primitivism in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1, ed. William Rubin (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), x.

anthropology and modernism, Clifford argued, worked in tandem to deny subjectivity to the “primitive” other:

Since the early years of modernism and cultural anthropology non-Western objects have found a “home” either within the discourses and institutions of art or within those of anthropology. The two domains have excluded and confirmed each other, inventively disputing the right to contextualize, to represent these objects. . . . Both discourses assume a primitive world in need of preservation, redemption, and representation. The concrete, inventive existence of tribal cultures and artists is suppressed in the process of either constituting authentic, “traditional” worlds or appreciating their products in the timeless category of “art.”<sup>43</sup>

In other words, in the eyes of its critics, the exhibition revealed the insidious dynamics of anthropology, empire and art.

## **Part 2. The Persistence of Primitivism in Contemporary Theory**

### ***Primitivism Revealed and Reviled***

In the years after the 1984 MoMA exhibition, several important works appeared exploring the constructedness of the primitive “other” and the complicity of ethnography, art and imperialism more generally. Anthropologists and historians of anthropology, building off of Fabian’s work, examined the history of the concept of primitive and how the supposedly objective science of anthropology had been shaped by ideological influences of class, gender and race. Adam Kuper, in *The Invention of Primitive Society*, sought to account for “the genesis of the illusion, and more particularly for its persistence. The persistence of the model is

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<sup>43</sup> Clifford, *The Predicament of Culture*, 200.

peculiarly problematic since various of its basic assumptions were quite directly contradicted by ethnographic evidence and by the logic of evolutionary theory itself.”<sup>44</sup>

Other studies, more oriented towards primitivism in art and literature, paid greater attention to the role of popular culture.<sup>45</sup> Sally Price’s *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (1989) was one of the first works to articulate this argument for a broad audience. Widely reviewed in the academic and popular press, the short book evoked a mixed reception at first, drawing ire from those anthropologists and art critics who continued to assert the validity of the concept of “primitive” art and society.<sup>46</sup> Torgovnick’s *Gone Primitive* (1990) offered a sweeping and rigorous examination of the most well-known examples of primitivism from the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. She looked at anthropologists such as Bronislaw Malinowski, Margaret Mead, and Claude Lévi-Strauss; popular culture, such as the Tarzan novels; the psychology theories of Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung; art critics such as Roger Fry, Michel Leiris, and William Rubin; and novelists such as Joseph Conrad and D.H. Lawrence. Torgovnick was the first major writer on primitivism to bring into the foreground the many ways that constructions of gender and sexuality informed primitivist tropes. Finally, whereas Kuper had confined his study to the theoretical developments in anthropology, Torgovnick, following Said, emphasized the cultural pervasiveness of the discourse of primitivism:

The primitive is in our museums and homes, in our closets and jewelry boxes, in our hearts and minds. The primitive is everywhere present in modernity and postmodernity, as impetus or subtext, just as modernity or postmodernity forms the subtext of much

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<sup>44</sup> Adam Kuper, *The Invention of Primitive Society: Transformations of an Illusion* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 8.

<sup>45</sup> Though it should be noted that the two strongest works (though less cited than Kuper’s) on primitivism in anthropology, Stocking’s *Victorian Anthropology* and Kuklick’s *The Savage Within*, both paid significant attention to the relationship of popular culture to anthropology, although the focus was on internal theoretical developments within the field. Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991).

<sup>46</sup> Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989).

ethnological writing and thinking. Interest in the primitive cuts across levels of culture—from the high to the low and vice versa—with the gap between the statements made by “low” culture and those made by “high” culture narrower than we might intuitively expect. A voyeuristic interest in the primitive surrounds us in what we see and hear, what we learn and read, from the cradle to the grave: it is part of our atmosphere, of the culture we live and breathe. We have no need to “go primitive” because we have already “gone primitive” by the fact of being born into our culture.<sup>47</sup>

As we have seen, the outcome of this work has been a much deeper understanding of the constructedness of the primitive. This has not simply been a matter of obscure academic interest, but one with serious political concerns of global scope. Primitivism, at its most basic, in its application to contemporary human societies, constitutes an ideological distortion of the world—an ethnocentric, class-centric, male-centric tool for cultural and social domination. Historically, primitivism, as a product of imperialism, has worked to legitimate colonialism, exploitation, and violence. Today, in the absence of formal imperialism, the specter of primitivism continues to undergird global hierarchies, as developed nations and the West dictate the fates of the Third World or the Global South. Whether through hard power or soft power, primitivism bolsters geopolitics and, as Johannes Fabian writes, accommodates “the schemes of a one-way history: progress, development, modernity (and their negative mirror images: stagnation, underdevelopment, tradition).”<sup>48</sup>

### ***Primitivism Vanquished?***

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<sup>47</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 246.

<sup>48</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 144.



The primitive, then, was a concept whose time had come. As Kuper wrote, “If this book helps to explain the persistence of an illusion, then perhaps it may even hold out the promise of an escape from illusion.” Torgovnick expressed a parallel desire in *Gone Primitive*:

[This study] asks precisely that we understand the rules governing the exchange between the modern West, the postmodern West, and the versions of the primitive they have created or endorsed. It seeks to make impossible innocent reenactments of the dramas of us and them that have been staged and restaged in the modern West’s encounters with primitive Others.<sup>49</sup>

To some in the heady days of postmodernism, buoyed by the swells of self-reflexivity and “incredulity toward metanarratives,” it seemed that primitivism was at last poised to fade away—if not because of the onslaught of theoretical criticism and scholarship, surely as the inevitable result of globalization and the final disappearance of those imagined “primitive” societies to which the concept had once referred, societies which could no longer be seen as isolated, authentic, natural, pure.<sup>50</sup> For Fredric Jameson, the triumph of Western modernity and globalized capitalism had produced:

a situation in which the survival, residue, the holdover, the archaic, has finally been swept aside without a trace . . . Ours is a more homogeneously modernized condition; we no longer are encumbered with the embarrassment of non-simultaneities and non-synchronicities. Everything has reached the same hour on the great clock of development or rationalization (at least from the perspective of the “West”).<sup>51</sup>

For the postmodernists, the disappearance of the imagined “primitive,” the impossibility to believe in the myth of the primitive, posed a deep epistemological problem for postmodern

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<sup>49</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 41.

<sup>50</sup> The quote is from Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), xxiv.

<sup>51</sup> Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991), 309-10, quoted in Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 33. Jameson also writes: “In modernism, . . . some residual zones of ‘nature’ or ‘being,’ of the old, the older, the archaic, still subsist; culture can still do something to that nature and work at transforming that ‘referent.’ Postmodernism is what you have when the modernization process is complete and nature is gone for good” (ix).

culture. The receding of primitivism was less a liberation from imperialist thinking than a curse of capital, because the primitive, the fundamental form of alterity, had been rendered a commodity, and an impossibility. Alterity, that radical alternative which is deemed necessary to critique Western modernity, seemed to have vanished along with it. As Jean Baudrillard wrote:

There has been a beautiful moment of culture . . . . [I]t is between the seventeenth and the nineteenth centuries. Here we find exchange, cultures bump into each other, and considering also the irruption of primitive cultures, it is a very interesting moment. But today, with globalization, all differences are annulled, or else it is a game of differences, but there is no longer a real clash, an alterity of cultures . . . . But there can't be identity without alterity; if there is no other, there is no self. Today one does not know where the other is, because with globalization there is no other.<sup>52</sup>

### ***The Primitive Refrain : Primitivism without Primitives***

Yet for all that, primitivism hasn't disappeared, not from theory, nor from popular culture. In 2005 Kuper issued a revised edition of his earlier work, now titled *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth*, in which he wrote:

The first time around, I made the . . . error of supposing that the idea of primitive society was on its last legs. "My aim," I wrote in the final paragraph of *The Invention of Primitive Society*, "has been to free us from some of our history. Anthropologists developed the theory of primitive society, but we may make amends if we render it obsolete at last, in all its protean forms." This was a vain hope.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Jean Baudrillard, "An Interview with Jean Baudrillard: Europe, Globalization and the Destiny of Culture," by Monica Sassatelli, *European Journal of Social Theory* 5, no. 4 (2002): 526-27, quoted in Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 1.

<sup>53</sup> Adam Kuper, *The Reinvention of Primitive Society: Transformations of a Myth* (London and New York: Routledge, 2005), xi.

On the one hand, Kuper expressed confidence that anthropology as a discipline had for the most part overcome its reliance on the model of primitive society. Although he noted that some anthropological research on hunter-gatherers continues to be informed by classical conceptions of the primitive,

this branch of anthropology seems to have parted company from the mainstream. Anthropology can no longer be defined as the study of primitive societies. . . . Cultural and social anthropology today has very largely abandoned the study of social institutions. American anthropologists typically define their discipline as the study of culture, by which they mean systems of values and symbolic representations, and they struggle, probably unavailingly, to assert a proprietary interest in this glamorous if slippery property. However, since they preach that every culture has equal value, they are inclined to regard any attempt to distinguish “primitive culture” from “civilisation” as not only mistaken but oppressive.<sup>54</sup>

Outside of the discipline, Kuper’s assessment was less sanguine. He documents the continued popular romanticization of “indigenous” societies, concluding that “the ghostly category of ‘primitive peoples’ [has] been restored to life under a new label.”<sup>55</sup> While the increased political efforts to empower and provide sovereignty to several formerly marginalized indigenous groups (such as the creation of Nunavut territory in Canada in 1999) have had laudable intentions, Kuper draws attention to the questionable rhetoric behind some of these movements, noting for example that in a 1994 essay, United Nations Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote: “It is now clearly understood that many indigenous people live in greater harmony with the natural environment than do the inhabitants of industrialized consumer societies.”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 223.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 204.

<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 207.

Kuper cites Boutros-Ghali to underline the public prominence of such views. Aside from this romanticized view of contemporary indigenous people and lifestyles, the image of the primitive as the antitheses of modern life continues to shape discussions reflecting the widespread unease about technology, the rapid pace of modern life, and the alienation of urban life. One could point to the anti-civilization manifestos of anarcho-primitivist John Zerzan.<sup>57</sup> The primitive equally remains a focal point in popular art, whether in terms of content or form. An example of the former would be the films of Werner Herzog, including his recent documentaries *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (2010) or *Happy People: A Year in the Taiga* (2010); an example of the latter would be Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding #9*, 1999.<sup>58</sup> (See fig. 2.3)

Primitivism has yet to be dislodged from popular culture. The problem extends further, however. For even in spite of the impressive body of critical scholarship cited above, there is a

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<sup>57</sup> John Zerzan, *Future Primitive and Other Essays* (Brooklyn, NY: Autonomedia, 1994); Zerzan, *Running on Emptiness: The Pathology of Civilization* (Los Angeles, CA: Feral House, 2002). Zerzan's views of the "pathology" of civilization may be read as extreme but they are in fact representative of a wider current of popular angst. Zerzan traces the ills of civilization to its roots in the historical development of agriculture, which has replaced the idyllic "primitive" life of hunter-gatherer societies: "Agriculture ended a vast period of human existence largely characterized by freedom from work, non-exploitation of nature, considerable gender autonomy and equality, and the absence of organized violence. It takes more from the earth than it puts back and is the foundation of private property. Agriculture encloses, controls, exploits, establishes hierarchy and resentment. . . . The contrast with thousands of generations of forager (hunter-gatherer) life is staggering. There is no dispute that these ancestors put sharing at the center of their existence. Throughout the anthropological literature, sharing and equality are synonymous with the forager social organization, characterized as bands of 50 or fewer people. In the absence of mediation or political authority, people enjoyed strong expressive bonds face-to-face with one another and in intimacy with nature." (*Running on Empty*, 199) Zerzan draws on the work of ethnographers who have studied contemporary hunter-gatherer groups—in particular, the branch of anthropology which, in Kuper's terms, "seems to have parted company from the mainstream," yet which enjoys popularity with a broader audience outside academia. To take an example: "Hewlett and Lamb (2000) explored the levels of trust and compassion in an Aka band of foragers in central Africa. The physical and emotional closeness between Aka children and adults, they concluded, is closely related to their benign orientation to the world. Conversely, Aka people see their environment as generous and supportive, at least in part, because of the unrestricted bonds among themselves. Colin Turnbull observed a very similar reality among the Mbuti in Africa, who addressed greetings to 'Mother Forest, Father Forest.'"

<sup>58</sup> Bill Brown, "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," *Critical Inquiry* 36, No. 2 (Winter 2010): 183-217.

lingering and entrenched primitivism which contemporary theory itself seems unable to escape. This is the argument put forth by Victor Li in his recent book, *The Neo-primitivist Turn*. Li writes: “Our awareness of the chronopolitics and geopolitics of primitivism . . . has not led to the disappearance of primitivism but to its deeper imbrication in contemporary theoretical discourses that appear to be anti-primitivist and politically progressive.”<sup>59</sup>

Li applies the term *neo-primitivism* to contemporary theorists who, although they critique primitivism and the primitivist discourse from various angles, nevertheless resuscitate the very discourse which they try to overcome. Li focuses on the work of such theorists as Torgovnick, Baudrillard, Jean-François Lyotard, Marshall Sahlins, and Jürgen Habermas, and argues that in spite of their attempts to dispense with the primitive, their formulation of concepts like alterity, culture, and modernity nevertheless remain entrenched in primitivist thinking. Li’s book attempts to explain “why primitivism keeps reappearing *even after* it has been uncovered as a myth, a projection, or a construction necessary for establishing the modernity of the West.”<sup>60</sup>

Thus, to take Kuper’s comment above, for example, the anthropological focus on the ostensibly neutral category of “culture” actually covers up the fact that the concept serves the same ends that “primitive” once did. Li wavers on whether this is a fundamental feature of the concept of culture, or is simply a result of the inability of anthropologists to reflect neutrally on other societies or their own.<sup>61</sup> His critique of the use of the culture concept in anthropology is

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<sup>59</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, viii.

<sup>60</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

<sup>61</sup> Li argues that in Sahlins’ case, which is presented as the archetypal cultural relativist case, it is a fundamentally impaired concept. At the same time Li would have to admit that Sahlins is not representative of the discipline as a whole, and so here Li leans on the latter suggestion, although the argument isn’t fully developed in Li’s critique; it is therefore this latter suggestion that I aim to elaborate on here.

focused on the work of Marshall Sahlins, who in a series of books and essays prominently defended an idea of cultural particularity; to assess the validity of Li's critique it will be necessary to look briefly at Sahlins' development of the culture concept in these texts.

The focal point of Sahlins' argument was the eighteenth-century British naval explorer Captain James Cook, his visit to Hawai'i Island in 1779, his alleged deification by the natives, and his eventual murder shortly thereafter. Sahlins specifically sought to make the case that the beliefs and thought-systems of eighteenth-century Hawaiians must be understood as crucially different from a European mentality marked by bourgeois rationalism, secularism, and empiricism.

Although Li's argument implies that Sahlins may be read a spokesman for anthropology and the culture concept, Li would have to acknowledge that a critique of Sahlins is not a critique of anthropology writ large. Li devotes considerable attention to the fact that Sahlins' culture concept was far from universally accepted, but was in fact part of a major and contentious disciplinary debate between Sahlins and Princeton anthropologist Gananath Obeyesekere, about the nature of rationality and the ability of anthropologists to interpret different cultural belief systems and behavior. Sahlins' *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (1995) was written as a rebuttal of Obeyesekere's *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific*.<sup>62</sup> Sahlins argued that the Hawaiians had perceived Captain Cook as the incarnation of the fertility god Lono (due to his arrival at a particular moment in the Hawaiian calendar honoring the god), and that when Cook later returned to Hawaii, the natives

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<sup>62</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *How "Natives" Think: About Captain Cook, for Example* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995); Gananath Obeyesekere, *The Apotheosis of Captain Cook: European Mythmaking in the Pacific* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992).

killed him because his reappearance conflicted with the ritual calendar.<sup>63</sup> His murder could therefore be explained, Li writes, as “a ritual solution to the cosmological crisis occasioned by [his] out-of-season return.”<sup>64</sup> Obeyesekere responded vituperatively to Sahlins’ “apotheosis” argument, accusing him of perpetuating a Eurocentric belief that the “natives” were “so blinded by their myths that they could not distinguish a British naval captain and his crew from their own gods.”<sup>65</sup> Obeyesekere argued that Sahlins had upheld the “nefarious side of the Western ‘civilizing mission,’” and added “new dimensions of arrogance to the European myth of the indigenous people’s irrationality.”<sup>66</sup>

In order to prevent such primitivism, Obeyesekere insisted that practical rationality, “the process whereby human beings reflectively assess the implications of a problem in terms of practical criteria,” must be understood as a pan-human capacity.<sup>67</sup> Sahlins responded in turn that Obeyesekere had in doing so produced a more insidious type of primitivism, that by endowing Hawaiians with “the instrumental, empiricist rationality of the West” he had covertly assimilated “Hawaiian difference into the likeness of the West.”<sup>68</sup> Obeyesekere had therefore dispensed with the Hawaiians’ cosmology, and hence their own voices and unique perspective on their history.

Li finds in Sahlins a prominent example of, and a rich theoretical defense of, the cultural relativist argument, and an argument for “unaltered” cultural particularity. For Sahlins and cultural relativists like him, the insistence on culture as radical difference produces a “back-

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<sup>63</sup> Marshall Sahlins, *Islands of History* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1985).

<sup>64</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 89.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*, 90.

<sup>66</sup> These are Sahlins’ words. Sahlins, *How Natives Think*, 1.

<sup>67</sup> Obeyesekere, quoted by Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 100.

<sup>68</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 91.

door” ethnocentrism: “What this means in effect is that [the] avoidance of ethnocentrism depends paradoxically on the other (native) culture’s resolute ethnocentrism, its assimilation of all events into its own pre-existing cosmology.”<sup>69</sup> The result, Li writes, is that:

Even as the culture concept opposes domination by Western universalism, it also engages in the project of exoticism by emphasizing the otherness of societies that have not completely lost their cultural uniqueness or particularity in the face of historical changes and the global threat posed by the culture of modernity.<sup>70</sup>

Li’s critique of Sahlins, based on the above claims, seems at first unjustified. It will be helpful to acknowledge where Li’s argument unintentionally misconstrues the issue, in order to highlight where it has the most traction. On the one hand, the texts of Sahlins upon which Li chooses to focus are from the mid-1990s at the latest; this is recent to be sure, but a lot has happened in anthropology in the meantime.<sup>71</sup> Moreover, Li suggests here that Sahlins and others continue to emphasize an untouched “particularity” in presumably isolated groups, unaltered by history and cultural interaction. Neither Sahlins nor any other mainstream anthropologist today would support such a view. Anthropological theory in general has embraced the realities of cultural interaction and exchange and many anthropologists have even critiqued the problematic concept of culture. As Matti Bunzl writes:

At the turn of the century, the intersubjective coevalness of anthropological Self and ethnographic Other is no longer in question. There are indications, however, for an even more lasting *Aufhebung* of the traditional configurations. For scholars like Arjun Appadurai and Ulf Hannerz, the global dimensions of cultural developments are at the center of anthropological inquiry . . . and, as such, their ethnographic descriptions require the development of concepts that can grasp and render the complex coevalness of cultural realities. Appadurai famously identifies five dimensions in this context—the

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<sup>69</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 142.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid.*, 44.

<sup>71</sup> Torgovnick registers this point as well in her critical review of Li’s book: “Most of the theory Li discusses was written during the lively theory crucible of the 1980s or 1990s—not so very long ago, especially because theory has been quieter since, but long enough to make a difference.” Marianna Torgovnick, “On Victor Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 548.



“ethnoscapes,” “mediascapes,” “technoscapes,” “financescapes,” and “ideoscapes” that configure transnational fields and their cultural flows. . . . Appadurai and Hannerz see all of the world’s groups as part of the global integration effected by late capitalism, a circumstance that not only renews attention to power differentials but necessitates the effective abandonment of particularized investigations of supposedly isolated peoples. As Hannerz asserts, there is no “really distant Other,” no “Primitive Man,” in the “global ecumene” but only combinations and continuities from “direct and mediated engagements.”<sup>72</sup>

Second, Li’s suggestion that cultural relativism is inherently tainted with primitivism is inaccurate. Li bases his argument on Sahlins’ own claims that the notion of anthropological difference is central to the discipline’s aims:

Sahlins’s debate with Obeyesekere over Cook’s fate and his writings on Hawaiian history and culture thus serve primarily to defend the idea of anthropology as the study of cultural differences. What is crucially at stake is not just the question of historiographic or ethnographic accuracy, but also the very *raison d’être* of anthropology itself. Without a relativistic concept of cultural difference we would end up with an anti-anthropology, a “common sense bourgeois realism . . . [which] is a kind of symbolic violence done to other times and other customs.” Anthropology must, therefore, always begin by considering “ideas, actions, and ontologies that are not and never were our own”; guarding against ethnographic incorporation, its slogan must always be: “Different cultures, different rationalities.”<sup>73</sup>

In this reading, Li misconstrues the meaning of anthropological notion of relativistic difference. For Sahlins, it is true that the anthropologist must insist on difference. Needless to say, the anthropological interest in “culture” only makes sense if that culture is construed as different from the anthropologist’s own. Li suggests, however, that any ascription of difference, or different rationalities, entails an assertion of primitivism. This clearly is not the case. A more defensible claim would be a modification of Li’s argument to the effect that the culture concept *often* does not merely posit difference, but a determinate and evaluative difference. The problem is not difference per se, but arises when that difference is understood in terms of

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<sup>72</sup> Bunzl, “Foreword to Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other*,” xxvii.

<sup>73</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 97.

a loaded binary opposition. Li explains, “Though indigenous or native culture may no longer be the untouched and unchanging primitive culture of evolutionary anthropology, its role is still that of representing alterity, of being the Other of modernity.”<sup>74</sup> The anthropological ascription and valorization of difference becomes primitivism when that which is different is defined as different *from* modernity. The assertion of a normative modernity may not be the author’s intent, but when one targets (and these are Sahlins’ words) “ideas, actions, and ontologies that are not and never were our own,” it is the seemingly innocuous “our own” and the temporal “never” that usher modernity into the bargain.

Moreover, as Li points out, in the case of anthropologists like Sahlins, the discipline of anthropology serves a manifestly political purpose, which is the critique of “Western bourgeois-utilitarian reason and its claim to universality.”<sup>75</sup> The point is not that the “culture” of the other is unchanged by history, but that it is seen as a tool for the critique of “Western modernity.” Not all anthropologists conceive of their work in this manner; but just as with the postmodern proclamation about the totality of global capital, the acknowledgement that there is no longer any existing “Primitive Man” hasn’t eroded the ubiquitous tendency to conceive of global modernity as the totality of civilization, and the tendency to imagine its opposite in terms of the primitive.

In other words, it isn’t when anthropologists are looking at the cultural other that they are secretly thinking about the primitive, it’s when they are looking at the other, and thinking about themselves—which is to say, when they are thinking about the problems of modernity. In this sense, the primitive is more of a problem for theory than anthropology. As a (non-

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<sup>74</sup> Ibid., 44.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.

anthropologist) example, Li cites literary theorist Gayatri Spivak, who, in thinking about globalization and ecological destruction, is led to invoke the idea of the aboriginal as offering an alternative relationship to the “sacred”:

Nature is no longer sacred for civilizations based on the control of nature. The result is global devastation due to a failure of ecology. It is noticeable that less advanced groups in the fourth world still retain this sense as a matter of their cultural conformity. I am not exoticising or romanticizing the aboriginal, they are not all “radicals” . . . What we are dreaming of here is not how to keep the aboriginal in a state of excluded cultural conformity, but how to learn and construct a sense of sacred nature by attending to them . . . We want to open our minds to being haunted by the aboriginal. We want the spectral to haunt the calculus.<sup>76</sup>

Although there may not be any “true” aboriginals, Spivak suggests that the idea of the aboriginal remains relevant as a tool of critique. Spivak’s language also highlights that this is less of a theoretical choice than a matter of desire—*we want* the imaginary aboriginal, because it offers the means of critiquing the rational, the calculable. It is in this sense that Li writes:

Neo-primitivism has become an attractive theoretical option precisely at a time when “primitives,” defined as belonging to authentic, primordial cultures yet untouched or uncontaminated by modernity, can no longer be called upon to act as pure forms of otherness. . . . Neo-primitivism can thus be seen as a primitivism without primitives insofar as it forwards a concept of the primitive so pure that no empirical referent or actual primitive can contradict or refute it.<sup>77</sup>

Li’s book, it should be noted, received a rather haughty dismissal from at least two of its targets, Kuper and Torgovnick (and it’s fair to assume that Sahlins and Li’s other targets would object as well). There is a certain irony here; just as Torgovnick and others had rankled art historians and anthropologists who felt comfortable speaking about all things primitive, they

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<sup>76</sup> Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Supplementing Marxism,” in *Wither Marxism?: Global Crises in International Perspective*, ed. Bernd Magnus and Stephen Cullenberg (New York: Routledge, 1995), 115-16, cited in Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 29-30.

<sup>77</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, ix.

themselves were now the ones accused of partaking in the insidious and offensive discourse of primitivism.

If Li's critique of anthropology is potentially limited to its protagonist, Sahlins (who, for all his prominence as a theorist, cannot be said to be representative of the discipline at large), Li's critique of Torgovnick demonstrates the wider traction of his argument. And if the critique of Sahlins is judged to be weakened for its focus on dated material, then an examination of Torgovnick's recent response to Li's 2006 book should validate Li's claim that primitivism remains a problem for theory even today.

Torgovnick, as mentioned above, embraces the idea that the primitive is a projection of the West. One of our most astute observers of primitivism, she illuminates not only its history but its contemporary resurgence as a popular phenomenon:

What we are seeing in the United States today is the full-tilt exploration of patterns formed in the 1920s: fascination with the primitive as an expression of fears about what the West has wrought in the world, even of white European self-loathing—often with an accompanying utopian impetus for change. Utopian desires are emerging strongly once again at the end of the twentieth century, in movements that envision the primitive as a locus of harmony and a shelter from the dangers and fragmentation of modern life.<sup>78</sup>

Torgovnick indeed sees her work as “[closing] down certain possibilities—like vampiric hunger for the exotic Other.”<sup>79</sup> Yet, Li argues, she makes use of a concept of alterity which serves to perpetuate the discourse of primitivism. Li's critique is based on *Gone Primitive* and her follow-up study, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (1997). In the latter, she aims to map out “a comprehensive psychology of the West's fascination with the

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<sup>78</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997), 18.

<sup>79</sup> *Ibid.*, 19.

primitive.”<sup>80</sup> The root of this fascination, she argues, is the desire for what early-twentieth-century thinkers termed the “oceanic” — which she defines as “a dissolution of subject-object divisions so radical that one experiences the sensation of merging with the universe.”<sup>81</sup> She explains:

My claim in *Primitive Passions* is that the West has tended to scant some vital human emotions and sensations of relatedness and interdependence—though it has never eliminated them. These sensations include effacement of the self and the intuition of profound connections between humans and land, humans and animals, humans and minerals, of a kind normally found in Europe and the United States only within mystical traditions.<sup>82</sup>

The deep desire for the oceanic has led Westerners to project their fears and longings onto the imagined “primitives.”<sup>83</sup> Torgovnick rejects any implication that her account is primitivist, because she insists that the “alterity” of the oceanic experience is not only to be found in primitive societies, but has been present in certain underground traditions within the West itself: “The perceived ‘collectivity’ or ‘spirituality’ of primitives may be no greater than what has existed at different times in the West, and still does, albeit often in a displaced or distorted form.”<sup>84</sup>

Li argues, however, that this notion of the oceanic as alterity, although it doesn’t require a belief in actually existing primitives, is conceived in terms of the primitive:

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid., 5.

<sup>82</sup> Ibid., 4.

<sup>83</sup> Torgovnick defines her use of the primitive as follows: “Today, ‘the primitive’ often refers to specific groups living traditional lives (the Asmat in Irian Jaya, the Yanomani in Brazil, and many others) — but it also encompasses a great deal more. ‘The primitive’ denotes the eons of prehistoric human experience; it refers as well to societies such as the Aztecs, with highly developed but now mysterious or exotic-seeming ancient histories. Most of all, ‘the primitive’ describes a vast, generalized image, an aggregate of places, things, and experiences associated with various groups and peoples: Africa, the Amazon, or the American Southwest; communal drumming and ecstatic dancing; initiation and other rituals that express respect for the powers of nature and the supernatural.” (*Primitive Passions*, 4)

<sup>84</sup> Ibid., 18.

Even as Torgovnick incisively critiques Western primitivism's ethnocentric construction of an exotic Other, she also asserts that "what has been sought elsewhere may yet be found in the folds and creases of the West's own neglected traditions." In short, the West's primitive Other disappears to become the Other *within* the Western self. Primitive alterity is to be sought *not outside* but *inside* the West itself. In Torgovnick's version of a primitivism without primitives, primitive others—geographically, temporally, or culturally separated from us—are no longer needed because the so-called primitive quest for oceanic ecstasy is to be found as much in the West as elsewhere. We no longer need to go in search of primitives because they have been generalized or universalized to the point where we can now say, "primitives are us."<sup>85</sup>

Torgovnick, in her review of Li's book, objected strongly to Li's interpretation of her work, and claimed he had misread her arguments. She responded:

When I talk, for example, in *Primitive Passions*, about traditions that recognize "the oceanic" within premodern cultures and within the West, I'd hate to be seen as maintaining that tribal peoples exist constantly and continuously within states of mind accessed mostly during ritual and meditation, states of mind not coextensive with or fully viable in quotidian life. I state, or thought I did, quite clearly, that such a belief in the continuously spiritual primitive is in itself a major form of primitivism.<sup>86</sup>

Torgovnick misses the point, however. Li is not claiming that she asserts that "primitive" peoples actually live in a continuously oceanic experience. He argues that her notion of alterity preserves a dichotomy in which the primitive is positioned as outside of the West, outside of modernity. This can be made more clear by attending to the way in which this alterity is defined. She writes:

My broadest claim, then, is this: the primitive is the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress—desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, direct correspondences between experience and language, direct correspondences between individual beings and the collective life force.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Li, *Neo-primitivist Turn*, 43.

<sup>86</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, "On Victor Li's *The Neo-Primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity*," *Criticism* 49, no. 4 (Fall 2007): 546.

<sup>87</sup> Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 8.

The oceanic is present in the West, but only in “neglected” fissures, “displaced or distorted.” It is continuously “repressed” and “hounded out of institutionalized religions.” The oceanic is a figure of alterity because it is radically other. The force responsible for the neglecting, the hounding, is the West itself.

The ubiquitous figure of the “The West” in Torgovnick’s framing of the issue is telling. Interestingly, in *Gone Primitive*, she had commented on the problematic nature of the concept, especially when writing about primitivism: “In fact, funny things begin to happen when *primitive* goes into question marks. The first thing is that all other constructed terms—especially terms like *the West* and *Western*—seem to require quotation marks as well.”<sup>88</sup> Yet she opted not to adopt such a practice, finding it “a technique that despite its seeming sophistication ultimately relieves writers of responsibility for the words they use.”<sup>89</sup> It is no doubt true that putting a word in quotation marks can be a smokescreen, making it look as if one questions its validity when in fact one continues to endorse its implications (as we might say was the case with the “primitive” of the MoMA exhibit); yet the problem is deeper. For writers like Torgovnick, and myself, the West appears to be too fundamental of a concept; it shakes off any attempt to put it in a harness.<sup>90</sup>

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<sup>88</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 20.

<sup>89</sup> “The heritage of Western domination,” Torgovnick writes, “cannot be abolished by wishing or by typography.” *Gone Primitive*, 20.

<sup>90</sup> My objection is not that Torgovnick doesn’t put quotations around the West – the task is obviously more complicated than this. For as she says, quotations alone can dissemble. It’s a commonplace now that the West is imagined, so perhaps quotations are superfluous. And surely not everything that is imagined must go into quotation marks, else we may need to begin to speak of the “United States” (or perhaps that too would be a good thing?). Clearly it depends upon the context in which one is working. I wish, however, to draw attention to a particular meaning of “the West” in Torgovnick’s work, as the imagined community of modernity. By failing to use “the West” in quotations, she affirms the identification of “the West” with modernity, and the identification of others, those who experience the oceanic (both in the West and elsewhere) as primitive. I should add that just because a community is imagined doesn’t mean one must or should or can disbelieve in it. Community membership is a powerful thing. Yet as with all imagined communities, it also sometimes helps to be reminded of

“The West” as a term seems straightforward enough at first – Torgovnick defines it in *Gone Primitive* as “dominant Euro-American cultures.”<sup>91</sup> She adds that “the term Euro-American denotes Europeans, Americans of European ancestry, and others of European ancestry who may be citizens of countries outside Europe.”<sup>92</sup> In *Primitive Passions*, she writes that “‘Western’ refers to the sum total of European and European-American traditions; ‘the West’ to nations populated largely by people of Western European descent.”<sup>93</sup> But under scrutiny these boundaries fray; to draw a line around nations and populations defined by descent seems to make sense, but when she defines it by “cultures” and “traditions” it becomes more slippery, especially, it would seem, in the modern era. One might point to the Young Turks, for example, who hoped to modernize the Ottoman Empire through appropriating major features of “Western” culture in combination with Islamic belief and an Ottoman heritage. Or one might point to Taha Hussein, the celebrated twentieth-century Egyptian novelist and figure head of the Arab Renaissance (a movement which aspired to European modernity and modernization), who declared: “We must follow the path of the Europeans so as to be their equals and partners in civilization, in its good and evil, its sweetness and bitterness, what can be loved or hated, what can be praised or blamed.”<sup>94</sup> Similarly, what of Rabindranath Tagore, Mahatma Gandhi, Naguib Mahfouz? Not “Westerners” under Torgovnick’s description, but their involvement with “Western” culture and modernity is undeniable. My point of course

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their constructedness, to empower one to judge for oneself what defines the community, and whether one wishes to belong. I have a hope that the time has come in which “The West” will be appearing more often within quotations, yet what such a consciousness would portend, what new identities would emerge, is an open question.

<sup>91</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 256n41.

<sup>92</sup> *Ibid.*, 253n19.

<sup>93</sup> Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 221n2.

<sup>94</sup> Saree S. Makdisi, “The Empire Renarrated: *Season of Migration to the North* and the Reinvention of the Present,” *Critical Inquiry* 18, no. 4, *Identities* (Summer, 1992): 806.



is not a radical one, simply that “the West” implies more than a geographical region or a people with a presumed biological ancestry; it evokes a culture, a perspective, and a condition—namely, the condition of modernity.

In the face of the perceived reality of “the West,” which is to say, modernity, the primitive “projection” begins to take on substance once more. That “the West” serves as a sobriquet for modernity becomes clear through the structure and terms of Torgovnick’s argument, the opposition of “the West” and the “primitive,” and the resurgence of the idea of “primitives.” Even though she has rejected the idea of “primitives” existing out there in the world, they are in fact still lurking on the periphery. In *Primitive Passions*, she writes, “Do groups that have been described as primitive have a special, continuous access to the spiritual, cosmic world—or do Westerners just see it that way?”<sup>95</sup> Although the projectionist argument (which she developed to great length in her previous book) would have to affirm the latter, this time, she remains surprisingly agnostic: “There are simply no reliable sources which would allow me to decide these points for sure.”<sup>96</sup>

In her review of Li, Torgovnick defends herself from Li’s criticism by quoting from a section in *Gone Primitive* in which she explained her use of the word “primitive.” She states that, although she would “want to make some nips and tucks and alterations,” she would “by and large . . . stand by it.”<sup>97</sup> She explains:

Given the mixed history of the word *primitive*, the urge to jettison it is understandable. But before we could responsibly do that we would need a viable alternative to designate the kinds of societies it describes. Currently, we do not, since all its synonyms are either inexact or duplicate in various ways the problematics of the term *primitive* itself. And

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<sup>95</sup> Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 18.

<sup>96</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.

<sup>97</sup> Torgovnick, “On Victor Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*,” 549.

here I include savage, pre-Columbian, tribal, third world, underdeveloped, developing, archaic, traditional, exotic, “the anthropological record,” non-Western, and Other. Some of these alternatives (third world, underdeveloped, exotic) blur necessary, indeed vital distinctions between third world nations (which are often urban and industrial) and the remote, relatively primitive societies they may still harbor. All take the West as norm and define the rest as inferior, different, deviant, subordinate, and subordinatable. We simply do not have a neutral, politically acceptable vocabulary.<sup>98</sup>

Her point makes sense. But what is entailed here? She says in effect that we might as well use the word primitive because, after all, we don’t have any good way of talking about *primitive* societies. It is clear to her that there *are* such societies, the only question is over what we ought to call them. What exactly are the “kind of societies it describes”? She explains that “Third world” is a poor designation because it occludes the fact that such nations are often urban/industrial—in other words, if a nation is urban/industrial, it is *not* primitive; although these nations probably harbor “relatively primitive societies.” Thus a rough outline of what constitutes the primitive begins to emerge – that which is non-urban, non-industrial.

A fuller picture emerges when, in *Gone Primitive*, Torgovnick offers the following working definition of primitive societies. They are marked by:

the legality of custom, the presence of traditional leadership roles, the paramount importance of kinship in social and economic organization, widespread and diffuse social and economic functions assigned each individual, the importance of ritual for individual and group expression (rituals which often include dance and the expression of ambivalence), and a relative indifference to Platonic modes of thought – in short, the condition of societies before the emergence of the modern state. Additional markers, such as rudimentary technology and (frequently, though by no means always) a nomadic or village life with agrarian, herding, or hunting economies, can also be noted. Such societies clearly once occupied much of the earth; today they survive in fewer and more isolated spaces and are often marked by contact, however minimal, with modern (urban and industrial) cultures.<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>98</sup> Torgovnick, *Gone Primitive*, 21.

<sup>99</sup> *Ibid.*

For Torgovnick, then, there are still a few examples of this “kind of society” in the world—isolated, with minimal contact with “modern cultures.” The primitives are the non-urban, the non-industrial, and the non-technological. Note also the evocation of the passing of time – the primitive is something *before* “the emergence of the modern state.” And there is also the interesting allusion to a different way of knowing—marked by indifference to Platonic modes of thought. What could it mean, Platonic modes of thought? One suspects a euphemism—an indifference, presumably, for rational thought.<sup>100</sup> In this latter remark Torgovnick’s idea of the primitive as alterity clearly recalls Sahlins concept of culture.

Why is such a definition troubling? Torgovnick is quick to point out, she is merely describing an observable spectrum of material culture, but one which is loaded with value judgments:

For me, as narrative voice, theorist, and critic, [the “primitive”] exists only along a continuum of terms from the technologically replete, perhaps now overly replete, and the relatively free of technology. It’s a central contention of my work that no choice of words to describe the continuum can be entirely neutral or objective. In the preceding sentences, for example, “replete” is more neutral than “overly replete,” and

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<sup>100</sup> There is no doubt that not all humans experience or think in the same way, yet to posit these binaries (Platonic and non-Platonic) is a precarious move, which reveals its nefarious implications most clearly when encountered in a political context. Li points to just such an uncomfortable example in Torgovnick’s critique of his book: “We can take as a case in point what Torgovnick describes as her own ‘loaded but not inapt example’ of primitivism’s role in America’s invasion of Iraq. She argues that the Bush administration failed to take cultural differences into account when it decided to invade Iraq in 2003. She explains that Bush and his planners assumed that Iraq ‘was secular and middle-class enough to allow for rapid rebuilding after a U.S. invasion.’ Now, four years later, with no end to carnage in sight, the consequences of that failure are all too horrifically clear. Torgovnick thus concludes that the failure to see cultural differences is also, ironically, ‘the failure to be primitivist enough.’ ‘Indeed,’ she adds, ‘one could say that in this instance a larger dose of primitivism—a belief in the difference of Others and their adherence to nonmodern values—might have done the Bush administration some good!’” (Victor Li, “A Necessary Vigilance: A Response to Torgovnick and Kuper,” *Criticism* 49, no. 4 [Fall 2007]: 562.) One might compare Henry Kissinger’s related remark in a 1974 article for *American Foreign Policy*, quoted by Said in *Orientalism*: “‘Cultures which escaped the early impact of Newtonian thinking have retained the essentially pre-Newtonian view that the real world is almost completely internal to the observer.’ Consequently, [Kissinger] adds, ‘empirical reality has a much different significance for many of the new countries than for the West because in a certain sense they never went through the process of discovering it.’” (Said, *Orientalism*, 47, quoting Henry Kissinger, “Domestic Structure and Foreign Policy,” *American Foreign Policy* [1974].)

“technology-free” has, in 2008, a positive connotation that “non-technological” does not always have and would generally not have had in 1900 or 1920 or even 1980.<sup>101</sup>

For starters, she says the primitive exists “along” this continuum, but it does not. The primitive is not sharing space with technologically replete, it is at the far end, with the relatively technology-free. She acknowledges that the terms she uses can never be neutral. But this doesn’t go deep enough into the epistemological problem. It is not enough just to acknowledge it; this is like putting a word in quotes, to absolve oneself of dealing with its implications. This is clear from the fact that in the very next paragraph, she slides down from this self-reflective height and is mired again in primitivism. She writes that:

My use of the term “authentic primitive” needs to be understood within the framework of a continuum from the patently fanciful (for example, the belief that Atlantis could be found in the core of Africa) to the ethnographically demonstrable (for example, communal dance as ritual).<sup>102</sup>

It may be demonstrable that a certain group engages in communal dance, but the idea that, compared to a fanciful projection, this can be deemed “authentic primitive” is itself a fancy. The implication is that the designations of “communal,” “ritual,” and the ethnographic are enough to identify something as “primitive.” In this way, the technology-free is stitched up with the ethnographic, “oceanic,” primitive.

The perception that a “continuum of technology” is a meaningful observation is itself the problem, because it implies that one end of the continuum is meaningfully different from the other – namely one end is more alienated, the other, more authentically human. On one end a hunting spear, on the other, a smart phone. The problem here is that the characteristics

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<sup>101</sup> Torgovnick, “On Victor Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*,” 547.

<sup>102</sup> Torgovnick, “On Victor Li’s *The Neo-Primitivist Turn*,” 548.

which the primitive is said to oppose—urban life, industrialism, technology, the state—are themselves far from neutral. As soon as one puts down Torgovnick’s book, or perhaps the electronic device one is using to read it, one might feel a stirring of gratitude for living in a modern, “technologically replete” society, or lament the alienation caused by the proliferation of technology and desire a return to a more natural existence. Torgovnick’s sophisticated and historically-informed understanding of primitivism, in its perpetuation of a desire for an oceanic experience equated with the primitive, is therefore not so very far from the primitivism of Zerzan.

As we saw with Sahlins’ case above, primitivism isn’t so much a problem in thinking about others; the problem manifests when thinking about modernity. Primitivism, all are agreed, is a projection. Modernity, however, is not. Thus Li’s tripartite analysis of neo-primitivist concepts is somewhat misleading. It isn’t the concepts of culture (Sahlins) or alterity (Torgovnick) in themselves that are the problem; it is only when these are posed as counter to modernity that they adopt the features of primitivism.

Christopher Miller, in his important study of primitivism, *Blank Darkness: Africanist Discourse in French*, optimistically wrote, “The idea that Europe is an idea is one whose time has come.”<sup>103</sup> But, he continued, “to reach back to the point of its origin is not an easy task. A more feasible project is to observe Europe in the act of reaching back or out toward an idea of what Europe is not: the ‘primitive,’ the ‘Orient,’ ‘Africa.’” The key insight from decades of studies into primitivism was that it formed a projection, a mirror of the West. One implication from this

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<sup>103</sup> Miller, *Blank Darkness*, xi.

scholarship has been that the awareness of the constructedness of the primitive should reveal the constructedness of the West. Yet the West refuses to let go. The reason, I believe, is that the West itself is a product of the primitive refrain. The primitivist discourse must be seen, not as a mirror, but as a lamp, illuminating the territory of modernity—this argument forms the focus of the next section.<sup>104</sup>

My aim in what follows is to carry Li's project forward. Although Li says he aims to explain "why primitivism keeps reappearing," his critique more accurately demonstrates *that* primitivism keeps reappearing, in new guises—the *why* remains unresolved. Below, I shall outline a theory to account for the lingering power of primitivism. I attempt to explain, first, why the scholarly critique of primitivism hasn't dislodged primitivism; namely, that through the continued association of primitivism with modernism it appears less as a projection and more as a project. Second, I argue that this primitivist discourse is responsible for the continuing concreteness of the imaginary edifice of Europe, the West, and modernity.

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<sup>104</sup> My use of "refrain" is intended to evoke the writings of philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, who elaborate the idea in their work *A Thousand Plateaus*. It is a concept, I find, particularly suited to theorizing the persistence, power, and playfulness of the discourse of primitivism. Jane Bennett's brief illumination of the idea, drawing together the conceptual links between the "refrain" and enchantment, is itself enchanting: "One also notes," she writes, "that the word *enchant* is linked to the French verb *to sing: chanter*. To 'en-chant': to surround with song or incantation; hence, to cast a spell with sounds, to make fall under the sway of a magical refrain, to carry away on a sonorous stream. [Deleuze and Guattari] describe the refrain as having a transformative or 'catalytic function: not only to increase the speed of the exchanges and reactions in that which surrounds it, but also to assure indirect interactions between elements devoid of so-called natural affinity, and thereby to form [new] organized masses.'" Bennett uses the concept to describe the role that sound plays in theorizing sources of enchantment; this forms part of her argument for a "weak ontology" of enchantment. My own usage is meant to aesthetically theorize the enchantment to be found even within disenchantment, which is to say, primitivism. It is also an attempt to provide a new ontological understanding of this discourse, which is necessary to critique the ontological faith in modernity. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, Trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1987); Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001), 6.

### **Part 3. From Modernism to Modernity: The Mirror and the Lamp**

#### **A. Modernism: “The Projection of the Primitive” or the “Primitivist Project”?**

Primitivism, as I have been using the term, refers to more than the aesthetic movement that appeared in the early years of the twentieth century. It designates a broad cultural discourse of alterity: a set of ideas and images, circulating in academic, literary and artistic discourse as well as in popular culture, from novels and films to dreamcatchers and tee-shirts, all of which draw upon a cohesive set of signifiers which mark out the “primitive” from the “civilized.” The topic of primitivism has thus moved from an issue for art historians to an issue for cultural analysis.

Contemporary efforts to theorize primitivism, however, remain influenced by the historical circumstance that it was through primitivist art, and the critique of it, that primitivism came to be understood as a larger cultural discourse of alterity. The double reference of primitivism (to an artistic movement and to a cultural discourse) becomes problematic in contemporary theory because the effort to link aesthetic primitivism to modernism has the result of linking modernism to cultural primitivism.

At the same time that the body of critical scholarship on the conceptual constructedness of the primitive was being produced, research on aesthetic primitivism sought to articulate the relationship of primitivism to modernism, as a set of aesthetic practices and principles. A good example of how these two lines of inquiry were interlocked can be seen in the recent collection of essays edited by Elazar Barkan and Ronald Bush, *Prehistories of the Future: The Primitivist*

*Project and the Culture of Modernism* (1995). The interdisciplinary contributions analyze the role of the primitive in literature and painting, the central role of anthropology in the development of the primitive projection, as well as its expression in both academic and popular arenas, from sociology and politics to photography and travel engravings, ragtime music and the performances of Josephine Baker. Throughout these essays, the authors acknowledge that primitivism must be understood as a projection. Barkan and Bush state at the outset in their introduction: “primitivism denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose ‘reality’ is purely Western,”<sup>105</sup> and in the accompanying footnote they clarify, “In this essay, as ought to be self-evident, the terms primitive, savage and civilized are always to be understood as constructions, never as ‘reality.’”<sup>106</sup>

Yet uniting the diversity of approaches and topics is the drive to link primitivism to modernism—casting it as the “primitivist project.” As Barkan and Bush write in the introduction’s final paragraph:

Acknowledging the complexities, political and otherwise, of the primitivist project, the essays in this book suggest that primitivism has always involved contested ideological forces and that the process seems to have generated a set of responses inseparable from what we have come to call modernism. . . . As Edward Said wrote in a text subsequent to *Orientalism*, “Europe and the West” were forced “to take the Other seriously,” and this “is the fundamental historical problem of modernism.”<sup>107</sup>

Before I attend to the consequences of this fusion confusion, I would point out that there are two important factors behind the drive to link primitivism to modernism. The first is a long-standing dismissal of the importance of primitivism to modern art. As William Rubin announced in the opening sentence to his introduction to the MoMA 1984 exhibition

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<sup>105</sup> Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future*, 2.

<sup>106</sup> *Ibid.*, 375n2.

<sup>107</sup> *Ibid.*, 18.



catalogue: “No pivotal topic in twentieth-century art has received less serious attention than primitivism—the interest of modern artists in tribal art and culture.”<sup>108</sup>

This denigration of primitivism’s artistic value, it may be noted, is as old as the recognition of primitivism as an artistic movement. Contemporary critics and artists often denigrated primitivist art for its perceived artificiality. The German painter Max Beckmann, for example, in a popular 1912 article, condemned what he saw as an unhealthy “dependence on ancient primitive styles which in their own times grew organically out of a common religion and mystic awareness”:

[I find it] weak because Gauguin and the like weren’t able to create types out of their own confused and fragmented times which could serve us in the way that the gods and heroes served the peoples of old. Matisse is an even sadder representative of this ethnography museum art—from the Asian department.<sup>109</sup>

In the years that followed, some important former exponents turned into detractors. Most notably, Wilhelm Worringer, the German art critic whose dissertation, *Abstraction and Empathy* (*Abstraktion und Einfühlung*), written in 1907 and published as a best-selling book in 1908, was a major expression of, and influence upon, primitivist modernism.<sup>110</sup> As Mary Gluck has written,

No manifesto of the pre-war years did more to define the meaning of the primitive for European educated opinion . . . [It] succeeded in giving powerful expression to the two central preoccupations of early-twentieth-century modernism: the impulse to abstraction and the fascination with the primitive.<sup>111</sup>

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<sup>108</sup> Rubin, *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art*, 1. Rubin continues, “The immense bibliography of modern art lists only two instructive books on the subject: the pioneering text by Robert Goldwater, first published almost half a century ago, and that of Jean Laude, written two decades ago, considerably more limited in scope, never translated from the French, and long out of print.”

<sup>109</sup> Max Beckmann, “Gedanken” über zeitgemäße und unzeitgemäße Kunst, *Pan 2* (March 1912), 499ff, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 85.

<sup>110</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (Munich: Piper, 1908).

<sup>111</sup> Mary Gluck, “Interpreting Primitivism, Mass Culture and Modernism: The Making of Wilhelm Worringer’s *Abstraction and Empathy*,” *New German Critique*, no. 80, Special Issue on the Holocaust (Spring - Summer, 2000): 154.

By 1920, however, Worringer had become deeply disillusioned with Expressionism, primitivism, and modern art in general, declaring that the artists of his day had become:

refined specialists on the margin of what is necessary and immediate to life for us today. Let us not confuse these marginalia of our culture with its proper text. Art once stood within the text—in the very middle of it—today it stands irretrievably at the margins, and any assertions to the contrary are based on an unconscious fiction.<sup>112</sup>

In 1934, Georg Lukács cited Worringer's "funeral oration" over Expressionism in his own essay on the topic, "Greatness and Decline of Expressionism," providing what may have been the most crushing critical blow to modernist primitivism. Lukács gave voice to the increasingly prevalent perception (in the wake of Dadaism) in which Expressionism seemed an aesthetically naïve claim to authenticity of expression; he joined this with a Marxist-influenced critique which derided the movement as a garish bourgeois fantasy of harmony with nature evading the reality of imperialist violence and racism.<sup>113</sup> Lukács' essay led to a much-noted 1938 debate between Lukács and Ernst Bloch in the pages of *Das Wort*; the focus of the debate was Expressionism, not primitivism *per se*, but in the terms of the debate the two were ideologically linked. Bloch defended Expressionism as a robust modernist critique of contemporary society; Lukács excoriated Expressionism as not only a veiled form of decaying bourgeois ideology and a "pseudo-critical, misleading abstract mythicizing form for Imperialist pseudo-opposition," but as a precursor to fascism in general and Nationalism Socialism in particular.<sup>114</sup> Expressionism, and modernist primitivism along with it, were slow to recover; the current of criticism has

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<sup>112</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, "Questions about Contemporary Art" (*Künstlerische Zeitfragen*), 1921, quoted in Charles W. Haxthausen, "Modern Art After 'The End of Expressionism': Worringer in the 1920s," in *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, ed. Neil H. Donahue (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995): 120.

<sup>113</sup> Theodor Adorno et al., *Aesthetics and Politics: Theodor Adorno, Walter Benjamin, Ernst Bloch, Bertolt Brecht, Georg Lukács*, afterword by Fredric Jameson, translation ed. Ronald Taylor (London and New York: Verso, 1977; 2007).

<sup>114</sup> Lukács, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, viii.

remained a steady force which art criticism has been unable to shake. Of course, popular interest in primitivism continued to grow in the years following World War 1, in conjunction with the *négrophilie* sweeping the US and Europe, and after World War 2, the market for “primitive” objects themselves blossomed. But, as Rubin observes, critical appreciation, although far from absent, was never widespread.

The second factor behind the drive to link primitivism to modernism, ironically perhaps, was the MoMA exhibition itself. As previously discussed, primitivism became the target of much heated criticism following the exhibition. Art critic Hal Foster expressed the sentiment in a prominent article for *October*: when discussing *Les Femmes d'Alger* as “a primal scene of modern primitivism,” he wondered if the “aesthetic breakthrough” of primitivism was “not also a breakdown, psychologically regressive, politically reactionary.”<sup>115</sup> More accurately, then, we might say that following the exhibition, the fates of modernism and primitivism were fused; but the problem now became how to assess the value of primitivism, both aesthetically and politically, given that its association with imperialism and racism (not to mention sexism and classism) had been driven into the foreground.

Jill Lloyd explored this issue in the German context in her important study *German Expressionism: Primitivism and Modernity* (1991).<sup>116</sup> Referring to the *Das Wort* debate, she writes:

Bloch and Lukács formulated a central question which must be posed in a critical examination of modernist primitivism. Could the inspiration the Expressionists drew from non-European and folk art be used as a disruptive strategy to challenge the norms and values of European culture? Or was it, as Lukács suggests, merely an appropriative device, reaffirming precisely those values they set out to undermine? . . . The relevance

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<sup>115</sup> Hal Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” *October* 34 (Fall 1985): 45.

<sup>116</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*.

of these questions to an understanding of the political status of modernism continues to occupy us today.<sup>117</sup>

That the debate has not been settled is attested by the attitude of no less a respected authority on modernism than T. J. Clark.<sup>118</sup> In his sprawling monograph, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism*, he devotes but one paragraph to primitivism—

which is to say, a largely parasitic and second-rate imitation of objects from the colonies, by artists who lacked the skills to do the job of imitation properly, not having so much as the beginnings of an understanding of what was being imitated – not thinking such an understanding necessary.<sup>119</sup>

Against this criticism, then, recent research on primitivism has sought to assert its aesthetic and political value through establishing its crucial place in the history of modernism, and this has largely been through the trope of the “primitivist project.” Lloyd, to take a paradigmatic example, argued that primitivism (namely that of the German expressionist group *die Brücke*) was not an aesthetic dead-end nor an “escapist” flight from modernity, but rather an engagement with the fundamental concerns of modernism:

Conventional interpretations of the primitivist impulse in European culture as an *imaginative alternative* to the changes underway in the modern world fail to take on board the complex, dualistic character of modernity itself. Far from presenting *simply imaginative counter-images*, primitivism provided modern artists, as I hope to show, with a means of negotiating the internal paradox of modernity, of spanning between its positive and negative, its forward- and backward- looking tendencies.<sup>120</sup>

Whereas Lukács had seen primitivism as a passive, uncritical reflection of a damaged modernity, Lloyd’s line of argument takes the notion of primitivism as a projection, as an inverted mirror of the West, one step further, and suggests that some forms of aesthetic

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<sup>117</sup> Ibid., viii-ix.

<sup>118</sup> Clark is best known for his work *The Painting of Modern Life: Paris in the Art of Manet and His Followers* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984).

<sup>119</sup> T. J. Clark, *Farewell to an Idea: Episodes From a History of Modernism* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 306.

<sup>120</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, vii (italics added).

primitivism can be understood as using that mirror progressively, in an avant-garde critique of the West. She writes, “In a positive sense, primitivism could be used to engage with the contradictions of modernity.” She admits that “the danger of false reconciliation, of a retreat from the real complexities of history into lazy universalism, remained,” but concludes that “Primitivism could be used as a critical tool to question the dominant values of Western bourgeois society.”<sup>121</sup>

The problem in this, I would suggest, is that even if the mirror of primitivism can be used as a tool of critique, it remains a mirror. Primitivism, even where it is a critique of modernity, is perceived as a product of modernity, because modernism is theorized as a product of modernity. Charles Harrison expresses this understanding of modernism in his definition of the term for *Critical Terms for Art History*:

Modernism is used to refer to the distinguishing characteristics of Western culture from the mid-nineteenth century until at least the mid-twentieth: a culture in which processes of industrialization and urbanization are conceived of as the principal mechanisms of transformation in human experience.<sup>122</sup>

This interpretation of modernism, ubiquitous in the scholarship, is usually traced back to the nineteenth and early twentieth-century theorists who are credited for first articulating it. Harrison cites the German sociologist George Simmel, whose work is often seen to encapsulate the modernist predicament. In his essay “The Metropolis and Modern Life” (1902-3), Simmel wrote: “The deepest problems of modern life derive from the claim of the individual to

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<sup>121</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, vii.

<sup>122</sup> Charles Harrison, “Modernism,” in *Critical Terms for Art History*, Second Edition, ed. Robert S. Nelson and Richard Shiff (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2003), 189.

preserve the autonomy and individuality of his existence in the face of overwhelming social forces.”<sup>123</sup> Harrison concludes:

In this form modernism is regarded both as a condition consequent upon certain broad economic, technological, and political tendencies and as a set of attitudes towards those tendencies. . . . In [this] sense, then, “modernism” is the substantive form of the adjective “modern,” while the condition it denotes is virtually synonymous with the experience of modernity.<sup>124</sup>

In other words, modernism is product of civilization—a particularly advanced type of civilization, characterized by a certain social/economic/political developments, which when viewed together are referred to as the historical period/experience known as modernity. The recent spate of research, despite a diversity of particular aims, shares this unifying conceptual framework. Modernism is identified as a set of aesthetic practices produced by of the conditions of modernity. Secondly, insofar as *primitivism* is figured as a branch of modernism, primitivism is theorized as 1) a product of modernity, and often 2) a critique of modernity. The difference between product or critique, however, is irrelevant, being a matter of passive reflection or active critique, the degree to which a certain work or artist merely expresses a set of contradictions (like symptoms), or uses the primitive to critique the ailments of modern society. The key is that in both cases, primitivism as modernism functions as a mirror of

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<sup>123</sup> Simmel, quoted by Harrison, “Modernism,” 189.

<sup>124</sup> It may be useful to note that Harrison in his entry offers this definition of “modernism” as one of three uses of the concept. The second sense of modernism refers to its use by critics such as Clement Greenberg to distinguish a “modernist tradition” in high art from popular and mass culture (and especially from what Clement termed “kitsch”). The third sense refers to a critical framing of Greenberg’s approach to aesthetics, which is dubbed Modernist (capital M). In this sense, according to a Modernist critic like Greenberg, a defining feature of modernist art is its self-reflexive awareness. “Thus for Greenberg, Manet’s paintings ‘became the first Modernist ones’ not primarily by virtue of their picturing of circumstances redolent of modern life, but ‘by virtue of the frankness with which they declared the surfaces on which they were painted.’” For the Modernist in this sense, “the true critical potential” of art lay “in its autonomy vis-à-vis social and utilitarian considerations and in its pursuit of the aesthetic as an end in itself.” To suggest that primitivism belongs to modernism in this sense has clearly not been a driving critical concern.

modernity, a condition whose contours are seen as evident, and whose reality is judged obvious.

It is one thing to link primitivism to modernism, but quite another to link it to modernity. The difference is that in the case of the former, one is concerned to identify the relationship of primitivism to a specific set of historically demarcated aesthetic practices. In the case of the latter, one is concerned to identify the relationship of primitivism to the project, or experience, of modernity. On the surface, this seems quite familiar and unproblematic; surely primitivism, like modernism, is a product of the “economic, technological, and political tendencies” of its time. And yet, this formulation has turned us back against our original aim, suggested by Miller—to better understand the constructedness of “the West.”

I argue that primitivism should not be seen as a tool of critique, nor a mirror of modernity, but as itself a discourse productive of the experience of modernity. This idea in itself isn't new; Foster identified this possibility in his 1985 essay.<sup>125</sup> However, as the above discussion has attempted to show, the imbrication of the cultural studies approach to primitivism and the drive to link aesthetic primitivism to modernism has inadvertently thwarted the articulation of this argument about the constructedness of modernity.

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<sup>125</sup> Foster writes: “Historically, the primitive is articulated by the West in deprivative or supplemental terms: as a spectacle of savagery or as a state of grace, as a *socius* without writing or the Word, without history or cultural complexity; or as a site of originary unity, symbolic plenitude, natural vitality. There is nothing odd about this Eurocentric construction: the primitive has served as a coded other at least since the Enlightenment, usually as a subordinate term in its imaginary set of oppositions (light/dark, rational/irrational, civilized/savage). This domesticated primitive is thus constructive, not disruptive, of the binary *ratio* of the West; fixed as a structural opposite or a dialectical other to be incorporated, it assists in the establishment of a Western identity, center, norm, and name. In its modernist version the primitive may appear transgressive, it is true, but it still serves as a limit: projected within and without, the primitive becomes a figure of our unconscious and outside (a figure constructed in modern art as well as in psychoanalysis and anthropology in the privileged triad of the primitive, the child, and the insane.)” Foster, “The ‘Primitive’ Unconscious of Modern Art,” 58.

“As for ‘primitives,’” to quote Barkan and Bush once more, “they never existed. Only Western ‘primitivism’ did. . . . Primitivism denotes an Occidental construction, a set of representations whose ‘reality’ is purely Western.”<sup>126</sup> This formulation brings us back to Torgovnick’s dilemma about quotation marks. Putting quotation marks around “primitives” would properly require us to do the same with “Western,” yet this is resisted. What happens to analytical weight of this observation when both go into quotations, when we write that “only ‘Western’ ‘primitivism’ existed”? We are dealing with what seems a projection of a projection.

The concepts of “the Occident” and “the West” are left standing because they presumably convey an ontological reality. How is this reality specified? We might here return to Torgovnick’s definition of the primitive from *Primitive Passions*:

My broadest claim, then, is this: the primitive is the sign and symbol of desires the West has sought to repress—desires for direct correspondences between bodies and things, direct correspondences between experience and language, direct correspondences between individual beings and the collective life force.<sup>127</sup>

What is it, then, that produces these desires? The longing for “direct correspondences” is the result of the “Western” individual’s alienation from nature (bodies and things), alienation from meaning (through language), and alienation from spirit. The sources of this alienation need not be specified because they are taken for granted—they are those outlined by Harrison above, the “economic, technological, and political tendencies” of the time of modernity—in short, capitalism, urbanization, bureaucracy, rationalization, secularism, and so on.

However, Torgovnick’s construction of the primitive in terms of desires and repressions provides a direction for rethinking primitivism and its relation to modernity. We must first

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<sup>126</sup> Barkan and Bush, eds., *Prehistories of the Future*, 2.

<sup>127</sup> Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions*, 8.



approach the phenomenon of primitivism with the same hermeneutic suspicion that Michel Foucault brought to his analysis of the history of sexuality, or the history of punishment. Foucault argued that one could read the history of sexuality, and in particular the sexuality of the 18th and 19th centuries, not as a history of the repression of sexuality, but as the production of a discourse about sexuality. In Volume 1 of *The History of Sexuality*, Foucault writes:

Sexuality must not be thought of as a kind of natural given which power tries to hold in check, or as an obscure domain which knowledge tries gradually to uncover. It is the name that can be given to a historical construct: not a furtive reality that is difficult to grasp, but a great surface network in which the stimulation of bodies, the intensification of pleasures, the incitement to discourse, the formation of special knowledges, the strengthening of controls and resistances, are linked to one another, in accordance with a few major strategies of knowledge and power.<sup>128</sup>

If we can view the desires of “Westerners” for the “primitive” not as originating in a “natural given,” a condition of alienation produced by modernity, it becomes possible to grasp the construction of these desires. From this perspective, the primitive appears not as “sign or symbol” of desire, but as a discourse productive of these desires—in this case, desires for direct correspondences. It becomes possible to envisage how the primitive constructs the modern, to suggest that when a “modern” or “Western” subject contemplates such features of modernity as technology, urbanization, bureaucracy, rationalization, secularism, and so on, the experience of these features is structured by the discourse of primitivism.

The above discussion set out to account for one of the reasons that theoretical writing on primitivism hasn’t fully succeeded in embracing the insight that the primitive, and hence the modern, are equally constructed. Yet it becomes apparent that the problem extends beyond

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<sup>128</sup> Michel Foucault, *History of Sexuality: Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Random House, 1978), 105-6.

the domain of theory, however; at its root the problem is about the experience of modernity, or to be specific, the projection of a particular experience of modernity—one popularly identified in Max Weber’s phrase, “the disenchantment of the world.”<sup>129</sup>

## **B. Primitivism and the Critique of Modernity**

In the accepted interpretation of primitivism understood as modernism, European artists are described as either arriving independently at (in Rubin’s “affinity” hypothesis), or (in the eyes of Rubin’s many critics) appropriating, “primitive” aesthetic forms and styles as a way to critique not only the classical aesthetic tradition, but the many problems of European civilization: artificiality, anonymity, and alienation; the disintegration of community; the failures of rationalism, secularism, and science to provide some kind of meaningful human fulfillment; the failure of industrialized or bureaucratic society to provide satisfactory modes of employment or an authentic experience of life. The implication in this view is that modernity’s problems were obvious, and that primitivism offered one way of expressing these discomforts within a rapidly changing industrial, urban, metropolitan civilization. Had there been no encounter with the primitive, other artistic forms or styles would have sufficed.

In other words, in this interpretation, even if the “primitive” was not truly a discovery, *primitivism* itself is still understood and presented *as a discovery*, as a mode of aesthetics responding to the ailments of modernity—it is seen as a *deus ex machina*: the right thing at the right time.

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<sup>129</sup> Max Weber, “Science as a Vocation,” in *Max Weber’s Complete Writings on Academic and Political Vocations*, ed. John Dreijmanis, trans. Gordon C. Wells (New York: Algora, 2008), 35.

I argue that this view is a product of teleological historical hindsight which should be re-examined—that the experience of modernity’s “problems” must be seen as not immediately obvious or necessary, but as in fact a result of the primitivist discourse and the primitive/modern dichotomy. Thus, rather than a mirror, we might see primitivist discourse as a lamp—a discourse which is not just a reflection of self, but itself a source of light and energy. Perhaps a lamp like Wittgenstein’s, which has no firm boundaries, yet for all that, illuminates a terrain.

This conceptual play is intended as an ironic reference to M.H. Abrams’ celebrated 1953 work on literary Romanticism, *The Mirror and the Lamp*. “The title of the book,” Abrams writes, “identifies two common and antithetic metaphors of mind, one comparing the mind to a reflector of external objects, the other to a radiant projection which makes a contribution to the object it perceives.”<sup>130</sup> Abrams argued that, whereas the former metaphor characterized the tradition of intellectual thought extending from Plato through eighteenth-century European philosophy, the metaphor of the lamp typified the “Romantic conception of the poetic mind,” which originated in the eighteenth but took hold in the early nineteenth century.<sup>131</sup> Abrams described this as a historical shift in aesthetic theory, from a classical view based on mimesis, to a Romantic view based on expression. What was distinctive about the Romantic thought of poets like William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge was not simply the belief in a “life and soul” informing nature, “but the repeated formulation of this outer life as a contribution of,

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<sup>130</sup> M. H. Abrams, *The Mirror and the Lamp: Romantic Theory and the Critical Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1953), viii.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

or else as in constant reciprocation with, the life and soul of man the observer.”<sup>132</sup> The Romantic poets, in other words, saw nature not simply as given, but as something constructed in the act of perception.

I am suggesting that a similar move should be made in the theorization of primitivism. The discourse of primitivism is not simply like a mind reflecting reality (modernity), but should be seen, rather, as productive of it. There is an important irony implicit in my usage, however, which I must now address. According to Abrams, the Romantic poets were reacting to the “mechanistic” and “materialist” vision of the universe which had emerged in the work of scientists, social theorists and philosophers such as Rene Descartes, Thomas Hobbes, Francis Bacon, Isaac Newton, and so on. Romantic poetry and philosophy were meant to counter the harm inflicted on the human spirit by the Enlightenment and its great philosophies of empiricism, materialism, and scientific rationalization. In this sense, Abrams writes, Romanticism was:

an attempt to overcome the sense of man’s alienation from the world by healing the cleavage between subject and object, between the vital, purposeful, value-full world of private experience and the dead postulated world of extension, quantity, and motion. To establish that man shares his own life with nature was to reanimate the dead universe of the materialists, and at the same time most effectively to tie man back into his milieu.<sup>133</sup>

Abrams, focusing on the example of Coleridge, explains that his theory of poetry was integrally related to this theory of mind. For Coleridge, the act of perception involved two distinct elements or moments:

the primary and already creative act of perception yields the “inanimate cold world” of the ever-anxious crowd. This coincides roughly with the inert world of both empirical

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<sup>132</sup> Ibid., 64.

<sup>133</sup> Ibid., 65.

philosophy and of common sense, which is perceived only in so far as it serves our practical interests and aims. . . . The subsequent and higher act of re-creation, among its other functions, by projecting its own passion and life, transforms the cold inanimate world into a warm world united with the life of man, and by that same act, converts matter-of-fact into matter-of-poetry—and according to Coleridge’s conception, into the highest poetry, because it is the product of the “secondary imagination.”<sup>134</sup>

Thus for Coleridge and the Romantics, the poetic mind, as lamp, bestowed life on the material universe, which had otherwise been reduced to a cold and meaningless void in the intellectual developments of the day. The irony here, then, is that I argue the discourse of primitivism did not restore warmth to the void, but produced *both the sense of disenchantment and the longing for harmony* which found expression in Romanticism. The lamp of primitivism cast a powerful, alluring light, as well as deep shadows of disenchantment, across the terrain of modernity.

It should be clear, then, that I have not cited Abrams simply to borrow his useful metaphor of the lamp. Rather, I wish to draw attention to the more important point, that my argument requires a rethinking not merely of primitivism but of Romanticism as well. Jill Lloyd, in speaking about aesthetic primitivism, writes: "All previous histories of primitivism have rightly located its beginnings in Romanticism."<sup>135</sup> Yet, I argue, it would in fact be more accurate to say that histories of Romanticism should be locating its beginnings in primitivism.

Consulting any encyclopedia entry on Romanticism will provide the classic story of Romanticism versus Enlightenment with which we are familiar. Here, for example, is Richard Tarnas’s version of the story in his bestselling popular intellectual history, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View*:

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<sup>134</sup> Ibid., 68.

<sup>135</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 120.

Thus Bacon and Descartes—prophets of a scientific civilization, rebels against an ignorant past, and zealous students of nature—proclaimed the twin epistemological bases of the modern mind. In their respective manifestos of empiricism and rationalism, the long-growing significance of the natural world and the human reason, initiated by the Greeks and recovered by the Scholastics, achieved definitive modern expression. Upon this dual foundation, philosophy proceeded and science triumphed; It was not accidental to Newton’s accomplishment that he had systematically employed a practical synthesis of Bacon’s inductive empiricism and Descartes’ deductive mathematical rationalism, thereby bringing to fruition the scientific method first forged by Galileo.<sup>136</sup>

However, this Enlightenment achievement called forth the inevitable Counter-Enlightenment views, giving shape to a current of thought identified as Romanticism, which would develop over the ensuing centuries. The disenchantment for which the Romantics blamed Enlightenment philosophy would in the course of the nineteenth century be attributed more to the ills of industrialism, capitalism, and the rationalization of society:

In the longer run . . . the early Romantic sense of harmony with nature underwent a distinct transformation as the modern era grew old.. Here the Romantic temperament was complexly influenced by its own internal developments, by the sundering effects of modern industrial civilization and modern history, and by science’s view of nature as impersonal, non-anthropocentric, and random. The overdetermined result was an experience of nature almost opposite from the original Romantic ideal: Modern man now increasingly sensed his alienation from nature’s womb, his fall from unitary being, his confinement to an absurd universe of change and necessity. No longer the Romantic’s spiritually glorious child of nature, late modern man was the incongruously sensitive denizen of an implacable vastness devoid of meaning.<sup>137</sup>

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<sup>136</sup> Richard Tarnas, *The Passion of the Western Mind: Understanding the Ideas That Have Shaped Our World View* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1993), 280.

<sup>137</sup> *Ibid.*, 376. In citing Tarnas I grant that I am dealing with popular framings of these intellectual currents, namely the Enlightenment and the Romantic, both problematic concepts which have been dramatically reconfigured and deconstructed in the scholarship of recent decades. Yet, on the one hand, it is precisely the popular understanding of history and modernity in which I am interested. Even so, as should be clear from the discussion thus far, recent academic interpretations of primitivism, which link it to Romanticism, make recourse to this general understanding of Romantic longing and its historical causes. Finally, in spite of great work on the heterogeneous character of the Enlightenment, formulations of “multiple Enlightenments,” or attempts to dispense with the term altogether, this core understanding of its salient characteristics remains a fixture of contemporary historiography. As Sebastian Conrad wrote in 2012: “The Enlightenment has long held a pivotal place in narratives of world history. It has served as a sign of the modern, and continues to play that role yet today. . . . According to this master narrative, the Renaissance, humanism, and the Reformation “gave a new impetus to intellectual and scientific development that, a little more than three and a half centuries later, flowered in the scientific revolution and then in the Enlightenment of the eighteenth century.” The results included the world of the individual, human rights,

The sense of alienation which the Romantics of the early nineteenth century had attributed to the growth of materialist science and rationalist secularism, would, in the writings of sociologists a century later (such as Simmel) be attributed to the economy and social change, namely to capitalism, industrialism, and urbanization. Nearly a century after that, this sense of alienation is discernible in the writings of postmodernists, in the “simulacra” of Baudrillard, or in Jameson’s critique of the global capitalist colonization of culture.<sup>138</sup>

These are all variants on what political theorist Jane Bennett has termed the “disenchantment narrative,” in reference to its most well-known proponent, Max Weber.<sup>139</sup> The difference between them is seen as one of gradual disillusionment, from a Romantic faith in the redemption of the material world, through a social-science informed longing mixed with anxiety and despair, through a postmodern sense of malaise, nihilism, or liberation, as the case may be, brought on by the abandonment of Romantic aspirations. Whether alienation is attributed to a perceived separation from nature, the ill effects of industrialization, or systems of representation (language itself, the commodification of culture, or the ubiquity of mass media), all can be understood as variations on the concept of alienation produced in the primitivist discourse, the alienation of civilization from a primitive state. The postmodern suspicion toward meta-narratives ironically failed to be suspicious of this meta-narrative,

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rationalization, and what Max Weber famously called the ‘disenchantment of the world.’ Over the course of the nineteenth century, or so the received wisdom has it, these ingredients of the modern world were then exported to the rest of the world.” See Sebastian Conrad, “Enlightenment in Global History: A Historiographical Critique,” *American Historical Review* 117, No. 4 (October 2012): 999. Conrad is citing Toby E. Huff, *Intellectual Curiosity and the Scientific Revolution: A Global Perspective* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 4. Conrad’s essay critiques this master narrative and surveys recent attempts to undo the Eurocentric understanding of the Enlightenment.

<sup>138</sup> Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation*, trans. Sheila Faria Glaser (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1994); Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1991).

<sup>139</sup> Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life*.

partially explaining why postmodernism failed in its attempts to get past the modern. It is in this sense that I argue that primitivism has constituted a fundamental discourse of alterity since roughly the late eighteenth century.

Primitivism, then, is not simply a product of romanticism, modernism, or postmodernism; rather, the discourse of primitivism has informed these various critiques of culture. Primitivism is certainly not the only factor behind such critiques, yet it has been a fundamental discourse in each instance, such that it is impossible to imagine them without it. Together they form the various elements of what we might call the critique of modernity. Primitivism has informed these discourses insofar as they have expressed a view of the world characterized by the “disenchantment” narrative. To demonstrate that these critiques share this common disenchantment narrative, and that this narrative is produced through the discourse of primitivism, I will turn to a closer examination of Bennett’s work.

Bennett has compellingly argued that the disenchantment narrative is just that—a narrative, and not a necessary or binding one. She writes:

Although the disenchantment story captures important features of contemporary life, it is also important to come to terms as closely as possible with enchanting events and affects residing within or alongside scientific calculation, instrumental reason, secularism, or disciplinary power. This seems advisable in order to induce a more visionary and expansive mood from the one that would be present if the disenchantment story held the whole field.<sup>140</sup>

Although her work is historically minded and richly documented, it is essentially a work of political philosophy, a theoretical attempt to derive and develop an “enchanted

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<sup>140</sup> *Ibid.*, 14.



materialism.” She uses Max Weber, as well as the more recent writing of Hans Blumenberg and Simon Critchley, to characterize the disenchantment view, but her main concern is to scour history, philosophy, and contemporary culture in order to find and persuasively articulate counter-examples which challenge the disenchantment narrative—from the ancient writings of Lucretius to Renaissance physician Paracelsus, from Henry David Thoreau to Franz Kafka; from the philosophies of Bruno Latour and Isabelle Stengers to Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari; even from seemingly unlikely places, such as the writings of Kant, or television ads for Gap clothing. As she explains, her motivation is ultimately an ethical one:

The story I tell is of a contemporary world sprinkled with natural and cultural sites that have the power “to enchant.” It is a story born of my own discomfort in the presence of two images circulating in political and social theory. The first is the image of modernity as disenchanted, that is to say, as a place of dearth and alienation (when compared to a golden age of community and cosmological coherency) or a place of reason, freedom, and control (when compared to a dark and confused premodernity). For me the question is not whether disenchantment is a regrettable or a progressive historical development. It is, rather, whether the very characterization of the world as disenchanted ignores and then discourages affective attachment to that world. The question is important because the mood of enchantment may be valuable for ethical life.<sup>141</sup>

I identify with Bennett’s project, and I see my work here as a supplement to her own. To that end, it seems to me that perhaps part of the difficulty “the West” has had in achieving a popular sense of “enchanted materialism” is to be found in the powerful hold the disenchantment story has held on “modern” individuals. Bennett, it should be noted, is keenly attuned to the power of affect, and the affective power the disenchantment narrative. She writes:

The story of disenchantment represents and sustains a specific range of aesthetic sensibilities; it enters into moods, temperaments, habits, perceptual compartments,

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<sup>141</sup> Ibid., 3.

and somatic predispositions that find expression or resistance in political choices, alliances, and policies. Some portions of those sensibilities and comportments are so sedimented that they are highly resistant to reform, but there also seem to be others that are more susceptible to techniques of the self. My project is premised on [the] existence of those latter portions, the hope and target of my alter-tale.<sup>142</sup>

Bennett's attention therefore is geared toward discovering and articulating the affective power to be found in the sites of resistance. Greater attention can be paid, I argue, to the affective powers that support the disenchantment narrative itself, an area she does not explore. As she explains:

Rather than examine [the] political culture [of disenchantment] through specific events, or by means of a history of the ideas that shape them, or by a study of the institutional arrangements (of government, class, law, race, gender, consumption) that support them, I focus on a register of experience—the register of a cultural imaginary.<sup>143</sup>

What seems useful, then, is a critical reassessment of the history of the disenchantment narrative, and in particular, a recognition that this history cannot be told without understanding the role that primitivism has played. For if the source of disenchantment is consistently attributed to the wrong sources (empiricism, rationalism, technology, secularism, and so on), it makes it that much more difficult to uproot. In the following chapter, I attempt to call this history into view through an examination of the primitivist traces in Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno's *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. Through an examination of the text's participation in the discourse of primitivism, I seek to draw attention away from the figure of rationality and toward the history of imperialism.

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<sup>142</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.

<sup>143</sup> *Ibid.*, 15.

**Chapter 3.**  
**From *Dialectic of Enlightenment* to Dialectic of Empire:**  
**Disclosing Traces of Primitivism and Disenchantment in Critical Theory**

What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire! Empire has created the time of history. Empire has located its existence not in the smooth recurrent spinning time of the cycle of the seasons but in the jagged time of rise and fall, of beginning and end, of catastrophe. Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history. One thought alone preoccupies the submerged mind of Empire: how not to end, how not to die, how to prolong its era.

—J.M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*<sup>1</sup>

## **Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I argued that the traditional interpretation of primitivism holds that primitivist discourse is a projection, a product of civilization—a response to living in a society characterized by such traits as rationalism, empiricism, technology, and secularism. These features of contemporary society, it is suggested, trigger emotional responses, and primitivism is therefore an evaluative, affective discourse. As such, examples of primitivism take the form of either a celebration of civilization’s achievement, namely autonomy and power, or as a nostalgic longing for a lost, unalienated mode of being. In the latter version, civilization is thought to have achieved too much knowledge and power, at the expense of detachment from

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<sup>1</sup> J. M. Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians* (New York: Penguin, 1982), 133.

meaning, and hence individuals are alienated from nature, society, and self. In other words, this set of views is premised upon what I have been calling the disenchantment narrative. Whether expressed positively or negatively, primitivism is figured in this view as the product of a certain condition of knowledge and power.

Through an examination of the contemporary theory of primitivism, I have argued that the consensus view embraces the idea that the “primitive” is a projection, but yet ascribes an unwarranted ontology to civilization. In other words, this causal view asserts that a *condition of society* (a condition of knowledge and power) is the source of the primitivist discourse. On the contrary, I maintain that primitivism has structured the evaluative discourse about this *condition*; that while there is no denying a history in which technological and social change are evident, the evaluation of these changes as moments of historical crisis producing increased autonomy and increased alienation—i.e., the disenchantment narrative—has in fact been structured by the discourse of primitivism, and hence, the history of imperialism.

Thus far I have developed this argument through an application of the theoretical apparatus of colonial discourse analysis. The previous chapters have used this apparatus to diagnose a persistence of primitivism in contemporary theory, and made a theoretical case for reorienting the discussion of primitivism. In this chapter I shall begin to explore the history of primitivist discourse. In particular I will examine the relationship of primitivism to the historical construction of the disenchantment narrative: the ethnocentric idea that a particular history, the history of Western civilization, is characterized by knowledge and power, too much knowledge and power, and that this excess is responsible for alienation. Through my analysis I will show how this disenchantment narrative was constructed historically—that primitivism, in

the era of imperialism, produces this narrative of disenchanted modernity. It is not civilization, or a surfeit of knowledge or power, that produces a *condition* of alienation, it is rather the discourse of primitivism that produces a narrative of disenchanted modernity.

In the above quote from *Waiting for the Barbarians*, J. M. Coetzee offers a moving expression of the disenchantment narrative. His imagery evokes a longing for an unalienated existence—to live like birds in the air, like children. In Coetzee’s reckoning, however, it is not civilization or rationality that severs humans from this experience, it is empire. In this chapter I will examine Max Horkheimer and Theodor Adorno’s *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, and argue that their text offers an exemplary instance of primitivist discourse in which rationality is presented as a force of theoretical and social alienation; the text is, in this sense, a perpetuation of the disenchantment narrative.<sup>2</sup> By adopting Horkheimer and Adorno’s own theoretical critique of what they call enlightenment, and applying it to their text, I will argue that they neglect the context of imperialism in which the “dialectic of enlightenment” emerges. I argue that the ethnocentric image of the West as defined by totalizing reason is in fact the product of the history of imperialism. In this sense, I seek to expand the frame of their critique, and shift the focus from the dialectic of enlightenment to the dialectic of empire.

It should be noted that my claim here is not that had there been no imperialism, there would be no disenchantment narrative. There would have been (and indeed have been) numerous particular expressions of disenchantment, from various sources, unrelated to any imperial context. From the ancient Greek and Roman examples collected by Arthur Lovejoy and George Boas, to a great many of the world’s religions, there are no shortage of claims that

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<sup>2</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments*, ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, trans. Edmund Jephcott (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002).

thinking requires detachment, or that human life requires separation from nature.<sup>3</sup> I argue that Empire, however, created the conditions in which such individual and particular assessments became collected into a whole, woven together into a narrative that was used to define and orient a people. In other words, imperialism can help explain how disenchantment becomes ethnocentric, how it becomes a sustaining narrative of “the West” and “Western rationality.”

There are different ways one could go about making this argument. One way might be to follow the path set by Fuyuki Kurasawa in *The Ethnological Imagination* and to examine the major thinkers of the theoretical tradition in which the disenchantment narrative emerges, from Jean-Jacques Rousseau to Immanuel Kant, from Georg Friedrich Hegel to Karl Marx, from Max Weber to the present, and demonstrate that in each case, the discourse of primitivism structures their understanding of society.<sup>4</sup> As I noted in chapter 1, however, in many ways this has already been done. Kurasawa draws attention to the various ways in which thinking about ethnographic others shaped the social theory of these thinkers. From Kurasawa’s perspective, however, this seems to suggest that these thinkers had achieved some kind of “cross-cultural” understanding; their ability to empathize with different societies enabled them to develop a critical perspective on their own. Such an account is of course mired in its own primitivism, suggesting that these thinkers’ ability to appreciate the supposed simplicity, collective sociality, or meaningful lives of various ethnographic others enabled the theorists to critically diagnose the ills, and achievements, of the West, its alleged rationalism, empiricism, individualism, and secularism.

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<sup>3</sup> Arthur O. Lovejoy and George Boas, *Primitivism and Related Ideas in Antiquity* (New York: Octagon Books, 1965).

<sup>4</sup> Fuyuki Kurasawa, *The Ethnological Imagination: A Cross-Cultural Critique of Modernity* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2004). For the details of Kurasawa’s argument see my discussion in chapter 1.

If Kurasawa's case is typical, it is clear that demonstrating the *presence* of a primitivist discourse at work in the history of social theory is not sufficient. What is necessary, for starters, is the theoretical framework derived from colonial discourse analysis, demonstrating that these thinkers' "knowledge" of primitive societies was a discursive construct; and that accordingly, the "knowledge" produced about their own society was equally a discursive construct.

There is a further problem, however. It would also be insufficient merely to rewrite this historical tradition of social theory as the tradition of primitivist/modernity discourse, accepting the facts of Kurasawa's connections, but insisting at each point along the way upon their role as discursive constructions. The problem here is that doing so would perpetuate a particular linear history of the West, a Eurocentric perspective of history that colonial discourse analysis has tried to displace. This is not to say that historicism is the product of primitivism, but rather that historicism has been inflected by imperialism. Although linear concepts of history are by no means unique to the West, it is imperative in the present moment to critique this particular version of linear history, because of the way in which the narrative has absorbed to itself the identities of rationality, progress, and autonomy, and in so doing has justified imperial power and violence.

In order to make my argument, therefore, I will begin with a theoretical critique of a particular instance of primitivism in a particular text, and from here will let a historical horizon come into view.<sup>5</sup> The point of departure will be Horkheimer and Adorno's *Dialectic of*

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<sup>5</sup> This method is in fact shaped by the very object of my critique, the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. As Simon Jarvis observes, in noting that the book draws upon the historical but is explicitly *not* attempting to provide historical narrativity: "Instead of telling a story, which would start from some distant and inevitably hypothetical 'origin' and then eventually arrive in the twentieth century, [*Dialectic of Enlightenment*] starts out from where we are now, from the assumptions about concepts and about the world which we habitually deploy, very often without recognizing that we are making these assumptions. It sets out to give an account of how we got to these

*Enlightenment*, a notably challenging text, yet one that is especially relevant for the present discussion. I argue that their text offers an exemplary focal point for the analysis of primitivism in the German context. On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno provide the theoretical framework for the analysis of primitivism that I myself employ. In many ways their analysis of the operation of power and knowledge anticipates Foucault, and accordingly Said. In addition, their argument that enlightenment and myth are mutually constitutive provides the framework for my own argument that primitivism and civilization are similarly co-constituted. Hence my own project is in fact premised upon their own.

On the other hand, however, I argue that their text perpetuates the primitivist discourse. It does so primarily through the text's association of mythic projection with instrumental reason, and the identification of reason with "bourgeois Western civilization."<sup>6</sup> Moreover, I suggest that the primitivism of the text emerges on account of an unstable combination in their text of a critique of theory and a critique of contemporary society. At the theoretical level, they seek to critique philosophy and yet make an argument for a new approach to philosophy, one that will overcome reason's historical identification with alienation

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assumptions, but it does this by working back from these assumptions themselves. It asks: *what must have happened for our thinking to have become what it is?*" Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 21 (italics added). However, I do not claim to follow merely a "fragmentist" approach as do Horkheimer and Adorno, as I seek to go beyond merely a conceptual critique and to assert the connection of conceptuality to history, and thus provide a historical narrative of primitivism, in which this chapter is but one element. In this sense, while seeking to avoid universal linear history and yet maintain a historical argument, I generally follow Foucault's genealogical approach, which of course is not without its own problems. As Robert Young explains, "Genealogy develops the possibility broached in the *Archaeology* that in a general history different significances can be accorded to events, depending on 'their correlation with other previous or simultaneous events, discursive or not.' Here it is the problem the historian poses that determines what constitutes an event and what status it has. Foucault's genealogy means that by asking a question, posing a problem, you set up a generality against which you constitute events and arrange them in a series. The construction of that generality does not pretend to be the only possible one—the same event could operate in all sorts of different ways in different series, temporalities, which would mean that, strictly speaking, it was no longer the same event, for it would have dispersed in their different rarefactions." Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, 2nd ed. (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 118.

<sup>6</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.



and violence. “The critique of enlightenment,” they write, “is intended to prepare a positive concept of enlightenment which liberates it from its entanglement to blind domination.”<sup>7</sup>

Contrary to many of their critics, I accept that this critique can function on a theoretical level; I am not asserting that their text is self-refuting. Their approach to philosophical critique, as Simon Jarvis has pointed out, is to inhabit and exhibit contradictions, not to “liquidate” them: as a result, “criticisms of [the text] in fact fall more helplessly, because unconsciously, into contradiction themselves.”<sup>8</sup> I am interested, rather, in the *form* that their particular critique takes. I argue that it is the form of the argument—critiquing reason while rescuing a “positive concept,” in conjunction with their humanist critique of contemporary society—that perpetuates the primitivist discourse.

Horkheimer and Adorno explain in the preface of 1944/47, “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”<sup>9</sup> In the context of this merger of theoretical critique and social critique, the aim to prepare a “positive concept” leads to an argumentative framework in which the distinction between civilized and primitive is seemingly collapsed—“Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology,” runs the core of the argument.<sup>10</sup> Yet the distinction, I argue, is in fact reproduced at a higher level of meta-critique. The text presents an example of a “savage civilization” argument, in which the current state of civilization is analyzed to reveal that there is no fundamental difference between savagery and civilization; the distinction, they argue, was only ever a fantasy of reason. However, to critique

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

<sup>8</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 42.

<sup>9</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., xviii.

this state of affairs, Horkheimer and Adorno must posit an alternative, “truly human” state, even if they themselves do not claim to inhabit such a utopian position of critique. Their moral critique, in its attempt to negate the “savage civilization” in contrast to a utopian image of humanity, reproduces the terms of the primitivis discourse. In addition, their combination of this moral critique with a theoretical critique, in which instrumental reason is associated with alienation and domination, perpetuates the disenchantment narrative.

I will present this argument in three sections. In the first, I excavate the core argument of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and explain how my own project is premised upon Horkheimer and Adorno’s text. I then highlight the text’s problematic relationship with the disenchantment narrative, and I argue that the form of the argument, as a critique of “savage civilization,” reproduces the discourse of primitivism. Finally I argue that the dialectic of enlightenment that Horkheimer and Adorno analyze should be repositioned as a product of imperialism and primitivism.

In the second section, I distinguish my own critique of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. My interest here is not to object to the text as theory, but to draw out the traces of primitivism in the text’s conceptual framework. I must make clear at the outset that there is a simple sense in which the text appears primitivist, but that this is not my aim here. As Jarvis writes, tongue in cheek, the text is littered with “thinly sown references to often out-of-date historical and anthropological sources . . . It looks as though the book is an outlandish survival of the nineteenth-century genre of speculative universal history – except that this time the story runs

not from barbarism to civilization but in the other direction.”<sup>11</sup> This is of course a common misreading. I argue rather that their text is primitivist in a more robust sense, in that the theoretical framework reproduces the primitive-civilized distinction, and that their rhetorical work, while aiming to liberate conceptual thinking, nevertheless hinges upon the discourse of primitivism. When Horkheimer and Adorno suggest that the present state of society threatens to (or has already) regressed to barbarism, there are implicit quotation marks around the word “barbarism.” This is how the situation *would appear* from within the dialectic of enlightenment: that which enlightenment defined as barbaric, and excluded from itself, is now recognized as its own defining feature, as the return of the repressed. And yet the moral force of the argument relies upon the negation of barbaric society in the hope for a “truly human” state.

Finally, I will make an excursus, away from the theoretical and into the particular work of conceptual signification, to disclose the traces of primitivism in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. For this part of the argument I examine Horkheimer and Adorno’s critique of Homer’s *Odyssey*. Through contrasting their interpretation with my own reading of the *Odyssey*, I demonstrate how the lingering primitivism of their theoretical framework leads them to misread the *Odyssey* as merely expressive of the “enlightenment/myth” dialectic, when in fact it can be read as critical of it. I argue that Homer’s text rebukes Odysseus—not for his rationalism, but for his relations with alterity (the strange humans and creatures he encounters on his journey). Homer’s text therefore offers a *critique* of Odysseus’s primitivism, and links that primitivism not to rationality, but to empire. This leads to an alternative ending: Horkheimer and Adorno’s text appears to hover somewhere in limbo, on the border between

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<sup>11</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 20.

the aporetic and the apotropaic. My argument is that the answers one receives depend on the questions one brings to the text. When this text is approached from the question of enlightenment, the text succeeds as a critique of reason; yet when it is approached from the perspective of imperialism, it produces an apotropaic discourse of modernity. As a counterpoint, however, Homer's *Odyssey*, if we approach it from the question of empire, provides an example of aporia—how one might emerge from the encounter with alterity liberated from the discourse of modernity.

## **Part 1. From the Fault of Reason to the Fault of Empire**

### ***The Critique of Enlightenment as a Model for the Critique of Primitivism***

To begin, I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno's text offers a critique of primitivism upon which my own critique is based, which can be used against their own text to reveal the lingering traces of primitivism in their work. They argue that primitivist thinking is a product of enlightenment thinking. They do not use the term primitivism however, nor are they speaking specifically about the historical Enlightenment. Their text is an investigation of the concept of *enlightenment* understood as a particular mode of thinking, one which can be found exhibited in Homer's *Odyssey* no less than in the writings of Francis Bacon:

Enlightenment, understood in the widest sense as the advance of thought, has always aimed at liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters. . . .

Enlightenment's program was the disenchantment of the world. It wanted to dispel myths, to overthrow fantasy with knowledge.<sup>12</sup>

Enlightenment, as a way of thinking, sets itself in opposition to myth, to mythic thinking. By overcoming such mythic thinking, enlightenment enables humanity "to use its knowledge for the betterment of its conditions."<sup>13</sup>

This ideal of a mode of critical thinking that conveyed power over nature, and over the self, was articulated in the historical Enlightenment, but was not unique to it: "What human beings seek to learn from nature is how to use it to dominate wholly both it and human beings."<sup>14</sup> The historical Enlightenment, however, shares with the present moment of materialist, positivist thought a movement towards increased self-reflexivity, in which enlightenment's attack against the mythic turns on itself, and recognizes that the very concepts of Enlightenment thought are equally mythic:

Ruthless toward itself, the Enlightenment has eradicated the last remnant of its own self-awareness. Only thought which does violence to itself is hard enough to shatter myths. Faced by the present triumph of the factual mentality, Bacon's nominalist credo would have smacked of metaphysics and would have been convicted of the same vanity for which he criticized scholasticism.<sup>15</sup>

The irony, however—and this is the primary polemic of their text—is that enlightenment, which defined itself in opposition to the mythic, is in fact permeated by the mythic. This forms the heart of Horkheimer and Adorno's argument, which is that the concepts

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<sup>12</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1. As Simon Jarvis explains: "Adorno and Horkheimer do not use the term 'enlightenment' primarily to designate a historical period ranging from Descartes to Kant. Instead they use it to refer to a series of related intellectual and practical operations which are presented as demythologizing, secularizing or disenchanting some mythical, religious or magical representation of the world." Jarvis, *Adorno*, 24.

<sup>13</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 1.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.* They add, "Once the movement is able to develop unhampered by external oppression, there is no holding it back. Its own ideas of human rights then fare no better than the older universals. Any intellectual resistance it encounters merely increases its strength" (3).

of myth and enlightenment are involved in a dialectic. This is expressed, as they explain in the preface of 1944/47, in the work's "two theses": "Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology."<sup>16</sup> By this combination of theses, Horkheimer and Adorno assert that while enlightenment defines itself in opposition to myth, magic, and animism, it succumbs to the very qualities that it fears. "The disenchantment of the world," they write, "means the extirpation of animism."<sup>17</sup> In this project, enlightenment, paradoxically, both succeeds and fails. It disenchants the world—which it is to say, it objectifies the world; it assumes a cognitive stance that makes the world into material ready to be classified, mastered, and dominated. Yet enlightenment fails, because it itself remains mythic. The result of this bifurcation is historical catastrophe: "The wholly enlightened earth," they write, "is radiant with triumphant calamity."<sup>18</sup>

In Horkheimer and Adorno's presentation, the way in which enlightenment defines itself in opposition to myth and magic can be understood as a type of primitivism. The attempt of enlightenment to distinguish between mythic naïveté and rational knowledge is in fact a projection and a self-deception. Unlike the forms of primitivism I diagnosed in the previous chapter, therefore, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of enlightenment acknowledges that not only the mythic "other" is a projection, but so is the concept of the "rational" enlightened self. In this my own critique follows theirs.

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<sup>16</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

### ***Perpetuating the Disenchantment Narrative***

The problem with Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, I argue, is twofold. On the one hand, in spite of their argument that myth and enlightenment are mutually constitutive, their dialectic links this mythic projection with rationality. This perpetuates the argument that it is rationality that is the cause of primitivism. The primitivism of Western civilization, in other words, is the product of a totalization of a culture of blind rationalism. This leads to the second point, which is that Horkheimer and Adorno, although they critique the disenchantment narrative, end up reproducing it, through their critique of contemporary society.

For Horkheimer and Adorno, the concept of enlightenment is not simply a problem for theory. Their materialist critique of idealism has led them to the understanding that concepts and conceptual analysis are not isolated from praxis; they seek "to gain greater understanding of the intertwinement of rationality and social reality."<sup>19</sup> This is because, as Jarvis explains, "concepts always carry buried in within them, even when they look entirely abstract, the traces of bodily pleasure or suffering, fear or desire, critically interpreting conceptual contradictions can be a way of critically interpreting our real social experience."<sup>20</sup>

Some readers of the *Dialectic* insist that whatever claims Horkheimer and Adorno make about social reality and history, these can only be understood as fragmentary moments that cannot be examined in isolation from what is essentially an epistemological critique (an important objection which I will examine below). Nevertheless, most commentators accept that the text is intended to critique the array of developments known as modernity, from the rise to

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., xviii.

<sup>20</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 6.

dominance in academic philosophy of an anemic positivism, to the blind will to power of science and technology, and the permeation of society by the ill effects of the latter, from the domination of the culture industry (see the chapter “Enlightenment as Mass Deception”), to the psychic violence of capitalism, to the physical violence of totalitarianism. As Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, editor of the volume of Horkheimer’s writings in which *Dialektic der Aufklärung* was later included, writes in an afterword:

Reason appears as inextricably entangled with domination. Since the beginnings of history, liberation from the compulsions of external nature has been achieved only by introducing a power relationship of second degree. Both the repression of the internal nature of human drives, and social domination, are already at work in myth. Finally, fascism and the modern culture industry are the forms taken by a return of repressed nature. In the service of an advancing rationalization of instrumental thought modeled on the domination of nature and serving its purposes, enlightenment reason is progressively hollowed out until it reverts to the new mythology of a resurrected relationship to nature, to violence.<sup>21</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno’s own comments encourage such interpretations; as they wrote in the preface of 1944/47: “What we had set out to do was nothing less than to explain why humanity, instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism.”<sup>22</sup> Similarly, in the preface to the Italian edition (1962/66), they explain that the book “is shaped by the social conditions in which it was written. In keeping with its theme, our book demonstrates tendencies which turn cultural progress into its opposite.”<sup>23</sup> They add that the twin focal points of their critique were “social phenomena of the 1930s and 1940s in America” and “the period of National Socialist rule” in Germany.

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<sup>21</sup> Gunzelin Schmid Noerr, afterword to *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 218.

<sup>22</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xiv.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid*, xiii.



Horkheimer and Adorno therefore on the one hand anticipate Foucault, in the understanding of power as not simply something that some people hold over others, but as a force embedded in knowledge production, and a force shaping social reality. The problem, however, is that their own account, as it veers from epistemological conceptual critique to the critique of contemporary civilization, ends up reinforcing the disenchantment narrative that their dialectic investigation was poised to unravel. This is the inevitable result of an investigation that posits reason as the defining feature of Western civilization, and yet at the same time insists that it is only through this reason (in a “corrected” form) that an avoidance of calamity is possible.

### ***The Persistence of Primitivism: The Critique of Savage Civilization***

Horkheimer and Adorno’s text is a perpetuation of the disenchantment narrative, although not in a simplistic fashion. A common misreading of the text is to consider it to be a polemic against enlightenment, and against reason in all its forms. But this is not the case. Horkheimer and Adorno explicitly state that their aim is not to dispense with enlightenment, merely to suggest a path toward a necessary self-reflexivity. As Horkheimer and Adorno write:

The aporia which faced us in our work thus proved to be the first matter we had to investigate: the self-destruction of enlightenment. We have no doubt—and herein lies our *petitio principii*—that freedom in society is inseparable from enlightenment thinking. We believe we have perceived with equal clarity, however, that the very concept of that thinking, no less than the concrete historical forms, the institutions of society with which it is intertwined, already contains the germ of regression which is taking place everywhere today. If enlightenment does not assimilate reflection on this regressive moment, it seals its own fate.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid., xvi.

Their philosophy is intended, therefore, as a “corrective,” as Jarvis explains:

This “corrective” form has the advantage of allowing Adorno and Horkheimer to admit that all rationality to date has been entangled in some way with social domination and the domination of nature, while opening a space for them to suggest that, none the less, reason does not have to be like this.<sup>25</sup>

This poses the following questions, however: what is this space? how precisely do they open it?

The space, as others have noted, functions as a utopia, a negation of negation. In addition to this, however, I argue their tool for opening up this space is the affective moral critique launched against instrumental reason. Moreover, this moral critique is founded upon the discourse of primitivism.

Horkheimer and Adorno, to advance their critique, must project a utopian image of humanity, in contrast to the “savage civilization” in which history is mired. In their rewriting of the philosophy of history, there has been no progress—there has only been the dialectic, in which reason has imagined itself free from myth, and imagined for itself a history of progress. Their own critique reduces this image of progress to a grand, but horrific, illusion. And yet the dream image of freedom that the enlightenment wrests out of its dialectic is for them the only flicker of hope, the possibility that the image of progress that existed formerly only as myth, might one day begin as reality: “Critical thought, which does not call a halt before progress itself, requires us to take up the cause of the remnants of freedom, of tendencies toward real humanity, even though they seem powerless in face of the great historical trend.”<sup>26</sup>

The rhetorical form of the argument, therefore, is posed as a contrast between either self-reflection or regression to “barbarism.” In this sense, Horkheimer and Adorno replicate the

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<sup>25</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 24.

<sup>26</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xi.

primitivist dichotomy between civilization and primitive. This is not to deny the self-conscious deployment of such terms in Horkheimer and Adorno's text; their own use of such binaries should, on the one hand, be seen as primarily rhetorical. However, even as a rhetorical construction, this rhetoric, according to the terms of their argument, must be investigated, to determine the traces it contains.

On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno reveal the constructedness of the distinction between primitive and civilized, yet they also perpetuate this distinction through the moral force of their argument as a critique of modernity. On the surface, the text collapses this distinction between primitive and civilized: humanity, "instead of entering a truly human state, is sinking into a new kind of barbarism." Horkheimer and Adorno do not argue, however, that civilization, in essence, is barbaric. Rather, it is specifically contemporary society that offers an image of this collapsed state, in which the civilized is primitive, and the primitive civilized. This collapsed state itself is identified as a specific historical crisis of rational civilization.

Their argument can thus be understood as a mode of the "savage civilization" argument. This argument seems to erase the distinction between primitive and civilized, while in fact preserving it. The primitive-civilized dichotomy is reinscribed through the evaluative force of the argument, through the very rhetoric which Horkheimer and Adorno's dialectical work is intended to undermine. The equation that is posited in the "savage civilization" argument is not neutral; it is intended to suggest a negative assessment of the condition in question. In Horkheimer and Adorno's case, the extreme violence of fascism and capitalism. The standpoint of this moral critique is in fact humanism—the aspiration to create a "truly human state." They write, for example:

What is at issue here is not culture as a value, as understood by critics of civilization such as Huxley, Jaspers, and Ortega y Gasset, but the necessity of enlightenment to reflect on itself if humanity is not to be totally betrayed. What is at stake is not conservation of the past but the fulfillment of past hopes.<sup>27</sup>

Through the utopian element in Horkheimer and Adorno's text, and the desire to "fulfill past hopes," they envision a critical counterpoint to the current state of "savage civilization." Critics are therefore too generous when they assert that Horkheimer and Adorno make no specific claims about this utopian counterpoint; it is envisioned quite literally as a refined or "corrected" mode of rationality. As Jarvis writes, "The point is that positivistic and rationalist conceptions of enlightenment are not enlightened enough."<sup>28</sup> As a result, however, the binary opposition between primitive and civilized is reinscribed. Their own theoretical work is therefore itself structured by the primitivist discourse.

It should be clear that I am not arguing that Adorno and Horkheimer's attempt to preserve a "positive concept" of enlightenment should be seen as an attempt to recuperate "culture as a value." As Robert Witkin observes:

It is misleading to identify Adorno's critique of culture with cultural criticism that adopts apparently similar conclusions. Adorno himself was especially critical of those who treat culture as a value, who deplore the decline of serious Culture and its displacement by the vulgarities of mass culture; this was a type of criticism that issued in nostalgia for things past. For Adorno, criticism that tacitly accepts the world as it is, that complains of it but embodies no real resistance to it, is actually complicit in reproducing the existing state of affairs.<sup>29</sup>

I am not claiming that Horkheimer and Adorno merely want to preserve a kind of mandarin high culture. However, the distinction between Horkheimer and Adorno's

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<sup>27</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xvii.

<sup>28</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 22.

<sup>29</sup> Robert W. Witkin, "Philosophy of Culture," in *Theodor Adorno: Key Concepts*, ed. Deborah Cook (Stocksfield: Acumen Publishing Limited, 2008), 177.

disenchantment narrative and that made by other “critics of civilization” is above all one of method. From Horkheimer and Adorno’s perspective, it is not enough simply to critique culture, but one must do so in a way that resists the totalizing aims of enlightenment. It is only through one’s approach to conceptuality, therefore, that one can offer “real resistance.” Nevertheless the *threat* that one hopes to resist remains the force of a destructive rationality that is believed to objectify the world and alienate one from truth.

### ***The Fault of Empire***

To summarize the foregoing argument: On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno present a critique of enlightenment in which primitivism (a distinction between a civilized self and primitive other) is presented as the product of instrumental rationality. Primitivism is the result of a certain mode of rational cognition, which denies its nature, and projects it onto the other. Their work thus provides the theoretical tools for undoing the primitivist discourse. Yet at the same time, they end up perpetuating the discourse of primitivism, through identifying Western civilization as characterized by a totalizing rationalism, and by a theoretical critique that is structured upon the primitive-civilized binary.

I argue, rather, that primitivism is produced, not by rationality, but by imperialism. The very notion of a period of historical time (Enlightenment or modernity) and a people (the West) as defined by instrumental reason, mastery over nature, and alienation from nature—is *itself* a product of imperialism, not “reason.” It is not Western rationality (even as mythical self-conception) that perpetuates primitivist thinking; it is empire. This is the point suggested by

J.M. Coetzee in *Waiting for the Barbarians*. It is not a particular kind of rational thinking that produces disenchantment and alienation—not even the supposedly ruthless “totalitarian” objectifying mentality of rationalism.<sup>30</sup> Coetzee writes, “What has made it impossible for us to live in time like fish in water, like birds in air, like children? It is the fault of Empire.” The practice of empire—the encounter with cultural difference in the field of imperial power relations—converts a primitivist discourse into a historical narrative—the narrative of modernity. In doing so, “Empire dooms itself to live in history and plot against history”<sup>31</sup>—the circumstance of empire, in other words, explains the paradoxical predicament in which Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.

## **Part 2. *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and the Traces of Primitivism**

There are different ways in which one can interpret the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*; there would seem to be few ways, however, in which one can hope to critique it with any success. A puzzle box of contradiction and self-reflexivity, it tends to elude attempts to establish its meaning, to fix its concepts and thereby assess its achievements or failures. “Success,” however, depends of course on what we mean by critique. Horkheimer and Adorno’s text is, among other things, an attempt to redefine the criteria and practice of critique, and criticisms that fail to account for this fundamental reorientation can only produce unsatisfactory interpretations. It shall be useful therefore at the outset to distinguish my

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<sup>30</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno write, “No matter which myths are invoked against [enlightenment], by being used as arguments they are made to acknowledge the very principle of corrosive rationality of which enlightenment stands accused. Enlightenment is totalitarian.” *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 3.

<sup>31</sup> Coetzee, *Waiting for the Barbarians*, 133.

argument from other common criticisms of the text—and to present my own critique as an extension of their work, an attempt to interpret and liberate concepts, rather than a criticism of it.

My argument is essentially that although Horkheimer and Adorno diagnose a phenomenon of primitivism in the dialectic of enlightenment, they nevertheless recapitulate this primitivist discourse in their own critique. On the surface, this may look similar to other arguments that have been made regarding Horkheimer and Adorno's text. It is important to make clear that I am not offering a critique of the text's epistemological stance, but rather an extension of its own method of critique, to apply to the text itself.

Several authors have argued, for example, that in Horkheimer and Adorno's attempt to rescue a "positive concept" of enlightenment, they remain trapped in the dialectic of enlightenment, trying to wrest truth from myth, freedom from domination. Their project thus appears either self-refuting or self-exempting. This argument has been made, perhaps most notably, by Jürgen Habermas, who argued that their critique of rationality is the heir of Nietzsche's totalizing and self-referential critique of enlightenment. Habermas argues that on their own view, "it is no longer possible to place hope in the liberating force of enlightenment."

This results in their being trapped in a performative contradiction:

Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves in the same embarrassment as Nietzsche: If they do not want to renounce the effect of a final unmasking and still want to *continue with critique*, they will have to leave at least one rational criterion intact for the explanation of the corruption of *all* rational criteria. In the face of this paradox, self-referential critique loses its orientation.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>32</sup> Jürgen Habermas, *The Philosophical Discourse of Modernity: Twelve Lectures* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 1987), 126.

Habermas argues that Horkheimer and Adorno's response differs from that of Friedrich Nietzsche, for example, or Michel Foucault, who embrace the theoretical consequences of a theory based on the totalization of power, and thereby avoid the charges of self-contradiction. Horkheimer and Adorno, however, in their rejection of power as domination, their attempt to "rescue," enlightenment, are compelled to take an alternative route, by "stirring up, holding open, and no longer wanting to overcome theoretically the performative contradiction inherent in an ideology critique that outstrips itself."<sup>33</sup> Habermas writes that theory at this level of self-reflection is groundless, but that Horkheimer and Adorno try to inhabit this "groundless" position: "They therefore eschew theory and practice determinate negation on an ad hoc basis."<sup>34</sup> Habermas thus concludes that this position is theoretically untenable: "Anyone who abides in a paradox on the very spot once occupied by philosophy with its ultimate groundings is not just taking up an uncomfortable position; one can only hold that place if one makes it at least minimally plausible that there is no way out."<sup>35</sup>

Habermas is half right. It is important at this point to observe that Horkheimer and Adorno are engaged in both a critique of theory and contemporary society. Although the work pursues both simultaneously, for purposes of clarity, it will be useful for a moment to discuss them individually. I argue that Habermas is correct in questioning their theory of modern society, in that their account presents an image of reason in society as totalizing. It is incorrect, however, to suggest as Habermas does, that Horkheimer and Adorno's critique, though it insists on theoretical self-referentialism, aims at totalization in the critique of theory. My point here is

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid., 127.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid., 128.

<sup>35</sup> Ibid.



not simply that they hold up the potential for a “positive concept of enlightenment.” Habermas acknowledges as much, but finds the position untenable.<sup>36</sup> My point is rather that Habermas’s approach to their critique of theory is, in effect, too literal. He fails to appreciate the literary-philosophical techniques by which Horkheimer and Adorno resist the dogmatic claims of enlightenment reason.

Horkheimer and Adorno’s approach to conceptual analysis in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* can be rather crudely understood as a synthesis of two separate strands of critique: immanent critique and the Hegelian notion of “determinate negation.” To begin with the latter, Horkheimer and Adorno distinguish determinate negation from a dogmatic critique:

Determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth. Language thereby becomes more than a mere system of signs. With the concept of determinate negation Hegel gave prominence to an element which distinguishes enlightenment from the positivist decay to which he consigned it.<sup>37</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno therefore explicitly declare their intention to resist subsuming the results of their practice of determinate negation into a claim of systemic or historical totality.

Horkheimer and Adorno therefore explicitly declare their intention to resist subsuming the results of their practice of determinate negation into a claim of systemic or historical totality.

Indeed, Horkheimer and Adorno argue that Hegel, “by finally postulating the known result of the whole process of negation, totality in the system and in history, as the absolute, he violated the prohibition and himself succumbed to mythology.”

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<sup>36</sup> Moreover, Habermas’s own attempt to recuperate a positive concept of enlightenment leads him to construct a theory of modernity that is no less infused with primitivism, as it is premised upon a radical distinction between modern and premodern societies. See Victor Li’s critique in *The Neo-primitivist Turn: Critical Reflections on Alterity, Culture, and Modernity* (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2006), 153ff.

<sup>37</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 18.

Critics such as Habermas fail to observe, as Jarvis has argued, that the style of the work is just as important as the content of the critique.<sup>38</sup> Habermas's mistake is to presume that Horkheimer and Adorno offer a *dogmatic* critique of critique, but this is not the case; Habermas attempts to "reduce the critique of instrumental reason to this core"<sup>39</sup>—but this elides the crucial reorientation of theory that they propose, *away* from dogmatism. Horkheimer and Adorno's approach here develops out of the notion of immanent critique that Adorno first began to articulate in "The Actuality of Philosophy," in which he argued for a rejection of philosophy as metaphysics in favor of philosophy as *interpretation*.<sup>40</sup> Rather than establish a theoretical apparatus aimed at determining the essential signification of concepts such that they could then be applied universally, in order to subject a text to critique, Adorno focused instead on a practice of philosophy as interpretation of particulars.

Adorno came to describe this approach to philosophy as "immanent" critique, which could be distinguished from "transcendent" critique. As Simon Jarvis explains:

"Immanent" means "remaining within." An immanent critique is one which "remains within" what it criticizes. Whereas a "transcendent" critique, a critique from the outside, first establishes its own principles, and then uses them as a yardstick by which to criticize other theories, immanent critique starts out from the principles of the work under discussion itself. It uses the internal contradictions of a body of work to criticize that work in its own terms. . . . Unlike most "critiques," that is, it is not so much trying to score a victory over the work criticized, as to understand the significance of the particular kinds of contradiction present in a given body of such work—in particular, to understand what these contradictions tell us about the social experience out of which the work was written.<sup>41</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 20-43.

<sup>39</sup> Habermas, *Philosophical Discourse*, 112.

<sup>40</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, "Die Aktualität der Philosophie" (1931), in *Gesammelte Schriften*, vol. 1, eds. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1970). See Jarvis, *Adorno*, 5ff.

<sup>41</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 6.

The purpose of such a critique, as Jarvis explains, is not that it philosophically refutes a previous position (by highlighting its contradictions), but that through philosophical critique, the history embedded in such concepts could be interpreted and called into the open.

To critique the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, therefore, by pointing out such contradictions would amount to a futile exercise. These contradictions are written into the fabric of the text, as it were. As Jarvis points out, at a theoretical level, their aim is primarily to produce a type of philosophy that resists totalizing claims based on establishing connections between concepts and absolutes; this project of philosophical resistance to absolutes Adorno would later call non-identity thinking. In his introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, Adorno writes:

Amongst the moments which must remain common to philosophy and sociology if both are not to decline—the former to contentlessness, the latter to conceptlessness—one of the most important is that both contain something not wholly transformable into science. In both, nothing is meant entirely literally, neither statement of fact nor pure validity . . . . This not entirely literal element bears witness to the tense non-identity of appearance and essence.<sup>42</sup>

As Jarvis explains, Adorno is here suggesting that:

the qualitative specificity of social experience is actually more likely to go missing in social science when it attempts to be absolutely literal in its presentation of its results. Without a certain self-reflective cunning in its deployment of concepts, social science is likely to end up without any concepts worthy of the name. It ends up, not in fact interpreting the experience it claims to be investigating, but rather classifying it.<sup>43</sup>

This reconceptualization of critique therefore must be taken into account in any attempt to assess the achievements of the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*. The text is not an attempt to undermine the philosophical foundations of social theory; the argument of the text amounts to

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<sup>42</sup> Theodor Adorno, introduction to *The Positivist Dispute in German Sociology*, trans. G. Adey and D. Frisby, (London: Heinemann, 1976), 5-6, quoted by Jarvis, 21.

<sup>43</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 21-22.

an admission that social theory, which aims at freedom, is a product of what Horkheimer and Adorno call enlightenment thinking. This type of thinking, they argue, has historically been implicated in domination, and theoretical work that imagines itself as autonomous, as free from mythical thinking, is partaking in the myth of enlightenment. This is why the style of their argument, presented as a literary-philosophical fragment, not dogmatic philosophy, is not arbitrary but essential to their project. Horkheimer and Adorno above all want to acknowledge this contingent history (of the association of knowledge with domination) as the source of their theoretical project, yet suggest that it need not be so; an alternative method can be followed, which does not “classify,” but which attempts to interpret and understand experience. It is in this sense, that their text can be read as a “rebellion of experience against empiricism.” This rebellion of “experience against empiricism” begins by the liberation of the concept.

On the other hand, it would be disingenuous to suggest, as Jarvis seems to imply, that this position brackets the implied critique of contemporary civilization. For the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is equally a critique of theory *and* a critique of society. Just as the text’s “two theses” demand to be thought together, these twin polemics are inseparable. In this sense, Habermas is closer to the truth when he writes that they wish to “abide in the paradox.”

The paradox in which the text resides makes it difficult to pose certain questions. As John Abromeit notes, many critics have argued that the text posits “a transhistorical notion of instrumental reason as the domination of internal and external nature.”<sup>44</sup> This is a complicated claim, one that, if made “dogmatically,” can only be satisfactorily answered with a yes and a no.

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<sup>44</sup> John Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer and the Foundations of the Frankfurt School* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 427.

I would argue, rather, that the text marshals a transhistorical notion to leverage a historically specified argument. As Abromeit concedes:

Perhaps it would be a mistake to criticize *Dialectic of Enlightenment* for the transhistorical character of some of its central concepts because Horkheimer and Adorno were really only concerned with history, as Benjamin put it in his “Thesis,” as “it flashes up at moments of danger,” that is, only insofar as it can critically illuminate the present.<sup>45</sup>

This is essentially the claim I am arguing. Abromeit, however, rejects this possibility:

“Such an interpretation is plausible but it by no means obviates the necessity for historicization.”<sup>46</sup> I would suggest in response that they do not want to obviate the necessity for historicization. Quite the contrary, they insist upon it. They present a critique of theory that calls for liberating the concept from totalizing claims, and yet they want to provide a critique of contemporary society in which reason appears totalizing. As they write in the 1969 preface, “What matters today is to preserve and disseminate freedom, rather than to accelerate, however indirectly, the advance to the administered world.”<sup>47</sup>

Unlike Habermas, then, or critics that question their use of a “transhistorical notion” of reason, I have no objection to their “abiding” in this paradoxical position. And yet it is here that, insofar as their argument also makes particular claims about reason—linking reason to alienation, on the one hand, and on the other to a critique clearly aimed at “bourgeois Western civilization”—I find that their work is in need of a further corrective. In arguing that rationalism objectifies the world and alienates the subject from truth, they are invoking the

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

<sup>47</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xii.

disenchantment narrative. This is the case, even though their “cunning” deployment of concepts attempt to eschew claims of narrativity.

My point is not that Horkheimer and Adorno are presenting a disenchantment narrative as a philosophy of history, as for example Herbert Schnädelbach has argued.<sup>48</sup> Schnädelbach, a former student of Habermas, argues that, in spite of Horkheimer and Adorno’s attempts to preserve a positive concept of enlightenment, their text assumes a common form of critiques of human society, a tradition stretching from Rousseau and Hegel to Marx and Freud, in which a theory about the “nature” of society is premised upon a historical narrative. Schnädelbach writes, “in so far as the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* is narratively organized . . . it cannot be saved. As a social myth which wishes to enlighten us about the enlightenment, it only confirms the aporia.” Jarvis explains that according to Schnädelbach, for such a critique to succeed, it “can only be formulated theoretically, not narratively, and must be formulated not as a philosophy of history, but as social theory.” I am not arguing, like Schnädelbach, that Horkheimer and Adorno should jettison the “historical” aspect of the argument. To do so would be anathema to their insight that concepts are not simply abstract ideas in a void, but are the products of a real social history. Nor do I agree with Schnädelbach’s assessment that they present a narrative of philosophy of history. The work provides no narrative of development or decline, but proceeds through conceptual analysis; history appears only in the traces of concepts and their significations.

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<sup>48</sup> Herbert Schnädelbach, “Die Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung,” in *Die Aktualität der Dialektik der Aufklärung*, eds. Harry Kunnemann and Hent de Vries (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 1989), 15-35. See Jarvis, *Adorno*, 40ff.

What I wish to draw attention to, rather, is how a potentially theoretically effective dissolution of the disenchantment narrative ends up transformed into a rehabilitation of that narrative. This takes place, I argue, on account of the affective register of the conceptual critique. As Horkheimer and Adorno argue, concepts contain, in Jarvis's words, the "traces of bodily pleasure or suffering, fear or desire." This insight enables their conceptual critique to reach out to a historical horizon. They leave undeveloped the corollary of this argument, however, which is that the same form of embodied history applies to the effects of concepts on readers. Theory, after all, is not read from a position of objective or emotionless neutrality. This affective register of discourse therefore, on their own grounds, must be taken into account in an assessment of their theory. The affective register that they employ, however, is one based on the fear of the primitive, and the desire for the autonomy promised by civilization. Their critique is an echo of the final words of Colonel Kurtz in Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness*: "The horror." Myth is already enlightenment, and enlightenment reverts to mythology—just as Kurtz in the jungle succumbed to barbarism; and the modern subject, which had thought itself rational, autonomous, and moral, wakes up in modernity to the frightening realization that it is none of these things.

I hasten to point out that I am not arguing that Horkheimer and Adorno should have abstained from a moral critique premised upon an affective register, or that their critique of disenchantment might succeed if they had not inveighed against it in emotionally laden terms. Rather, I am arguing that, as their own theory suggests, in the practice of theory, the affective level of meaning cannot be separated from the theoretical. Therefore it too must be subject to

critique. To critique, here, means to disclose the traces of primitivism residing in their argument.

Horkheimer and Adorno's text offers not only a powerful reorientation of the project of theory, but a vital and urgent critique of exploitation and violence in contemporary society. As Abromeit has observed,

The uncompromising negativity of *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was without question a remarkable and thoroughly appropriate expression of the catastrophic historical events that were unfolding at that time. . . . Adorno's provocative argument—that the social, psychological, and historical conditions that had made Auschwitz possible continued to exist after the war, and that, therefore, other historical catastrophes of similar magnitude were still possible—must be taken seriously.<sup>49</sup>

I am not therefore arguing that Horkheimer and Adorno should have refrained from condemning the horrors of National Socialism and the Holocaust or the social and psychological violence of capitalism. Rather, I am arguing that they have grounded their critique in the affective terminology of the primitivist discourse, using the categories of primitive and civilized to underwrite a moral critique. To put it another way, my objection here is not to their moral position, but their suggestion that the ills of modernity should be understood as the result of instrumental reason. This notion, that reason objectifies the world, producing violence and alienation, is a perpetuation of the disenchantment narrative. Moreover, in theorizing rationalism as the defining trait of “bourgeois Western civilization,” they reinforce the ethnocentrism of the disenchantment narrative. Through an affective moral critique of reason, buttressed by the discourse of primitivism, they inadvertently reaffirm the narrative of an imagined modernity.

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<sup>49</sup> Abromeit, *Max Horkheimer*, 428.



Finally, then, I am not critiquing their work from the position of dogmatism. I accept their reformulation of the role of theory, and thus try to subject their own work to an imminent critique. To argue, therefore, that their argument perpetuates primitivism and the disenchantment narrative is not to find fault with their critique of theory; it is rather to pick up the tools of their own argument, and redirect attention to the historical traces of primitivism contained in the concepts (and conceptual framework) that they employ. As they attempt to liberate a positive concept of reason, I am attempting to here to liberate critique from the discourse of primitivism.

### **Part 3. *Excursus*: Odysseus, or Primitivism and Empire**

Thus far I have argued that the *Dialectic of Enlightenment* participates in the discourse of primitivism, on account of its theoretical framework, and the perpetuation of the ethnocentrism of the disenchantment narrative. In critiquing enlightenment as mythic, as the primitive made manifest, they reinscribe the primitive as the foil, against which the image of a future “truly human” variation of enlightened theory must then contend. If the foregoing discussion engages with theoretical claims, it remains however to examine the particulars of Horkheimer and Adorno’s essay. According to their own argument, a critique of their work (or any work for that matter) at only a theoretical level threatens to participate in the identity-thinking of enlightenment, working at the level of absolutes, and effacing the particular, eliding experience. To remain faithful therefore to their aims, a theoretical critique must be wedded to

the particulars, in order to disclose the traces of conceptual history. In other words, philosophy as critical theory requires the *excursus*, or digression.<sup>50</sup>

Accordingly, I will make a detour through Homer's *Odyssey*—just as Horkheimer and Adorno do in their text. The *Odyssey* is itself the archetypal story of detour, as Odysseus is thrown off course time and time again on his journey back to Ithaca. He overcomes numerous obstacles to finally return home to his wife Penelope, and to slaughter the suitors that have been harassing her in his absence. For Horkheimer and Adorno, the purpose of examining the *Odyssey* is to present it as “one of the earliest representative documents of bourgeois Western civilization,” and Odysseus, as the symbol of enlightenment.<sup>51</sup> This sounds anachronistic, but as mentioned above, enlightenment for Horkheimer and Adorno does not refer specifically to the historical Enlightenment, but rather to a mode of rational thought that they trace back as far as Homer. The aims of enlightenment were founded upon the liberation from a “mythic” consciousness. In this project, enlightenment, paradoxically, both succeeds and fails. It disenchant the world—which it is to say, it objectifies the world; it is a cognitive stance which makes the world into material ready to be mastered, or dominated. Yet it fails, because it represses its own dialectical relationship with the mythic; in doing so, it remains trapped in the mythic.

In Horkheimer and Adorno's reading of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus represents self-preserving reason; his endless striving to return home, to flee from the mythic creatures he

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<sup>50</sup> As Adorno later expressed this in *Negative Dialectics*: “The matters of true philosophical interest at this point in history are those in which Hegel, agreeing with tradition, expressed his disinterest. They are nonconceptuality, individuality, and particularity—things which ever since Plato used to be dismissed as transitory and insignificant . . . A matter of urgency to the concept would be what it fails to cover, what its abstractionist mechanism eliminates, what is not already a case of the concept.” Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973), 8.

<sup>51</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, xviii.

encounters, represents his failure (the failure of reason) to grasp that these mythical worlds are his own projections. Instead of achieving a self-reflective awareness of the dialectic that carries him along, he attempts to overcome myth through rationality, unleashing domination, exploitation and violence through his self-deception. In this way, the epic, according to Horkheimer and Adorno, “bears witness to the dialectic of enlightenment.”<sup>52</sup>

I shall offer here a different reading of the *Odyssey*; my point is not that their own reading is wrong, but that alternative readings are possible. That being the case, I aim to show by way of contrast that their own reading reveals the persistence of primitivism in their critique. Their reading of Odysseus as self-preserving reason occludes the text’s concern with cultural alterity. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno link primitivism to reason, Homer links it to ethnocentrism. Homer’s text, I argue, offers a perspective in which the dialectic of enlightenment is in fact a product of a dialectic of empire.

In the first place, Horkheimer and Adorno read the text as a naïve reflection of the dialectic (“bears witness”), rather than a critique of it. Second, they neglect an essential feature of the epic, which is that Odysseus’ journey is structured around the trope of the encounter with the foreign other; it is a narrative about the Greek fascination with cultural difference. Horkheimer and Adorno make the mistake of presenting Odysseus as a symbol of reason in an abstract form; if Odysseus can be said to represent reason, as they argue, it must be said that he represents reason specifically in the context of cultural difference.

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 35. In the original German: “Wie die Erzählung von den Sirenen die Verschränktheit von Mythos und rationaler Arbeit in sich beschließt, so legt die Odyssee insgesamt Zeugnis ab von der Dialektik der Aufklärung” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in *Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940-1950*, Vol. 5., ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987), 67.

Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno read the narrative as the celebration of Odysseus's eventual triumph; this corresponds with their larger argument in the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, an attempt to theorize the "triumph" (the attainment of dominance) of instrumental, self-preserving reason in society. I argue rather that the *Odyssey* should be read, not only as a story about engaging with the cultural other, but a story in which Odysseus is in fact presented *critically*; he is condemned for continually failing to engage with the cultural other. If Odysseus represents Enlightened reason, he is reason engaged specifically with the problem of cultural alterity. Odysseus therefore can be said to represent not enlightenment, but the ethnocentric logic of empire.

I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno's argument that Odysseus's encounters are marred by his projections. Odysseus's failure to engage with the cultural other is shown to be the result of the projection of mythic qualities onto the other—in a word, primitivism. Yet they fail to observe that the epic itself criticizes Odysseus's primitivism. Homer's text suggests that it is not "reason" that compels Odysseus onward, but empire. This reading of the *Odyssey* therefore enables a critique of Horkheimer and Adorno's text. The colonial discourse of imperialism, I argue, picks up the distinction between rationality and otherness and inscribes it upon social relations; it produces the subject position of rationality as a cultural (or ethnic) identity. In other words imperialism can be said to produce the dialectic of enlightenment. Horkheimer and Adorno, in presenting Odysseus as a representative of enlightenment, are reinscribing an ethnocentric discourse of rationality upon knowledge and society. Without observing that the epic itself criticizes the error of Odysseus's own forms of primitivism, Horkheimer and Adorno

end up recuperating that primitivism in their own analysis, and thereby reproduce the logic of empire.

To demonstrate the primitivism at work in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, I will focus on a salient example—Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading of the brief episode from the *Odyssey* in which Odysseus encounters a people referred to as the Lotus-eaters. In Book Nine of the *Odyssey*, Odysseus, “the great teller of tales,” begins to recount his *nostos* (or homecoming) for his hosts, the Phaeacians.<sup>53</sup> According to his tale, after leaving Troy, Odysseus and his men had a series of exotic encounters. The first encounter with an unfamiliar people in a foreign land is that of the Lotus-eaters, who “live on a flowering food.”<sup>54</sup> The island, according to Herodotus, was along the North African coast, near present-day Libya.<sup>55</sup> Odysseus, who is narrating, explains that upon arriving, he sent three men to investigate, “choosing two, and providing a third as a herald. They straightaway went off and mingled with the Lotus-eaters.”

The Lotus-eaters represent Odysseus’s first encounter with cultural difference. Odysseus and his men have come to this island after a previous encounter, but that was with the Cicones, allies of the Trojans who lived in Thrace, north of Troy. There, Odysseus had “sacked the city, killed the men,” and taken the wives and treasure for plunder. The Cicones recruited their neighbors and mounted a counter-attack, and the Greeks hastily sailed off.<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. Robert Fagles (New York: Penguin, 1996), 221 (9.1).

<sup>54</sup> The translation of the Lotus-eaters episode that I cite in this chapter has been generously provided by Matthew Newmann. I have preferred Newman’s more literal translation over more popular translations, such as that of Robert Fagles, because I have found that these often adopt the primitivist projection which I critique below. See also footnote 57. Cf. Fagles, 214 (9.92-117).

<sup>55</sup> Herodotus, *The Histories* (c.430 BCE), Internet History Sourcebook, ed. Paul Halsall. <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/ancient/herod-libya1.asp>.

<sup>56</sup> As Glenn W. Most has argued, this marks the first of the “other-worldly” encounters; the structure of Homer’s epic is intended to draw a distinction between the “normal” Greek world and a “fantastical” or mythological world, of which the Lotus-eaters would be the first chronological example (although not the first narratively speaking).

The Lotus-eaters, however, present no threat of violence. Odysseus relates, “the Lotus-eaters were not contriving destruction for our men, but they only gave them lotus to taste.”

This presents, however, a new type of danger. Odysseus continues:

Whoever of [the men] ate of the honeysweet fruit of the lotus  
was no longer willing to report back or to go home,  
but they preferred to remain right there beside the Lotus-eaters,  
grazing on lotus and to forget about homecoming.<sup>57</sup>

This Odysseus cannot allow. As he tells his hosts, he brings his men “wailing” back to the ships:

I dragged them and fettered them beneath the benches in the hollow ships; and the  
other strong comrades I bid hurry up and get on the swift ships, lest somehow one of  
them eat lotus and forget his homecoming. Forthwith they got on and sat at the  
oarlocks, and seated in a row they beat the gray salt with their oars. From there we  
sailed onward grieving in our hearts...

Horkheimer and Adorno interpret this episode as a paradigmatic encounter between reason and naivety, between work and idleness, and between historical progress and an imagined, timeless “prehistory.” Odysseus’ men, they write, are threatened by “forgetfulness and loss of will”:

The curse [of the lotus] condemns them to nothing [other] than a primal state exempt from labor and struggle in the “fertile land.” . . . Self-preserving reason cannot permit

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Glenn W. Most, “The Structure and Function of Odysseus’ Apologoi,” *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119 (1989): 15-30.

<sup>57</sup> A comparison of Newmann’s translation with Fagles’ reveals that Fagles incorporates the subtle form of primitivism I am attempting to draw attention to. Fagles translates this portion: “Any crewmen who ate the lotus, the honey-sweet fruit, / lost all desire to send a message back, much less return, / their only wish to linger there with the Lotus-eaters, / grazing on lotus, all memory of the journey home / dissolved forever.” (Fagles, 214.) He thus interposes a declarative clause about forgetting (“all memory of the journey home dissolved forever”), whereas the original Greek suggests that they “preferred” to forget. Similarly, Fagles’ version emphasizes a “loss of desire,” phrasing that leans more toward the “loss of will” interpretation adopted by Horkheimer and Adorno, undermining the sense that the men may be making a conscious decision; in Fagles’ translation, the will to remain becomes a “wish” to linger. The tradition of interpreting the lotus as inducing forgetfulness has been reified in criticism through numerous studies of the “forgetting-remembering” motif in the *Odyssey*, yet the text itself is minimalist. Horkheimer and Adorno, as it happens, cite a German translation that does not make this emendation, although they fail to follow the lead (unfortunately they do not name the translator): “Wer des Lotos Gewächs nun kostete, süßer als Honig, / Nicht an Verkündigung weiter gedacht der, noch an Zurückkunft; / Sondern sie trachteten dort in der Lotophagen Gesellschaft, / Lotos pflückend zu bleiben und abzusagen der Heimat.” Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, 86.

such an idyll—reminiscent of the bliss induced by the narcotics, by which subordinate classes have been made capable of enduring the unendurable in ossified social orders—among its own people. And indeed it is only an illusion of bliss, a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals. At best, it would be an absence of the awareness of unhappiness.<sup>58</sup>

Odysseus, as reason, rejects the island because it represents the antithesis of reason. It is a place with nourishment, but no critical awareness. Interestingly, however, Horkheimer and Adorno find themselves agreeing with Odysseus in principle—that the island represents an illusory existence, and is anti-reason. They see it as not only the antithesis of enlightenment reason, but of their own dialectical concept. Horkheimer and Adorno conclude:

The enduring Odysseus is therefore right not to endure life among the Lotus-eaters. Against [the men] he asserts their own cause, the realization of utopia through historical work, whereas simply abiding within an image of bliss deprives them of their strength. But in being exerted by rationality, by Odysseus, this right is inevitably drawn into the realm of wrong. His immediate action is one which reasserts domination.<sup>59</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno argue that on the one hand, Odysseus was “right not to endure life among the Lotus-eaters,” because to do so would be merely to accept a fantasy; more specifically, this would mean allowing his men, representative here of humanity as the working class, to forgo their destiny and exist on illusions. It would amount to treating the fantasy of idleness and happiness as a reality, which, they argue, is unattainable. Odysseus is “right” in the sense that he recognizes this as an illusory projection. They see this as the positive aspect of reason, liberating humanity from a mythicized non-existence. Odysseus is “wrong” however, in his exertion of rationality in the form of domination.

I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno may have misread this pivotal encounter. Although they are correct to point out that Odysseus here is presented as making a projection onto the

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<sup>58</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 49.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

other, they fail to observe that Homer offers a subtle critique of Odysseus's primitivism. Homer's critique of Odysseus, however, differs dramatically from their own. Although Horkheimer and Adorno's description of the Lotus-eaters is intended to represent how the island would appear to Odysseus (to reason), a close analysis reveals that their characterization of the island as a primitivist idyll represents not Odysseus' primitivist projection, but their own. Their own sense of the island as the antithesis to even dialectical reason compels them, at this point, to agree that Odysseus was "right" to move on; they too don't want to leave his ship, as it were, for fear of the natives.

The text itself, I argue, is surprisingly silent about the specifics of life among the Lotus-eaters. The ambiguity of the text creates an island populated by projections. Peeling back these layers will reveal that Odysseus' projection is *not* identical with that made by Horkheimer and Adorno. Moreover, Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Odysseus, as failing to achieve self-reflexivity, differs from the critique of Odysseus provided by the text itself. The conspicuous silences of the text in fact suggest that the problem for Odysseus is not a matter of his "reason" or even his *lack* of self-reflective reason, but more specifically, a failure to try and listen to the voice of other. It constitutes, in other words, what we might call a failure of ethnocentrism.

The difference between Homer's critique of Odysseus, and that made by Horkheimer and Adorno, can be glimpsed initially in the fact that Horkheimer and Adorno invoke the idea of the lotus as a narcotic, producing a state of forgetful bliss. The text itself (in which is Odysseus is the speaker) gives no suggestion about a narcotic stupor or sedation. It merely states that those who ate the flower wanted to linger. Homeric scholars have identified three possible varieties of lotus to which Homer might have been referring, the most likely being the *Zizyphus*



*lotus*, indigenous to northern Africa and southern Europe. As Emma Converse writes, this variety:

produces fruit in great abundance. The fruit is a drupe, about the size of a wild-plum, with a globose kernel. It is farinaceous, and the taste is sweet and mucilaginous. The Arabs call it *nabka*, and, from the earliest times, it has served as an article of food to the inhabitants of the north of African, where it is still a principal part of the nourishment of the poor.<sup>60</sup>

A second possibility is that Homer refers to the Egyptian white water-lily, *Nymphae lotus*, found along the shores of the Nile. This strain produces no fruit, but the root is edible and was consumed by the region's inhabitants. A third possibility is the Egyptian blue water-lily, *Nymphae caerulea*. The blue water-lily is the only form of lotus that contains narcotic alkaloids, which can produce mildly sedative effects.

The current consensus among Homeric scholars is that Homer refers to *Zizyphus lotus*, as Homer specifically mentions the flower, the sweetness of the plant, and on account of the North African location. It is interesting, then, that Horkheimer and Adorno would suggest the possibility that Homer references the narcotic variety. They are of course not alone in doing so. Many readers of the *Odyssey* have assumed that Homer was referring to the *Nymphae caerulea*. The image of the narcotic lotus was perhaps most memorably expressed by Tennyson in his poem of 1832, "The Lotos-Eaters." As Converse writes, "The spell of the gentle sedative breathes in every line of the poem. A voluptuous languor, a sweet forgetfulness, a soft slumber, takes possession of the senses, until we are ready to sing with 'the mild-eyed, melancholy lotos-eaters.'"<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Emma M. Converse, "The Lotus," *The Art Journal*, New Series, Vol. 5 (1879): 246.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 247.

Significantly, however, the Greek word Homer uses, *lôtos*, is ambiguous in its referent. In the face of an indeterminate text, Horkheimer and Adorno allude to the possibility of a narcotic plant, no doubt because it corresponds with their own perception of the island, as a place lacking rationality. It will be noted that Horkheimer and Adorno do not state that the flower was in fact narcotic, merely that it was “reminiscent of [such] bliss.” Indeed, they invoke commonplace Orientalist themes to designate the island’s lack of rationality:

Lotus is an oriental food. . . . The eating of flowers, as is still customary during dessert in the East and is known to European children from baking with rosewater and from candied violets, bears the promise of a state in which the reproduction of life is independent of conscious self-preservation, the bliss of satiety uncoupled from the utility of planned nutrition.<sup>62</sup>

In addition, in Horkheimer and Adorno’s reading, the island represents a “loss of will,” a lack of autonomy. Homer’s text, however, through its intentional ambiguity, leaves open the possibility that the islanders are indeed rational and autonomous. In Horkheimer and Adorno’s interpretation, the scouts’ lack of desire to communicate is interpreted as an inability to communicate, a loss of rationality. Their unwillingness to return to the ship is interpreted as a lack of will. Their decision to abide with the islanders is interpreted as a rejection of work in favor of idleness. The island is interpreted as the negation of autonomous reason.

On the one hand, Homer’s text presents Odysseus as sharing a similar projection, in which the island appears as a threat to both rationality and autonomy. He sees a place where men are reduced to animality—Odysseus uses the word “grazes.” (The theme of fear at being reduced to animality is encountered again in the meeting with Circe in Book 10, in which half of

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<sup>62</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 50.

Odysseus's men are turned into swine.<sup>63</sup>) As Horkheimer and Adorno suggest, Odysseus seems to fear "a dull aimless vegetating, as impoverished as the life of animals."

Beyond this, however, Odysseus's description of the encounter is remarkably tentative. He does not directly state that the lotus caused the men to forget; he states that the men were "no longer willing to report back or to go home, but they preferred to remain right there . . . and to forget about homecoming." They were not *unable* to report back, through a loss of will, rationality, or inability to communicate, but, rather, no longer "wanted" to do so. They "preferred" to stay, and "preferred" to forget. In other words, Odysseus's words suggest a degree of volition that Horkheimer and Adorno's reading neglects.

The text thereby leaves open the alternative that this was a conscious, autonomous, and possibly rational choice. Horkheimer and Adorno, by suggesting the lotus's narcotic effect, on the one hand, or its "Oriental" origins on the other, foreclose on such an interpretation. Homer, however, presents this island not as the absence of rationality, but rather as a different kind of rationality. On this reading, it is not rationality that separates Odysseus from the islanders, it is his fear of difference, the inability to imagine an alternative rationality.

Odysseus's view of the island, in contrast to Horkheimer and Adorno's reading, is noticeably diffident. This degree of uncertainty becomes more clear in comparison to the descriptions Odysseus uses to describe his subsequent encounters; from Polyphemus the Cyclops to the cannibalistic Laestrygonians, Odysseus's interpretations become more descriptive, the details provided about the other more concrete. The minimalism of this first

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<sup>63</sup> Moreover, it will be noted that Odysseus's subsequent escape from Polyphemus, the Cyclops (and son of Poseidon), requires him to disguise himself as an animal, which in this context reads as injunction to face his fear.

encounter seems to serve as a reminder of the world of the other *before* it is draped in projection. As he progresses, his projections become more effacing.

Homer's text not only suggests that Odysseus misconstrues the Lotus-eaters, but, contrary to Horkheimer and Adorno's reading, criticizes him for this misunderstanding. Homer's critique of Odysseus, however, differs from their own. The specific mention of the fact that Odysseus dispatched a messenger, for example, followed by his silence, is uncanny; it draws our attention to Odysseus's failure to question the messenger, and thus his failure to attempt to understand the Lotus-eaters. In effect, the text suggests that Odysseus was *not* right to depart from the Lotus-eaters' shores in haste, but should instead have lingered. This is indeed the first in a series of encounters that represent Odysseus' continual failure to engage with a foreign cultural other, due to his own projections. To linger, in other words, is not presented as an impossibility, as Horkheimer and Adorno suggest; it would not mean to let oneself slip into an illusory state, an animal-like existence. It would mean, rather, the possibility for an encounter with cultural difference.

In this initial encounter, the only certainty for Odysseus is that the Lotus-eaters represent a threat to the continuance of his journey; as such, he sees them as a negation of his *nostos*, as do Horkheimer and Adorno. Yet the text implies that the island is not, in its essence, a negation; it is merely an alternative. It is Odysseus's monolithic focus on *nostos* that leads to set of binary projections in which alternatives become seen as negations. The men's desire to not to return to the oars is interpreted as indolence—since the men refuse this *particular* form of work, the island is envisioned as place in which there is *no* work. Similarly, the returning men are wailing—rather than identify this as sorrow about this particular fate, their suffering is

inverted to into the notion that the island must represent bliss, the absence of all sorrow. In this way the negations multiply inexorably. Since Odysseus's journey home requires history, the island is figured as a place without history, a place where one can only "linger" indefinitely.

Beneath the binary projections of Odysseus, as well as Horkheimer and Adorno, the text leaves open the possibility that one could live in nature, without being absorbed into it, without succumbing to natural, or mythic, consciousness, and without giving up communication, rationality, work, and suffering. Odysseus's self-centered, goal-oriented journey leads him to the binary thinking which dismisses the specificity of the Lotus-eaters' world. There is only one choice: the journey home. The journey home is not viewed as one reality among many, but as the only possible reality. (This is amplified by the fact that Odysseus's next encounter after the Lotus-eaters is with Polyphemus, the fabled one-eyed Cyclops—an image of the monocentric vision that Odysseus is himself developing.) Odysseus's exclusive obsession with home, an obsession that prevents him from fathoming the possibility of other perspectives, represents a form of ethnocentrism. From the perspective of the text, it is not reason that leads to projections; it is this form of rigid ethnocentrism, which clings to the identity of reason that it has postulated for itself. In Horkheimer and Adorno's critique of Odysseus, the proper goal of reason is to become self-reflective; in Homer's critique of Odysseus, the goal is to listen to alterity.

A further comparison of the Lotus-eater episode with the other episodes of the *Odyssey* dealing with Africa clarifies what Odysseus might have done, but did not. The comparison

makes clear precisely the way in which Homer's text critiques Odysseus, not for a lack of self-reflection, but for a lack of attention to alterity.

My contention that the encounter with cultural difference plays a central role in the *Odyssey* is supported by the fact that the theme is conjured in the opening passage of the epic. Directly after Odysseus is introduced as "the man of twists and turns," Homer mentions that Poseidon, Odysseus's nemesis, misses a meeting of the gods up on Olympus:

Poseidon went off to the Ethiopians living far away, the Ethiopians who are divided into two people, men at the farthest edge: some of them live at the setting of Hyperion (the sun god), others at his rising. He met with a hecatomb of bulls and rams there; seated beside the feast he took delight.<sup>64</sup>

The Ethiopians are not simply far away, but indeed exist at the "farthest edge," a location defined not just as a liminal space but a liminal time. They live in a land imagined as the other side of the world, where the sun sets and where it rises. It is where the ends of the world meet, an evocative image of duality and unity.

In other words, the Ethiopians are presented as an archetypal example of cultural difference. They represent an encounter that challenges rational thinking (the fundamental logic of identity and duality). But most important, they are not in fact out of reach. Poseidon visits them and enjoys a feast in their company. The implication, I argue, is that Homer does not represent them as the *absence* of rationality; rather, in Homer's text, it is *the idea* of rationality (the idea of a *singular* rationality) that presents a barrier to those who might seek an encounter with otherness. This barrier, however, can be overcome, and the company of others can be enjoyed.

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<sup>64</sup> Translation by Matthew Newmann. Cf. Fagles, 78.

In most interpretations of the epic, Poseidon is seen as the “villain,” the one responsible for forcing Odysseus to endure such endless suffering. As I have suggested above, however, the epic critiques Odysseus for his failures to engage with cultural difference; in this sense, Poseidon actually appears as the model for the protagonist, and his catalyst for transformation. Poseidon’s ability to associate with the Ethiopians, the most radical example of cultural alterity, represents his achievement and wisdom; the experience is one of “delight.” This is further borne out in the fact that Poseidon is set apart at the beginning of the epic from the other gods, who will come to appear as the forces of discord, sometimes helping, sometimes hindering, as Odysseus tries to get home. Poseidon’s antagonistic relationship with Odysseus can thus be better understood as a veiled mentorship, in contrast to Athena, his explicit “mentor” throughout his journey.

If the epic makes the Ethiopians the archetype of cultural difference (a symbol of both distance and delight), the *Odyssey* offers a privileged position to Africa in general. Two major characters, Menelaus and Helen, have encounters with Africa. In neither case is the African other portrayed as negative, as a negation, as something to be feared and avoided. Africa and its inhabitants are presented as foreign and exotic, but not as pre-civilized or pre-historical. Nor are they presented as lacking rationality or autonomy. The stories of Menelaus and Helen depict Africa as an exotic, unfamiliar land, but more importantly, a place (and a people) with which one can engage<sup>65</sup>; in fact, the stories present the necessity of making this engagement, as it is only through such engagement that transformation is possible.

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<sup>65</sup> In Helen’s account, the inhabitants are civilized, technological, and historical; Menelaus’s episode does not treat Africans but rather a mythological being that nevertheless represents Africa, a being that Menelaus must seek out while marooned off the coast of Egypt after initially failing to make the proper sacrifices.

In Book Four, Telemachus (the son of Odysseus) visits Menelaus and Helen, the king and queen of Sparta. At one point, as the heroic men are sharing stories about Odysseus, Helen makes an attempt to participate. When the men try and silence her, Helen secretly drugs the men's wine, enabling her to participate in their conversation. Interestingly, her achievement is contrasted to a similar incident earlier in the epic, when Penelope, wife of Odysseus, had tried to participate in men's conversation, but was rudely silenced. Helen, on the other hand, is able to speak and participate in the conversation and tell her story about Odysseus. The drug, the narrator explains, was a gift to Helen from "a woman of Egypt, land where the teeming soil bears the richest yield of herbs in all the world; many [are] health itself when mixed in the wine, and many deadly poison. Every man is a healer there, more skilled than any other men on earth."<sup>66</sup> Here the cultural other is represented as a potential source of danger, but also as a source of empowering knowledge and technology.

Menelaus's encounter with Africa proves equally transformative. During the same visit from Telemachus, Menelaus recounts for his guest how he was marooned on an island off the coast in Egypt during his own return from Troy; he explains that eager as he was to voyage home, he had failed to make the proper sacrifices. He learns that he cannot return home until he's wrestled with Proteus of Egypt—the "immortal Old Man of the Sea who never lies, who sounds the deep in all its depths."<sup>67</sup> If Menelaus can force Proteus, a servant of Poseidon, into conversation, Menelaus will be able to ask him what he must do in order to leave the island and return home. Menelaus is instructed to pick three of his best men and grab hold of Proteus: "Hold him fast, wildly as he writhes and fights you to escape. He'll try all kinds of escape—twist

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<sup>66</sup> Homer, *The Odyssey*, trans. E. V. Rieu (New York: Penguin, 1997), 131 (4.254-259).

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, 136 (4.431).



and turn into every beast that moves across the earth, transforming himself into water, superhuman fire, but you hold on for dear life, hug him all the harder!”<sup>68</sup>

Menelaus follows the advice, and discovers that “the old rascal [had lost] none of his cunning quick techniques! First he shifted into a great bearded lion, then a serpent—a panther—a ramping wild boar—a torrent of water—a tree with soaring branchtops—but we held on for dear life, braving it out.”<sup>69</sup> Proteus, surrendering, begins asking Menelaus questions, and Menelaus can then question him about how to get off the island—enabling him to continue his journey. In other words, Menelaus succeeds in his *nostos* due to his willingness to engage with Proteus, to hold on through a bewildering array of what amount to illusory or mythic projections, to arrive at the point of *conversation*.

The argument that these episodes should be read as foils for Odysseus is supported by the fact that they both come in Book 4, the final book of the Telemachy (the part of the epic devoted to the education and preparation of Telemachus). They come in the form of speeches by the two most important and powerful figures in the Greek world, the king and queen of Sparta. Menelaus’s encounter is presented as a direct foil, from the circumstance that he too is stranded on an island on his way home from Troy, to the detail that he too selects three men to help him.

Unlike Helen, for whom the encounter with the foreign other reveals an exchange of goods that provides her a voice; or Menelaus, who engages with this dynamic projectionist, wrestles with it, and ultimately converses with it, Odysseus flees. Whereas Menelaus and Helen are empowered by their experience, Odysseus emerges as a failed hero, a figure who makes the

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 137 (4.466-471).

<sup>69</sup> Ibid., 138 (4.511-515).

journey home, but yet is suspended in a state of arrested development, having failed to learn the lessons he is intended to learn.<sup>70</sup> Odysseus fails because he didn't take the detour he needed to take—the detour outside of his own ethnocentric logic. I use the term ethnocentric because, as I mentioned above, the unifying feature of Odysseus's many encounters on his travels back from Troy is their foreignness, their difference from the familiar Greek world. The fact that these encounters all take place under the framework of the “mythic” portion of the epic confirms that in his encounters with cultural difference, Odysseus remains trapped in his projections.<sup>71</sup> He remains trapped in ethnocentrism because he has been unable to understand a non-Greek cultural encounter outside of the framework of the mythic. All his encounters therefore remain “mythical” in his recollections.

This reading is finally supported by the prophecy Odysseus receives from Tiresias in the underworld. Odysseus is directed to the prophet by Circe, who informs Odysseus that Tiresias alone can tell him what he needs to know in order to finally make his way back to Ithaca. The visit to the underworld comes in Book XI, about the mid-point of the epic's 24 books, and the mid-point of Odysseus's own narrative to the Phaeacians about his series of mythological encounters (see fig. 3.1, “The Ring Structure of Odysseus's Tale”). The symmetry of the

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<sup>70</sup> Odysseus, as it happens, when he is back on Ithaca, invents a false story about his nostos in which he was marooned in Egypt. (In Ithaca, Odysseus disguises himself while he prepares his attack on the suitors; as part of his disguise, he invents this alternative narrative.) While temporarily stopped at the head of the Nile, Odysseus explains, his men went berserk—“They promptly began to plunder the lush Egyptian farms, dragged off the women and children, killed the men.” The nearby city sent an army upon them, slaughtering his men. Odysseus saved only himself by tearing off his armor and making himself a suppliant to the king, appealing to laws of hospitality, which were punishable by Zeus. (Fagles, 309-10; 14.279-319) Odysseus thus tells of an encounter with Africa that amounted to a campaign of excessive and unnecessary violence, which only Odysseus survived, by the surrender of his autonomy to authority. In other words, his “false” story reads like a terse allegory of his failure—or as perhaps the repressed “true” story behind the “mythic” narrative he presents to the Phaeacians.

<sup>71</sup> Most, “The Structure and Function of Odysseus' Apologoi.”

narrative structure around this visit emphasizes its role as a pivotal point—albeit not, as I will argue, a turning point—in Odysseus’s journey.

Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the visit to the underworld as the “farthest point” of Odysseus’ journey, as the moment when he comes closest to overcoming himself.<sup>72</sup> He makes appropriate sacrifices in order to speak with the shades of former warriors, wise men, matriarchs, and finally Tiresias. On the one hand, the visit to the underworld discloses to Odysseus, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the very image of his own self overcoming. The sacrifice enables the shades to speak to him from beyond the grave; here he has the opportunity to learn from them, while recognizing them as dead, as illusions: “Only when subjectivity masters itself by recognizing the nullity of images does it begin to share the hope which images vainly promise. The Promised Land for Odysseus is not the archaic realm of images.”<sup>73</sup> In other words, Odysseus glimpses the proper relationship to representation.

Yet Odysseus, as reason, fails (again) to understand the truth contained in the image: “Having recognized them as dead he dismisses them with the lordly gesture of self-preservation. . . . In such knowledge the power of myth, transposed into mental forms, survives only as imagination.”<sup>74</sup> Thus Odysseus is the closest yet to a wake-up call, and yet the truth is now at its farthest removed, confined to the imagination, the underworld. Horkheimer and Adorno thus read the visit to the underworld as enlightenment’s greatest goal, the desire to force open “the gates of hell” as a symbol of enlightenment’s wish to abolish death. Odysseus

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<sup>72</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 59.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> Ibid.

at this point represents the penultimate moment of reason engaged in its campaign to abolish myth.

This highest point of reason's "antimythological" campaign, they argue, is contained in Tiresias' prophecy to Odysseus, which was after all the focal point of the trip to the underworld. Tiresias informs Odysseus that he will make it home to Ithaca, but warns him that when he and his crew must take shelter on Thrinacia Island, they are not to harm the cattle of Helios. Otherwise, "you'll come home late, and come a broken man—all shipmates lost, alone in a stranger's ship—and you find a world of pain at home, crude arrogant men devouring all your goods, courting your noble wife."<sup>75</sup> Tiresias says he has no doubt that Odysseus will slaughter the suitors—but that his journey will not in fact be at an end. He will be compelled to "go forth once more . . . carry your well-planed oar until you come to a race of people who know nothing of the sea, whose food is never seasoned with salt, strangers all to ships with their crimson prows and long slim oars."<sup>76</sup> Here, Odysseus will receive a sign: "When another traveler falls in with you and calls that weight across your shoulder a fan to winnow grain, then plant your bladed, balanced oar in the earth."<sup>77</sup> Only then will Odysseus be able to return home, live out his remaining days, and die peacefully.

A winnowing fan was an oar-shaped tool, resembling a shovel, which farmers used to toss grain, and let the wind separate the wheat from the chaff. Horkheimer and Adorno interpret this as a joke, designed to placate Poseidon, in the hope that "his anger might be

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<sup>75</sup> Fagles, 253 (11.129-134).

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.* (11.138-142).

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.* (11.145-147).

dispersed in laughter.”<sup>78</sup> Laughter, in other words, is reason’s final weapon against myth. If the underworld relegated the mythic to the merely “imagined,” now laughter renders myth powerless, something no longer a threat, something no longer to be even feared. It, becomes, as this point, mere entertainment.

Horkheimer and Adorno move on to discuss the climax of the epic, in which Odysseus, his son, and their helpers slaughter the suitors. The scene is a brutal one, in which the treacherous goatherd Melanthius and the household’s faithless maidservants (who serviced the visiting suitors) are killed in particularly gruesome fashion, the former mutilated, the latter hung. The narrator recounts the killing of the maidservants by Telemachus:

Then, as doves or thrushes beating their spread wings against some snare rigged up in thickets—flying in for a cozy nest but a grisly bed receives them—so the women’s heads were trapped in a line, nooses yanking their necks up, one by one, so all might die a pitiful, ghastly death . . . they kicked up heels for a little—not for long.<sup>79</sup>

In this scene of cruelty, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the laughter that Odysseus directs at Poseidon emerges as the fundamental “voice,” or even the “origin,” of epic: “The cold detachment of narrative, which describes even the horrible as if for entertainment.” Thus, Horkheimer and Adorno argue, the genre of epic itself represents reason’s conversion of myth into harmless entertainment. In this way the *Odyssey* not only “bears witness to the dialectic of enlightenment,” but participates in it.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>78</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 60.

<sup>79</sup> Fagles, 453-54 (22.494-500).

<sup>80</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno interpret the callousness of Homer’s narrative as an anticipation of the novel, “the unmoved composure [of the epic] comparable in its inhumanity only to the *impassibilité* of the greatest narrative writers of the nineteenth century” (*Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 61). The novel, they suggest, represents an even greater effacement of the mythic potential for horror, which in Homer’s epic they suggest still lingers in the subtle sense of unease contained in the phrase, “not for long.”

I agree with Horkheimer and Adorno in regards to the injustice of the suffering that is inflicted upon Melanthius and the housemaids. Yet Horkheimer and Adorno are mistaken to conclude that “over the raveled skein of prehistory, barbarism, and culture, Homer passes the soothing hand of remembrance, bringing the solace of ‘once upon a time.’”<sup>81</sup> Their argument presumes that Homer presents this episode naively and uncritically; yet, as I have argued, Homer is in fact critical of Odysseus. The callousness on display here is not Homer’s, but Odysseus’s (or more specifically that of Telemachus, acting on orders from his father). On the one hand, the image of the housemaids as doves, “flying in for a cozy nest,” suggests at least some possibility that their death is rendered with sympathy, and that Telemachus has gone too far. (Telemachus, in hanging the women, has in fact overruled his father’s orders to kill with swords, a more “clean” death).

The degree to which Homer’s similes can be used to ground interpretations based on sympathy is a matter of some debate among Homeric scholars. Yet beyond this point, there remains the fact that the narrative itself has suggested that the hero has yet to learn—this was above all the lesson of Tiresias, whose prophecy prepares the reader for the wisdom that the end of the epic is not the end of Odysseus’s journey. Tiresias’s prophecy has in all ways come true—Odysseus’s men did indeed carelessly slaughter the cows of Helios, and he has thus returned to Ithaca “a broken man.” His men have all died; one of the themes of the narrative is a question as to Odysseus’s responsibility for their death, yet whether or not he can be held responsible, yet for any leader the complete loss of one’s crew surely must rest upon one’s conscience, and publicly undermines his success as a leader. He arrives in Ithaca in a stranger’s

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<sup>81</sup> Horkheimer and Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 62.

ship, a metonym perhaps for his own recourse to disguise as soon as he arrives upon his home shore. Odysseus, I argue, is not presented as a successful hero in this act of vengeance. The climax, significantly, does not represent the end of the story—not only are there two further books (the reunion with Penelope, the testing of Laertes), but the reader knows from Tiresias that Odysseus’s journey is not at an end. Horkheimer and Adorno, in claiming for themselves an ironic approach to conceptuality, are here denying to Homer the possibility of attaining any such narrative irony.

The end of Odysseus’s journey, as foretold by Tiresias, will arrive when, far from the sea, he encounters “another traveler” who will call his oar a winnowing fan. On the one hand, Horkheimer and Adorno are correct: Tiresias’s prophecy is not without humor. A man of the sea could not help but be amused by the thought of digging one’s oar into the ground as though it were water; and at the level of the narrative, to dig an oar into the ground offers a surefire image of a journey brought to a standstill. More importantly, however, this is also the crucial moment marking the protagonist’s final achievement, his willingness to engage with other ways of thinking. Odysseus’s journey will only end with a genuine cultural encounter. He grasps that what for him was always an oar, for another could be a fan. When the voice of the other is finally listened to, it triggers the *aporia* which is transformative. Odysseus, at last, is able to return home, a “free man.”

On the one hand, this moment represents an important shift, from the tool of forward progress, the oar, to a tool of nourishment, the winnowing fan. One might read this in reference to the Lotus-eaters episode, as an affirmation of the possibility of genuine “nourishment” available in what was before imagined as only a fanciful idyll. The fan moreover

offers a symbol of discrimination: it separates the wheat from the chaff. Discrimination suggests the existence of rationality in what had been imagined as the negation of all rationality.

However, although I believe Odysseus's new understanding serves as a counterpoint and corrective to his earlier error, it would be incorrect, I think, to read this encounter as a moment of cross-cultural understanding. Odysseus does not proceed to use the oar as a fan. He buries it in the ground, and walks away. It becomes, in other words, an aesthetic object. As an aesthetic object, it is an object that inhabits the significations applied to it, and yet which holds these significations at bay. It insists upon the paradox of its complete "objectness" and inherent participation in "subjectivity." In this image, Homer leaves open the distance between different cultures, leaves it as a liminal space. The oar in ground becomes a symbol of the liminality in play. This is not presented as a moment of direct translation, of cultural "understanding"; it is rather a cultural encounter that calls into question Odysseus's own narrative. Once turned into an aesthetic object, the narrative of the oar, of forward progress, loses its hold over Odysseus. Odysseus's encounter with alterity, therefore, is the key to undoing his imagined identity, to separating him from his narrative of progress, domination, and finally his exclusive identification of home with "rationality."

In the *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, Horkheimer and Adorno set out to critique the self-preserving instrumental reason, a force of totalizing violence that they argue is embodied in Odysseus, in his restless progressive striving for domination, for mastery over nature and himself, as well as in his progressive striving for knowledge, but knowledge as a form of



absolutist thinking that in the process abolishes the particulars of experience, reducing knowledge to merely entertainment. To counter this dark swath of destruction (and self-destruction), Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to prepare a “positive concept” of enlightenment, one that, through an awareness of its place within the dialectic, and a paradoxical insistence upon deploying concepts while refusing the totalizing claims of conceptualization, might in the end succeed in liberating thinking from domination.

I argue, however, that in the process of pioneering this fundamentally valuable contribution to critical thinking, their own text inadvertently perpetuates the discourse of primitivism. This is revealed in their reading of the *Odyssey*, which discloses their own projections of a primitive idyll as something anathema to even dialectical reason. In their condemnation of the Homeric epic *tout court*, as an insidious form of reason’s attempt to dominate and abolish myth, they fail to consider that Homer himself presents a subtle critique of Odysseus. Whereas Horkheimer and Adorno see in Odysseus the forward march of totalizing reason, which fails to achieve self-reflexivity, Homer sees in Odysseus a flawed figure who journeys through a series of failed encounters, the result of an ethnocentric refusal to engage with others; the violence of his return to Ithaca is not the triumph of instrumental reason, but the failure of ethnocentric logic.

Thus while Horkheimer and Adorno critique the onward drive of the Odyssean dialectic of enlightenment, they nevertheless find themselves carried along in its wake. By focusing on enlightenment, they recapitulate the primitivism of empire. It seems, then, that they are left holding still an oar. It remains for the rest of this dissertation to plant the oar in the ground. If the first section of this study has been geared toward demonstrating that the encounter with

the other in era of imperialism can lead to the imagined community of a disenchanted modernity, then Homer's text offers an example of how an encounter with alterity can in fact carry one in precisely the opposite direction. Odysseus's conversion of an oar into an aesthetic object provides a paradigmatic example of an aporetic discourse. In the following section, I will locate examples of primitivism that function aporetically; these modes of primitivism turn discourse into an aesthetic object, sever it from its significations, and in so doing, bring the discourse to an impasse. If Tiresias's prophecy holds up, the impasses is not the end of the story; yet it may let Odysseus at last make his way home—or, in the case of the present study, free from the disenchantment narrative of modernity.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> A final clarification: I argue that Horkheimer and Adorno recapitulate, rather than capitulate to, the discourse of primitivism (with thanks to Zachary Sng for pointing out the difference, although I would not presume that my revised reading fully attends to his criticisms of an earlier draft.) Horkheimer and Adorno's work exhibits the traces of the primitivist discourse; yet it is far from surrendering to such discourse. Indeed, as I have argued above, their theoretical critique provides the foundation for my own attempt to diagnose the operations of primitivist discourse as a complex system of power and knowledge. Moreover, I see my critique here as merely using the theoretical tools they have developed to draw attention to historical traces upon concepts that their original text did not attend to. I don't believe such a project would run counter their work, but rather carry it forward. As they write in the Preface (1969), "We do not stand by everything we said in the book in its original form. That would be incompatible with a theory which attributes a temporal core to truth instead of contrasting truth as something invariable to the movement of history." The movement of history has drawn forth important questions about the persistence of primitivism, and thus a reexamination of their text from the perspective of imperialism, primitivism, and modernity is surely warranted.

**Section II.**  
**Historical Case Studies:**  
**Self-Critical Primitivism in Ethnology and Art**

[Expressionism] hardly knows how much it knows of God and of things. It is a convulsion that comes just as close to the all as to the void.

—Wilhelm Hausenstein<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Wilhelm Hausenstein, "Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick," *Der neue Merker* 3, Sonderheft "Werden," undated (late 1919), 120.

**Chapter 4.**  
***The Darkness of Time: Aporetic Primitivism***  
**in the Nineteenth-Century Ethnology of Adolf Bastian**

The origin of sculpture is lost in the darkness of time; it is therefore an art of Caribs. . . .

—Charles Baudelaire, 1846

What a tremendous and exciting advance could be made if we could assemble an index, or statistic, of ideas which showed the same number of psychological elements (like cells of a plant) is circulating in regular and uniform rotation in the heads of all people, and that is so for all times and places!

—Adolf Bastian, 1860

**Part 1. Defining the “Primitive” and the Denial of Coevalness**

In 1846, in an essay on the inferiority of sculpture to painting, Charles Baudelaire remarked: “The origin of sculpture is lost in the darkness of time; it is therefore an art of Caribs. Indeed, we see that all peoples carve fetishes very skillfully long before they take up the art of painting, which is an art of profound reasoning and one whose enjoyment demands a particular

initiation.”<sup>1</sup> The “Caribs”—the dark-skinned former inhabitants of the Caribbean islands, believed to have migrated there from South America, and in the popular imagination associated with cannibalism and fetishism—seemed to Baudelaire and his contemporaries an archetype of “primitive man.”<sup>2</sup> Baudelaire here gives voice to the intertwined set of concepts that, in the course of the nineteenth century, solidified into the imaginary boundaries that separated the European from the primitive: time, reason, and art. Above all, it was the Europeans’ imagined achievement of reason that had brought them out from a benighted past, enslaved to nature and misled by myths. The achievement of reason delivered the Europeans into progressive time, into history, and ensured that the European enjoyed the privileged possession of art, whereas the Caribs had only the fetish.

Although conceptions of cultural difference based on hierarchical and binary thinking were certainly not new to the nineteenth century, it was at this time that they found their clearest articulation in the emerging science of ethnology, and in particular, in the theory known as cultural evolutionism. Evolutionist thought, which achieved prominence in British anthropology in the latter half of the nineteenth-century (but had popular exponents in Germany as well), envisioned a gradual historical progress of “man,” stretching from his origins in the pre-historical past, to the current heights of modern European civilization, defined by

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<sup>1</sup> Charles Baudelaire, “Pourquoi la sculpture est ennuyeuse,” *Salon de 1846, Critique d’art*, ed. Claude Pichois (Paris, 1965), 166. Translation is adapted from that of Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics, 1725-1907* (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 29. In French: “L’origine de la sculpture se perd dans la nuit des temps; c’est donc un art de Caraïbes. En effet, nous voyons tous les peuples tailler fort adroitement des fétiches longtemps avant d’aborder la peinture, qui est un art de raisonnement profond et dont la jouissance même demande une initiation particulière.”

<sup>2</sup> See chapter one for commentary on Baudelaire’s relationship to the figure of the “primitive.”

unprecedented technological and material progress.<sup>3</sup> Cultural evolutionists ostensibly linked “modern man” with his “primitive” counterpart, through the narrative of historical, teleological development, and nineteenth-century anthropologists professed to study the “psychic unity of mankind” from a universalist perspective. As recent historians of anthropology have argued, however, such claims of universalism obscured the ways in which ethnographic discourse erected unbridgeable gaps between the civilized, “modern” subject and the ethnographic subject of study, the “primitive”—gaps premised upon a fundamental distance in terms of reason and time.<sup>4</sup> This recent body of work, partially inspired by postcolonial theory and Edward Said’s critique of Orientalism, has trained an eye on the anthropology’s implicit and sometimes explicit collusion with European imperialism, casting light on how the history of anthropology theory buttressed forms of political and cultural power. Johannes Fabian, in his pioneering work *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object*, articulated this argument most forcefully; moreover, he argued that nineteenth-century cultural evolutionism was not an exception, but in fact the distancing devices deployed here, which he labeled a

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<sup>3</sup> For British evolutionary anthropology see George W. Stocking, Jr., *Race, Culture and Evolution: Essays in the History of Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1968); Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology* (New York: Free Press, 1987); Stocking, *The Ethnographer’s Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992).

<sup>4</sup> Henrika Kuklick, *The Savage Within: The Social History of British Anthropology, 1885-1945* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991); Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); George W. Stocking, Jr., ed., *Colonial Situations: Essays on the Contextualization of Ethnographic Knowledge* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1991); Peter Pels and Oscar Salemink, eds., *Colonial Subjects: Essays on the Practical History of Anthropology* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1999); For an examination of the relationship between pre-colonial imaginaries and anthropological discourse, with a focus on tropes of gender and nationalism, see Susanne Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies: Conquest, Family, and Nation in Precolonial Germany, 1770-1870* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1997).

“denial of coevalness,” were endemic to the history of anthropology as a discipline, and the hermeneutic and representation practices it deployed.<sup>5</sup>

Fabian’s work has had a major impact in the critique of anthropology by drawing attention to deeply embedded epistemological collusions with imperial power. In this chapter I will argue that not all ethnologists can be subsumed into Fabian’s account: in particular, Fabian’s critique fails to distinguish an idiosyncratic strand in the distinctive work of Adolf Bastian (1826 – 1905), generally recognized as the founder of nineteenth-century German ethnology. The idiosyncrasy of Bastian’s approach, combined with his institutional prominence in the field of nineteenth-century German ethnology, call for a reassessment of his particular contributions to the history of the discipline. Bastian’s work on theorizing (and un-theorizing) cultural difference can also offer important insights into the ambivalent operations of colonial discourse in the era of German imperialism.

The significance of Bastian’s unusual approach to the problem of conceptualizing the primitive can be glimpsed most clearly by contrasting it with cultural evolutionism. The figure of “primitive man” has a long pre-history, with origins stretching back far before the nineteenth century. It was not until the 1860s and 1870s, however, that a new and more clearly defined science of ethnology took shape, which took the “primitive races of man” as its main focus. The nineteenth century ushered in a new paradigm of historical thinking, and with the ascension of evolutionary theory, the image of the “primitive” solidified as a category of the other which was not simply strange and different, but somehow behind, in time and in mental capability. This new science carved out a space for itself, distinct from the philosophical *Anthropologie* of the

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<sup>5</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, with a new foreword by Matt Bunzl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; 2002).

Enlightenment. Intellectually it was shaped by a host of factors, including the historicist critique of the Bible; a positivist orientation shaped by Auguste Comte; advances in geography, zoology, and botany; and Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Other social influences included institutional changes and professionalization within the educational system, as well as increased exploration and trade, heightened colonial involvement, and greater state interest and support of anthropology as a result. The seedbeds of this new science of anthropology were primarily Britain and Germany. In England, its greatest spokesperson was E. B. Tylor, whose *Primitive Culture* (1871) essentially established the particular concept of "culture" which became the focus study; in Germany, the leading exponent was Adolf Bastian.<sup>6</sup> While these two figures shared a common interest in understanding the "primitive" people of the world, the differences between them were significant.

In drawing out the contrast between Tylor and Bastian, it will be helpful to follow for a moment George W. Stocking, Jr., who, in his classic work on the nineteenth-century British tradition, *Victorian Anthropology*, makes an evocative and illuminating association between British cultural evolutionist theory and the Crystal Palace, the monumental construction built to house the first of what would come to be known as the "World's Fairs." Held in London in 1851, the Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations was rich with symbolism, primarily

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<sup>6</sup> France indeed produced important nineteenth-century thinkers who shaped the history of anthropology, yet for various reasons, not least of which was a stricter divide between theorizing and fieldwork, it remains difficult to speak of a French anthropological tradition before the work of Marcel Mauss and Lucien Lévy-Bruhl in the twentieth century. The work of Émile Durkheim (1858-1917), the closest contemporary equivalent of Bastian or Tylor, was deeply infused with the figure of the "primitive," yet his overriding focus on European society generally earns him recognition as the founder of French sociology rather than anthropology. See Robert Parkin, "The French-Speaking Countries," *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), ed. Fredrik Barth, et al. 157-208. For surveys on the British tradition, see Stocking (1987); Fredrik Barth, "Britain and the Commonwealth," *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005); For an overview of the German tradition, see Andre Gingrich, "The German-Speaking Countries," *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, ed. Fredrik Barth, et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 61-153.



intended to celebrate the great technological and economic achievements of British civilization. As Stocking writes, quoting Prince Albert, “The purpose of the Exhibition was to ‘give a true test and a living picture of the point at which the whole of mankind has arrived in this great task, and a new starting point from which all nations will be able to direct their further exertions.’” Yet as Stocking wryly observes, “The most obvious lesson of the Exhibition, however, was that in pursuing their sacred mission, not all men had advanced at the same pace, or arrived at the same point.”<sup>7</sup> The Palace, showcasing the various arts and industries of the world’s nations, amounted to a glorious edifice intended to reify the boundaries of Time and Rationality which divided the primitive from the civilized. “It is hardly surprising,” Stocking writes,

that the Exhibition forced some to think about the origins and progress of the civilization it epitomized. Much in the Crystal Palace encouraged speculation of a more specific sort: the overall system of classification, which forced jurors to compare the same functional object in a variety of national forms; the character of the different national exhibits, which led one along a line of progress from Tasmanian savage through the “barbaric” civilizations of the East, northwest across the European continent toward an apex in Great Britain.<sup>8</sup>

Stocking’s tour of the Crystal Palace presents the discursive reification of time and reason as boundaries of difference, and points to the co-production of “primitive” and “civilized” with which this dissertation is concerned. Moreover, as a symbol of British cultural evolutionary ethnology, it offers a vivid contrast to the ethnology being developed in Germany by Tylor’s contemporary, Bastian. The aim of Tylor’s comparative science was to assemble data that would reveal cultural differences, and thereby make it possible to locate the position of any particular human group or society on the scale of evolution. Bastian’s comparative approach, however, was interested in locating fundamental similarities, rather than differences.

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<sup>7</sup> Stocking, *Victorian Anthropology*, 3.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Bastian conceived of ethnology as a form of philosophical psychology; the project of ethnology, as he outlined in a steady flow of books and articles, should be understood as the search for, and study of, “elementary thoughts” (*Elementargedanken*), which were the foundational elements of culture. These elementary thoughts, however, were not immediately discernable, but contained within the observable creations of culture, which Bastian termed the “folk ideas” (*Völkergedanken*). Through a rigorous comparative analysis of the diversity of the latter, the ethnologist would be able to approach the singularity of the former.

Both Bastian and Tylor ascribed to the belief in the “psychic unity of mankind,” but whereas for Tylor this was a connection across evolutionary time, a model for schematizing difference, for Bastian, the connection was a psychological one. The result was that for Tylor, this unity was nominal. Tylor’s theory of cultural evolutionism, and his concept of cultural traits as “survivals,” erected an unbridgeable distance in time between civilized and primitive; and his analysis of primitive culture preserved the distinction between rationality and irrationality. Bastian’s ethnological theory, however, problematized the categories of difference and identity; in doing so, it called the boundaries of time and reason into question.

As Fabian has argued in *Time and the Other*, this reification of time as distance (which we can see in construction of space in the Crystal Palace), was not a random characteristic of nineteenth-century thought, nor confined to cultural evolutionism, but in fact can be seen as an inherent hallmark of ethnology from its origins up through the present (*Time and the Other* was published in 1983). Fabian, as part of an early wave of postcolonial critiques of the discipline, approached the history of anthropology with the aim of understanding its political and colonialist imbrications; he compellingly argued that ethnological discourse has routinely

deployed time as a distancing device, confining the other to a separate and subordinate state. Fabian suggested that the temporal structures frequently employed in ethnographic texts were marked by what he called a “denial of coevalness.” As Matti Bunzl explains in his foreword to the 2002 re-issue, “The temporal structures so constituted thus place anthropologists and their readers in a privileged time frame, while banishing the Other to a stage of lesser development. This situation is ultimately exemplified by the deployment of such essentially temporal categories as ‘primitive’ to establish and demarcate anthropology’s traditional object.”<sup>9</sup>

This distancing function is evident in the tradition of British sociocultural evolutionism, as is apparent in Stocking’s account. Yet, as this chapter will argue, regarding the work of Adolf Bastian, Fabian’s thesis falls short. Bastian was the leading figure at the founding of German ethnology, a prolific writer whose output of monographs and journal articles one could easily label “monumental”<sup>10</sup>; in addition, his construction of the guiding principles shaped the collection of ethnographic objects and their display in Germany’s premier ethnology museum for decades. Despite Bastian’s affinity with Tylor on some accounts, often leading scholars to lump him in, erroneously, with evolutionist ethnology, Bastian in fact rejected the sociocultural evolutionist framework. In both his theoretical and textual practices, the commonly invoked boundaries dividing the civilized and the primitive—time and reason—were in fact disarticulated.

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<sup>9</sup> Matt Bunzl, “Foreword to Johannes Fabian’s *Time and the Other: Syntheses of a Critical Anthropology*,” in Fabian, *Time and the Other*, xi.

<sup>10</sup> H. Glenn Penny notes, “By 1885, Bastian had over 230 publications to his credit, and by 1905 his books took up three to four feet of shelf space and included over 10,000 pages.” H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19.

## Part 2. Adolf Bastian and the Ambiguities of German Anthropology

The formation of anthropology as a formal scholarly discipline in Germany occurred in sync with the creation of the German Empire. Prussian military victories over Austro-Hungary in 1866 and France in 1871, through the leadership of Otto von Bismarck, prepared the way for the unification of German lands under the Prussian king, Wilhelm I, crowned the new German emperor. During this period of national delimitation and definition, the science of *Völkerkunde* (ethnology) was established, also with its headquarters in Berlin. In 1867, the Berlin Society for Anthropology, Ethnology and Prehistory was founded, along with the journal *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, which quickly became the leading periodical in the field. In 1873 the Royal Museum of Ethnology was established in Berlin; the museum was the largest and best funded of Germany's several ethnological museums, and quickly achieved world renown. Up through the early decades of the twentieth century it was considered the largest ethnographic museum in the world.<sup>11</sup> This concurrence of events highlights important questions about the place of German anthropological science in relation to German national identity on the one hand and the connection of ethnology to state and imperial power on the other.

If Berlin was from the start the heart of German anthropology, at the heart of the Berlin establishment was Adolf Bastian. The first German to pass the habilitation (*venia docendi*) for *Völkerkunde*, in 1869, he was also the first professor of *Völkerkunde* as an academic subject in a German university. Bastian served as the first director of the Berlin Museum of Ethnology, from 1873 until his death. (He had since 1869 directed the ethnographic collection in the royal

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<sup>11</sup> Andre Gingrich, "The German-Speaking Countries," *One Discipline, Four Ways: British, German, French, and American Anthropology*, ed. Fredrik Barth et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2005), 61-153.

museums.) He was the leading member of the Berlin Geographical Society (*Gesellschaft für Erdkunde*), and one of the founding members of the Anthropological Society in Berlin.

There were of course important precursors in the field. Gustav Klemm, a Leipzig librarian, had authored a massive multi-volume work on “the history of culture” (*Allgemeine Cultur-Geschichte der Menschheit*, 10 volumes, 1843-1852), and assembled Germany’s second-largest ethnographic collection. Theodor Waitz, a philosopher based in Marburg, had pioneered *Völkerkunde* in his six-volume study, *Die Anthropologie der Naturvölker* (1859-1872). Both, however, were ethnological *philosophes* and armchair anthropologists, unlike Bastian, whose constant travels earned him a reputation for being away from Berlin more than he was in it.<sup>12</sup> It is also true that Bastian shared center stage in Berlin with Rudolf Virchow, but the latter’s domain was the field of *Anthropologie*, the German designation for physical or biological anthropology. A medical student, Virchow reignited the debates about identifying racial features that had been introduced in the work of Blumenbach and Christoph Meiners.<sup>13</sup> But as H. Glenn Penny writes,

It was unquestionably Bastian who set the central trends in German ethnology from the 1860s through the 1880s as he sketched out his vast empirical project, established extensive international networks of collection and exchange, created an ethnographic institution that became the critical point of comparison for all others, and helped to train a number of Germany's first professional ethnologists and encourage them to harness this new science in pursuit of self-knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>12</sup> Bastian made eight major expeditions outside of Europe and spent at least twenty-five years of his life abroad. (Penny, *Objects of Culture*, 20). Walter Benjamin in his essay on Eduard Fuchs offers the following anecdote: “Bastian acquired legendary fame for his readiness to pack a suitcase and go on expeditions when it was necessary to clarify a question, even if it kept him away from home for months. Similarly, Fuchs obeyed his impulses whenever they drove him to search out new evidence. The works of both these men will remain inexhaustible treasures for research.” Benjamin, “Eduard Fuchs: Collector and Historian,” *New German Critique*, no. 5 (Spring, 1975): 40.

<sup>13</sup> Gingrich, “The German-Speaking Countries,” 79ff.

<sup>14</sup> H. Glenn Penny, *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002), 19.

Bastian's prominent role in ethnology remains indisputable, yet the current assessment of Bastian's place in the history of ethnology remains not only ambiguous, but contradictory. The two most important recent works in English on the history of German anthropology, Andrew Zimmerman's *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* and Penny's *Objects of Culture: Ethnology and Ethnographic Museums in Imperial Germany*, offer conflicting interpretations of ethnology's aims in general and Bastian's position within it in particular.<sup>15</sup>

Zimmerman finds in nineteenth-century anthropology an antiliberal and antihumanist orientation that gestures towards the racist and eugenic bent of anthropology under National Socialism. He argues that "while the discipline of anthropology emerged all over Europe in the nineteenth century, it was above all in Germany that it functioned as a new *antihumanist* worldview, and it was in Germany that this anthropological antihumanism had some of its most important and far-reaching effects."<sup>16</sup> German anthropology, he writes, under the auspices of its two leading figures, Bastian and Virchow, adopted a new approach, inspired by the natural sciences, and conceived in opposition to the perceived limitations of traditional humanism. These anthropologists rejected historicism, which they saw as unnecessarily confined by its narrow focus on European and classical history. Instead, they opened up the possibility of

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<sup>15</sup> Andrew Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism in Imperial Germany* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001); Penny, *Objects of Culture*, 2002.

<sup>16</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 1 (emphasis mine). Zimmerman's interest in "continuities as well as discontinuities" led him to reject earlier accounts which had "described a cataclysmic break between the avowedly antiracist German anthropology of 1870s and 1880s and the increasingly biologicistic and racist anthropology of the 1890s and after." (253n27). Zimmerman refers here to Benoit Massin, "From Virchow to Fischer: Physical Anthropology and 'Modern Race Theories' in Wilhelmine Germany," in Stocking, ed., *Volkgeist as Method and Ethic*, 79-154; and Robert Proctor, "From Anthropologie to Rassenkunde in the German Anthropological Tradition," in *Bones, Bodies, Behavior: Essays on Biological Anthropology*, ed. George W. Stocking, Jr. (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1988), 138-79.

knowledge to be gained by studying the non-European other. At the same time, he argues, their theoretical work continued to draw firm boundaries between Europeans and others, only now the distinction was between *Naturvölker*, or natural peoples, and the *Kulturvölker*, the people with culture. They thus embraced the non-European other, while at the same time excluding it; by linking the non-European “primitive” other with nature, they fancied they could study other groups of people “objectively,” using the methods of natural science.

A contradictory account of German ethnology emerges in Penny’s *Objects of Culture* and in Penny’s edited anthology with Matti Bunzl, *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*.<sup>17</sup> Penny and Bunzl argue that the German tradition contains elements of tolerance and pluralism, an orientation towards difference that they trace back to the German philosopher Johann Gottfried Herder. Herder, they argue, offers an example of nascent cultural relativism, formulated in opposition to the “homogenizing tendencies” of such French theorists as Voltaire and Nicolas de Condorcet:

Against [the French theorists’] inclination to view all of humanity as progressing along a set path toward civilization, Herder posed a vision of historical specificity and cultural incommensurability. . . . This Counter-Enlightenment stance persisted through the emergence of German anthropology and ethnology as scientific disciplines in the second half of the nineteenth century.<sup>18</sup>

Thus, whereas Zimmerman sees Bastian as leading the charge in anthropology’s antihumanist turn, Penny and Bunzl place him squarely in the humanist tradition of Herder and Alexander von Humboldt. Penny cites Bastian’s conviction that “human nature is uniform all over the globe,” and that “if there are laws in the universe, their rules and harmonies should

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<sup>17</sup> H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl, eds., *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

<sup>18</sup> Matti Bunzl and H. Glenn Penny, "Introduction: Rethinking German Anthropology, Colonialism, and Race," in *Worldly Provincialism: German Anthropology in the Age of Empire*, eds. H. Glenn Penny and Matti Bunzl (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003), 11; Penny, *Objects of Culture*, 2002.

also be in the thought processes of man.”<sup>19</sup> This discrepancy with regards to the philosophical orientation of anthropology in the late nineteenth century, and Bastian’s role in particular, suggests that his legacy requires closer scrutiny.

Penny and Zimmerman have both illuminated certain aspects of German anthropology, although both also obscure certain features. On the one hand, Penny’s depiction of a disciplinary change after the turn of the century more accurately reflects the increased attention to nation and race which developed in the year leading up to World War I. However, their argument that nineteenth-century anthropology on the whole was marked by a Herdian cultural relativism or pluralism neglects the ways in which such “pluralist” views could (and generally did) cohabit with ethnocentric and racial thinking. Similarly, Penny and Bunzl’s narrative neglects the existence of such variants in nineteenth-century anthropology as the evolutionary and antihumanist thinking of figures like Gustav Klemm, the most important precursor to Bastian; it also fails to provide a satisfying explanation for such figures as Friedrich Ratzel, whose diffusionist approach ultimately eclipsed Bastian’s ethnology in the twentieth

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<sup>19</sup> Penny, *Objects of Culture*, 22, quoting Bastian, *Alexander von Humboldt: Festrede* (Berlin: Wiegandt and Hempel, 1869), 23-25. Other recent works on Bastian have emphasized different aspects of this multi-faceted figure’s life and career. Marie-France Chevron has analyzed Bastian’s work in the context of contemporary debates about evolution, and elicited his differences from his most important successor, Friedrich Ratzel. Klaus Peter Buchheit has produced a philosophically suggestive monograph exploring Bastian’s idiosyncratic style of writing and thinking. Christine Stelzig has offered a detailed history of the Berlin Ethnological Museum’s African department, in which Bastian figures as a “visionary globe-trotter.” Klaus-Peter Köpping’s work offers a thoughtful analysis of Bastian’s theoretical framework, stressing Bastian’s commitment to understanding the “psychic unity of mankind” and connecting him with contemporary anthropological developments. Although Köpping’s presentist attempt to reconstruct Bastian’s relevance is less convincing, his nuanced readings regarding the tensions and overlooked aspects of Bastian’s work have inspired my analysis. See Marie-France Chevron, *Anpassung und Entwicklung in Evolution und Kulturwandel: Erkenntnisse aus der Wissenschaftsgeschichte für die Forschung der Gegenwart und eine Erinnerung an das Werk A. Bastians* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2004); Klaus Peter Buchheit, *Die Verkettung der Dinge: Stil und Diagnose im Schreiben Adolf Bastians* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005); Christine Stelzig, *Afrika am Museum für Völkerkunde zu Berlin: 1873-1919: Aneignung, Darstellung und Konstruktion eines Kontinents* (Herbolzheim: Centaurus, 2004); Klaus-Peter Köpping (*Adolf Bastian and the Psychic Unity of Mankind: The Foundations of Anthropology in Nineteenth Century Germany* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005).



century, and whose theory seems to combine cultural pluralism and a de-emphasis on race with a nevertheless intensified articulation of a primitivist discourse.

On the other side of the debate, Zimmerman's impressive argument helps to understand the direction and self-conception of ethnology among Bastian's colleagues and successors (such as Virchow and Felix von Luschan), and remains cognizant of the important influences of imperialism on anthropological knowledge production. Zimmerman's account, however, fails to do justice to Bastian's thought, and the significance that humanism held in Bastian's ethnological theory. Bastian, in spite of his interest in object collection, did not reject humanism, but rather sought to expand it to include non-Europeans. This is an important distinction, not only for setting the historical record straight, but also because a closer examination will reveal Bastian's particular place in an important epistemological change.

Although a part of my argument will be to restore Bastian to the humanist tradition (and thus parallels Penny's work), my argument more broadly reframes the debate, by adopting a theoretical framework that resists the supposed binary between humanism, pluralism, or liberalism on the one hand, and the "turn" to nation or race, on the other. Instead, I have made the discourse of "primitivism" the focus, a shift which in some ways broadens the scope, bringing together both humanist discourses and discourses about nation and race; in other ways, this approach offers greater potential for making useful new distinctions in different types of primitivism, allowing for a narrative that is 1) able to highlight important relationships and connections between different moments of primitivism discourse; and 2) able to note where such discourse can be read as resistance to ethnocentric modes of thinking (in particular, the notions of time and reason, mentioned above), without positing such resistance as

somehow outside the sphere of colonial discourse, or part of an unsullied tradition of Enlightenment humanism.

The concept of primitivist discourse therefore is intended to reorganize and reconceptualize these elements in a new and productive way. In thus shifting the theoretical framework, some traditional associations are problematized, while other ideas previously dealt with separately can find themselves profitably conjoined. A humanist theory, for example, may still adopt a form of primitivism, and different types of primitivist discourse may make use of racial or national concepts in different ways. Primitivism, as an ethnological mode of defining the other, primarily refers to concepts of culture and cultural difference. To fully grasp the ways in which ideas about racial and national differences solidified in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, it is important to understand how they drew upon and interacted with primitivism, which offered a fundamental discourse about cultural difference and otherness.

To briefly summarize the theoretical approach (presented in greater detail in chapter one), I have employed a basic taxonomy of primitivist discourse, isolating two roughly-hewn categories of negative (or imperialist) primitivism and positive (or romantic) primitivism. To these we may now add scientific primitivism, to refer more specifically to ethnology, as a mode of primitivism that aspires toward objectivity, yet which is premised upon the notion of a “primitive” object of study. I have argued that these foregoing categories can be understood as examples of apotropaic primitivism—primitivism that upholds the distinction between primitive and civilized. In contrast to these, Bastian’s approach exemplifies the concept of aporetic primitivism. These terms are not intended as distinct categories within which various authors,

artists, or theorists should be placed; rather, any particular text, image, or theory may be seen to incorporate one or more of these modes.

I use the terms negative or imperialist primitivism to designate the commonplace negative views of primitive society that have been expressed from the fifteenth century up to the present, in particular the ways in which European individuals constructed a subject identity founded on a belief in civilization, progress, rationality, and autonomy, in opposition to a primitive “other” lacking these traits, and therefore an object of aversion or disgust. An example would be the images of cannibals which filled European travelogues in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, or in the mocking comments made by a critic of T. E. Bowdich’s 1819 study of the Ashanti of West Africa: “The ‘history’ of the Ashantees, to which Mr. Bowdich has dedicated a whole chapter, is, like that of all other savages who can neither read nor write, the history of a day, and little worthy of notice.”<sup>20</sup> Another example would be Christoph Meiners, an eighteenth-century popularizer of the hierarchical racial theory in which white Europeans (and especially Germans) occupied the highest place. Linking physical and cultural traits, Meiners wrote: “Even if we had no idea that the Negroes are uglier in body and countenance than the Europeans, and that they have smaller skulls, a smaller and less pliant brain and coarser nerves than these, we would still be bound to conclude from their entire mode of living and acting that Negroes are significantly less sensitive and more irritable than whites.”<sup>21</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Unsigned review, in *Quarterly Review* 22 (January 1820), 286; quoted in Frances S. Connelly, *The Sleep of Reason: Primitivism in Modern European Art and Aesthetics 1725-1907* (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 15.

<sup>21</sup> Christoph Meiners, *Grundriss der Geschichte der Menschheit*, 1785, quoted in Zantop, *Colonial Fantasies*, 84.

I use the terms romantic or positive primitivism, on the other hand, to designate an opposing view: eighteenth-century fantasies of the noble savage, for example, or Paul Gauguin's Post-Impressionist paintings of idyllic Polynesian scenes. More recently, United Nations Secretary-General Dr. Boutros Boutros-Ghali wrote (in a 1994 essay): "It is now clearly understood that many indigenous people live in greater harmony with the natural environment than do the inhabitants of industrialized consumer societies."<sup>22</sup> It should be clear that both negative and positive primitivism involve an inherent imposition of a hierarchy between self and other. The difference between negative and positive primitivism is only that the latter reverses the value judgment of the former; hierarchy and otherness are preserved, casting the other as an object of desire rather than fear. Thus the timelessness which Bowdich's critic despised in the report on the Ashanti becomes in Gauguin's work an idealized, desirable, dreamlike state.

What we may call "scientific primitivism" refers to that mode of discourse which treats the "primitive" yet ostensibly seeks to bracket positive or negative judgments. A primary example of this would be nineteenth-century evolutionary anthropology, which sought to "objectively" analyze primitive societies, not to explicitly condemn them or praise them, but simply to learn from them—to observe how they function, to compare them, in order to locate their position on an evolutionary timeline of humanity, ascending from lowly primitives to advanced modern Europeans.<sup>23</sup> As Fabian has argued, even where such ethnologists sought to

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<sup>22</sup> Boutros Boutros-Ghali, "Foreword," *Voice of Indigenous Peoples*, edited by Alexander Ewen (1994); quoted in Kuper, 207.

<sup>23</sup> I have opted for the term "scientific" to suggest this mode's aspirations to analyze the primitive "other" with scientific objectivity or neutrality; calling it "scientific," "objective," or "neutral" primitivism would convey an unwarranted sense of having accomplished that aim. (Even where scientific discourse refrains from condemning

withhold value judgments, the very framework of their approach employed a clearly hierarchical construction of the scientific, European self and the primitive other, and used the notion of time as a device to maintain difference.<sup>24</sup> (Fabian finds this mode of distancing not only in the cultural evolutionary thought of the nineteenth century, embodied in the ethnology of E.B. Tylor, but in twentieth-century anthropology as well, whether the cultural relativism of the Anglo-American school or the taxonomic approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss's structuralism.)

I have adopted the notion of aporetic primitivism to designate a mode of primitivism that strictly speaking is not a fourth category on par with the previous three, but rather a mobile, meta-category; it is intended to suggest moments of discourse in which one or more of the previous modes of primitivism is evident but is also paired with a destabilizing counterpoint. Aporetic primitivism is thus a mode of primitivist discourse in which hierarchy and otherness are articulated, but simultaneously undermined through various aesthetic strategies. Whereas modes of imperialist, romantic, and scientific primitivism all uphold the distinctions between civilized (self) and primitive (other), modes of aporetic primitivism employ these distinctions while calling their tangibility into question.

I have termed these modes primitivism "aporetic," and not merely paradoxical, because aporetic suggests more clearly the productive power of a paradox. The point is not simply to locate intellectually interesting contradictions in a text (i.e., that a discourse of primitivism can both support a modern subject position, and undermine it), but to argue that a moment of discourse which undermines its own primitivism can be aporetic, in the sense of producing

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the primitive as negative or extolling its traits as desirable, it erects a clear boundary between knower and known that involves an epistemological hierarchy.)

<sup>24</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 2002.

impasse, the moment through which the discourse cannot pass. I am not therefore offering a deconstructionist reading of Bastian's discourse, as though it were one example of the general discourse of primitivism, which was premised upon the inevitability of contradictions, which can be revealed to the critic. Rather, I am arguing that Bastian's discourse works against particular claims of the primitivist discourse. The notion of aporia is intended to suggest the ensuing disorientation (or vertigo, as I have called it below), as well as the opening up of new interpretive possibilities.

As the previous chapter argued, primitivism has been a historically fundamental discourse of alterity, producing a modern subject position—which is to say, one defined by critical awareness, autonomy, historical progress, and alienation (from nature, from community, from the self). If that is the case, then a discourse of aporetic primitivism, I argue, works to undermine the construct of an *imagined* modernity. In so far as empire has historically claimed a monopoly on “modernity,” invoking it to maintain power hierarchies, as the state to which all civilizations must strive, then a discourse which challenges the existence and teleology of modernity should be seen as a radical project.

### **Part 3. *Vertigo*: Time, Reason, and Bastian's *Acronych* Ethnology**

Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes Its Object* helped spur a radical re-evaluation of the history of anthropology. Influenced by Foucault, and working with an intent and method similar to that of Edward Said in *Orientalism*, Fabian turned his attention to a historical and philosophical analysis of the uses of the concept of Time in anthropological

discourse. As Matti Bunzl writes in his introductory comments to the 2002 reissue, "*Time and the Other* functions both as a meta-analysis of the anthropological project at large and as a deconstruction of its enabling temporal formations."<sup>25</sup>

Fabian begins his critique with the fundamental, if commonplace, observation that knowledge is power. "Anthropology's claim to power," he declares, "originated at its roots. It belongs to its essence and is not a matter of accidental misuse. Nowhere is this more clearly visible, at least once we look for it, than in the uses of Time anthropology makes when it strives to constitute its own object—the savage, the primitive, the Other."<sup>26</sup> Fabian highlights a contradiction inherent to the practice of ethnography. As Bunzl explains:

On the one hand, anthropological knowledge is produced in the course of fieldwork through the intersubjective communication between anthropologists and interlocutors; on the other hand, traditional forms of ethnographic representation require the constitutive suppression of the dialogic realities generating anthropological insights in the first place. In the objectifying discourses of a scientific anthropology, "Others" thus never appear as immediate partners in a cultural exchange but as spatially and, more importantly, temporally distanced groups.<sup>27</sup>

Fabian refers to this contradiction, between the reality of shared time in fieldwork and the mode of temporal distancing employed in anthropological texts, as the "schizogenic use of Time." Fabian terms this particular feature of anthropological writing the "denial of coevalness." He explains this as "*a persistent and systematic tendency to place the referent(s) of anthropology in a Time other than the present of the producer of anthropological discourse.*"<sup>28</sup> This can be seen, he argues, in the recurrent use of such terms as "primitive"; other times it is less obvious, as in the "walled gardens" of cultural relativism, or the taxonomic

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<sup>25</sup> Bunzl, "Foreword," *Time and the Other*, x.

<sup>26</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 1.

<sup>27</sup> Bunzl, "Foreword to Johannes Fabian's *Time and the Other*," x.

<sup>28</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 31 (italics in original).

approach of Claude Lévi-Strauss. This consistent denial of coevalness, based on a perceived distance in Time, Fabian terms the “allochronism” of anthropology.<sup>29</sup>

Fabian’s diagnosis, although he makes some qualifications, is intended to describe the history of anthropology *tout court*. It is interesting in this regard that he in fact focuses on the British/American and French traditions.<sup>30</sup> He neglects to note that there was indeed an alternative, markedly different methodology, which in fact defined nineteenth-century German anthropology—the universalist, humanist approach of Adolf Bastian.<sup>31</sup> Bastian’s conception of ethnology as a mode of humanistic, scientific psychology effectively incorporated the “primitive” other *within* the European concept of self; this stood in contrast to the cultural evolutionary model, which figured the primitive as separate, distanced from the European in

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<sup>29</sup> Evolutionary time, Fabian writes, “promoted a scheme in terms of which not only past cultures, but all living societies were irrevocably placed on a temporal slope, a stream of Time—some upstream, others downstream. Civilization, evolution, development, acculturation, modernization (and their cousins, industrialization, urbanization) are all terms whose conceptual content derives, in ways that can be specified, from evolutionary Time.” He goes on to highlight the lasting effects of this development: “A discourse employing terms such as primitive, savage (but also tribal, traditional, Third World, or whatever euphemism is current) does not think, or observe, or critically study, the ‘primitive’; it thinks, observes, studies in terms of the primitive. Primitive being essentially a temporal concept, is a category, not an object, of Western thought.” Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 17.

<sup>30</sup> The omission is noteworthy, all the more so considering the international prominence of German ethnology in the nineteenth century. (Fabian does discuss German diffusionism, which comes to the fore in the German field in the early twentieth century.) The neglect of German-language sources also offers an interesting parallel with Said, whose *Orientalism* also rather notoriously failed to examine German texts, despite the major contributions of German authors. For Said, Germany seemed to pose a problematic case, in that the nation’s late entry into colonialism suggested no “protracted sustained *national* interest in the Orient”—a perspective which later scholarship has overturned. (Edward Said, *Orientalism* [New York: Vintage, 1978], 19. Italics in original.) Fabian’s neglect appears more a sin of omission than commission. For Said see Jennifer Jenkins, “German Orientalism: Introduction,” *Comparative Studies of South Asia, Africa and the Middle East* 24, No. 2 (2004): 97-100; Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

<sup>31</sup> In some ways, it should come as no surprise that Fabian fails to consider Bastian, whose prominent role in the history of German ethnography has only become the study of research in the last decade or so, after some years of neglect. This is in part due to Bastian’s notoriously obscure and ponderous writing style (a point to which I return later in this chapter). His contemporary Ernst Haeckel mocked him with the title of “*Geheimer Oberkonfusionsrat*.” Robert Lowie, whose *History of Ethnological Theory* (1937) was the authoritative source in its day, wrote of Bastian’s style: “At its worst it is surely inconceivably crabbed. To confront Bastian in some of his lucubrations is a never-to-be-forgotten experience. The astounded reader runs into sentences twenty lines and more in length and hacks his way through bracketed quotations in Latin, Greek, or Polynesian, only to find that he has yet to extricate himself from the maze of some major parenthesis.” Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc. 1937), 32-33.



evolutionary time. Accordingly, I will argue that Bastian's theory remains a key moment in which this allochronic discourse did *not* appear—or to be more precise, in which a “denial of coevalness” was combined with its opposite, an a theoretical discourse based on identity and coevalness. Bastian was no relativist—he adopted a colonial ethnological discourse which presupposed a hierarchical difference between civilized Europeans and uncivilized primitives; his writing thus constitutes a form of primitivism, a fact which is neglected in arguments which only focus on his humanist tendencies. Yet unlike the British evolutionary model of primitivism, Bastian's discourse did not establish distancing divides along the boundaries of time and rationality.<sup>32</sup> Here, on account of his humanism, Bastian's theory collapsed boundaries and theorized coevalness.

To call Bastian a humanist, however, demands a reconsideration of Andrew Zimmerman's argument, which casts a tradition of German anthropology as fundamentally antihumanist—and Bastian as “the greatest spokesman of the anthropological critique of

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<sup>32</sup> It should be noted that the history of ethnography which tends to fall out from Fabian's indictment (as expressed in Bunzl's forward) is in fact surprisingly whiggish, tending to follow the development of ethnographic writing as it progressed from early, confused, allochronic beginnings, to an enlightened, more open-ended, multi-vocal ethnography, in which ethnographers adopt the autobiographical voice. Bunzl highlights Anna Tsing's *In the Realm of the Diamond Queen* (1993) – “a ‘classic’ monograph of a small indigenous group, the Meratus Dayaks, who live in near isolation in the southeast of the Indonesian part of Borneo. . . . Tsing resolutely protests the allochronic assumption that the Meratus Dayaks are ‘anybody's “contemporary ancestors”’; moreover, her rhetorical strategies strive for the constant transmission of coevalness. Through the use of innovative narrative approaches (a creative symbiosis of analytical and reflexive elements), the concrete dialogical dimensions of her fieldwork remain accessible. Informants thus become complex and grounded subjects.” (Bunzl, xxiv). Without detracting from Tsing's achievements, I argue that it behooves the historian to reject this simple progressive development, and instead to look for moves in different and unexpected directions. Fabian himself, in fact, has already distanced himself from the whiggish tendency and explored these contradictory trends. In *Out of our Minds: Reason and Madness in the Exploration of Central Africa* (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press, 2000), he reveals traces of intersubjectivity in texts from the turn of the twentieth century. Thus, in thinking against the grain of Fabian's argument, I rely upon Fabian himself for inspiration. However, whereas he focuses on these marginal, albeit significant moments, I have found a counter-example in the heart of the discipline, in the writings of what many consider the founding father of German ethnology.

humanism.”<sup>33</sup> Anthropology, in the time of Bastian, became increasingly focused on analyzing objects and the physical characteristics of people, not interpreting texts, which had been the purview of humanism.<sup>34</sup> This methodological difference, applied to anthropology, helped anthropologists create a simple distinction between the *Kulturvölker*, the people with culture and history, and the *Naturvölker* or *Naturmenschen*, the people without history. Whereas humanism, according to Zimmerman, was engaged in the interpretation of texts, and “depended on a hermeneutic identification of scholars with their objects of study, the natural scientific methods that anthropologists applied emphasized the separation of the knowing subject from the known object.”<sup>35</sup> According to Zimmerman, the rejection of textual and historical study in favor of natural scientific methods enabled German anthropologists to envision their new science as more “objective” than humanism: “Anthropology was thus conceived as a natural science of natural peoples, which eschewed what practitioners held to be ‘subjective’ historical narratives in favor of ‘objective’ observations of people uncomplicated by culture and historical development.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 47.

<sup>34</sup> Zimmerman points, for example, to the growing interest in skull measurements to determine racial categories, a practice that led to the official establishment of a common method in the 1883 Frankfurt Agreement. This new method, Zimmerman writes, “provided an epistemological role different from that of the traditional humanities. Their studies of the skull allowed them to escape their own subjectivity and to avoid the subjectivity of the people they studied.” (Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 106) Zimmerman also describes the vast study conducted by Virchow on behalf of the German Anthropological Society in the 1870s, in which six million German schoolchildren were examined to record their hair, eye, and skin color in order to “determine the fate of the fair-skinned, blond, blue-eyed ‘classic Teutons’ (*classische Erscheinungen des Germanen*) described by Tacitus and the origins of the brown-skinned, brown-haired, brown-eyed individuals who had become so preponderant in Germany.” (135, quoting from Virchow, “Die Ziele und Mittel der modernen Anthropologie”). Felix von Luschan crafted similar questionnaires that field anthropologists were instructed to use in order to regularize and systematize the type of ethnographic knowledge produced by practitioners. (54-55)

<sup>35</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 240.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 38.

Bastian was, like his colleagues, interested in modeling anthropology after the natural sciences. He criticized the “subjectivity” of humanist philosophy, and he was interested in collecting ethnographic objects, which would furnish the raw data for anthropological study. Yet, I will argue, his version of anthropology was not a rejection of humanism, but rather, in fact, an expansion of it. He hoped to maintain the humanist goal of self-knowledge, but through epistemological critique to provide a new theoretical foundation, and to establish what he thought of as a more empirical basis.

Bastian, indeed, was interested in the collection and examination of ethnographic objects—almost to the point of caricature. He is frequently remembered for his ardent admonitions to collect as many ethnographic objects as possible, before time had run out. He gave an early voice to what was later termed the “salvage paradigm” in anthropology, referring to a sense of the urgent need to gather up artifacts for study before the objects (and societies in which they originated) had disappeared due to the effects of European imperialism and expansion.<sup>37</sup> In an 1885 article, for example, Bastian issued a clarion call for increased collection of ethnographic objects. After explaining that ethnology had finally appeared on the scene to join “anthropology and psycho-physics for the inductive formation of a scientific psychology,” which will offer a new hope for “the science of man,” he states that, “the fulfillment of such hope, however, remains dependent upon the prior question, whether it will be possible to procure the ethnic material in sufficient amounts, in order to examine them

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<sup>37</sup> The term is more commonly applied to early twentieth-century American anthropology. See for example Stocking, *The Ethnographer's Magic and Other Essays in the History of Anthropology* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1992), 118-119.

according to the demands of the comparative-genetic method.”<sup>38</sup> Bastian calls for the collection of “tangible, sensory objects” which, “for illiterate people, are the only expression of their *Volksg Geist*.” Indeed, “thus far [these are] the only documents and models which are available, with which the mental creations can become understandable.” Urgency is crucial in this “critical moment of danger,” as these cultural documents “perish before our eyes daily.”<sup>39</sup>

Leaving aside for the moment Bastian’s talk of “psycho-physics” and “scientific psychology,” it should be clear that for all his enthusiasm for collecting ethnographic objects, it was ultimately ideas he was after. Not only is it clear from the above that objects are important for offering insights into “mental creations”; moreover, his interest in objects comprised only part of his research agenda. Much of his ethnographic writing concerns the “narrative” elements of culture as well. In *Der Mensch in der Geschichte* (1860), his second major publication and his first formal organization of his thoughts into an ethnographic treatise, he explains:

In incidental features of narration, in nursery tales and proverbs, sayings and modes of speech, we encounter the same idea, be it in England or Abyssinia, in India or Scandinavia, in Spain or Tahiti, in Mexico as well as in Greece. If we look carefully enough, it will be the same idea which emerges from the hiding place of ethnic peculiarities and manifests itself in the thoughts of mankind in a fashion that, unless perceived as being part of cosmic harmony, appears to be incomprehensible.<sup>40</sup>

Objects were important, but only insofar as they disclosed insights into the creations of the human mind. In the 1885 article Bastian begins in fact not with a discussion about objects, but about the challenges involved in gaining an understanding of the *Naturmenschen*: “Only he who has understood, to place oneself sufficiently in the thought process of a natural people, in order to follow involuntarily their idea associations, will be in the position to present an

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<sup>38</sup> Bastian, “Über Ethnologische Sammlungen,” *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, 17 (1885), 38.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

<sup>40</sup> Bastian, *Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, Vol. 1 (1860), 10, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 180.

unfalsified picture . . . [one that is] useful and correct, in order to be valuable for scientific examination.”<sup>41</sup> Such skill, he continues, “to contemplate the thought process of the *Naturmenschen*, is therefore a ‘*conditio sine qua non*,’ as I have often emphasized.” In the absence of written texts, objects become especially important, but only because, “in the collection of ethnological museums, some psychological secret [*psychologische Geheimniss*] may be divulged.”<sup>42</sup>

Bastian, perhaps realizing that his interest in ideas could make him vulnerable to criticism that he was engaging in merely subjective philosophical speculation, cites an earlier work in which he provided an explanation of how his approach to ideas can be said to function like a natural science:

Should there be for this purpose [of collecting and analyzing objects] a sufficient count of workers ready to sacrifice themselves, then maybe the coming generation might achieve the same, which has already been successful in chemistry, namely: to establish an accurately researched electrochemical series of psychological basic elements [*Grund-Elemente*], and with it for the first time to lay a strong basis for a scientific psychology, which despite its many-sided procedure has still not found such a basis. From these elementary foundations we could then move outward, progressing carefully from the simple to the various combinations, gradually then to specify the thought-structure of humanity in its double and triple bonds, and thus to come back to the current height of culture, to bring to it the gift of self-understanding, as the gain of the research. This alone is the way, which the sciences have taught, the way of experience (instead of speculation), in order not to lose, during the investigations, the safe shelter of control in rectifying comparisons.<sup>43</sup>

On the one hand, Bastian’s comment confirms Zimmerman’s contention that there was indeed a movement in the field toward reconceptualizing anthropology along the lines of natural science. Bastian too embraced the notion of putting anthropological thought on a

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<sup>41</sup> Bastian, “Über Ethnologische Sammlungen,” 38.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 41.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid.*, 39n1 (citing *Das Beständige des Menschenrassen und die Spielweite ihre Veränderlichkeit* [1868], 70-71).

“strong” empirical foundation. However, it is important to observe that Bastian did not see himself as abandoning the original humanist philosophical project, which is to say, attaining knowledge of the fundamental structures of the human mind; nor did he abandon the humanist interest in narrativity and the pursuit of knowledge as self-knowledge. Narrativity, however, could be approached just as well through the study of cultural objects. Bastian wanted to substantiate the humanist project by incorporating more empirical methods of study.

To briefly summarize the theoretical framework of Bastian’s project, the goal was to understand the form, patterns, and structures of human thought. Bastian sought to study the myths, customs, and practices of a society in order to discover the “elementary thoughts” (*Elementargedanken*). These were the foundational elements of culture.<sup>44</sup> These elementary thoughts, however, were not immediately apparent, but hidden or within the observable creations of culture. The “folk ideas” (*Völkergedanken*) are those ideas which present themselves most readily to the observer of culture; these are the myths and religions of diverse ethnic groups. The aim of a scientific ethnology was to reconstruct the elementary ideas from a thorough comparative study and analysis of the variety of folk ideas as they existed in the world’s human populations. This analysis would reveal the common collective representations (*Gesellschaftsgedanken*)<sup>45</sup> which would ultimately lead to the elementary ideas. Therefore, “An unconditional prerequisite is a complete survey of the whole of mankind’s mental creations through time and space, geographical variations and historical influence.”<sup>46</sup> Although the folk ideas may differ, the elementary ideas should be universal; this was the meaning behind

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<sup>44</sup> Bastian’s theory has sometimes been compared to the structural psychology of Claude Lévi-Strauss, a not entirely accurate comparison but one that is helpful in grasping the thrust of his project.

<sup>45</sup> Sometimes compared to Carl Jung’s “collective unconscious.” (Bastian was in fact an influence on Jung.)

<sup>46</sup> Bastian, *Controversen in der Ethnologie*, Vol. 1 (Berlin: Wiedmannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1893), 14, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 30.

Bastian's belief in the "psychic unity of mankind." Bastian's goals were still essentially those of the humanist philosophical project of the Enlightenment: the analysis of the fundamental structures patterns of cognition, in order to better understand humanity's place in the world. Bastian explicitly positioned his work as an extension of that begun by Alexander von Humboldt (to whom Bastian dedicated his first important publication, *Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, 1860), and Bastian often invoked Johann Gottfried Herder as a primary influence:

The very thought that man as mankind is the essential object of study if man is to understand himself as a social animal appears as an almost intuitively conceived elementary idea all over the world. This implies that we ethnologists should look for Man in the average man who represents the mean of the whole of mankind; for this we need a "social physics." As Herder said with some amazement, it is about time that, having studied the kingdom of minerals, plants and animals, we make an attempt to understand man .<sup>47</sup>

At the same time, however, Bastian wanted to base his philosophical-anthropology on the positivist model of the natural sciences; it was to be collaborative, comparative and inductive. If the aims of philosophy were still good, what needed improvement was the methods, and a new focus on the "objective realizations" of the human spirit: "Where therefore must psychology, if it is to become a natural science, gather its building blocks? This is the crucial question around which everything turns. Such building blocks are to be found in the folk ideas (*Völkergedanken*), which are to be procured through the comparative psychology of ethnology."<sup>48</sup>

Bastian's image of a natural science, however, was not a materialist vision; as noted above, he conceived of ethnology as a form of *psycho-physics*, a scientific psychology pioneered

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., vol. 1, 95, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 28. By "social physics" (*physique socialie*) Bastian refers to the early work of Auguste Comte.

<sup>48</sup> Bastian, *Heilige Sage*, 219.

by the anti-materialist experimental psychologist Gustav Fechner (1801-87), notably in his work *Elements of Psychophysics* (1860).<sup>49</sup> Fechner rejected mind-body dualism and argued for a unity of physical and psychic events (he remains known today as the originator of Fechner's law, a system for quantifying subjective sensation and linking it to the intensity of a physical stimulus).<sup>50</sup> Fechner's work belonged to a growing trend of anti-materialist thought, including, for example, the monist philosophy of Ernst Haeckel (1834-1919). As Woodruff D. Smith writes, for many intellectuals of the day, radical materialism seemed "intellectually unsatisfactory, politically suspect, and inconsistent with the philosophical idealism that held pride of place at German universities in the later nineteenth century."<sup>51</sup>

Fechner's work was important to Bastian primarily as a theoretical framework for a research agenda, asserting the unity of mind and body in order to pursue empirically quantifiable principles or "laws" of psychic life. Bastian declared allegiance to such a view in the opening pages of *Der Mensch in der Geschichte* (published the same year as *Elements of Psychophysics*):

The difference in subjective perceptions has since olden times given rise to the postulate of an essential opposition between the consciousness of purely mental concatenations of thought and the physical oscillation of the nerves. Thus an independent microcosmic realm was postulated against the macrocosmic one. Yet the microcosmic realm is in reality only a mental distillation of the macrocosmic realm in an individuality which is but a part of it. Properly speaking, the mind and the body are one, and together make the man. This unity of mind and matter, created anew each moment, is the essence of the nature of man.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Gustav Fechner, *Elemente der Psychophysik* (Leipzig: Breitkopf und Härtel, 1860).

<sup>50</sup> For Fechner's influence on Bastian, see Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 88-94.

<sup>51</sup> Woodruff Smith, *Politics and the Sciences of Culture in Germany, 1840-1920* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 207."

<sup>52</sup> Bastian, *Der Mensch in der Geschichte: Zur Begründung einer Psychologischen Weltanschauung*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1860), 1, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 179. Köpping adds, "One can only marvel at the speed with which Bastian became familiar with the current scientific results; he had just returned from a world-trip of eight years, but already incorporated most of Fechner's concepts in his own work" (91).



In spite of his appreciation for Fechner's work, however, Bastian argued that philosophical psychology had thus far proven a dead-end. The problem, he argued, was that research into psychology had approached the problem from the perspective of individual psychology, rather than an anthropological focus on collective or social manifestations. Reflecting on the shortcomings of scientific psychology in the late 1880s, Bastian praises pioneers in the field as Friedrich Beneke (1798-1854) and Theodor Waitz (1813-66), for realizing that "psychology had to become a natural science," and yet Bastian concludes:

The reason for their failure was their lack of materials to establish a truly inductive science. Beneke hoped to find the material by self-observation, though Kant had already pointed out the inherent delusions of such attempts. Besides, these researchers fell back upon data about the soul as provided by psychiatry and by pathological aberrations, they compare man's progress with the development of children or animals. All this is of very limited value.<sup>53</sup>

Bastian argues that, while practitioners of scientific psychology from Beneke through Fechner may not have succeeded thus far in demonstrating conclusively the link between mind and matter, his own approach addressed the fundamental obstacle, focusing not on individual psychology but on the empirical study of collective cultural representations, and attempting therefore not simply to theorize but to document the unity of the human mind, through the collection of objects and the recording of folk ideas on a mass scale. Through the analysis of the folk ideas, the ethnologist would be able to formulate the essential cognitive structures or elementary ideas. The concept of the elementary idea was therefore the key, able to unite "both the physical and the psychic realm."<sup>54</sup> Bastian explains that,

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<sup>53</sup> Bastian, *Der Völkergedanke im Aufbau einer Wissenschaft vom Menschen und seine Begründung auf ethnologische Sammlungen* (Berlin: Ferd. Dümmler, 1881), 4, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 89.

<sup>54</sup> Bastian, *Controversen*, vol. 1, 95.

the new psychology based on the principles of the natural science will in the further development of psychic-physics eventually unravel the unseen universe of the world of the mind. The main object of psycho-physics has become research on patterns of thought as they are acquired in socialization processes and as they are manifested in the collective representations of man as social animal.<sup>55</sup>

Importantly, the “empiricism” of Bastian was not intended to draw a firm boundary between the knowing subject and the known object. Zimmerman has argued that, in Bastian’s perspective, “History was entrapped in subjectivity, both because it dealt with the national self and because it had necessarily to describe the subjective experiences of the period that it portrayed.”<sup>56</sup> While Bastian would have agreed with the criticism of historicism’s subjectivity, the suggestion that Bastian therefore dismissed “subjective experience” appears incorrect. As the 1885 article suggests, Bastian was very much determined to understand the subjective experience of his “object,” the ethnographic other. This is not to say that Bastian saw himself entering into the “subjectivity” of the other, to the extent that it offered an “equally valid” worldview, as the term is used in contemporary discourse. True, in his writing, Bastian often seems to enter into the shoes of the other, imagining how some feature of European life would look from an outside perspective, as it were, but this sense of “relativism” is a variable, not uniform, feature of this thought, and not necessarily a part of its theoretical framework. However, in the more limited sense, Bastian’s ethnology was premised upon understanding subjectivity, understood as the subject’s manifold perceptions, interactions with, and interpretations of the world—this subjectivity was, after all, the substratum of the folk ideas.

“It is true,” Bastian writes, “that the natural sciences have become the dominant form of thought in our times, but they tackle the merely material realm, and have not yet touched on

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<sup>55</sup> Bastian, *Controversen*, vol. 1, 4, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 171.

<sup>56</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 48.

the essential qualities of man as human being, qualities which are seen in the social realm as collective representations.”<sup>57</sup> The distinction Bastian makes here is not against the “subjectivity” of historicism, but its failure to recognize subjectivity in the ethnographic other, the object of anthropological knowledge. Bastian writes:

If we are to achieve a genuine science of man, we must take cognizance of the subjective angle. The psychic or intersubjective element which is both the core of the individual and the reflection of him and in him of the ethnic horizon, is manifested in the collective representations (*Gesellschaftsgedanken*) as these appear in specific folk ideas, these nodal points of the interplay between the physical organism and the total environment.<sup>58</sup>

Ethnology’s niche was to bring a clearer focus on “the world of ideas, that world which other sciences study from the outside.”<sup>59</sup> Bastian did not reject historicism’s interest in subjectivity, therefore; rather, he objected to historicism’s Eurocentricism. Bastian argued that the new science of man must include all people, and all of world history. “The human *qua* human,” Bastian explained, “does not live only in Europe and part of Asia.”<sup>60</sup> Bastian’s ethnology was intended as a clear attack against the historical tradition, which had focused exclusively on Europe and classical civilization: “The stately building in which the honored discipline of history was enthroned [admitted few] newcomers among the carefully ordered, stately row of historical peoples.”<sup>61</sup>

Bastian critiqued humanist philosophy, but it would be incorrect to say that he rejected it. On the one hand, Bastian argued humanist philosophy could not answer the fundamental questions about the harmony between the human and the world because these had not been

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<sup>57</sup> Bastian, *Controversen*, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 172.

<sup>58</sup> Bastian, *Controversen*, vol. 1, 7, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 29.

<sup>59</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>60</sup> Bastian to General Administration of the Royal Museums, December 1894, MfV, XIIa, 1178/95, quoted in Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 47.

<sup>61</sup> Bastian, *Die Vorgeschichte der Ethnologie*, 56, quoted in Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 47.

pursued in an empirical fashion. On the other hand, humanism was narrowly Eurocentric, a framework that had undermined humanist ambitions. But Bastian did not reject humanism; he saw his own work as an enhancement of the humanist project of self-knowledge, albeit on a firmer empirical basis, and with a broader scope, focused, as he argued humanism should be, on all of humanity.

However, it may here be objected that my argument that Bastian envisioned an expanded humanism is belied by the simple fact that he employed the hierarchical distinction, commonplace in anthropological discourse of the period, between *Kulturvölker* and *Naturvölker*. Zimmerman makes this argument, writing that, “Instead of studying European ‘cultural peoples’ (*Kulturvölker*), societies defined by their history and civilization, anthropologists studied the colonized ‘natural peoples’ (*Naturvölker*), societies supposedly lacking history and culture.”<sup>62</sup> This distinction, Zimmerman argues, allowed anthropologists to conceive of the object of their study as natural objects, rather than humans, and thus corresponded with anthropological aspirations towards an “objective” mode of natural science. It was thus a lynchpin of their antihumanism, enabling them to draw a firm boundary between self and other.

Interestingly, Zimmerman argues that the *Naturvölker/Kulturvölker* distinction constituted a deliberate rejection of the evolutionary framework and its conceptual focus upon the “primitive,” which seemed to suggest a connection in time:

While the German term *Naturvölker* referred to roughly the same societies as the English term primitives, the two terms had fundamentally different meanings. Whereas primitives were the earliest actors in a narrative that also included Europeans,

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<sup>62</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 3.

*Naturvölker* were, by definition, excluded from the narrative of progress central to German self-understandings.<sup>63</sup>

Zimmerman's argument raises an important point, which is that German anthropologists, including Bastian and Virchow, did indeed reject British theories of cultural evolution. However, whereas Zimmerman suggests that evolutionary theory joined the civilized and primitive in a narrative of historical connection, Fabian has demonstrated that evolutionism in fact worked against such a connection through the "denial of coevalness." Thus, rather than suggest a contrast between German primitivism (the *Naturvölker/Kulturvölker* distinction) and cultural evolutionism, both should be seen as similarly erecting an epistemological distance between anthropologists and their objects of study.

While the *Naturvölker/Kulturvölker* distinction was frequently deployed by German ethnologists, however, the clear dichotomy the terms suggest is not in fact an accurate portrayal of their use in Bastian's writings, nor does it align with his theory of anthropology as the study of universal psychology. Not only did Bastian generally qualify his use of these terms in his written work, but his theoretical framework was premised upon a fundamental connection between the two, not a division. Therefore, while his colleagues often used these terms for the demarcating purpose Zimmerman describes, I argue that Bastian's use of the terminology was ambivalent. He used it by default—it was the commonly used vocabulary—but in conjunction with his universalist psychology, it acquired a dynamic tension. In his hands, it did indeed constitute a rejection of the evolutionary framework, but in a difference sense than Zimmerman suggests. If we accept Fabian's argument that evolutionary discourse created

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<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 50.

above all a distance in time, despite the implied narrative connection, it will become clear that Bastian's terminology resisted this allochronic distance, even while it worked with hierarchies, in terms of the level or degree of "cultural" complexity, which verged on allochronism. In this sense, Bastian's terminology was heuristic; it did not label a clear division among peoples, but was a model that Bastian used to work out the contradictions within his thinking.

In his 1871 article, "Die Cultur und ihr Entwicklungsgang," for example, Bastian explains that "the difference between the so-called *Culturvölker* and *Naturvölker* is only a relative one, since the possibility of human existence always requires at least a minimum of culture, and the accompanying necessary artifices which make up linguistic exchange in social intercourse."<sup>64</sup>

Bastian here calls the distinction into question with his qualification, "so-called," while asserting quite plainly that all forms of human life exhibit culture. Later in the text, he observes:

The primitive conditions of life now on the Polynesian islands do not preclude previous relations to the sophisticated Malay regions by past sea-voyages, as the linguistic connection indicates, or even a culture-historical connection to America; it is a known fact that enforced isolation can quickly lead to the impression of primitiveness.

It is significant here that Bastian says that isolation may lead to the "impression" (*scheinbare*) of primitiveness, the implication being that a *Naturvolk* may appear to lack culture to the untrained eye—thus revealing a certain nominalism, or at the least that these designations can be misleading.

Such hesitancy, of course, is not sufficient to conclude he rejected the use of these categories; indeed he speaks of the "primitive" (*primitiven*) conditions, affirming a hierarchical division. This tension permeates the text, as Bastian feels compelled, on the one hand, to

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<sup>64</sup> Bastian, *Die Cultur und ihr Entwicklungsgang auf ethnologischer Grundlage*, in: *Supplementband zur Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 3 (1871), II.

recognize the validity of the distinction, while on the other, his other theory pushes him toward resistance to it.. After a series of similar cultural comparisons, he observes, “The contrast between savagery [*Wildheit*] and culture seems to be clearly delineated, yet it would indeed be difficult to draw a definite borderline.” He goes on to contemplate what should be the obvious difference, the use of reason:

The Eskimo has been forced on account of the climate to develop certain skills (without which his existence would be impossible), and in comparison with the naked, wandering Indian of the bush, with only his weapons in his hand, has built through his artistry a liveable environment. Nevertheless, it would seem that the former ought to be classed with the latter, in the class of cultureless peoples, since the differences between them are attributable to the differences in the environment, and the mind has not yet soared to free-willed action.<sup>65</sup>

Thus the figure of autonomous reason appears to Bastian as a necessary distinguishing factor, although, as we will see below, the distinction becomes a difficult one for him to maintain. Bastian’s work is characterized by such contradictory statements. He qualifies his usage of *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, but just as often speaks negatively about “primitive” Africans and other “less-developed” peoples. It would seem that the designations of humanist or antihumanist fail to convey this recurrent tension. Although Bastian is not an evolutionist, it is true that much of his thought is based on notions of cultural development; he does not embrace the framework of evolution, but speaks of “development” and cultural “blossoming.” Moreover, although he broadened the scope of humanism to incorporate non-Europeans, and conceived of ethnology as based on a universalist study of the full variety of human societies, he clearly thinks hierarchically about the *Natur/Kulturvölker* distinction. Some societies, namely

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<sup>65</sup> Ibid., X.

the European, exhibit a more “complex” culture than the less-developed *Naturvölker*.

Psychological unity does not seem to entail cultural incommensurability.

It should be clear, however, that Bastian does not use the terms *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker* in the generic way Zimmerman describes. These contradictions can be better understood by reframing the question in terms of the modes of primitivist discourse which Bastian employs—namely, as an aporetic primitivism which combines the allochronic discourse of negative primitivism with a self-other identification that negates it. Bastian’s primary conceptual tool is to distinguish between a notion of “culture” in the broad, indeed universal sense—the idea of culture as it developed in the historical and aesthetic writings of Herder, and which in the late nineteenth century became the organizing concept of anthropology—and culture in a narrower sense, which would apply to more “advanced” or “complex” societies.<sup>66</sup> The latter represents the more common nineteenth-century use of the word, in which culture referred to the various artistic, scientific, literary and philosophical achievements of society.<sup>67</sup>

In a publication from 1878 Bastian writes:

Under the term natural people [*Naturvölker*] are the so-called savages [*Wilden*], the people without culture, or rather, people with a minimum of culture, because without any culture, the existence of man as a “toolmaking animal” would be unthinkable, for the . . . Culture in the narrower sense arises when man is no longer preoccupied with survival tasks and has time to contemplate in comfort.<sup>68</sup>

As noted before, Bastian qualifies his use of the term “savages” and argues that culture, strictly speaking, is a universal feature of “man as a toolmaking animal.” At the same time, however, he explains that he has in mind two these senses of culture, one which is shared by all

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<sup>66</sup> For Herder’s humanist conception of culture, see Robert J.C. Young, *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race* (London: Routledge, 1995), 36ff.

<sup>67</sup> Stocking, 1968; 1987.

<sup>68</sup> Bastian, *Die Culturländer des Alten Amerika*, Vol. 1 (1878), 681.



societies, and one which is the result of contemplation and leisure. Bastian here preserves a boundary between Europeans and primitives, by making leisure time and its accompanying “contemplation” (or rationality) the dividing line. This was also noted in the quote above, where he writes that, regarding the Eskimos and the natives of South America, both must be classed as cultureless (*culturlosen*), as the mind is not yet fully awakened to “free and deliberate activity.”

In the 1871 publication Bastian makes a similar distinction:

As with the physical demands, so also the spiritual needs: they cannot be absent even on the lowest scale of humanity; and they find expression originally in the demonic images created by the religious impulse (in the transition to mythological poetry), but the culture (as such) sprouted only if, after the satisfaction of basic needs (and thus the enabling of life at all), the spirit/mind became the more receptive to subtle charms of *Kalon k'agathon* (Greek for “the good and the beautiful”), and the body, in addition to the basic needs of life's required maintenance, was drawn to the unnecessary, but seductive luxuries.<sup>69</sup>

Spiritual needs, and mental activity, are present even at “the lowest scale” of human development, but “culture as such” is something distinct from mental activity in the broad sense. The *Naturvölker* share in the broad sense of culture, a universal form of culture and mental activity, but not in this narrow sense. The difference is the relationship of the *Naturvölker* to nature. The *Naturvölker* do not belong to nature, but they are closer to it. In this way Bastian's theory is indeed allochronic. Yet this allochronism is not stable, but consistently countered by Bastian's psychological theory, for it is the *Naturvölker's* very proximity to nature that makes them the ideal subject for humanist knowledge; and this theory rests upon a premise of coevalness.

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<sup>69</sup> Bastian, *Die Cultur und ihr Entwicklungsgang auf ethnologischer Grundlage*, in: *Supplementband zur Zeitschrift für Ethnologie*, Vol. 3 (1871), XI.

The above examples, which fall under what I have termed negative primitivism, are intended to emphasize that Bastian's humanism should not be confused with a facile cultural relativism or a pluralist conception of cultural incommensurability—a temptation to which even Köpping, whose elucidation of Bastian's "psychic unity of mankind" has greatly influenced my own argument, succumbs, when he writes that "Bastian emphatically denies the imputation of the superiority of the European value system or the possibility of measuring the one against the other."<sup>70</sup> This negative primitivism, however, was combined with Bastian's theory of psychological unity to produce a dynamic tension.

Bastian's interest in the elementary ideas was based on the premise of psychological unity. "The subject matter of psychology," he writes in 1873, "lies in the ideas: it is therefore necessary, in order to collect the ideas in their totality, first to establish a statistics of ideas to show how the developmental process operates, tracing it back from the complex products to the rudimentary and primary ones, and secondly to study the laws, which govern thought processes."<sup>71</sup> Psychological unity didn't apply only to *Kulturvölker*, but to *Naturvölker* as well. Bastian's humanistic theory therefore brought *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, Europeans and non-Europeans, within the same category of thought. His approach, which he called "comparative-genetic" produced an ethnographic coevalness, a result of the following three theoretical elements: (a) His comparative approach was premised upon establishing identities between the thought processes and products of *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*; (b) He rejected the linear models of evolutionary cultural development and its implied allochronism; his genetic

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<sup>70</sup> Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 54.

<sup>71</sup> Adolf Bastian, "Die Grundlage der Ethnologie in den geographischen Provinzen," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 5 (1873), 320, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 64.

theory of ideas emphasized *contingency* in development, which entailed that *Naturvölker* shared historical, developmental time; and (c) The *Naturvölker*, although “closer to nature” (which is to say their character and folk ideas result primarily from geographic or environmental influences), are also subject to cultural influences, and must be considered therefore a part of cultural history. The following section takes up each of these three arguments in greater detail, before returning to the main argument, where I propose a reading of Bastian’s aporetic ethnology not as allochronic but “acronych.”

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To take the first of these theoretical elements, Bastian’s comparative theory required that the mental processes and their products be viewed on the same level, not hierarchically. Many nineteenth-century anthropologists adopted what would be termed a comparative approach, yet with different aims. The goal of Tylor’s comparative science was to assemble data which would reveal cultural differences, and thereby make it possible to locate the position of any particular human group or society on the scale of evolution. Bastian’s comparative approach, however, was interested in locating similarities, not differences—as is evident in his conception of ethnology as psychology, and his search for the common collective ideas as well as the universal elementary ideas underlying the different varieties of folk ideas. This is on display, for example, in the following discussion of Buryat shamanism in Siberia, which appeared in *Geographische und Ethnologische Bilder* (1873):

In the whole region from the central Asian steppes to the east of Siberia, the cult of fire has a deeply religious significance. When kindled, it is not supposed ever to be quenched with water: this was considered a grave offense. The inhabitants of the Amur region feared to share the fire of their huts, and among the Buryat we find an old yearly

festival during which the sacred fire was kindled anew. In Europe the sacred fire that burned at Uppsala [in Sweden], as well as in every Icelandic temple, did not cease to burn until the conversion of Yagellow after his baptism in Wilnas in 1386. During their prayers, the Buryat invoke the fire, a practice followed by adherents of shamanism as well as of Buddhism.

The latter have incorporated the whole pantheon of *tengri*, the heaven of the Buryat and Mongols, into their own system. In a longer poem which the priest Orlov related to me, this Buryat Firdausi extols the "high-minded hero Sam who climbed the steep slopes of Mount Altai." According to the Buddhist scripture *Uligerun-Dalai*, shamanism was the pre-eminent religious cult during the last five hundred pre-existing stages of Shigemuni (Shakyamuni). Their priests knew that written laws and treatises on magical practices impressed the Mongol people mightily. Since the contact with the Russians the Buryat call the god of thunder *Provoc* ("prophet") *Eliya*, and they see in the thunderbolts the rolling of wheels of fire (as do the people of the Caucasus region). Between gods and men stand the mediators of god and bad demons which are represented by the innumerable *ongon* who constantly recruit new members from deceased shamans.<sup>72</sup>

Bastian's typical method is to report a string of cultural "facts." Whether or not his observations are valid or accurate is not here the point, but rather his method. Bastian doesn't try to explain these facts, let alone place these ideas in an evolutionary sequence. For him the import and significance of these observations is simply that they are examples of "folk ideas" which will eventually lead toward understanding of the elementary ideas. In the meantime, the reader is simply treated to what amounts to a phantasmagoria of ideas and impressions, stories, myths, and observations. The future ethnologist, which is to say, the reader, is intended to contemplate these impressions and their meaning. There are some connections to be found here, between meaning attributed to fire among the Buryat priests, for example, and the fires burning in Sweden and Iceland. Further on, Bastian recounts a myth: "A converted shaman who was a schoolteacher among the Buryat in Irkutsk, told me the following about the cosmogony of the Buryat Mongols." The myth describes the origin of man, who was created with a pure,

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<sup>72</sup> Adolf Bastian, *Geographische und Ethnologische Bilder* (1873), translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 222-23.

beautiful body, though initially without a soul. When the divine creator went to heaven to fetch the soul, an evil spirit, jealous, spits upon the beautiful creation. The creator returns, and because “he did not want to leave his creation, thus sullied, in its former perfect beauty, [he] therefore turned the body upside-down and inside out. Although he let the soul now enter the body, the seed for disease and death was sown, and man remained spoiled since then.”

Although Bastian does not say so directly, the point is to consider how this story of “the creation of man” compares with other creation stories. Sometimes he encourages the reader more explicitly: “I also collected from this shaman a story which has uncanny parallels to the Scandinavian pair of children, Bil and Hinki, and to the German thief of fire-wood.” The reader, therefore, should be looking for “connections,” but not in the logical patterns as outline by Lévi-Strauss. Bastian is content to merely suggest “uncanny parallels.”

This quote leads to the second theoretical element, that Bastian’s genetic theory of ideas emphasized *contingency* in development, which meant that even the *Naturvölker* participated in historical, developmental time. This contrast can best be made by returning to Fabian, who argues that allochronism marks not only evolutionism, but the twentieth-century school of anthropology known as structuralism, as found in work of Claude Lévi-Strauss. Fabian writes: “Rather than walling-in the Time of others so that it cannot spill over into ours [as in cultural relativism], this school simply preempts the question of coevalness. Its strategy is to eliminate Time as significant dimension of either cultural integration or ethnography.”<sup>73</sup>

Bastian’s thought seems to closely resemble Lévi-Strauss’s structuralism, as Köpping has

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<sup>73</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 52.

argued.<sup>74</sup> Whereas Bastian sought elementary ideas, Lévi-Strauss sought to identify elementary structures of thought, which formed a system of binaries. Fabian argues that Lévi-Strauss practiced the most devious form of allochronism, and thus it must be considered whether his critique applies to Bastian as well.

Fabian argues that Lévi-Strauss's structuralism is based upon the linguistic principles of Ferdinand de Saussure, the distinction of diachrony and synchrony. Lévi-Strauss's argument contrasts diachrony and synchrony, connecting history with the former, and ethnology with the latter. Fabian argues that this is a disingenuous contrast: "Ever since Saussure canonized the opposition between synchrony and diachrony it [has] served, not as a distinction *of* temporal relations (as one might expect from the presence of the component *chrony* in both terms), but as a distinction *against* Time."<sup>75</sup> That is, they both bracket Time, to take as their focus a set of purely logical relationships, whether distributed vertically or horizontally. But though diachrony may imply sequence, it does not entail Time. As Fabian writes,

Time . . . is a mere prerequisite of sign systems; its real existence, if any, must be sought where Lévi-Strauss likes to locate the "real": in the neural organization of the human brain being part of nature. Structuralism thus . . . *naturalizes* Time by removing it from the sphere of conscious cultural production. Lévi-Strauss . . . maintains that forms of thought reflect natural laws. Consequently it is futile to use our (cultural) conceptions of temporal relation for the purpose of explaining relationships between things.<sup>76</sup>

Lévi-Strauss writes that while the historical approach seeks "to make out contingent links and the traces of a diachronic evolution," the structuralist discovers "a system that is synchronically intelligible. . . . In doing this we have merely put into practice a lesson by

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<sup>74</sup> Köpping, "Bastian and Lévi-Strauss: From 'Entelechy' to 'Entropy' as 'Scientific' Metaphors for Cultural Teleologies," in *Adolf Bastian and His Universal Archive of Humanity: The Origins of German Anthropology*, edited by Manuela Fischer, Peter Bolz, and Susan Kamel (Hildesheim, Zurich, New York: Georg Olms Verlag, 2007), 22-31.

<sup>75</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 56.

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

Ferdinand de Saussure . . . As one considers the subject matter of linguistics more deeply one gets more and more convinced . . . of a truth which gives us much to think, namely that the link one establishes between things pre-exists . . . the things themselves and serves to determine them.”<sup>77</sup> Fabian concludes, “If the proper subject matter of anthropology is the study of relationships between cultural isolates, and if these relationships rest on principles or laws that pre-exist their actualization in ‘contingent’ history, then Time is effectively removed from anthropological consideration.”<sup>78</sup>

Here the contrast with Bastian becomes apparent. Bastian does not view the elementary ideas as something that “pre-exist” their actualization in “contingent” history—they exist only in that actualization. As Köpping notes, he defines the *Elementargedanken* as “thought-seeds” or *logoi spermatikoi*—a Greek term, originally appearing in ancient Stoic philosophy, suggesting that ideas existed in a state of potential.<sup>79</sup> Bastian writes: “By patient collecting of the facts of man as the ‘logical animal,’ we are rediscovering those initial idea-complexes, those thought-seeds or *logoi spermatikoi* which encapsulate the inherent potential for the growth of man’s mind.”<sup>80</sup> According to Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff, the concept of *logoi spermatikoi* “was first used by the Stoic philosophers to explain how the *Logos* (God) was active in individual things. . . The idea was picked up by Plotinus to explain how the transcendent, unchanging God could possibly be connected to a changing universe.”<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Lévi-Strauss, *L’Origine des manières de table. Mythologiques III* (Paris: Plon, 1968), 216, quoted in Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 56.

<sup>78</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 57.

<sup>79</sup> Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 85ff.

<sup>80</sup> Bastian, *Controversen I*, translated in Köpping, 171.

<sup>81</sup> Orlando O. Espín and James B. Nickoloff, *An Introductory Dictionary of Theology and Religious Studies* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2007), 785.

The elementary ideas, therefore, cannot be observed in “pure form,” but only insofar as they have been actualized and manifested in the folk ideas. Bastian writes: “Only when the elementary ideas of the savage tribe come into contact with outside stimuli do they develop their inherent potential through a growth process in historical forms of cultural development.”<sup>82</sup> This contact of the elementary ideas with outside stimuli—either the natural environment or other human populations—is what produces the folk ideas.

Bastian’s theoretical approach, as noted earlier, can be best understood in the context of nineteenth-century monism, an orientation which he shared. Monism, broadly speaking, is a philosophical belief that everything belongs to a single, organic whole. Traditionally associated with Spinoza’s rejection of Descartes’ mind-body dualism, in the late nineteenth century it came to be associated with Haeckel, who would form the German Monist League in 1906. Despite Bastian’s disagreements with Haeckel about evolution, he shared the general outlook, which was quite popular at the time.<sup>83</sup> As early as 1860, in his second publication, *Der Mensch in der Geschichte*, Bastian wrote, “Properly speaking, the mind and the body are one, and together make the man. This unity of mind and matter, created anew each moment, is the essence of the nature of man.”<sup>84</sup> This unity of mind and matter necessarily shaped his theory of ideas. “The introduction of the concept of elementary ideas unites both the physical and the psychic realm,” he wrote in a later volume. “If we are considering elementary ideas in relation to geographical provinces, we would say that they grow from the environmental conditions as a kind of crystallization of them. If we look at elementary ideas in relation to the laws of cultural

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<sup>82</sup> Bastian, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 172.

<sup>83</sup> Todd H. Weir, ed., *Monism: Science, Philosophy, Religion, and the History of a Worldview* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012).

<sup>84</sup> Bastian, *Der Mensch in der Geschichte: Zur Begründung einer Psychologischen Weltanschauung*, Vol. 1 (Leipzig: Otto Wigand, 1860), 1, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 179.



evolution they then become the individual cells or atoms which evolve, according to organic laws of growth, into different streams of ideas.”<sup>85</sup>

Finally, Bastian’s genetic theory of ideas is equally informed by the idea of entelechy, an Aristotelian concept intended to address the problem of causality, in which the development of any particular organism is said to result from both an inner and an outer cause. As Köpping explains, “The inner cause, the final end, contains the potential which is set in motion by the outer or sufficient cause.”<sup>86</sup> Bastian explained in a 1900 publication:

Because Plato’s soul, as “self-moving principle of all movement” had flown to the “world beyond the arc of heaven”—to a metacosmic location (*topos*, see Philo)—, had flown, that is, to the “*chorismos*,” dualism was to be the next suggestion, that dualism which was to reach its most harsh expression in the separation of the “extended” and “thinking” substance (of matter and spirit) in the modern and fashionable expression, while the monistic unity was preserved in the psychic “entelechy” of Aristotle (for the “*influxus physicus*”), that monistic unity which has since then found its scientific foundation in modern psycho-physics.<sup>87</sup>

Fabian had argued that with Lévi-Strauss, “The possibility of identifying and analyzing semiological systems is unequivocally said to rest on the elimination of Time and, by implication, of such notions as process, genesis, emergence, production, and other concepts bound up with ‘history.’ Diachrony does not refer to a temporal mode of existence but to the mere succession of semiological systems one upon another.” As a result, “Time is removed from the realms of cultural praxis and given its place in that of pure logical forms.”<sup>88</sup> But by now it should be clear that Bastian doesn’t make this move. The obvious difference is that he is not after semiological systems; despite his interest in philology, he is of course pre-Saussure

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<sup>85</sup> Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 175.

<sup>86</sup> Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 85.

<sup>87</sup> Bastian, *Die Völkerkunde und der Völkerverkehr mit seiner Rückwirkung auf die Volksgeschichte* (Berlin: Weidemannsche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1900), 109, translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, xiv.

<sup>88</sup> Fabian, *Time and the Other*, 56.

and before philosophy's linguistic turn. More importantly, the elementary ideas are only understandable insofar as they are expressed in the folk ideas. The folk ideas are inherently shaped by all of the notions which Lévi-Strauss dismisses: *process, genesis, emergence, production*. Bastian's genetic theory of ideas, with its emphasis on "contingency," not only distances him from the evolutionists, with their notion of an inherent and hereditary law of cultural development, but also from Lévi-Strauss, with his naturalized and predetermined "structures of mind." Bastian's genetic theory brings psychology into history, and brings the *Naturvölker* into historical, developmental time—and thus cannot be classed as allochronic.

This brings us to the third theoretical element, which is primarily a clarification: although Bastian's theory emphasizes the contingency of ideas, there remains a further dilemma, in that Bastian distinguishes *two* ways in which the elementary ideas may be actualized—through contact with the natural environment and through encounters with other human populations. Bastian writes in an essay of 1877: "The geographical province imprints its character on the *Naturstamme* (natural tribe), while the *Culturvolk*, on the other hand, lives in the sphere of its historical horizon."<sup>89</sup> This seems to have hoisted the boundary back in place—to confine the *Naturvölker* to the realm of "nature" by saying that their folk ideas are only a response to the natural environment, whereas civilized societies respond to historical encounters.

This interpretation is belied by a more thorough survey of his writings. In that same essay, he goes on to explain that although his terminology regarding this distinction has changed over time, "With ethnology, it must be admitted that the interpenetration of

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<sup>89</sup> Bastian, "Ethnologische Erörterung," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 9:1 (1877), 184.

geography and history is stressed; regarding this, above all, Ritter's great oeuvre shall be of much importance for cultural history." He adds that "Ethnology is less of a zoological science of Man, than that history on a geographical basis, as envisaged by K. Ritter in his work, and it will have included the people in all their colors, shimmering over the earth's surface."<sup>90</sup> Karl Ritter, who held the first chair in geography at the University of Berlin from 1825 until 1859 (and was one of the teachers of Heinrich Barth, whose ethnographic writings will be examined in the next chapter), focused on the effects of geography on human history. That Bastian is eager to consider Ritter's work a major contribution to culture history makes clear that the "natural" peoples' responses to geography or the environment cannot simply be grouped under nature, but are indeed a manifestation of culture. Bastian writes: "This aspect of the intimate interaction of geography and history, and the implementation thereof in ethnology, has for me always been so decisive, that I have touched upon it in one way or another in almost all of my work, as often as it related to the geographical or ethnological field."<sup>91</sup> He then produces a series of selections of his own writings, attesting to a view in which the natural people no less than the cultural people are shaped by both environmental *and* historical/cultural factors. The *Kulturvölker* were subject to natural, environmental influences, though they were harder to discern beneath the historical elements; likewise, although *Naturvölker* were closer to nature, they were also subject to contingent, historical, cultural influences.

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<sup>90</sup> Ibid., 185.

<sup>91</sup> Bastian, "Ethnologische Erörterung," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 9:1 (1877), 186.

## **Bastian's Acronych Ethnology**

Bastian's thought is characterized by its remarkable ambivalence. On the one hand, Bastian rejected cultural evolutionism (and its allochronic orientation). He nevertheless employed the common *Naturvölker / Kulturvölker* terminology, which can also be understood as a mode of allochronic discourse, as Zimmerman has argued, insofar as it erects a temporal gap between cultural, historical people and natura, ahistorical people. However, the allochronism of this primitivist discourse was undermined by Bastian's own unique theoretical contribution, which was a mode of psychological humanism. His interest in "primitive" subjectivity (the connection between the *Völkergedanken* and *Elementargedanken*) made it impossible for him to deny the presence of "culture" in the broad sense (as opposed to "high culture"). At the same time, it undermined the alleged boundary of rationality as well, since the thoughts of both primitive and civilized were essentially the same.

Indeed this complexity has led to the contrary interpretations mentioned above, where on the one hand Bastian is made out to be a universalist or relativist, and on the other, an antihumanist specializing in crafting hierarchical boundaries. Clearly the answer must be to acknowledge that his work swings, erratically albeit seamlessly, between these poles. One could say that whereas Fabian diagnoses the schizogenia of anthropology as a whole (the contradiction between the intersubjectivity of ethnographic *practice* with the denial of coevalness in ethnographic *writing*), with Bastian, the writing *itself* is schizogenic.

Despite Bastian's distinction between *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, a distinction between higher and lower, simpler and more complex forms of culture (thus marked by a

certain allochronism), the hierarchy of cultures is consistently countered by the unity and identity employed through the psychological basis of the theory. In the evolutionary framework, the “primitive” society is at one end of the line, and civilization on the other; they are inherently distanced in Time. Bastian’s psychological framework places the primitive not “behind” temporally, but “within,” psychologically. Bastian’s use of the *Naturvölker*/*Kulturvölker* terminology indeed works to avoid the allochronic implications of the evolutionary term “primitive,” while at the same time making possible the tension between identification and difference.

In an 1869 essay in praise of Alexander von Humboldt, Bastian observes:

In the diaphanous and simple forms of social life among savages without culture we can find the red thread which can become the methodological tool for unraveling the more complex civilizations. The basis of this assumption was acknowledged by Humboldt: human nature is uniform all over the globe. This point is driven home by him not only in his scientific writings but also in his emotional plea against forms of slavery in Venezuela and Cuba.<sup>92</sup>

This quote captures well Bastian’s contradictions. He makes a clear distinction between the “savages without culture” and the “more complex civilizations.” Yet he affirms that beneath the veneer of civilization, “human nature is uniform all over the globe.” Bastian’s use of the “red thread” metaphor in this context is significant. The two categories that are here connected, the “savages without culture” and “complex civilizations,” are connected regardless of time or place, despite the appearance of distance in developmental time or geographic space. Bastian’s ethnology therefore does not align with the nineteenth-century trends of evolutionist allochronism or antihumanism.

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<sup>92</sup> Bastian, *Alexander von Humboldt. Festrede* (Berlin: Wiegand und Hempel, 1869), translated in Köpping, *Adolf Bastian*, 161.

Moreover, this dynamic contrast was not only a matter of his theory, but was manifest in the style of his writing as well. Bastian's theory of ideas led him to focus on form and structural similarity across time and location. From his earliest writings, his method is to chaotically juxtapose examples from *Naturvölker* with *Kulturvölker*. In his later writings, this practice became so pronounced that it made his colleagues dizzy. Karl von den Steinen, a younger colleague, lamented:

The countless parentheses made for a labyrinthine construction rather than for clear divisions. The reader was beset by names, key words, jargon, sentences of such a kind that he was overcome by vertigo. On the one hand, the Greek-Roman, medieval, Egyptian, Indian, Chinese, Mexican philosophies of religion as well as the mythology of the natural peoples, whether Negro or Eskimo, American Indian or Polynesian or Siberian; on the other hand citations, oblique references to the entire historical, sociological, natural scientific world literature. This flood of thoughts waltzed through hundreds of pages, branching out without order.<sup>93</sup>

As an example of what von Steinen is referring to, Zimmerman quotes a typical passage from one of Bastian's later works:

In the sign language (of the American Indians) the mime speaks (in "mimetic dance") as a translator (in the time of Nero), and as the King of Dahomey receives his guests dancing, the art of dancing was so highly regarded in Thessalonia that the leading men in the state and the champions in battle were even called head dancers (see Lucian) = Meoh in Indonesia.<sup>94</sup>

It is perhaps no surprise that Robert Lowie, in his 1937 history of ethnology, exclaimed: "To confront Bastian in some of his lucubrations is a never-to-be-forgotten experience."<sup>95</sup> Bastian's contemporary Ernst Haeckel mocked him with the title of "*Geheimer Oberkonfusionsrat*."

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<sup>93</sup> Karl von den Steinen, "Adolf Bastian: Gedächtnisfeier am 11. März 1905," *ZfE* 37 (1905): 233-56, 239. Quoted in Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 56.

<sup>94</sup> "In der Zeichensprache (der Indianer) redet der Pantomime (im 'mimischen Tranz') als Dolmetschen (zu Nero's Zeit), und wie der König von Dahomey seine Gäste tanzend empfängt, stand in Thesalien die Tanzkunst in so hohem Ansehen, dass man sogar die ersten Männer im Staate und die Vorkämpfer in den Schlachten Vortänzer nannte (s. Lucian), = Meoh in Indonesian." Bastian, "Ueber die priesterlichen Functionen unter Naturstämmen," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie* 21 (1889), 126, translation by Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 56.

<sup>95</sup> Robert H. Lowie, *The History of Ethnological Theory* (New York: Rinehart & Co., Inc. 1937), 32-33.

Bastian's style was clearly disconcerting. Yet I argue for a reevaluation of the significance of Bastian's style in terms of aesthetics; the form was after all inseparable from the content.

Critics such as Zimmerman, Penny, and Klaus Peter Buchheit have commented on Bastian's writing, but to different ends. Zimmerman, for example, writes:

In a single sentence Bastian juxtaposes languages, continents, and historical epochs. He obscures and subverts the basic subject-verb structure that makes ordinary sentences essentially narrative and seeks instead a new language commensurate with anthropological counterhumanism. His writing was a modernist experiment in the nonnarrative modes of perception wrought by anthropologists.<sup>96</sup>

These observations highlight this fascinating feature of Bastian's writing—the remarkable ease of juxtaposition across time and place. Yet Zimmerman's assertion that Bastian's main goal was to bolster anthropological counterhumanism misses the radicality of Bastian's thinking. For it is not merely juxtaposition at work, but an emphasis upon connections and linkages (=). Thus not only Bastian's theory but his textual practices had the startling effect of placing savage and civilized, *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker*, in the same time; the use of time as distancing device that Fabian finds to pervade anthropological writing is not to be found.

As Zimmerman asserts, Bastian's paratactic writing challenges the narrative logic of humanism. Also important however is that the textual subject-object dichotomy breaks down; the privileged allochronic standpoint of the ethnographic authorial subject is submerged in the flow of ideas and images. Temporal boundaries dissolve as it becomes increasingly difficult to locate what is self and what is other.<sup>97</sup> His writing thus works against the allochronism that Fabian identifies in anthropological writing.

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<sup>96</sup> Zimmerman, *Anthropology and Antihumanism*, 56.

<sup>97</sup> Klaus Peter Buchheit has written on the disintegrated *Ich* in Bastian's philosophical ethnology. See Buchheit, *Die Verkettung der Dinge: Stil und Diagnose im Schreiben Adolf Bastians* (Münster: Lit Verlag, 2005).

The vertiginous quality of Bastian's writing was not simply that it was hard to follow; his style of thought was bound up with his ethnological theory, which unraveled comfortable boundaries. Bastian's theory and writing, examined aesthetically, constitute an aporetic primitivism—a challenge to the allochronism which supports the subject identity of modernity. This isn't to say there are no distancing devices, as noted above. Time, however, is not the tool. In this sense, Bastian's thought could almost be described as *achronic*, were that a word. Yet Bastian's thought isn't marked by Timelessness (which, according to Fabian, characterized the more devious allochronism of structuralism as well as cultural relativism). Rather than achronic, one might substitute *acronych*—an astronomical term which refers to a celestial rising in the evening, of a star for example, while the sun is setting. This term is apt, for Bastian's theory, which differentiates while it conflates, is, if anything, dialectical. The image conveys Bastian's idiosyncratic contradictions, his theory of self and other which share the same time and space, at one minute coeval, the next minute not. With his search for the core of humanity in the universal elementary ideas, to which both *Naturvölker* and *Kulturvölker* were simultaneously connected and distanced, Bastian unfolded a mode of primitivism that finds a star appearing when the sun is setting, which is to say, in the darkness of time, *in* the allochronic discourse of primitivism, he locates the elusive self.

### **Conclusion: Bastian's Aporetic Primitivism**

Bastian's ethnology, due to its psychological, humanist conception as well as an increasingly paratactic mode of expression, constitutes a rejection of the allochronism of



cultural evolutionism. Bastian thereby undermines the invocation of Time and Rationality as boundaries for establishing the subject position of the European self in opposition to the primitive. While employing the culturally pervasive hierarchical distinction of imperialist thought, between the civilized and primitive, the *Kulturvölker* and the *Naturvölker*, Bastian also puts both categories in connection, sharing the same time, and sharing the same mental framework. In doing so, he deconstructs the primitivist assertion of opposition between them.

This helps explain why Bastian's thought roams so wildly between here and there, near and far, past and present. The effect of such writing, both theoretically and aesthetically, from our analytic perspective and also in the eyes of his contemporaries, was a form of interpretive vertigo. What I have termed Bastian's acronych ethnology proves to be a form of aporetic primitivism. This must be seen as an accompanying factor, not only in explaining the failure of subsequent attempts to appreciate and make sense of Bastian's thought, but also in the explanation of why Bastian's ethnology was supplanted at century's end by new models that sought to reinscribe hierarchical boundaries through ideologies of race, nation, and scientific authority. It is not sufficient to say that the growing racism, nationalism, and scientism of the late nineteenth century transformed ethnology (as Penny, Zimmerman, and others have argued), but rather that some currents of ethnology, through problematizing cultural difference, influenced these very developments.

The discipline of nineteenth-century ethnology, as has been argued in a growing body of scholarly research, produced a vision of modern civilization in opposition to the primitive. The following chapter will explore how ethnology, which established itself as the authority over this discourse, influenced the subsequent attempts of twentieth-century artists and social theorists

to articulate their experience of this modern subjectivity. The legacy of German ethnology in this history is ambivalent, however. One of the ways in which various cultures at various times have historically produced subjectivity is by defining a relationship to Time. These relationships can take various forms: by focusing on beginnings, such as genesis stories and foundational moments; by focusing on movement through time—in which past, present, and future are conceived in spatial terms; by focusing on power, the ability to shape time; and by focusing on the relationship to non-Time—to a supernatural or spiritual world, which is outside of Time.<sup>98</sup> Classical cultural evolutionism is ostensibly a theory of subject position based on beginnings, linking modern civilization to its distant origins in primitive life. Yet due to the inherent allochronism in evolutionist ethnology, as diagnosed by Fabian, this purported “connection” is forever postponed, delayed, and unfulfilled. As a result of this denial of coevalness, a dichotomy is produced. The image of modernity that emerges in ethnology is founded on a belief in civilization, progress, rationality, and autonomy, in opposition to a primitive “other” lacking these traits; at the same time, the primitive is thereby ascribed to the realm of nature, community, body, and naïve or supernatural mentality.

Social theorists of the nineteenth and twentieth century, insofar as they sought to describe modernity, engaged with this conception of the modern subject, whether explicitly, as in the classical sociology of Marx, Durkheim, and Weber, or implicitly, in the critical theory of the Frankfurt School. The dichotomy produced by the allochronic construction of the modern subject is visible in social theory in the form of modernity’s alienation from nature, community,

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<sup>98</sup> For this conceptual framework I am indebted to the recent exhibition at the University of Michigan Museum of Art, “African Art and the Shape of Time,” curated by Prita Meier and Raymond Silverman. See Prita Meier and Raymond Silverman, *African Art and the Shape of Time* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Museum of Art, 2012).

the body, and meaning (the rift between signifier and signified). Moreover, as civilization begins to take on the appearance of an “iron cage,” authentic autonomy begins to appear over the horizon, or in the distant past, in the primitive’s freedom from societal constraints. The various strands of contemporary “post-” theories (poststructuralism, postcolonialism, post-foundationalist philosophy, and most recently the posthuman or new materialist turn) have in common the aim to overcome these seemingly unbridgeable dualities.

Bastian’s ethnology, in refusing the cultural evolutionary perspective, is therefore of historical importance, for offering an example of thinking against the allochronic construction of the modern subject, and hence providing avenues toward unthinking “modernity” and its correlated self-definition as a time marked by the achievement of reason and historical progress, divorced from nature and “mere” existence. The history of ethnology’s subsequent “forgetting” of Bastian is equally noteworthy; the nineteenth- and twentieth-century ideological boundaries of race, nation, and science that were deployed to reify modern subjectivities must be seen in the context of the vertiginous encounter with the ambiguities of cultural difference. These discursive attempts to assert fixed hierarchies were not aimed at preserving allochronism, but emerged as replacements for it. At those junctures where the discourse of allochronism breaks down, then, racism, nationalism, and the cultural sciences sometimes stepped into the breach, providing alternative means to serve the same ends; they aimed at a reformulated denial of coevalness, and hence recapitulated the subject position of modernity in opposition to the primitive.

**Chapter 5.**  
**Reframing Primitivism and German Expressionism, 1905-1913:**  
**Brücke and the Critique of Modernity**

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.  
Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world.  
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always  
substance and increase, always sex,  
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed  
of life.

—Walt Whitman, “Song of Myself,” from *Leaves of Grass*, 1855<sup>1</sup>

I know of no “new art program.” I have moreover absolutely no  
idea what it could be. If one could speak of such a thing as an “art  
program,” then in my opinion it would be as old as the hills and  
eternally the same.

—Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, “Das neue Programm,” 1914<sup>2</sup>

## **Introduction**

In February of 1905, Adolf Bastian died in Port of Spain, Trinidad. His idiosyncratic approach to ethnology passed away along with him, having been officially eclipsed in 1904 by

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965), 30-31. From “Song of Myself,” Section 3.

<sup>2</sup> Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, “Das neue Programm,” *Kunst und Künstler*, XII, Heft 6 (1914): 308.

the ascendance of diffusionist theory, and new attempts to theorize racial and cultural differences. In June of that year, however, a group of young artists joined together in Dresden, calling themselves the Brücke—the artists had no direct connection with Bastian, but their art bears a striking similarity to Bastian’s ethnology. The Brücke, like Bastian, made use of a primitivist discourse, but did so in a way that undermined the discourse and its oppositions between primitive and civilized. If Bastian’s discourse worked to unravel the imaginary boundaries of time and history, culture and nature, the Brücke’s images of the primitive did so as well; moreover, their work questioned the notions of authenticity and alienation, the terms in which the primitive other was imagined in opposition to modernity.

The Brücke originated as the alliance of four young architecture students in Dresden—Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880–1938), Fritz Bleyl (1880–1966), Erich Heckel (1883–1970) and Karl Schmidt-Rottluff (1884–1976). They initially called themselves the *Künstlergruppe “Brücke”* (Artists’ group “Bridge”), though they soon dropped the *Künstlergruppe*. The Brücke represents the first collective of German visual artists known as expressionists, although the term Expressionism is used to designate an aesthetic trend that encompasses literature, poetry, music and film. The Brücke were also the first group of visual artists in Germany to express a heightened aesthetic interest in the life and art of the *Naturvölker* (natural people) or the *Wilden* (savages or natives).

Critical discussion of the Brücke has routinely characterized their work as a type of romantic primitivism, an idealization of the “primitive” other as authentic and unalienated, in opposition to an alienated modernity. This poses two distinct yet related questions, the significance of the Brücke’s primitivism, and their understanding of modernity. This

interpretation of the Brücke has been too willing to identify Brücke's aesthetic aims (the desire to produce an authentic art) as a critique of modernity—a misleading yet entrenched misperception. Historians have consistently interpreted the Brücke as shaped by contemporary critiques of modernity, whether those from the left (such as that of Georg Simmel) or the right (such as Julius Langbehn). Scholars have also interpreted their work through the lens of early critics who wrote about the expressionists, above all Wilhelm Worringer and Wilhelm Hausenstein, both of whom emerged as early spokespersons for the new art of Expressionism, yet subsequently came to view it as a failure. These critics initially shared a belief that Expressionism espoused a revolutionary utopianism or messianism; however, since European culture and society not only failed to be transformed, and in fact seemed to have deteriorated in the wake of World War I, these critics turned against Expressionism, convinced that the dream must have been fatally flawed. These critics however projected their own fears and desires onto the artists that fascinated them, but as a result, this “critical illusion,” to borrow Charles Haxthausen's term, has had a major impact on the interpretation of German Expressionism.<sup>3</sup> From these first attempts at theorizing Expressionism, interpretations have inevitably cast it as caught up on a dramatic pendulum veering between utopia and despair.

The following argument endeavors to chip away at this illusory account. The concepts of utopia and despair are only applicable if the Brücke shared a fundamentally critical interpretation of modernity, as something that either must be overcome, or to which one was condemned. This was not in fact the outlook of the Brücke. Part of the problem has been that

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<sup>3</sup> Charles W. Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion: ‘Expressionism’ in the Writings of Wilhelm Hausenstein,” in *The Ideological Crisis of Expressionism: The Literary and Artistic German War Colony in Belgium, 1914-1918*, ed. Rainer Rumold and O.K. Werkmeister (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1990), 169-191.

this interpretation finds support in the espoused positions of the Blaue Reiter (Blue Rider), a group of contemporary expressionist artists who formed in Munich in 1911, led by Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. Marc and Kandinsky both articulated clear and strident critiques of contemporary society as a moment of historical and spiritual crisis. There is however a lack of programmatic writings by the members of the Brücke regarding their aims in developing a primitivist aesthetic. Although they could be critical of bourgeois values or the urban environment, their critiques were not posed as stark rejections of modernity or as narratives of historical crisis.

There is thus a tendency to read backwards, as it were, from the Blaue Reiter to the Brücke, to let the vocal aims of the former stand in for the more ambiguous aims of the latter. Whereas the Blaue Reiter largely embraced a messianic or utopian critique of modernity, it is a mistake to assume they spoke for the Brücke as well. To make this argument, I offer an alternative cultural context for interpreting the Brücke, emphasizing their roots in *Jugendstil* (in particular the influence of Hermann Obrist) and other late-nineteenth century cultural sources (including the writings of Walt Whitman)—sources which, while they could be critical of contemporary art and society, did not embrace the assumptions made by the critique of modernity cited above—namely, the radical oppositions between authenticity and alienation, nature and society, primitive and modern. The Brücke emerged from a context in which the merger of art and life was not a utopian dream, but a recognition of present experience, an embrace of the now.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> This notion of “embracing the now” may sound utopian, but this reading depends upon the perspective I seek here to critique. As an ethos, “embracing the now” can only seem utopian from a perspective in which modernity (in particular, one of modernity’s features, namely civilization, rationality, secularism, capitalism, etc.) somehow

The point of this critique is to show that the primitivism of the Brücke was not an expression of the romantic belief in an authentic or unalienated primitive, in opposition to modernity. I shall thus argue that rather than a critique of modernity's ailments, the work of the Brücke deploys a type of primitivism that calls into question the opposition of primitive and modern—it is in this sense an example of aporetic primitivism. Although they emerged from ubiquitous romantic primitivist discourse, in which the “primitive” commonly signified “authenticity” and “unalienated” existence, their own work, through such techniques as parataxis and a modernist self-reflexivity regarding medium and representation, in fact dismantled such significations.

This argument is divided across two chapters. In this chapter I re-evaluate the Brücke's relationship to primitivism and modernity. To excavate the Brücke's positions I examine their available programmatic writings and delve into the interpretation of numerous images, in order to demonstrate that their work should not be seen as participating in the contemporary critique of modernity. I emphasize their connections to Jugendstil and Walt Whitman in order to reveal the vital materialism expressed in their images. The chapter explores the history of the Brücke's founding, their interest in non-European objects, their visits to museums and suburban lakes, their move from Dresden to Berlin. This account attempts to bring together a narrative of the group's historical development with a theoretical reexamination of the ways in which their works have been interpreted. While their aesthetics emerged from the context of

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prevents such an embrace from taking place. For the Brücke, this was not a utopian project to be achieved against, or in spite of, modernity, but was simply a way of experiencing, participating in, and depicting life in the moment, something that they saw their aesthetic work achieving. As an example of this kind of resistance to utopian thinking, see also the epigraph from Walt Whitman that opens this chapter. I will develop the connection between Whitman and the Brücke later in this chapter.



naïve primitivism, regarding ideas of “authenticity” and “immediacy,” from very early on their images and artworks began to undermine the stability of such signifiers.

The Brücke’s work therefore stands in marked contrast to the aesthetic theory of Worringer and the art of the Blaue Reiter. The latter were equally drawn to primitivist images, yet their aesthetics, driven by a transcendentalist motivation, departs from the Brücke’s embrace of the present. The Blaue Reiter’s aesthetics thus turns away from the disruptive aporias found in the Brücke’s work, enacting instead a reification of the distinction between the primitive and the civilized; it thus constitutes what I have called apotropaic primitivism, in that it serves to perpetuate the subject position of modernity. Whereas theories of Expressionism as a critique of modernity may accurately describe the Blaue Reiter (with the notable exception of Macke and perhaps Klee), they fail to account for the uniqueness of the Brücke’s work.

In chapter six, I examine the specific features that constitute the Brücke’s aporetic primitivism, in conjunction with the German Expressionist poet Georg Heym and the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche. Through a combination of formalist qualities—a parataxis of contrasts and a self-reflexive modernist attention to demonstrating the constructedness of representation, the art of the Brücke produced an aporetic primitivism—a bridge, yet not from an alienated modernity to a regenerated utopia; it was rather an aesthetic technique which produced an interpretive impasse.

Interest in the Brücke has grown considerably in the last decade. With the opening of the Neue Galerie in Manhattan in 2001, German and Austrian Expressionism achieved, in the words of Neil H. Donahue, “a permanent, centrally located showcase for German painting,”

serving as “a visible landmark in the steady incorporation of German Expressionism into American culture.”<sup>5</sup> The year 2003 witnessed the first non-commercial public exhibition in Great Britain devoted exclusively to Kirchner’s work.<sup>6</sup> In 2005 numerous major exhibitions were staged, including *Brücke und Berlin: 100 Jahre Expressionismus* at the Neue Nationalgalerie, Berlin, and the touring exhibition *Brücke: Die Geburt des deutschen Expressionismus*.<sup>7</sup> More recently, in 2009 the Neue Galerie hosted a retrospective, *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, marking the first major exhibition in the United States devoted to the Brücke.<sup>8</sup>

This blossoming of curatorial activity and critical scholarship has in part been due to the inevitable opportunity presented by the centenary of the Brücke’s founding, enabling Brücke enthusiasts to seize the current of contemporary interest. The centenary also offers an important opportunity for a new perspective on the Brücke’s aesthetic achievements. By making the case for the Brücke’s primitivism as a mode of aporetics, I draw upon recent new materialist theory, and also hope to present the Brücke’s aesthetics as a contribution to the new materialist project. These instances of aporetic primitivism in the art of the Brücke, I argue, can be seen as networked to the contemporary theoretical efforts of new materialists and others to rethink and dismantle the distinctions between modern and primitive, nature and

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<sup>5</sup> Neil H. Donahue, ed., *A Companion to the Literature of German Expressionism* (Rochester, NY: Camden House, 2005), 1.

<sup>6</sup> *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, Royal Academy of Arts, London. Curated by Jill Lloyd, Magdalena M. Moeller, Andrew Robison, and Norman Rosenthal. For the catalogue, see Jill Lloyd and Magdalena M. Moeller, eds., *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003).

<sup>7</sup> Anita Beloubek-Hammer, Magdalena M. Moeller and Dieter Scholz, eds., *Brücke und Berlin: 100 Jahre Expressionismus* (Berlin: Nicolaische Verlagsbuchhandlung, 2005); Magdalena M. Moeller and Javier Arnaldo, eds., *Brücke: Die Geburt des deutschen Expressionismus* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2005).

<sup>8</sup> Reinhold Heller, ed., *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

society, human and non-human.<sup>9</sup> The historical relevance of this is that, even before the appearance of what Matt Biro has called the “Dada Cyborg,” the artists of the Brücke were preparing the way for post-human and new materialist critiques.<sup>10</sup>

## Part 1. German Expressionism and the Concept of the Aporetic

In a 2003 publication marking the first exhibition in Great Britain devoted to Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Norman Rosenthal observed, “Of all the vital movements in the visual arts that flourished in the first decade of the twentieth century, Expressionism is still the least understood and appreciated, particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world on both sides of the Atlantic, where the move towards abstraction has consistently held the forefront of the modernist debate.”<sup>11</sup> Those aspects of German Expressionism which played a role in the development of abstraction, in particular the work of Wassily Kandinsky (cofounder the Blaue Reiter), have garnered greater critical attention than the more “figurative” wing of the movement, which would include Kirchner and other members of the Brücke, the artists’ group to which Kirchner belonged.

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<sup>9</sup> The body of new materialist scholarship is growing. Some representative works include Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991); Bruno Latour, *We Have Never Been Modern*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993); Bruno Latour, *Inquiry into Modes of Existence*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2013); Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010).

<sup>10</sup> Matthew Biro has recently argued that the Berlin Dadaists can be understood as developing an iconography of the cyborg that in some ways prefigured contemporary post-human critiques, such as that of Donna Haraway. See Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009).

<sup>11</sup> Norman Rosenthal, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Expressionist,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, 1880-1938*, eds. Jill Lloyd et al. (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2003), 9.

Part of the difficulty in adequately interpreting Expressionism is attributable to the sheer diversity of the work; unlike Futurism, Dadaism, and other avant-garde movements, it is more difficult to discern unifying traits or a shared vision. Expressionism was a name coined by critics in an attempt to make sense of clear changes in style and content that began taking place, primarily in Germany (but not only there), in the years leading up to World War I. It was a name that, unlike Impressionism or Cubism, was not widely adopted by its early practitioners. As Charles W. Haxthausen has argued, “to be faithful to its original usage, it is best to regard ‘expressionism’ not as the name of a coherent art movement, nor as a consistent aesthetic theory, let alone as an identifiable style, but above all as a theory of the avant-garde.”<sup>12</sup>

Haxthausen draws attention to the important German art critic Wilhelm Hausenstein, one of the early defenders of the German avant-garde, who had argued that, in many ways, the idea of Expressionism as a cohesive movement “was an illusion generated by dialectical thinking, a phantom defined only by a dialectical construction of antitheses to impressionism.”<sup>13</sup>

Hausenstein, originally a fervent champion of Expressionism as the precursor of a new utopian culture, subsequently turned against the movement, disparaging it as a symptom of the disintegration of culture itself. As Haxthausen explains, “Impressionism had been a precise concept with precise objectives; the term signified a concrete, specific relation to the world.” Expressionism on the other hand, according to Hausenstein:

hardly knows how much it knows of God and of things. It is a convulsion that comes just as close to the all as to the void. Thus the diversity of the attempt; the elusiveness of the

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<sup>12</sup> Charles W. Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion: ‘Expressionism’ in the Writings of Wilhelm Hausenstein,” in *The Ideological Crisis of Expressionism: The Literary and Artistic German War Colony in Belgium, 1914-1918*, ed. Rainer Rumold and O.K. Werkmeister (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1990), 172.

<sup>13</sup> Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion,” 185.

concept; the immeasurable span between Picasso and Nolde, Kandinsky and Rousseau, Klee and Meidner, Seewald and Kokoschka. The common denominator vanishes.<sup>14</sup>

Haxthausen's astute identification of Expressionism as a particular theory of the avant-garde, emerging in the work of such critics as Hausenstein and the popular art theorist Wilhelm Worringer, will be examined in greater detail below, where I shall argue that this particular theory of Expressionism as a critique of modernity, veering between utopian hope and despair, between longing for a spiritually renewed culture and a subsequent disillusionment, has exerted an unacknowledged yet profound influence even on contemporary accounts. In addition, I shall return to Hausenstein's own vivid image of Expressionism as "convulsion"; for the moment, it will suffice to observe that, on the issue of delimiting Expressionism, Haxthausen espouses agreement with the art historian Donald Gordon, who once concluded that "there is a . . . question as to whether the 'movement' itself can be considered as historical fact."<sup>15</sup> Gordon, however, subsequently reversed his view, and theoretical objections such as Haxthausen's notwithstanding, the label has stuck. This is not to discount the productive attempts to bolster the critical utility of the term through theoretical distinctions. Starr Figura, for example, has suggested in a recent important volume that the following can be posited as common denominators: "Directness, frankness, and a desire to startle the viewer characterize Expressionism in its various branches and permutations."<sup>16</sup>

Leaving aside the matter of precise definitions, there is the matter of appreciation, and this has largely been determined by the fact that subsequent historical developments cast a

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<sup>14</sup> Wilhelm Hausenstein, "Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick," *Der neue Merker* 3, Sonderheft "Werden," undated (late 1919), 120, translated by Haxthausen, "A Critical Illusion," 184.

<sup>15</sup> Donald E. Gordon, "On the Origin of the Word 'Expressionism'," *Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes* 29 (1966): 377, quoted in Haxthausen, "A Critical Illusion," 172.

<sup>16</sup> Starr Figura, ed., *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 10.

deep shadow on Expressionism, which came to be seen as a highly questionable movement, both aesthetically and politically. Aesthetically, Expressionism was characterized by an interest in “traditional” forms, such as the woodcut and conventional printmaking. This provides a marked contrast, as other avant-garde artists, especially Dada, moved onto such new techniques as photomontage and photolithography. Indeed, from the perspective of subsequent developments, more skeptical and cynical, Expressionism seemed to cling to an outdated belief in the place of art in society, an uncritical faith in its ability to effect change. As Figura writes, by the mid-1920s, “the nostalgic, Germanic, and handmade were rejected in favor of the international, future-looking, and machine-made.”<sup>17</sup>

Although the politics of individual expressionists varied considerably, the Brücke has generally been seen as ambiguous, suspiciously so. It hasn’t helped matters that for some of the early expressionists, strong associations with developing a “German” identity have led critics to tie it to nationalist and conservative tendencies, in contrast to more international outlook of other avant-garde movements. While it is true that before World War I the group was not notably politically active, afterwards several members took more explicit positions. One can point to the socialist leanings of Max Pechstein, who helped found the *Novembergruppe* (November Group) in 1918, a collection of revolutionary-minded artists and architects. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff helped establish the *Arbeitsrat für Kunst* (Work Council for Art), which sought radical social change, in particular regarding the public role of art. Erich Heckel and Emil Nolde also belonged to the *Arbeitsrat*—and yet, in a sign of the indeterminacy and instability of political ascriptions during the interwar period, Nolde would in 1935 become a

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<sup>17</sup> Figura, *German Expressionism*, 33.

member of the National Socialist Worker's Party (NSDAP). Nolde's turn to fascism was not unique; some of the most well-known literary expressionists, such as the poet Gottfried Benn and the art critic and writer Carl Einstein, became Nazis; the ease with which expressionist ideals seemed to coalesce with Nazi ideals has been among the leading reasons for lingering suspicion, a critical stance voiced most memorably by Georg Lukács, a point to which we will return. Though it should be noted that in the long run the National Socialists themselves unintentionally helped to turn the critical tide as a result of their condemnation of the majority of expressionist artists in the notorious *Entartete Kunst* (Degenerate Art) exhibition, which was staged first in Munich in 1937 and subsequently toured through Germany.

Perhaps most problematic for the critical reception of German Expressionism and the Brücke has been the issue of cultural politics—and in particular, the primitivism which pervades a great deal of their art. Beginning with the Brücke, many expressionist artists took an avid interest in the life and art of so-called “primitives”—a designation primarily referring to the certain people from regions of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas. There are and can be no acceptable (which is to say, not ideologically loaded) replacements for the word “primitive,” because it designates an entity which does not exist except from the perspective of a particular subject position, that of the equally constructed “Europe,” “West,” or “modernity”; suffice to say that the primary signification of the term “primitive,” for those who used it, was the alleged lack of “civilization.”<sup>18</sup>

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<sup>18</sup> To add to the confusion, the notion of the “primitive” was in flux at the turn of the century. In modern art there had developed a general interest in “exotic” art, most prominent in the the *Japonisme* of the impressionists. Japanese woodblock prints in particular exerted a strong influence on the development of Art Nouveau across Europe. In the early years of the twentieth century “exotic” art would have included not only Asian art, but Islamic, Egyptian, pre-Columbian, and ancient Iberian art. (See Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 114ff, and Rubin, “Primitivism” in *20th Century Art*, 2-3.) We can see this fluidity reflected in some of die Brücke's early

The concept of the “primitive” or “savage” (most commonly *die Primitiven, Wilden*, or *Naturvölker* in German) had solidified during the nineteenth-century in the discipline of anthropology as a scientific category, the object of anthropological study; the “primitive” designated the “other” of European or Western civilization, defined by rationality, technology, and historical progress. Around the turn of the century, many avant-garde artists reversed this value judgment, and the “primitive” became something positive, a source of inspiration. However, postcolonial studies and the critique of modernism that developed in the wake of the 1984 MoMA exhibition “Primitivism in 20<sup>th</sup> Century Art,” have together revealed the problematic aspects of this artistic primitivism, which although rejecting the anthropological, imperialist, or evolutionary view, nevertheless perpetuated traditional hierarchies of power and knowledge. Thus, for many critics, whatever aesthetic achievements the German expressionists had made, these were tainted with the movement’s complicity with imperialism and racism.<sup>19</sup>

At the heart of these debates is the meaning that the “primitive” held for the artists of German Expressionism. In the following I will seek to dislodge a ubiquitous interpretation about

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experiments with other “exotic” subjects, such as Kirchner’s *Japanisches Theater* (1909) or *Russische Tänzerinnen mit Turban* (1910). Yet these forays are outnumbered by the majority of die Brücke’s “primitivist” works which take an interest more particularly in the art and people of Africa and Oceania. It is worth noting that, during this period, to take the English example, such terms as exotic, primitive, and savage were often used interchangeably, yet in the first decades of the century the notion of primitive crystallized around a conception of uncivilized and “tribal,” and thus did not apply to other “civilizations,” no matter how exotic, whether contemporary or ancient. In German the situation is similar, with artists and critics using such terms as *die Primitiven, die Wilden, die exotischen Völker*, occasionally *Naturvölker* and *Urzeit*. In German, significantly, we also find more frequent use of such terms as *Urmenschen* and *ursprünglich* (for example in the writing of Friedrich Nietzsche or Hermann Obrist); although *Urmenschen* would translate as prehistorical man, *ursprünglich* generally means “original” or “primal”; together these terms are sometimes used to suggest primordality, often as an explicit rejection of *primitiv* with its evolutionary connotations which would draw firm boundaries between between “evolved” and “primitive” people, in contrast to the more universalist implications of “primordial” humanity. On Nietzsche’s use of *ursprünglich* see David Pan, *Primitive Renaissance: Rethinking German Expressionism* (Lincoln and Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 2001), 32ff.

<sup>19</sup> William Rubin, ed., *“Primitivism” in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, 2 Vols. (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984); for a review of the controversy surrounding the exhibition and selected excerpts from the critical discussion, see Jack Flam with Miriam Deutch, eds., *Primitivism and Twentieth-Century Art: A Documentary History* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 2003), 313-413.



the significance of primitivism for German Expressionism, focusing in particular on the visual art of the Brücke (often in comparison with that of the Blaue Reiter).<sup>20</sup> The prevailing critical view interprets this primitivism as a romantic view of the “primitive,” a reversal of anthropological primitivism; in this view, primitivist expressionists admired above all the “authenticity” and “naturalness” of the “primitive,” in contrast to the “alienation” of modernity. It participated, in other words, in a set of cultural discourses that can be called the critique of modernity. This claim will form a primary target of my critique. I shall argue, rather, that this view fails to distinguish between romantic primitivism and what I have termed aporetic primitivism. Although this prevailing interpretation emphasizes the difference between anthropological and romantic primitivism, it neglects that both modes preserve a categorical, hierarchical opposition between the primitive and the modern. I argue that some types of primitivism, rather than simply accepting the ontology of this framework (e.g. critiquing the alienation of modernity by celebrating primitive authenticity), in fact call the opposition into question; they are in this sense aporetic.

According to the scholarly consensus on German Expressionism, these artists had not one but two ambitious goals: to overthrow the tenets of classical aesthetics, and to critique modern society; the “primitive” seemed to offer the perfect weapon. I shall attempt to prise apart these two claims. While the artists sought to initiate a new aesthetics, the goal was not to critique modern society. Accordingly, their use of the figure of the “primitive” in their work requires a reconsideration.

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<sup>20</sup> German Expressionism encompasses not only visual media but literature, theater, film and aesthetic theory; some of what I have to say will apply to these other media as well, but in what follows I restrict myself to Expressionism in the visual arts.

The consensus view holds that, for most of these artists, the “primitive” seemed to embody something that had been lost to modern civilization, caught up in the harsh, mechanical grip of capitalism, industrialism, urbanization, and rationalism. The artists are seen as responding, above all, to the fragmentation and alienation of modernity. It is, according to this view, in the context of modernity’s dehumanizing forces and artificiality, that the artists looked to the art and objects from “primitive” societies. Such accounts are ubiquitous in the literature on Expressionism. Rose-Carol Washton Long, for example, writes: “From the very beginning, artists associated with Expressionism attacked not only the conventions of art but also the conventions of a society they found materialistic and dehumanizing.”<sup>21</sup> She goes on to explain that “The rapid industrialization of Germany at the end of the nineteenth century set up conditions that paved the way for art movements that questioned authority,” leading to an interest in anarchism, socialism, and theosophy. It is important to note that Washton Long here joins together an attack on artistic conventions with a critique of modern society. While the former is indisputable, the latter claim, I will show, is questionable, and in fact, unjustified. While it is quite clear that the expressionists advocated a new aesthetics, we must distinguish between this aesthetic interest and the critique of modernity—the view of modern, industrial society as materialist and dehumanizing—with which the aesthetic goal is uniformly conjoined in critical scholarship.

This critical apparatus has overwhelmingly situated German Expressionism in the context of sociologist Georg Simmel’s critique of modern life, art historian Wilhelm Worringer’s defense of visual abstraction, and Julius Langbehn’s strident denunciation of liberalism,

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<sup>21</sup> Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1993), xxi.

materialism, and mass culture. The effect has been to pose expressionist art as emerging from an intense longing for “renewal” and “spiritual rebirth,” brought about through the stresses of modernity. The interest in the “primitive,” in this interpretation, is thus seen as a figure for such renewal. Starr Figura expresses this view in the introduction to *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*, where she writes:

Heeding a Nietzschean call for a transformation of values, many artists shared a hope for renewal and believed that the arts would play a central role. Their goal was to upend social norms, and, through an acute attention to thoughts, feelings, and energies that had long been repressed, to achieve a heightened understanding or awareness of what it was to be human. In their efforts to tap into “vital forces” or “inner feelings,” many Expressionists shared an interest in art of non-European or “primitive” cultures, which they felt offered a more immediate and authentic mode of expression, in contrast to centuries of academic refinement in its various branches and permutations.<sup>22</sup>

While this narrative may adequately account for a selection of the art of German Expressionism (especially that of the *Blauer Reiter*), it is not an adequate characterization of the work produced by the *Brücke*. Although I would not deny that the *Brücke* artists participated in this romantic primitivist discourse, in which the “primitive” was coded as authentic, natural, and unalienated, it is nevertheless incorrect to say that their work was simply an expression of this set of ideas. Although it emerged from the discourse of romantic primitivism, this was paired with a counter-discourse, one which called into question this naïve understanding of the primitive. In these works, romantic primitivism itself become caricature; in this sense it becomes rather a self-reflexive primitivism. Through an aesthetics of parataxis, the hierarchical and oppositional relationship of primitive and civilized, and the categories they are intended to represent, are undermined.

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<sup>22</sup> Starr Figura, “German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse,” in *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*, ed. Starr Figura (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2011), 10.

I shall therefore seek to make a distinction between modes of primitivism which view the primitive as desirable—that is, which envy “primitive” life for its supposed naturalness, freedom, community, for its incarnation of an unalienated, authentic existence—and modes of primitivism which emerge from the encounter with the “primitive” with questions—primitivism which asks, what is natural? what is freedom? What is authentic existence? Put simply, the distinction I want to make is between modes of primitivism which preserve these distinctions, and those which cultivate aporia.

The notions of aporetic primitivism and naïve primitivism are not intended as blanket categories, but rather currents or qualities which are present to varying degrees in different art works, different artists, at different times, sometimes greater than others. I shall argue that this mode of aporetic primitivism is most evident in the works of original Brücke members, Kirchner, Schmidt-Rottluff, and Heckel, yet this is not to say that their work didn’t at times reveal a more commonplace naïve primitivism. Moreover, with later Brücke members Max Pechstein and Emil Nolde, their primitivism already begins to reveal a resurgence of a reified primitive-civilized binary, although not necessarily in the romantic mode; with Otto Mueller the romantic primitivist tendency predominates. Finally, the artists of the Blaue Reiter (with August Macke and Paul Klee being important exceptions) do not follow the aporetic aesthetics of the Brücke; Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky, voicing specifically spiritual aims, embraced revolutionary-tinged anti-modernity critique, and their primitivism serves to reify the distinction between the primitive and the modern.

The significance of aporetic primitivism is not merely that it questions such ideas as natural and authentic, but that it does so in the context of a discourse that has historically

defined modernity. In other words, it calls into question a prominent conception of modernity. Thus, while most scholars have argued that the Brücke, and German Expressionism in general, made use of primitivism as part of a critique of modernity—a vivid expression of, and reaction to, alienation and fragmentation—I argue that their aporetic primitivism in fact called this characterization of a “disenchanted modernity” into question.

### ***Aporetic Primitivism***

This aporetic primitivism is apparent in the work of the Brücke. The jarring polarities of the Brücke, both aesthetically and ideologically, have long been noted by critics, and have been the subject of evocative interpretations. These contradictions have most commonly been explained by identifying thematic similarities or through narratives of chronological artistic development. Thus for example, much is made of the difference between the works produced in Dresden, where they originally came together in 1905, and the works made after the group moved to Berlin, in 1911. The Dresden period is identified by the group’s initial forays into “primitive” themes and styles, especially evidenced in a series of bather scenes, depicting their summer sojourns to the Moritzburg lakes, beginning in the summer of 1909. Here, at this popular spot for nude bathing in a wooded locale outside of Dresden, the artists, their models, lovers, and friends would draw and sketch each other while cavorting in nature. Interpretations routinely emphasize the way in which the scenes show humans and nature existing in an ideal harmony (see fig. 5.1.). Heller writes:

The Brücke’s impulse to follow the “primitive” precedent of *Naturvölker*, the harmonious engagement, or even fusion, of men, women, and children with the

elements of nature—trees and meadows, ponds and marshes—is manifested in their scenes of bathers, in which human figures often take on the color of their surroundings and blend into them.<sup>23</sup>

After the group moved to Berlin, the idealized nature scenes gave way to more complex images of the agitations and anxieties of city life in the metropolis. The primitivism of the Dresden period is seen as exhibiting a “back to nature” ethos, in Lloyd’s phrase, or an “escape to nature,” as Rhodes terms it. This is then replaced by darker, more aggressive and edgy depictions of city life after the move to Berlin. Lloyd articulates this prevalent “Dresden to Berlin” narrative in a recent essay, speaking of Kirchner:

During his greatest years in Dresden and Berlin, Ernst Ludwig Kirchner’s art was characterized by dramatic contrasts and polarities. Images of the city, such as Kirchner’s colourful cabaret and circus scenes or his threatening paintings of the urban crowd, alternate with images set in an ideal natural world. Liberated from the urban throng, the men and women in Kirchner’s bather paintings frolic beneath the trees, swim naked in the sea, play with bows and arrows or make love in the open air, cut loose from the constraints and taboos of civilisation.<sup>24</sup>

Such interpretations of the Brücke, however, clearly fall within the rubric of romantic positivism, in which the primitive is said to represent a nostalgic longing for harmony with nature, an aversion to the complexities of modernity. The contrasts between the earlier and later period are merely resolved through positing a shared thematic unity, a primitivist response to the modernity.

Most interpretations of the Brücke embrace this standard approach. In her earlier work, however, Lloyd had offered a more nuanced interpretation. In *German Expressionism:*

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<sup>23</sup> Reinhold Heller, “Brücke in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913,” in *Brücke: the Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller, on behalf of the Neue Galerie New York (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 31.

<sup>24</sup> Jill Lloyd, “Kirchner’s Metaphysical Studio Paintings,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 15.

*Primitivism and Modernity*, she sought to critique the claim that the Brücke embodied a romantic primitivism:

All previous histories of primitivism have rightly located its beginnings in Romanticism; but conventional interpretations of the primitivist impulse in European culture as an imaginative *alternative* to the changes underway in the modern world fail to take on board the complex, dualistic character of modernity itself. Far from presenting simply imaginative counter-images, primitivism provided modern artists, as I hope to show, with a means of negotiating the internal paradox of modernity, of spanning between its positive and negative, its forward- and backward- looking tendencies.<sup>25</sup>

Lloyd's argument in *German Expressionism*, the most thorough study to date of the Brücke's interest in primitivism, comes closest to articulating the complex relationship between modernity and primitivism in the work of the Brücke. However, she continues to frame the primitivism of the Brücke as a naïve primitivism, in that "modernity" itself remains an unquestioned reality rather than an interpretation which is interrogated.

Lloyd's argument here assumes the familiar trope of the "primitive within"—a theoretical approach which, on the surface, seems to suggest that the aesthetics in question undermine difference; in fact, however, the notion of the "primitive within" preserves the polarity of the opposition. This comes across clearly in Lloyd's discussion of Kirchner's famous Berlin street scenes, a series of extraordinary paintings made between 1913 and 1915, which many consider to be his most important artistic achievement (figs. 5.2–5.5). Large, striking works, the paintings are noted for their strong contrasting colors, intense angularity, and elongated human forms. According to Lloyd,

The real friction and energy of the paintings comes from their combination of rational compositional geometry and powerful gestural brushwork, from their exaggerated colours set against sombre surrounds. In this way Kirchner conveys both the regulation

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<sup>25</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, vii.

and the potential wildness of the city crowd, which Simmel described as a complex organism threatening to erupt into chaos if not controlled and disciplined by the impersonal rationality of urban lifestyle, with its punctuality, exactitude, and “fixed non-subjective framework of time.”<sup>26</sup>

Thus for Lloyd the sense of an urban enchantment is apparently undermined by the threatening perception of a teeming chaos. The street scenes are also notable for their depiction of prostitutes, a familiar feature of Berlin city life. Lloyd argues that Kirchner’s metropolitan women “are caricatures of artificiality, genuine manikins based partly on the iconography of contemporary fashion plates,” referencing their seeming allusion to an image from the contemporary fashion magazine, *Damenmode* (fig. 5.6). But, Lloyd explains, “a tribal rawness replaces the elegant mannerism of Kirchner’s source, and the women, although constructed from artifice, are also the focus of powerful ‘uncivilized’ instincts of sexuality and aggression with the mask-like faces, ‘tribal’ costumes and spiky primitivist forms.”<sup>27</sup>

Thus for Lloyd, Kirchner’s Berlin street scenes evoke the urban “alienation” identified by Simmel, while they also discern a “primitive” energy whirling beneath the surface. This “primitive” energy is figured as a latent force, a repressed “primitive” vitality; whereas in the bather scenes, the “primitive” represented a rejuvenating force, something that needed to be released in order to renew society and achieve a merger of art and life, here it represents a threatening force, which must be controlled and contained. Lloyd associates their Berlin street scenes with the psychoanalytic theory of Sigmund Freud, who had “begun to make connections between the neuroses of modern man and his ‘primitive’ roots.”<sup>28</sup> She also connects them with the works with Gustav le Bon’s *La Psychologie des Foules* (1895; translated as *The Crowd: A*

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<sup>26</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 153.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 150.

<sup>28</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 150.



*Study of the Popular Mind*), which “spoke of the loss of individuality in modern industrial society, maintaining that this wore away the behavioral characteristics of civilization to reveal savage and primitive instincts.”<sup>29</sup>

The “primitive within” interpretation, however, although at first seeming to suggest an undermining of difference, fails to perceive the ways in which the Brücke’s primitivism dismantles the polarities between primitive and civilized. According to the notion of the repressed “primitive,” as adopted by Lloyd and others, modernity is defined by its rationalism and regularity, its attempt to control the forces “beneath the surface.” Although at first Lloyd attempts to invoke a parallel to Simmel as a way of separating the Brücke from the “disenchantment” narrative and the Romantic anti-capitalist critique of modernity, her interpretation nevertheless sees the art of the Brücke as responding to the problems of modernity. For Lloyd, the Brücke is still bound up in a naïve primitivism. Both the backward- and forward-looking elements, in other words, are ultimately romanticist, primitivist viewpoints, united in their rejection of modernity.

Thus, whereas Lloyd sees the Brücke artists as engaging with the contradictions of modernity, I argue that their aesthetics actually worked to prise apart this definition of modernity, to unravel the tightly woven narrative linking capitalism and urbanization, rationalism and positivism, to the experiences of alienation and liberation. They should not be situated as sharing Simmel’s or le Bon’s critique, but as producing works which question the assumptions upon which Simmel’s critique is based. It is a subtle distinction, yet a significant

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<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

one. Their work was about calling this very prevalent worldview into question. It wasn't simply naïve primitivism, but an aporetic primitivism.

## Part 2. Re-evaluating Origins, Aims, and Influences

The Brücke brought together four young men who shared a devotion to renewing German art, based on an ethos of artistic “honesty” and a commitment to exploring new ideas and new ways of living; they aspired, foremost, to a merger of art and life. When they first organized themselves as the *Künstlergruppe “Brücke,”* Ernst Ludwig Kirchner was 25 years old, the son of a chemical engineer from Aschaffenburg.<sup>30</sup> Kirchner had grown up in Chemnitz, Saxony (since the age of 10), after which he entered the Technische Hochschule (Technical College) in Dresden in 1901, to study architecture. It was there that he first met Bleyl, a young man from Zwickau. Both Bleyl and Kirchner had taken to architecture in order to appease their parents; both dreamed of becoming artists. As Bleyl later recalled their first meeting, in Kirchner’s studio, which had been converted from a former butcher’s shop:

I met a well-built, upright young man full of self-confidence and the most extreme passions, who had a wonderfully carefree nature and a capacity for infectious, guileless laughter, and who was possessed with a furry for drawing, for painting, for exploring, and grappling with artistic things and concepts. His “pad” was that of a real bohemian, full of brightly colored paintings lying all over the place, drawings, books, painting and drawing materials—more like a painter’s romantic lodgings than the home of a well-organized architecture student.<sup>31</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> The following biographical material is drawn primarily from Heller, *Brücke: the Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin*; Figura, *German Expressionism: The Graphic Impulse*; and Lloyd and Moeller, eds., *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*; and Donald E. Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: A Retrospective Exhibition* (Boston: Museum of Fine Arts, 1968).

<sup>31</sup> “Aus den ‘Erinnerungen’ von Fritz Bleyl,” in Hans Wentzel, ed. *Bildnisse der Brücke-Künstler voneinander* (Stuttgart, 1961), 23, quoted in Nicole Brandmüller, “The Early Years,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Retrospective*, ed. Felix Krämer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 55.

In 1903-04, Kirchner spent two semesters studying architecture at the Technical University in Munich. While there, he also took courses in life drawing and composition at the where he attended Lehr- und Versuchs-Atelier für angewandte und freie Kunst), founded by Wilhelm von Debschitz and the Jugendstil architect and designer Hermann Obrist. (Kirchner would later state that his stint at the Technical University was in fact merely a pretext to enable him to join Obrist's school.<sup>32</sup>) In 1904, back in Dresden, Kirchner and Bleyl made their first summer visit to the Moritzburg lakes. At the University, they soon met and befriended fellow student Erich Heckel, the son of a railroad construction engineer from Döbeln, near Chemnitz. Heckel, an ardent admirer of Friedrich Nietzsche and Fyodor Dostoevsky, joined the others in their drawing and painting sessions. In 1905 Heckel introduced them to a friend, Karl Schmidt (who would later append Rottluff, his birthplace, to his name). It was Schmidt-Rottluff who would suggest the name "Brücke," and on June 7, the four friends officially marked the creation of their new artists' group by penning the name, in Jugendstil-inspired lettering, upon a modest sheet of stationery (fig. 5.7).

Bleyl did not remain long with the group, however. In 1906 he began offering courses at the architectural school in Freiberg, in Saxony, and in 1909 he resigned from the group completely to focus on teaching, also eventually working for various architecture firms. Meanwhile, Kirchner emerged as the leader of the group, on account of his strong personality and intense ambition. Heckel served as its business manager. The group decided they would only exhibit as a collective; Heckel later recalled that part of the reason was to increase their

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<sup>32</sup> E.L. Kirchner to Botho Graef, September 21, 1916, in Lothar Grisebach, ed., *Von Munch bis Kirchner: Erlebte Kunstgeschichte in Briefen aus dem Nachlaß von Eberhard Grisebach* (Munich, 1968), 49ff, cited in Brandmüller, "The Early Years," 55.

profile: “Every individual among us would have had a much harder time being exhibited than several of us together . . . because no individual had enough pictures to fill a room . . . [and because] art dealers in general hesitated to exhibit unknown artists.”<sup>33</sup> Heckel’s pragmatic reasoning was only half the story; the group also embraced the idea of working as a collective for ideological reasons, which were particularly important to Kirchner.

The group began to make overtures to other artists whose work they admired. Having seen an exhibition of Emil Nolde at the Galerie Arnold in Dresden, the group invited him to join in 1906. Nolde, then 37, was from the village of Nolde, near Tondern, in the Danish-German border region of North Schleswig. Born Hans Emil Hansen, the son of a farmer, Nolde had trained as a woodcarver and designer before studying painting; he changed his name to Nolde in 1902. He showed the group new etching techniques, and introduced them to the art critic Gustav Schiefeler and the collector Karl Ernst Osthaus. Seeking greater independence, Nolde left the group a little over a year later, although he remained on good terms with its members.

In 1906, Heckel had met (Hermann) Max Pechstein, from Eckersbach, the son of a glazier. Pechstein had completed an apprenticeship as a scenic painter and joined Dresden’s Kunstgewerbeschule (School of Applied Arts) in 1900, and entered the Dresden Hochschule für bildende Künste (College of Visual Arts) in 1902. A student at Dresden’s Sächsischen Akademie der Künste, Pechstein was the most artistically trained member of the group, receiving in 1905 the Saxon State Prize, also known as the “Rome Prize,” a fellowship which provided funds for study in Italy.

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<sup>33</sup> Erich Heckel, in conversation with Roman Norbert Ketterer, 1958, in Roman Norbert Ketterer, *Dialoge, Bildende Kunst, Kunsthandel*, vol. 1 (Stuttgart and Zurich: Belser, 1988), 42, quoted in Figura, *Graphic Impulse*, 11.

Pechstein joined the group in May 1906, followed later that year by Cuno Amiet (1868-1961), an older Swiss painter. In that year the group introduced “passive membership,” issuing membership cards and a printed portfolio of the group’s work in exchange for a membership fee. (The passive members grew quickly; by 1910, there were 80.)<sup>34</sup> The group published seven portfolios between 1906 and 1912.

Pechstein moved to Berlin in 1908, where he worked to establish contacts for the group; he joined the Berlin Secession in 1909. Kirchner began to visit Pechstein in Berlin, sharing his studio there. In the summer Kirchner returned to Moritzburg with Heckel and Pechstein, as well as his new partner, and model, Doris Grosse (1884-1936), a milliner from Dresden also known as “Dodo.”

In 1910, Pechstein, Nolde and other Brücke members were denied participation in the Berlin Secession’s spring exhibition, leading them to resign from the Berlin Secession and form the Neue Secession in order to exhibit their rejected works. Pechstein assumed leadership of the new affiliation. Kirchner and Heckel meanwhile began spending more time in Berlin with Pechstein. In the summer the group returned to the Moritzburg lakes, along with two of their models, the girls Fränzi and Marzella, the daughters of a Dresden artist’s widow (some scholars now speculate that these were in fact nicknames for the same girl).<sup>35</sup> In September 1910, the largest Brücke exhibition to date opened in Dresden at the Arnold Gallery. Otto Mueller (1874-1930) was invited to exhibit as a guest in 1910 (Mueller was born in Liebau, Silesia, in what is now the Czech-Polish border region.) Mueller’s work focused above all on the female nude in nature, often bathing scenes.

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<sup>34</sup> Heller, “Brücke in Dresden and Berlin,” 13.

<sup>35</sup> Lloyd and Moeller, eds. *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 217.

In the summer of 1911, Heckel, Kirchner and Pechstein returned to the Moritzburg lakes. In the fall, Kirchner moved to Berlin, and the other Brücke members soon followed. In Berlin Kirchner met Erna Schilling, who would become his model and lifetime companion. In December, Pechstein and Kirchner founded MUIM (Modernern Unterricht in Malerie) in Berlin-Wilmersdorf, but due to lack of students, they closed the school in September 1912.

The year brought further difficulties, as Pechstein was expelled from the group in May for agreeing to exhibit his work independently at the summer exhibition of the Berlin Secession (thus breaking the Brücke's policy of exhibiting only as a group). The move to Berlin, whether or not the primary cause, seems to have coincided with increased diversification among the group members, which were in turn exacerbated by a complicated relationship with the Berlin Secession, as well as Galerie Der Sturm, which had closer ties to the Blaue Reiter. By 1913, tensions surfaced regarding Kirchner's history of the group, *Chronik der KG Brücke*, with the other members strongly objecting to Kirchner's self-centered version of events. In May 1913, the group officially disbanded, announcing the dissolution on a card distributed to passive members, signed by Amiet, Heckel, Mueller, and Schmidt-Rottluff. (Kirchner was not among the signees.)

The Brücke was the first collective of German visual artists to be labeled expressionists (although the term *Expressionismus*, in its earliest recorded usage, in 1911, referred not to German but French art, primarily those artists who would become known as Fauves or Cubists).<sup>36</sup> The Brücke is now recognized as part of the first wave of German Expressionism, yet

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<sup>36</sup> The term appeared in the catalog of the 1911 Exhibition of the Berliner Secession, to designate French art that had diverged from Impressionism. The familiar use of the term suggests however that it had previously been in circulation. By the end of 1911 it was being used to refer to international, although especially German, artists. It

in important ways, the aesthetics they pioneered was uniquely their own. There is a marked tendency in writing on Expressionism to interpret the Brücke through the lens of their successors in Munich, the Blaue Reiter. Despite important and undeniable similarities, not least of which is a shared enthusiasm for “primitive” art, I will argue that crucial distinctions can be made between them.

Colin Rhodes, for example, in *Primitivism and Modern Art*, writes that Franz Marc “set the tone for the Primitivism of the first half of the twentieth century” when the artist declared:

We are standing today at the turning point of two long epochs, similar to the state of the world fifteen hundred years ago, when there was also a transitional period without art and religion . . . The first works of a new era are tremendously difficult to define. . . . [But] they are the first signs of the coming new epoch – they are the signal fires for the pathfinders.<sup>37</sup>

Rhodes goes on to explain, “It is no coincidence that an interest in alternative traditions and cultures often went hand in hand with artists’ Messianic desire to deliver a new beginning to a Europe they perceived as old and spent.”

Yet, in the years before the Blaue Reiter formed, before this particular “tone” had been set, a different mode of primitivism was at work. This mode of primitivism, although it participated in the discourse of romantic primitivism, adopted a radically different approach to the present. The members of the Brücke sought a revolutionary aesthetics, one that challenged Impressionism as well as the classical tradition of realism or illusionism as the ideal mode of representation. Yet in spite of their faith in the relevance of art, and the desire to merge art and life, their aims were not messianic, in the sense of a spiritually-motivated rejection of

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was not until Paul Fechter’s book *Der Expressionismus* (1914) that the term became clearly associated with German art, namely the *Brücke* and the *Blaue Reiter*. See Thomas Anz and Michael Stark, eds., *Expressionismus: Manifeste und Dokumente zur deutschen Literatur, 1910-1920* (Stuttgart: Metzler, 1982), 14-17.

<sup>37</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 21.

contemporary society; nor was their interest in “primitive” art an expression of the popular critique of modernity, whether voiced by leftist critics such as Georg Simmel or conservatives such as Julius Langbehn (to name the two prominent figures with whose cultural politics the Brücke is most commonly associated). Instead of a rejection of the present, their work reveals an openness to possibilities of experience in the present, an attitude shaped above all by their Jugendstil roots, as well as their reading of the poet Walt Whitman (1819–1892). As Kirchner later wrote to world-renowned art dealer Curt Valentin, “I wanted to express the richness and joy of living, to paint humanity at work and at play in its reactions and interreactions and to express love as well as hatred.”<sup>38</sup>

This openness to experience was combined, however, with several aesthetic features in which the discourse of romantic primitivism—a discourse which positions the “primitive” as a mode of authentic or immediate being in contrast to an alienated modernity—was dismantled. The discourse of primitivism, as part of a critique of modernity, insists upon the separation of human and nature, rationality and instinct, artifice and authenticity. Yet the Brücke aesthetics often worked to undermine these oppositions. Rather than participating in the critique of modernity, their work questions this particular narrative of modernity. To make this argument, it shall be necessary to reexamine the significance of the primitive for the Brücke (the focus of Part 3), as well as to examine their relationship to the various contemporary critiques of modernity (Parts 4–6).

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<sup>38</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Curt Valentin, “Letter of April 17, 1937,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16 – May 10, 1952*, ed. Curt Valentin Gallery (New York: Curt Valentin Gallery, 1952), unpaginated.



### Part 3. Brücke and Primitivism

In the literature on the Brücke, their fascination with the primitive is interpreted as a romantization, a simple inversion of nineteenth-century anthropological ideas about the *Naturvölker* (natural people) or the *Wilden* (savages or natives). Jill Lloyd argues, for example, that in their work, the primitive is imagined as “authentic” and “immediate”—a symbol of unalienated existence, in opposition to modernity, marked by artificiality, mechanization, rationalization, and urbanization.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, Reinhold Heller writes: “the Brücke members had a naïve, idealistic perception of a utopian, ‘primitive’ life in which modernity’s central conflict—humanity, industry, and civilization versus nature—did not exist.”<sup>40</sup> Reinhold Heller, noting that the Brücke’s interest in “primitive” art informed their expressive scenes of bathing outdoors in natural settings, argues, “As women and men in these images cavort, dance, and bathe unclothed in verdant landscapes, they represent an idyllic natural life of primeval innocence and joy without shame, repression, or material need, in direct accord with the imagined life of Oceanic or African natives.”

Although the Brücke members no doubt shared in this popular discourse of primitivism, the way in which this discourse became articulated in their aesthetics is another matter. It will thus be useful to briefly trace the history of their encounter with the “primitive,” in order to render an alternative hypothesis regarding its significance in their artistic creations.

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<sup>39</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*.

<sup>40</sup> Heller, “Brücke in Dresden and Berlin,” 27.

### ***i. Brücke and Primitivist Discourse***

In the *Chronicle of the KG Brücke* (fig. 5.8), Kirchner writes that in Dresden, he “continued to advance his compact compositions; he discovered a parallel to his own work in the ethnographic museum, in Negro sculpture and in carved beams from the South Seas.”<sup>41</sup> Kirchner’s recollections are notoriously untrustworthy, especially regarding dates; yet in this instance—and leaving aside for the moment his designation of the non-European artwork as “parallel” rather than an “influence”—his account is generally accepted. It is impossible to determine an exact chronological account of the Brücke’s developing interest in the “primitive.” Nevertheless identifiable references to non-European art first begin to appear in postcards, drawings, and Brücke studio decorations from around 1909, during the group’s Dresden period.

It is the interest particularly in non-European art and aesthetics, and not simply in non-Europeans, that makes the primitivism of the Brücke historically significant. The interest in “exotic” non-Europeans and “primitives” had been a common part of German and European culture. The Brücke were most certainly aware of, and influenced by, the popular discourse of primitivism, prior to their conscious inclusion of “primitive” or “exotic” non-Europeans in their work. In the memoirs of Fritz Schumacher, Kirchner’s instructor in Dresden, Schumacher recalls an incident that suggests Kirchner was already inspired by the “primitive” before completing his architectural studies in 1904:

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<sup>41</sup> Kirchner, *Chronik der KG Brücke*. German: “Wahrenddessen führte Kirchner in Dresden die geschlossene Komposition weiter; er fand in ethnographischen Museum in der Negerplastik und den Balkenschnitzereien der Südsee eine Parallele zu seinem eigenen Schaffen.” The original is reproduced in Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 212.

One day [Kirchner] turned up in my office and spread out a folio of coloured drawings for a quite extravagant modern interior and told me this was his doctoral thesis. He asked to perform the necessary formalities so that he could assume his title. I had to inform him that the doctoral examination required scholarly research rather than an artistic sketch, which displeased him, I think. He made it clear that the civilized world only had disappointments in store and it was only with primitive people that some form of recovery could be found. I thought of Gauguin. He took this all so seriously that I certainly expected immediate departure from Europe when he left.<sup>42</sup>

Whether or not Schumacher's recollections (written decades later) are accurate, it is fair to assume that Kirchner and the other Brücke artists shared with their contemporaries a litany of popular ideas about "primitives"—their perceived naturalness, oneness with nature, open sexuality—in other words, an authenticity which had been lost in an alienated modernity. Ideas about the *Primitiven* or *Wilden* were an ordinary part of German popular culture, found for example in the novels of Karl May, Germany's best-selling author in the nineteenth century, and the *Völkerschauen*, "human zoos" in which indigenous groups from such places as Samoa or Cameroon were put on display in zoological gardens in reconstructed "native" villages.<sup>43</sup> The *Völkerschauen* toured through major cities, including Dresden, and were a popular attraction. In a letter to the art historian and Brücke supporter Botho Graef, Kirchner recalls his childhood fascination with non-Europeans at the zoo:

As a child I was always at the window drawing what I saw, women with baby carriages, trees, trains, etc., etc. Later we moved to Frankfurt and I added the huge railroad station and people on the street and in the zoo. I was also impressed by the art in the Frankfurt museum, the pictures of Grünewald's school. Old sculptures and foreigners in the zoo. From Frankfurt we moved to Switzerland with its huge mountains, its cows and pastures

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<sup>42</sup> Fritz Schumacher, "Aus der Vorgeschichte der Brücke," *Der Kreis* 9, (January 1932), 10, quoted by Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 15.

<sup>43</sup> Anne Dreesbach, "Colonial Exhibitions, 'Völkerschauen' and the Display of the 'Other'," in *European History Online* (EGO), published by the Leibniz Institute of European History (IEG), Mainz 2012-05-03, <http://www.ieg-ego.eu/dreesbacha-2012-en>.

and stony paths. And from there to Chemnitz, where my artistic development was interrupted.<sup>44</sup>

This fascination persisted into the artist's days in Dresden. In a letter to Heckel and Pechstein, dated May 31, 1910, Kirchner wrote, "the circus is back, and at the Zoologischen Garten there will be Samoans, negroes, etc. this summer!"<sup>45</sup> Kirchner reveals a common perception of foreigners as exotic; he also reveals a naïve Eurocentric acceptance of the status quo in imperial Germany, in which it seemed acceptable to display humans, like animals, in a zoo, for the entertainment of European spectators. Kirchner sketched some of these "inhabitants" and "performers" on postcards (figs. 5.9 and 5.10).

Although the Brücke artists' ideas about "exotic" foreigners were clearly informed by the popular primitivist discourse, it would be wrong to assume that their primitivism—the meaning of such "primitive" images in their own artistic creations—necessarily expressed this discourse in a straightforward manner. It is not until about 1909 that clear and consistent visual references to non-European artworks (as opposed to simply non-Europeans) begin to appear in the Brücke's own artistic creations. There are earlier instances in which connections are likely, yet not verifiable. Lloyd notes, for example, "It is impossible to tell whether the decorative borders in brush and ink in Kirchner's illustrations to *The Arabian Nights*, or the ornamental letter 'M' at the beginning of his *Programm der Brücke*, refer to tribal or Jugendstil models."<sup>46</sup> (See fig. 5.11.) Lloyd adds that *The Studio* and other Jugendstil periodicals, such as *Jugend* and

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<sup>44</sup> Kirchner, Letter to Botho Graef, Jena, Sept. 21, 1916, translated by Victor H. Miesel, *Voices of German Expressionism* (Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1970), 17.

<sup>45</sup> Kirchner, Letter to Heckel and Pechstein in Berlin, March 31, 1910. German: "Sonst weiter nichts neues, ein Cirkus ist wieder da und in den Zooligischen kommen Samoaner, Neger etc. diesen Sommer!" Reproduced in Annemarie Dube-Heynig, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Postkarten und Briefe an Erich Heckel im Altonaer Museum in Hamburg* (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1984), 235 (no. 30).

<sup>46</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 15.

*Kunstwart*, which Bleyl recalls they read while in Dresden, contained references to non-European art during the early 1900s.<sup>47</sup> Similarly, Bleyl's poster for the 1906 Dresden exhibition suggests the influence of Japanese prints, and he later claimed as much.<sup>48</sup> However, the influence of Japanese prints may have reached Bleyl through the Vienna Secession rather than through any direct examination.

Nevertheless, in 1909 and 1910, the Brücke members began to represent "primitive" or "exotic" figures and art works in their own artistic productions, including sketches, wood carvings, and studio decorations. The Brücke artists' interest in the non-European art seems to have manifested itself most prominently in their studio decorations during the Dresden years.

Art collector and Brücke patron Gustav Schiefler wrote about a visit to Kirchner's studio at Berlinerstraße 80, in Dresden, in December 1910:

The rooms were fantastically decorated with coloured textiles which he had made using the batik technique, with all sorts of exotic equipment and wood carving by his own hand. A primitive setting, born of necessity but nevertheless strongly marked by his own taste. He lived a disordered lifestyle here according to bourgeois standards, simple in material terms, but highly ambitious in his artistic activity. He worked feverishly, without noticing the time of day . . . Everyone who comes into contact with him must respond with strong interest to this total commitment to his work and derive from it a concept of the true artist.<sup>49</sup>

Kirchner had moved to the studio in November 1909. He was excited about the move; he sent Heckel a postcard with a drawing of himself dancing naked in the one of the rooms. Visitors to

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<sup>47</sup> Fritz Bleyl, "Erinnerungen," in "Fritz Bleyl: Gründungsmitglied der 'Brücke,'" *Kunst in Hessen und am Mittelrhein* 8 (1968), 94, cited in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 15.

<sup>48</sup> In 1948 Bleyl recalled the image: "A naked, young female form, emerging brightly white from a pale orange background, using a woodcut-like light-and-shadow concept, with a narrow vertical format, somewhat like a Japanese kakemono, a hanging for a pillar." Fritz Bleyl, "Erinnerungen," 89-105; quoted by Heller, "Brücke in Dresden and Berlin," 20.

<sup>49</sup> Gustav Schiefler, in *Postkarten an Gustav Schiefler*, ed. Gustav Schack (Hamburg, 1976), 80, quoted in Jill Lloyd, "Kirchner's Metaphysical Studio Paintings," in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 17.

Kirchner's previous studio at Berlinerstraße 60 make no mention of particular decorations, so it is likely that the scene described by Schiefler began to take shape in the Berlinerstraße 80 studio. The curtains, murals and other decorations are visible in photographs of the studio taken by Kirchner from 1910 and 1911 (figs. 5.12 – 5.14). Heckel, as usual, offered a more pragmatic explanation in an interview (1958/59), namely their lack of money: "We needed somewhere to sit—so we made the stools ourselves, also the batik curtains."<sup>50</sup> Batik, a technique for decorating textiles derived from Indonesia, had been introduced to the European arts and crafts movement around the turn of the century by the Dutch-Indonesian artist Jan Toorop.<sup>51</sup> Batik became popular in Jugendstil circles and especially with the Brücke, and this supports Lloyd's argument that one of the main avenues toward the "primitive" for the Brücke was Jugendstil, the interest in ornament and simplicity of form.

The photographs reveal other influences from non-European art, however. The wall hangings in the photographs depict nudes in erotic poses beneath trees and umbrellas. Hanging on the wall is a copy Kirchner had made of an Indian Buddha, derived from a book about Indian cave paintings. The color scheme, of chrome-yellow, red, and black, was likely inspired by a set of carved architectural beams from New Guinea, which Kirchner had discovered at the Dresden Ethnographic Museum.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Heckel, *Kunstwerk* (1958/59), quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 23.

<sup>51</sup> Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 59.

<sup>52</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 34.

## *ii. Encounters in the Ethnographic Museum*

It is likely that the Brücke members began visiting the Dresden Ethnographic Museum, (*Völkermuseum*) as well as the Zoological Garden (*Zoologische Garten*) around the time of their first exhibition, in 1906, although possibly as early as 1904. Lloyd notes that entry was free and the museum was a short walk from their lodgings. In March 1910, Kirchner wrote to Heckel and Pechstein noting with enthusiasm that the ethnographic museum was open again: “Only a small part, but still a refreshing delight, the famous Benin bronzes, a few things by the Pueblos from Mexico are still exhibited, and some negro sculptures.”<sup>53</sup> The letter included drawings based on two museum artifacts, a Benin bronze relief and a Cameroon figure (fig. 5.15 and 5.16).

Kirchner was particularly captivated, however, by a set of carved and painted wooden beams from Palau, an island in Micronesia, which he discovered in the Dresden museum (fig. 5.17). (Palau was at the time a German colony.) The beams, which were taken from a men’s clubhouse (or *bai*), depict scenes from daily life and mythology, including, according to Lloyd, “a favorite local tale about a native with a giant penis capable of penetrating his wife on a neighboring island” (as depicted in the fourth beam).<sup>54</sup> In June 1910, Kirchner made a drawing of a section of one of the beams on a postcard he sent to Heckel (fig. 5.18). However, Kirchner seems to have been aware of the beams before this date, as Kirchner wrote on the back of the

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<sup>53</sup> Kirchner, letter to Erich Heckel and Max Pechstein in Berlin, Mar. 31, 1910, reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Postkarten und Briefe an Erich Heckel im Altonaer Museum in Hamburg*, ed. Annemarie Dube-Heynig (Cologne: DuMont Buchverlag, 1984), 78-81, 235

<sup>54</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 29. Heller adds that the *bai* was a place “where the island’s men lived and slept (the men visited their own family homes only as guests, but received visits from the young women of neighboring villages at the *bai*).” Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 26.

postcard, “the beam is beautiful every time” (“Der Balken ist doch immer wieder schön”).<sup>55</sup> The beams had been brought to Germany by Carl Semper in 1862 and purchased for the Berlin Ethnographic Museum in 1881. According to Gordon, they had been in the Dresden museum since 1902.<sup>56</sup> As Lloyd notes, the eroticism of the beams likely inspired some of the Brücke’s studio decorations.<sup>57</sup>

In addition to the Palau beams, objects from Africa, in particular Cameroon, seem to have had the greatest impact upon the artists. In postcards and paintings from the time, studio decorations are clearly visible. For example, in Heckel’s *Nude (Dresden)*, of 1910, Heckel’s girlfriend Sidi Riha appears with a painted face, behind her an African textile (fig. 5.19). In Heckel’s *Still Life with Blue Vase* (1910/13), a Tanzanian mask is visible. In an interview (June 12, 1954), Schmidt-Rottluff stated that sculpture from the Cameroon had indeed provided the primary African source of inspiration for Brücke art.<sup>58</sup> Postcards and sketches from 1910 reveal that Kirchner had begun to carve furniture and other objects in reference to African models, for example a fruit bowl and a carved female figure carrying a bowl on her head (figs. 5.20 and 5.21). Britta Martensen-Larsen has argued that the latter is based on a Baluba throne from the Congo.<sup>59</sup> The female figure appears in a photograph of Kirchner’s Berlin studio at Körnerstraße 45, dating from 1914-15 (fig 5.22).

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<sup>55</sup> Kirchner, postcard to Heckel, June 20, 1910. Reproduced in Dube-Heynig, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 142-43 (no. 50).

<sup>56</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 21. Palau had been acquired by imperial Spain in 1885, when it was made part of the Spanish East Indies. Palau and surrounding islands were sold to Imperial Germany in 1899 under the terms of the German–Spanish Treaty. Ben Cook et al., *Federated States of Micronesia and Palau* (Other Places Publishing, 2010).

<sup>57</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 31.

<sup>58</sup> Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” 354.

<sup>59</sup> Britta Martensen-Larsen, “Primitive Kunst als Inspirationsquelle der Brücke,” *Hafnia* 7 (1980): 101.



A drawing by Heckel from 1910 shows Kirchner seated on an Africanized stool, which is similar to the one that appears in Kirchner's *Fränzi in front of a Carved Stool* (1910).<sup>60</sup> (Figs. 5.23 and 5.24.) Kirchner's *Nude Girl in Bath*, a 1909 woodcut, also shows a model sitting upon a carved stool. Lloyd notes however that this particular stool does not appear in other works, and thus was likely one that Kirchner had perhaps seen in the ethnographic museum, rather than one he had himself carved. She adds that a similar stool from Cameroon was in the Dresden Museum (figs. 5.25 and 5.26). Other sketches and paintings reveal that the studio contained a Cameroon leopard stool, which has been determined to be an original African piece.<sup>61</sup> The leopard stool is visible in the photograph of Kirchner's Körnerstraße 45 studio (fig. 5.22). It is important to note that the ethnographic museum was not the only means of exposure to African and other non-European objects. Lloyd notes, "Heckel's brother Manfred, who was working as an engineer in German East Africa, visited Dresden in the summer of 1910 and probably gave the African objects in the Brücke artists' studios as gifts. By the time of Gustav Schiefler's visit in December 1910, Kirchner certainly possessed a leopard stool from Cameroon."<sup>62</sup>

### ***iii. Stylistic Primitivism***

Non-European art objects not only appear as items *within* Brücke art works, however; around the same time, stylistic influences traceable to non-European art begin to appear. There

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<sup>60</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 75.

<sup>61</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 243n40.

<sup>62</sup> Lloyd, "Kirchner's Metaphysical Studio Paintings," in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magdalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of Arts, 2003), 46n8.

is a shift toward angular shapes and zig-zags, likely derived from the Palau beams, visible for example in Kirchner's *Nude Girl in a Bath* or Heckel's *Female Nude in the Studio* (fig. 5.27). In addition to the inclusion of ornamental zig-zags, the representation of human figures begins to change. The Palau beams inspired an earlier postcard to Heckel depicting bathers and a colored woodcut Kirchner made on the same theme, *Bathers Throwing Reeds* (figs. 5.28 and 5.29). As Lloyd notes, "the spiky figures in the drawing, with their jerky movements in a color scheme of yellow ochre and black, clearly refer in a quite literal way to the Palau beams."<sup>63</sup> Max Pechstein seems to have picked up on the theme in his 1909 painting, *Das gelbschwarze Trikot*, an outdoor scene where the bathers in the background echo the stiff and stylized movements of carved figures (fig. 5.30). In other works, faces become angular, contours and color schemes become bold and stark—all of which constituted a significant shift from the group's earlier primary influences, for example the Fauves and impressionists. (See Heckel, *Mädchen with Puppe (Fränzi)*, and Heckel, *Atelierszene*, 1910-11, figs. 5.31 and 5.32.) This is especially visible in woodcuts from the period, for example in the poster by Kirchner for the 1910 Galerie Arnold exhibition, and woodcuts by Heckel depicting Fränzi, one of the group's adolescent models: *Stehendes Kind* (Standing Child, 1910/11, fig. II) and *Fränzi liegend* (Fränzi Reclining, 1910, fig. 5.33).

Lloyd notes that the earliest evidence of stylistic influences which refer to non-European art in relation to the studio decorations are found in Heckel's attic rooms in his parents' house in Dresden. A letter from Heckel in February 1909 includes the first sketch of a studio mural,

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<sup>63</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 29.

along with a description of the colors: “overall tones zinc yellow, lime green, red, some black.”<sup>64</sup>

(Fig. 5.34.) This sketch also reveals one of the other singularly important non-European stylistic influences for the Brücke artists. The standing female figures in the sketch are derived from the John Griffith’s *Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta*, a book which Heckel discovered (before Kirchner, it would seem, although Kirchner claims to have discovered it on his own) in the Central Dresden Library in January 1908.<sup>65</sup> In a letter to Amiet, Heckel had written:

I admire Gauguin very much, I have seen some very beautiful paintings by him in the Folkwang Museum. Do you know Indian fresco paintings in the Buddhist temples? There is a . . . publication with photographs by Griffith . . . I discovered it recently in a library here. They are very good works.<sup>66</sup>

Griffith’s book had a profound stylistic influence on both Heckel and Kirchner.

Martensen-Larsen has noted that the influence of Ajanta is visible in Heckel’s 1909 painting *Young Man and Girl*.<sup>67</sup> Griffith’s *Paintings*, actually a two-volume work, contained 91 plates and over a hundred illustrations depicting sixth-century Buddhist cave-temples in Ajanta, Indian (fig. 5.35). Kirchner later wrote: “These works made me almost helpless with delight. This unheard-of unity of representation, this monumental tranquility of form, I thought I never would

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<sup>64</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>65</sup> John Griffiths, *The Paintings in the Buddhist Cave-Temples of Ajanta, Khandesh, India*, Vol. 1: Pictorial Subjects (London, 1896) and Vol. 2 Decorative Details (London: 1897). See Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 24.

<sup>66</sup> Heckel, letter to Amiet, Jan. 30, 1908, quoted by Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 24. “Gauguin bewundere ich sehr—ich habe ja von ihm einige wunderschöne Bilder – Folkwang Museum—gesehen. Kennen Sie die indischen Freskomalereien in buddhistischen Grabtempeln? Es existiert eine sehr. . . . Ausgabe mit Photographien wiedergegeben von Griffith . . . Ich habe es vor nicht langer Zeit in einer Bibliothek hier entdeckt. Es sind sehr gute Werke.”

<sup>67</sup> Martensen-Larsen, “Primitive Kunst als Inspirationsquelle der Brücke,” 101.

achieve. All my endeavors seemed hollow and restless to me. I copied a lot from the pictures, only to gain my own style.”<sup>68</sup>

Kirchner made numerous drawings after the Ajanta images (fig. 5.36). The Ajanta influence is especially clear in one of Kirchner’s most important works from the time, *Five Bathers at the Lake* (fig. 5.37). Donald Gordon notes that this was only the fifth canvas of this size—6 1/2 feet in width. The work reveals several important stylistic changes taking place. Gordon writes that “the new style is . . . for the first time, sculptural: the use of gray-blue ‘hatching’ strokes adjacent to most of the contours of the bather’s bodies is sufficient to lend tactile solidarity to the otherwise flat shapes bounded by firm black contours.”<sup>69</sup>

#### ***iv. Significance***

One question that has traditionally preoccupied Brücke scholars is the timing as well as degree of the influence of non-European work on the young Brücke artists. Donald Gordon, for example, has argued that the works of Gauguin, which were exhibited at the Galerie Arnold in September 1910, served as “the necessary catalyst in centering Kirchner’s attention on the fundamental stylistic and thematic possibilities to be found in non-Western art”—in other words, it was only through their exposure to Gauguin that the Brücke artists’ eyes were opened, not only to the primitive as theme but in terms of a primitive aesthetics.<sup>70</sup> Although

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<sup>68</sup> E. L. Kirchner, “Die Arbeit E. L. Kirchners,” quoted by Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” 357. Gordon notes that Kirchner may have had some previous knowledge of Indian temple architecture, and possibly also Ajanta wall paintings. Wilhelm Kreis, a professor in Dresden who was for a time Heckel’s employer, beginning around 1906, had previously visited India in order to study the temples.

<sup>69</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 74.

<sup>70</sup> Donald E. Gordon, “Kirchner in Dresden,” *Art Bulletin* XLVIII (1966): 356.

Heckel had been interested in Ajanta since 1908, it was only between autumn 1910 and the spring of 1911 that Kirchner began to render copious drawings based on the Ajanta works. Jill Lloyd has argued persuasively against Gordon's suggestion, however, noting that Kirchner and Heckel had already been making stylistic explorations in reference to the works of the Dresden museum before the Gauguin exhibition (as seen, for example, in Kirchner's postcards from 1909, or the images from the letter of March 31, 1910). Lloyd concludes that Gauguin's work likely "provided confirmation that Kirchner's interest in non-European art was an appropriate direction for a modern artist to be moving in, rather than a catalyst."<sup>71</sup>

Interestingly, Lloyd argues instead that it was "the experience at the Moritzburg ponds which seems to have been a necessary catalyst for their own creative use of this non-European visual stimulus." In her view,

The Moritzburg summers provided an opportunity for the Brücke artists to recreate their bohemian studio lifestyle in an open-air setting. Stripped of their clothes and "civilized" trappings, the artists and their models were "at one" with nature and led the life of modern "primitives" bathing in the nude and playing games with bows and arrows and boomerangs on the model of Karl May Red Indian stories.<sup>72</sup>

I agree with Lloyd, that the important question in tracing the development of the Brücke's primitivism is not to determine when exactly "primitive" motifs or styles appeared in Brücke artwork, but rather to ascertain their significance, for the artists as well as the viewers of these works. Lloyd, in her interpretation of the Brücke's developing primitivism, sees the bathing excursions as a fantasy-image of oneness with nature, nudity, and a carefree sexuality. These ideas were epitomized, she argues, in the figure of the "primitive"—which therefore was understood as a source of "renewal" in opposition to modern, alienated, civilization. The

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<sup>71</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 26.

<sup>72</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

bathing scenes in some way represent a fulfillment of the forays in the studio, which she calls a “testing ground” for primitivism. Both the bohemian studio and the summer bathing sessions presented an “alternative” to modern life.<sup>73</sup> In both cases, she argues that the driving impulse was the Brücke’s desire to merge art with life. She quotes a letter Kirchner wrote in 1923, recalling the group’s early days:

It was a lucky coincidence that real talents met, whose character and gifts in human terms too, left them no other choice than to become artists. Their life style, home and work, which for “regular” people were unusual to say the least, did not involve a conscious “épater les Bourgeois,” rather the quite naïve and pure necessity to bring art and life into harmony. And it is this more than anything else that has had a great influence on the forms of contemporary art.<sup>74</sup>

In Lloyd’s interpretation, the studio decorations (as well as the artwork centered there) and the “return to nature” ethos of the bathing scenes represented the aspiration to bring art and life into harmony. Lloyd argues, “References to non-European art appear first in the studio decorations because it was here, in the ‘unalienated’ artistic space of the studio that they attempted to bridge the gap between the decorative and fine arts, reintegrating art into life.”<sup>75</sup> Lloyd attributes the desire to reintegrate art and life to Jugendstil—“The primitivism of the studio space depends on . . . the notion of an ‘unalienated’ artistic environment in a Jugendstil tradition, where the barriers between art and life could be dissolved.”<sup>76</sup> Their discovery of the “primitive” thus appears, in this view, as the right thing at the right time; the “primitive” seemed to offer the perfect symbol of merging art and life—creating an authentic alternative in opposition to the alienation of modernity.

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 82.

<sup>74</sup> Lothar Grisebach, ed., *E.L. Kirchner’s Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften* (Köln: Verlag M. Dumont, 1968), 77-78, trans. in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 3.

<sup>75</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 21.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid., 22.

In her analysis of the Brücke's primitivist studio decorations and artwork, Lloyd makes two primary arguments. She argues that they reveal that the Brücke sought to express a conception of "primitive" sexuality, in opposition to the constraints of bourgeois modernity, and that the indiscriminatory use of "exotic" as well as "primitive" sources elided difference, thereby recapitulating the homogenous "other" of colonial discourse. In other words, they have merely inverted the discourse of anthropological primitivism:

The association of women and children with their concept of the primitive, which we shall find constantly recurring in the studio, bath and street scenes, relates to the sexual and racial politics of social Darwinism, which regarded both women and native communities as "children" occupying a lower rung on the evolutionary ladder. For die Brücke these associations had positive rather than negative connotations, suggesting a life force and an intuitive, "natural" alternative to the rationalizing and calculating "masculine" temper of their times. But this touches the ambivalent and problematic heart of their primitivism: for the "attack" on bourgeois codes and practices inverted rather than truly subverted existing evolutionary criteria, and thus reproduced many of the ruling prejudices of their times in a new and "positivist" guise.<sup>77</sup>

We should not be so quick, however, to dismiss Kirchner's designation, in the *Chronicle*, of his discovery of the art of Africa and Oceania as a "parallel" to his own artistic developments. On the one hand, this seems an obvious Eurocentric attempt to dismiss the idea that a European might be influenced by such works. A few lines further on in the *Chronicle*, Kirchner notes that "in Cranach, Beham, and other German masters of the Middle Ages," the Brücke "found its first art historical corroboration"—in other words, another rejection of influence. And the *Chronicle* ends with the bold statement: "Not influenced by today's fashionable

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<sup>77</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 47.

tendencies, Cubism, Futurism, etc., [the Brücke] struggles for a human culture, which is the source of a true art.”<sup>78</sup>

Kirchner was a sensitive and self-centered individual. He often pre-dated his own works; he was clearly anxious to undermine any perception that he had been influenced from any direction. However, there is a difference between “not influenced”, “corroboration,” and a “parallel”—and Kirchner’s choice of “parallel” seems not to have been an arbitrary one: in a letter to Botho Graef in 1916, Kirchner used the same word: “I discovered parallels to my own work in rafters from Palau and in Negro sculpture.”<sup>79</sup> The term “parallel” suggests a subtle but important recognition that these other artists are actually traveling the same trajectory; in other words, Kirchner seems to make a gesture of coevalness, to use Johannes Fabian’s phrase.

Moreover, Kirchner does not suggest that primitive styles are somehow inherently more authentic. In a letter to Nele van de Velde (daughter of architect Henry van de Velde), Kirchner thanks her for sketches she sent him which she had made at the Ethnographical Museum in Basel, saying they made him “very happy.” Yet he goes on:

If you want to get any benefit from such study you must examine and draw other works of art as if they were nature herself, that is to say, something where you capture feeling in only one of its thousand different aspects and by means of such study absorb life itself. The subject isn’t important. At best the attempt to reproduce it is a good exercise for the fingers and for your powers of comprehension.<sup>80</sup>

For Kirchner, a recuperation of the “primitive” is not the key to authentic, unalienated art. They can offer one example, but there are others. The key is a mixture of work and intuition.

“Remember Van Gogh,” he continues,

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<sup>78</sup> Kirchner, *Chronik der KG Brücke* (1913), translation by Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 213.

<sup>79</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Letter to Botho Graef, Sept. 21, 1916, in Grisebach, 53, translated in Miesel, *Voices*, 18.

<sup>80</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, letter to Nele van de Velde, no date (written summer 1919), in *Briefe an Nele und Henry van de Velde*, ed. Roman Norbert Ketterer (München: R. Piper, 1961), 19-22, translated in Miesel, *Voices*, 20-22.



who had his brother send him reproductions of drawing in order to copy them? Or Rembrandt, the way he copied the Indians and Italians? Certainly neither lacked material. They copied only to acquire “*du corps*.” To that end you have to draw constantly everything that impresses you: pictures, statues, objects, people, animals, nature, everything, everything because developing a calligraphic style is just as difficult as learning to walk.<sup>81</sup>

In other words, it is not “primitive” authenticity Kirchner is describing, but simply an *aesthetic* authenticity, which in his view could be found in “primitive” works from Africa and Oceania, as well as “exotic” Buddhist wall paintings or Japanese prints. The criteria for such authenticity was the artist’s participation in, and relationship to, contemporary life. Reinhold Heller, in a recent essay in which he subjects Kirchner’s *Chronicle* to a rigorous detailed analysis, has argued that Kirchner’s account of the group’s history in this document is interesting precisely because it differs from traditional art historical accounts:

Unlike the standard genetic art historical evolution, which posits an immanent, autonomous process for the evolution of artistic forms and styles, of artworks shaping artworks in a self-contained process of perpetual change, Kirchner tells of an organic growth process defined by the artists’ spontaneous interaction with “*Leben*,” and submission to its “*Erlebnis*.” This is not an art historical transmission of forms, clearly, but rather what can be identified as a process whereby the Brücke artists allow themselves and their work to submit to, be submersed in, and be shaped by the *Kunstwollen* of their temporal era and national locality.<sup>82</sup>

Heller here invokes the concept of *Kunstwollen* (artistic volition), an idea developed by the Austrian art historian Alois Riegl. Although Riegl had outlined the concept in *Stilfragen: Grundlegungen zu einer Geschichte der Ornamentik* (1893), it was not until *Spätromische Kunstindustrie* (1901) that he fully developed the idea.<sup>83</sup> Riegl conceived of the *Kunstwollen* as a

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<sup>81</sup> Ibid.

<sup>82</sup> Reinhold Heller, “Some Reconsiderations of Brücke’s ‘New German Style’: Shape, Components and Ramifications,” in *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism: Bridging History*, ed. Christian Weikop (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 65.

<sup>83</sup> Michael Ann Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History* (Ithaca and London: Cornell University Press, 1984), 73.

rejection of the materialist interpretation of the history of ornamentation of Gottfried Semper's *Der Stil in den technischen und tektonischen Künsten, oder Praktische Ästhetik* (2 vols., 1860/63). For Semper, historical changes in decorative forms could be explained as the result of changes in technique and material. Riegl essentially introduced a Hegelian notion of an artistic "spirit" driven by an internal will in a dialectical relationship to reality. According to Michael Ann Holly, Riegl interpreted changes in ornamental motifs "neither as a technical necessity nor as a 'spiritless copy of nature' but rather as a 'goal' of the 'art spirit' or the 'tendency' of the artistic will."<sup>84</sup> The ramifications of this idea were profound, as Holly explains:

One benefit of this scheme for the history of art resides in [its] refusal to regard any style of art as degenerative or devoid of artistic merit. Each period is its own testimony to an artistic intention. All is relative. Roman art does not represent a decline of the classical ideal, and the period between the Edict of Milan and the rise of Charlemagne demands recognition not conveyed by the appellation "Dark Ages," with which it was condescendingly burdened. Works of antiquity must be judged only by "their materiality, their contour and color, on the plane and in space." All ages have a part to play in the ongoing evolution of the artistic will.<sup>85</sup>

Kirchner and the Brücke artists may not have been directly aware of Riegl's works, although it is certainly possible Kirchner would have come across Riegl's writings; it is interesting to note that Riegl's initial discussion of geometric style in *Stilfragen* makes special note of the use of "primitive" zig-zag patterns.<sup>86</sup> Nevertheless, Riegl's ideas revolutionized art history, and the notion of a *Kunstwollen* was part of the general art historical discourse in the first decade of the twentieth century. It received perhaps its greatest popularity through its influence upon Wilhelm Worringer's *Abstraction and Empathy* (1908).<sup>87</sup> However, a similar

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<sup>84</sup> Holly, *Panofsky*, 72-73.

<sup>85</sup> Holly, *Panofsky*, 74.

<sup>86</sup> Riegl, *Stilfragen*, 23.

<sup>87</sup> Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraktion und Einfühlung: Ein Beitrag zur Stilpsychologie* (Munich: Piper, 1908). Holly notes that Riegl's approach to the cultural relativity of interpretive concepts also had an important influence on

relativist notion of aesthetics informed other ethnographic-aesthetic studies, such as Ernst Grosse's *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (1894), and the German ethnologist Paul Germann had applied Riegl's concept to Cameroon artwork in particular in his 1910 article, "Sculptural- Figurative Handicrafts in the Grasslands of Cameroon."<sup>88</sup>

Whether Riegl was a direct influence or not, the concept of *Kunstwollen* seems to be operating in Kirchner's *Chronicle*, as Heller suggests; the Brücke's art is presented as evolving "vitalistically in spontaneous visualizations of the experience of life as witnessed and lived passionately by the artists in the milieu that they shape themselves or that is shaped around them." Moreover, this perspective is expressed somewhat more explicitly in one of Kirchner's sketchbooks, also from 1913, in which he wrote:

Painting and sculpture are arts for the eye. . . . The task of the painter is to use the means of painting to create a work that captures his sensory experience. Through constant work he knows how to use his means. There are no hard and fast rules for it. . . . The enduring art of any period of time has its own particular parlance.<sup>89</sup>

Kirchner and his colleagues shared the common primitivist, Eurocentric attitudes of the day. Yet this in itself does not suffice to demonstrate that in their artistic creations, the "primitive" is imagined, as Lloyd argues, as an "authentic" and "immediate" alternative to modernity—a symbol of unalienated existence. Although they emerged from ubiquitous

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later developments, for example the theoretical biology of Jakob von Uexküll; one should also add to the list the German ethnologist Leo Frobenius. Holly, *Panofsky and the Foundations of Art History*, 70.

<sup>88</sup> Ernst Grosse, *Die Anfänge der Kunst* (Freiburg and Leipzig: J. C. B. Mohr, 1894); Paul Germann, "Das plastisch-figürliche Kunstgewerbe im Grasland von Kamerun: Ein Beitrag zur afrikanischen Kunst," in *Jahrbuch des Städtischen Museums für Völkerkunde zu Leipzig*, vol. 4 (1910) 1-35.

<sup>89</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Sketchbook 29, reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Die Skizzenbücher: 'Ekstase des ersten Sehens.'* *Monographie und Werkverzeichnis*, ed. Gerd Presler (Karlsruhe and Davos, 1996), 400, translated in "No one else has these colors": *Kirchner's Paintings*, eds. Karin Schick and Heide Skowranek (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantze, 2012), 25. Skowranek notes that "the lasting significance of this text for Kirchner is evidenced by the fact that he published it thirteen years later, with marginal changes, as part of an article titled 'Die neue Kunst in Basel,' in *Das Kunstblatt* 10 (September 1926), 321-22."

romantic primitivist discourse, in which the “primitive” commonly signified “authenticity” and “unalienated” existence, their own work, through such techniques as parataxis and a modernist self-reflexivity regarding medium and representation, in fact dismantled such significations. To demonstrate this however, it is necessary to provide the discursive context in which the “primitive” functions; the notion of the “primitive” as a symbol of unalienated existence only makes sense within a broader framework, that is, a critique of modernity as alienated. Only by situating primitivism as a feature of the critique of modernity will it be possible to re-evaluate the Brücke’s use of the primitivist discourse. Therefore, before addressing the prevalent interpretation of Brücke primitivism, it will first be helpful to consider their relationship to the critique of modernity.

#### **Part 4. The Critique of Modernity**

To reassess the aims of the Brücke, it is necessary to first prise apart the aesthetic aims from the cultural stance, which are so often conflated in the critical scholarship. A good place to begin is with their “founding” document, the “Programm der Künstlergruppe Brücke,” of 1906 (fig. 5.38). A woodcut produced by Kirchner for the first group exhibition at the Seifert lamp factory in Dresden, the Program was subsequently printed and distributed at the group’s early exhibitions.<sup>90</sup> The succinct Program, in spite of its brevity, supplies a keen insight into what the Brücke were up to, both through what it contains, and what it does not:

With a belief in development, in a new generation of creators as well as appreciators, we call together all youth. And as youth who carry the future, we seek freedom of

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<sup>90</sup> The text of the Program is commonly attributed to Kirchner, although it was evidently agreed upon by the group.

movement and of life for ourselves in opposition to the older, well-established powers. Anyone belongs to us, who reproduces with immediacy and authenticity that which urges him to create.<sup>91</sup>

This is perhaps the vaguest manifesto in a century of manifestos, providing little in the way of aesthetic principles. There is much that is ambiguous about the Brücke, their aesthetics, their goals, artistic and otherwise, and this opening artistic statement therefore provides a good beginning point for a critical re-examination. The following commentary engages in a critical archaeology, an attempt to peel back the layers of interpretation which have accumulated around the Brücke and their work. This type of deconstructive criticism is necessary to remove some of the many preconceptions which are routinely invoked to analyze the work. Having cleared the ground, I'll emphasize an alternative cultural context and introduce a new critical vocabulary, in order to cast a new light on the group's significance.

The obvious criteria celebrated in the Program are youth, immediacy, and authenticity. Interpretations of this document tend to discern in it aesthetic principles as well as more ambitious cultural aims. Heller, for example, calls it concise summary of the group's "messianic goals"—"It formulated a fervent faith in a better – if undefined – utopian future of freedom and sincerity."<sup>92</sup> It embodied their desire "to challenge the institutions and traditions of Dresden, of the world beyond the city, and of the still-young twentieth century." Strictly speaking, however, the program espouses immediacy and authenticity in terms of artistic creation—one should produce "authentically" (*unmittelbar* und *unverfälscht* can also be translated as directly and

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<sup>91</sup> Translation is my own. "Mit dem Glauben an Entwicklung, an eine neue Generation der Schaffenden wie der Genießenden rufen wir alle Jugend zusammen, und als Jugend, die die Zukunft trägt, wollen wir uns Arm- und Lebensfreiheit verschaffen gegenüber den wohlangesessenen älteren Kräften. Jeder gehört zu uns, der unmittelbar und unverfälscht wiedergibt, was ihn zum Schaffen drängt." Magdalena M. Moeller, et al., *Dokumente der Künstlergruppe Brücke* (Munich: Hirmer, 2007), 42. For an alternative translation, see Heller, "Brücke in Dresden and Berlin," 15.

<sup>92</sup> Heller, "Brücke in Dresden and Berlin," 15.

genuinely or unfalsified). Where Heller and others go wrong is in their reading of the Brücke's interest in youth and authenticity as a messianic rejection of the present.

The first task then will be to make a distinction between the group's aesthetic goals and their cultural goals. This will make it possible to tackle the two claims separately: that their aesthetics were shaped by the discourse of primitivism—an interest in immediacy and authenticity in terms of artistic production—and the argument that their primitivism constituted a nostalgic longing for an imagined “primitive” way of life, as a way of critiquing the problems of modernity (the romantic primitivism as specified above). In both cases, their primitivism clearly emerged from this discourse of romantic primitivism, but at times, in their most effective works, especially those of Heckel, Schmidt-Rottluff, and Kirchner, this naïve primitivism was called into question. I shall begin first to dismantle the second claim—that their work should be interpreted as a critique of modernity.

To begin with the document's celebration of youth: scholars readily admit that “the Brücke's progressive impulse toward artistic renewal clearly did not mean assuming the ‘down-with-the-past’ position that so often typifies the agonistic stance of avant-garde movements, such as Futurism and Dadaism.”<sup>93</sup> The group's interest in the German “Gothic” woodcuts and the German visual canon, including such artists as Albrecht Dürer and Lucas Cranach, has been well studied. However, there is a residual inclination to see in the Brücke a “down-with-the-present” position. Heller, for example, has written that:

The optimistic, even messianic faith in modern art and its evolution implicit in the Brücke program's first phrase is maintained throughout the text. It is joined by a similarly adulatory conviction that youth—Jugend—and a “new generation” as the

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<sup>93</sup> Christian Weikop, “Brücke and Canonical Association,” in *Brücke: the Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 103.

current phase of the evolutionary process are preordained to serve as carriers of the newly evolving art.<sup>94</sup>

Heller sees the emphasis on youth and evolution as a rejection not only of the past, but of the present. The Brücke's interest in youth was different, he asserts, from the "Young Germany" literary movement of the 1830s: "youth was [here] a means of preserving and revitalizing what already existed." Heller cites the art nouveau periodical *Jugend*, which was the source of the term Jugendstil and a major influence upon the Brücke members, as embodying a new understanding of youth. In 1899, the journal had declared in its opening pages: "Our age is not old, not tired! We are not witness to the last breaths of a dying epoch! We stand at the dawn of a fundamentally healthy time! It is a joy to be alive!"<sup>95</sup> The obvious reading of this would seem to be a rejection of utopian thinking and cultural discontent, and yet Heller insists it suggests a stance of rejection:

Certainly a sense of transition is maintained here, but the emphasis is not on the previously existent, weakened entity—the nineteenth century in 1899 by definition doomed to die—but rather is on the new entity which is evolving. This, too, was the attitude expressed by Brücke's program as it sought the displacement of older and "well-established powers." It was an attitude of rejection, a conscious proclamation of Brücke's "otherness," which denied compromise or integration.<sup>96</sup>

Yet what seems most striking in the quote from *Jugend* is the insistence upon the "joy" of living in a "fundamentally healthy time." Heller is led to overlook such details, as are other scholars, through the practice of associating the Brücke with the many prominent critiques of modernity then in circulation. Heller in this instance invokes the figure of Julius Langbehn (1851–1907), the author of *Rembrandt als Erzieher* (Rembrandt as Educator, 1890). The implication that Langbehn

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<sup>94</sup> Reinhold Heller, *Brücke: German Expressionist Prints from the Granvil and Marcia Specks Collection* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1988), 5.

<sup>95</sup> Preface, *Jugend* 3, no. 1 (January 1, 1899), 2, quoted by Heller, *Brücke: German Expressionist Prints*, 6.

<sup>96</sup> Heller, *Brücke: German Expressionist Prints*, 6.

offers some insight into understanding the Brücke has been advanced most recently by Christian Weikop, one of the foremost scholars on German Expressionism.<sup>97</sup> Langbehn vehemently critiqued science, rationalism, and materialism as the ruin of contemporary society; he held up Rembrandt as the exemplar of the *Niederdeutsche*, by which he meant northwestern Germany, as the spiritual educator for a new Germany. Langbehn announced in the opening pages:

It has almost become an open secret that the spiritual life of the German people [*Volk*] today is in a state of slow—some would say rapid—decay. Science everywhere is splintering into specialization; epoch-making figures are missing in the fields of thought and literature; the visual arts, though represented by important masters, lack monumentality and thus their best effect; musicians are rare, performers many.<sup>98</sup>

Weikop and Heller both connect Brücke to Langbehn, although the route is a circuitous one.

Both produce quotes from the text which seem to carry reverberations for the Brücke; Weikop notes Langbehn's remark, "A figure like Rembrandt, at least for Germany, can create a *bridge*

between the fragmented man of today and the total man of the future."<sup>99</sup> Weikop admits the

connection is tenuous: "Although Langbehn's influence on the Brücke cannot be directly traced

as he is not mentioned by name in the primary source material, his significance in helping shape

the cultural milieu out of which the Brücke grew was considerable."<sup>100</sup> Langbehn's popularity is

unquestionable; between 1890 and 1909 his book went through 49 printings.<sup>101</sup> Yet there are

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<sup>97</sup> Christian Weikop, ed., *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism: Bridging History* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 1-10; and Weikop, "Brücke and Canonical Association," in *Brücke: the Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 102-127.

<sup>98</sup> Julius Langbehn, *Rembrandt als Erzieher*, 37th ed. (Leipzig: C. L. Hirschfeld, 1891), 45-58, trans. Thomas Dunlap, *German History in Documents and Images*, German Historical Institute, Washington, DC, [www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org](http://www.germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org).

<sup>99</sup> Weikop, *New Perspectives*, 1.

<sup>100</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>101</sup> David Blackbourn, *The Long Nineteenth Century: A History of Germany, 1780-1918* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998), 395.



reasons to doubt that this particular cultural milieu would have appealed to the Brücke; Weikop and Heller both admit that the Brücke (with the possible exception of Emil Nolde) hardly shared his particular brand of nationalism. More to the point, perhaps, the *Jugend* quote above clearly sets itself against such screeds.

Langbehn, Weikop notes, influenced the artist known as “Fidus” (Hugo Höppener), whose “idyllic images of naked sun-worshippers” seem reflected in an early group insignia (then going by the name “Kuenstlervereinigung Brücke”) created by Kirchner in 1905 (figs. 5.39 and 5.40).<sup>102</sup> Fidus’s images of sunbathers had appeared in the pages of *Jugend*, and the Brücke members clearly enjoyed their escapes to the Moritzburg lakes, where they would bathe in the nude, seemingly part of the popular *Freikörperkultur* reform movement. Yet Fidus was not alone in such imagery. (In fact, the image referred to here, Fidus’ “Lichtgebet” (Prayer to the light), may not have been known to the Brücke artists at the time; although he had made similar images beginning in the 1890s, it was not until 1913, when this particular version was turned into a postcard, that it became widely known in Germany.) A far more likely source for the Brücke artists would have been the periodical *Ver Sacrum*, the journal of the Vienna Secession. Although there are no references in the source material to lead to Langbehn (or Fidus for that matter), the Brücke’s aesthetics reveal a useful comparison with the Secession. In the first volume of *Ver Sacrum* (Sacred Spring, 1898), the opening statement is accompanied by an image by Austrian artist Koloman (Kolo) Moser (1868–1918), which features a similar figure with arms joyously upraised (fig. 5.41). In addition, on the first page an image by Joseph Engelhart (1864–1941) is reproduced, a silhouette which bears striking resemblance to the

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<sup>102</sup> Lloyd makes a similar suggestion, linking Brücke to the *Freikörperkultur* and hence to Fidus. Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 108.

Brücke's poster which Bleyl designed for their first Dresden exhibition, in 1906 (figs. 5.42 and 5.43). Although the Brücke had exhibited the previous year in Leipzig, the Dresden show was much more ambitious, in scope and aim, marking their true arrival on the German art scene. Bleyl's image takes for its subject the nude figure, although the desexualized male in Engelhart's image is now a sexualized female; even so, the figure is not sexualized in a typical sense, when compared to similar representations of the female nude appearing, for example, in the pages of *Jugend* (fig. 5.44). Arms spread, knees joined, the figure appears perhaps tentative, emerging into the light; yet looking straight at the viewer, the gaze is assertive, querying. The figure is half in shadow, yet this is not a sexual coyness. The frontality of the image implies directness, as well as possibly suggesting the frontality of the non-European carvings with which the Brücke were becoming aware. In addition, Bleyl's work makes greater and more dramatic exploitation of stark contrast, through the woodcut technique. The image stresses its two-dimensionality, yet the implied movement into light reminds the viewer of a three-dimensional reality.

Heller notes that the elongated verticality of the poster, which broke from standard proportions in German posters, seems to echo the practices of the Secession; although he "to represent a 'spiritual' movement upward rather than a 'material,' earth-oriented horizontality."<sup>103</sup> In the next section I shall argue that this spiritualist interpretation very much distorts the materialist stance of the Brücke; for the moment, it is worth noting that in the opening statement of *Ver Sacrum*, Max Burckhard (formerly director of the Vienna Burgtheater) offered a paean to youth:

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<sup>103</sup> Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 20.

The spirit of youth, infused by the spring, which has brought the artists together; the spirit of youth, through which the present always becomes the “Moderne” — which is the driving force of all artistic creativity.<sup>104</sup>

In *Ver Sacrum*, modernity (*die Moderne*) is envisioned as being created in and through the present; it is the name for an artistic relationship to life which is being created now, not a utopia in the future or a nostalgia for the past. It is this particular Jugendstil ethos that is reflected and given new life in the Brücke. The important influence of Jugendstil upon the Brücke is well known. However, scholars tend to stress the aesthetic influence while neglecting the cultural outlook.

To continue with the analysis of the Program, then, there is the ambiguity of the word *Entwicklung*. In most contexts the word *Entwicklung* would be translated as development, however in many translations of the Program it appears as evolution, and not without good reason. Around the turn of the century, numerous works of art history explored the topic from a specifically evolutionary perspective, most notably Julius Meier-Graefe’s three volume *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst*, the first volume of which appeared in 1904.<sup>105</sup> Meier-Graefe, one of the founders of *Pan* in 1896, and founder of the periodical *Dekorative Kunst* in 1897, was an important figure in the Jugendstil movement and certainly known to the Brücke. In *Entwicklung*, Meier-Graefe presented a formalist analysis of the historical development of art, leading to the pinnacle of modern art, French Impressionism. (German art, in Meier-Graefe’s view, had failed to participate in this important development, having been

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<sup>104</sup> Max Burckhard, *Ver Sacrum* 1, Heft 1 (January, 1898), 3. “Der Geist der Jugend, der den Frühling durchweht, er hat sie zusammengeführt, der Geist der Jugend, durch welchen die Gegenwart immer zur ‘Moderne’ wird, der die treibende Kraft ist für künstlerische Schaffen.”

<sup>105</sup> Julius Meier-Graefe, *Entwicklungsgeschichte der modernen Kunst: Vergleichende Betrachtung der bildenden Künste, als Beitrag zu einer neuen Aesthetik*, 3 vols. (Stuttgart: Verlag Julius Hofmann, 1904).

arrested on the path by the work of Adolph von Menzel and Arnold Böcklin).<sup>106</sup> The discussion of art in terms of evolution owed much to the influence of biology and Charles Darwin on the development of art history, apparent in other major works such *Evolution in Art* (1895), by Alfred Haddon (who had trained as a biologist), and Henry Balfour's *The Evolution of Decorative Art* (1893).<sup>107</sup>

Nevertheless, I have adhered to the more neutral “development” for a few pertinent reasons.<sup>108</sup> Evolutionary thought, as discussed in a previous chapter in regards to the ethnology of Adolf Bastian, posited a denial of coevalness—an epistemic denial that the anthropologist (or his/her audience) existed in the same time as the “primitive” subject of anthropological knowledge.<sup>109</sup> Stated more simply, evolutionary thought, although it seemingly postulated a linear development of humanity, and thus a connection between a “primitive” past and a “civilized” present, in fact produced a radical ontological break between the two; as evolutionary theory developed under the ideological weight of demarcating the virtues of contemporary civilization, the purported connection in history was endlessly postponed, as the “primitive” other was shackled to a position of radical alterity, the antithesis of the civilized, modern self.

To invoke “evolution” in this context is thus to prematurely associate the Brücke with particular view of the “primitive” which, as I will show, they did not share. Suffice for the

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<sup>106</sup> Peter Paret, *The Berlin Secession: Modernism and Its Enemies in Imperial Germany* (Cambridge, Mass.: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1980), 170ff.

<sup>107</sup> Alfred Haddon, *Evolution in Art* (London: W. Scott, 1895); Henry Balfour, *The Evolution of Decorative Art* (London: Percival & Co., 1893). See Goldwater, *Primitivism in Modern Art*, 20-28.

<sup>108</sup> Others have done so as well: Magdalena M. Moeller, *The Brücke Museum Berlin* (Munich: Prestel, 2001), 10; and Nicole Brandmüller, “The Early Years,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Retrospective*, ed. Felix Krämer (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2010), 56.

<sup>109</sup> Johannes Fabian, *Time and the Other: How Anthropology Makes its Object*, with a new foreword by Matt Bunzl (New York: Columbia University Press, 1983; 2002).

moment to note that this view of evolution was rejected by Bastian himself, the most prominent German ethnologist of the late nineteenth century, founder and director of the Ethnology Museum in Berlin from 1873 until his death in 1905. The Brücke's notions about the *Primitiven* or *Naturvölker* would have been profoundly shaped by Bastian's ethnology (even had they not read his often abstruse monographs), through their experiences in the Berlin and Dresden Ethnographic Museums, the latter of which was organized along exhibitionary lines similar to those devised by Bastian. In addition, they would have been influenced by Karl Ernst Osthaus' Folkwang Museum in Hagen, one of the important early sources for their knowledge of non-European art. Osthaus's museum also dispensed with the evolutionary perspective. In different ways, both Bastian and Osthaus undermined the strict division between "primitive" and "civilized."<sup>110</sup>

The Brücke's conception of the "primitive" will be examined in greater detail below. For the moment let us return to the question of their conception of the "modern." A second reason, therefore, for favoring "development" over "evolution" is precisely to diminish the purported connection of the Brücke with Meier-Graefe, because it is through this association that they are commonly attached to the critique of modernity. To dismantle this assertion, we must now look more closely at the critical relationship of Brücke with Jugendstil.

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<sup>110</sup> On the influence of Osthaus and the Folkwang Museum, see Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 8-12, although her conclusion distorts its ultimate impact, suggesting it offered an ahistoricist and aesthetic (as in purely formal) appreciation of the "primitive," whereas I argue that it primarily disrupted the distinction between form and subject, history and the ahistorical.

## Part 5. Jugendstil

Julius Meier-Graefe was an important figure in the decorative arts movement, an international reform movement which in Germany was associated with Jugendstil. For many, the movement signified a rejection of industrialism and its effects on art. As Jill Lloyd writes, Meier-Graefe “attacked the specialized and mechanized values of the new industrial age which he felt had ruptured the unity of art and society. He hoped to heal this rift by promoting the decorative arts.”<sup>111</sup> As Lloyd points out, Meier-Graefe had attended Simmel’s lectures in Berlin in the 1890s, and thus “his ideas relate to Simmel’s critique of modernity which we find most fully developed in his *Philosophie des Geldes*.” Meier-Graefe, under Simmel’s influence, voiced “a longing for a ‘lost’ organic unity between art and life.”

As noted above, Lloyd argues that Brücke’s connection to Jugendstil served as the root of their ambition “to bring art and life into harmony.” But by associating the Brücke with Meier-Graefe, and through him, to Simmel, Lloyd takes the Brücke’s goal of merging art and life and turns it into an anti-modernity critique. As she writes:

The principles underlying *Jugendstil*, such as anti-historicism, the cults of authenticity and renewal and the breakdown of traditional artistic hierarchies, were transformed in a general and particular way into Expressionist primitivism. The Expressionists' aim to equate art and life moved away . . . from *Jugendstil* ivory-tower aestheticism towards a new vitalism. At the same time, however, they found themselves lodged in a problematic zone between a private and a public world—affirming life but rejecting society.<sup>112</sup>

But Jugendstil and the decorative arts movement were in fact ideologically diverse, and cannot simply be understood in terms of an straightforward opposition to modern industry and

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<sup>111</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 6.

<sup>112</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

economy, as may be the case with Meier-Graefe. For others associated with the movement, it represented above all a rejection of the traditional hierarchical distinction between fine art and ornament, and an interest in merging art and life, not as utopian vision, but applied in practice. A primary exponent of this view was Hermann Obrist, and Obrist in fact exerted a far greater, and historically demonstrable, influence on the artists of the Brücke. Kirchner had in fact attended for two semesters in 1903-4 the Studio for Teaching and Experimentation in the Applied and Fine Arts (*Lehr- und Versuchs-Atelier für angewandte und freie Kunst*), in Munich, which Obrist had co-founded with Wilhelm Debschitz in 1902.<sup>113</sup> Graduates of the school were encouraged to find applications for their designs in industry. The intention was reform, but not rejection, of contemporary industrial society. The purpose of the school was, as the name implies, to develop practical applications of Jugendstil ideals.<sup>114</sup> Obrist's 1903 publication, *Neue Möglichkeiten in der bildenden Kunst*, a collection of his essays and lectures, outlined the principles of his aesthetic vision, not as utopian ideal but as practice in the present:

Rarely has the moment been more propitious than it is today, when the initiative of powerful and enterprising corporate bodies has rescued the outskirts of our cities from the speculative builders of bleak apartment houses and has made them available for the building of homes fit for human beings to live in. In many of these developments the practical conditions of life at least come very close to the ideal that previous generations vainly longed for. In this new century let us take the chance that offers itself: let us prove ourselves worthy of social progress, by making these homes solid, true, contemporary, and individual, so that we may take pleasure in them and so that we may leave our descendants a memorial, not of the things we most liked to imitate, but of the way we were at the onset of the new century.<sup>115</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Eva Afuhs and Andreas Strobl, eds., *Hermann Obrist: Skulptur, Raum, Abstraktion um 1900* (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009); Brandmüller, "The Early Years," 55.

<sup>114</sup> Cf. Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 236n38.

<sup>115</sup> Obrist, *Neue Möglichkeiten*, 112-114, translated by David Britt, *Expressionist Utopias: Paradise, Metropolis, Architectural Fantasy*, edited by Timothy O. Benson (Berkeley and Los Angeles: University of California Press and Los Angeles County Museum of Art, 2001), 284. Benson's contribution to the volume situates Obrist in the utopian (and spiritualist) camp, although, of the few quotations from Obrist that Benson provides, the most significant one ironically reveals his anti-utopian stance. Obrist had responded to a questionnaire from the Abeitsrat für Kunst in

Obrist's numerous designs and sculptures, moreover, depicted forms in which the natural, human, and the material world (the built environment) existed in a synthetic harmony.<sup>116</sup> In the margins of a sketch, he declared: "Everything spirals, radiates, swirls! Lines of force!"<sup>117</sup> In this, as Annika Waenerberg writes, "Obrist's own quest for forms differed from that of most of his fellow seekers," a result of his appreciation for scientific naturalism.<sup>118</sup> Natural objects, Obrist wrote, were "organized entries full of their own laws, full of structures, full of manifestations of the forces at work in them."<sup>119</sup> (See figs. 5.44 and 5.45.)

Lloyd readily acknowledges Obrist's important influence upon the Brücke. She cites a passage from *Neue Möglichkeiten*:

We have already seen that there is little reason to admire or to regret the passing of the architecture and works of art made in recent times, although much of this is beautiful. It is much better to imitate the creations of relatively primitive peoples—like the early Greeks and medieval artists, or to go even further back to the ancient Vikings or even the natives from the South Seas. But this doesn't mean that we should imitate their

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1919 (about rebuilding after World War I), in which he declared: "[Utopia] is, in fact, the only thing that survives. Let us then live in Utopia, let us fabricate plans, castles in Spain." See Benson, 31.

<sup>116</sup> Hermann Obrist, *Neue Möglichkeiten in der bildenden Kunst* (Leipzig: Eugen Diederichs, 1903)

<sup>117</sup> "Alles spiralt, radiates, swirls! Kraftlinien!" Sketch, estate of Hermann Obrist, SGS Munich, Inv. no. 48816-fZ., translated by Annika Waenerberg, "Lebenskraft als Leitfaden: Naturprozesse und Konstruktion in Obrists Formensprache," in *Hermann Obrist: Skulptur, Raum, Abstraktion um 1900*, edited by Eva Afuhs and Andreas Strobl (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009), 46.

<sup>118</sup> Annika Waenerberg, "Lebenskraft als Leitfaden: Naturprozesse und Konstruktion in Obrists Formensprache," in *Hermann Obrist: Skulptur, Raum, Abstraktion um 1900*, eds. Eva Afuhs and Andreas Strobl (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009), 48.

<sup>119</sup> Hermann Obrist, "Die Lehr- und Versuch-Ateliers für angewandte und freie Kunst," *Dekorative Kunst*, no. 12 (1904): 229, translated by Waenerberg, "Lebenskraft als Leitfaden," 48. In a 1937 letter to Hagemann, Kirchner described the composition of his *Berlin Street Scene* (1913) in terms that echo Obrist's: "I have the photo of the street scene in front of me . . . What a lot of authentic drawing is needed to make a picture like this! How the figures hold together and build the whole street with nothing other than two entrances. How the movement of the passers-by is captured by the rhomboid formed by their heads, which is repeated twice. In this way life and movement results from geometric, elementary forms. They rest on firm laws which precisely here, in this picture, are rediscovered, that is to say by the artist in light of his experience of nature. It is the task of the artist after all to sight the richness of nature and to order it anew, to reform it so that what is meant shines forth, clear and pure." Kirchner to Hagemann, Davos, Feb. 27, 1937, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 146.



styles. Not at all. But we should create as they created—unconsciously, genuinely, simply, naturally, without thousands of stimuli and distractions.<sup>120</sup>

The resonance with the Brücke Program is striking. Yet Lloyd suggests that while Obrist provided a basis for Brücke's aesthetics, this was superseded by their turn to a new "primitive" vitalism. This turn brought them to Meier-Graefe and Simmel, and the practice of "merging art and life" in the present is thereby morphed in her interpretation into a nostalgic longing for an "unalienated" or "authentic" primitive state. But, as is clear from Obrist's comment, the emphasis is on an experience of this vitalism in the present, in the act of creation. (In addition we should note his oscillation between *Ursprüngliches* and *Wilden*, which runs throughout the text, suggesting a more "primordial" than strictly evolutionary understanding of the "primitive.")

This sense of vitalism, which is linked to an experience of the present, in harmony with society rather than against it, is perhaps most clear in Obrist's structural work. Although Obrist is largely known for his textile work, embroideries and furniture, around 1900 he began designing memorials and monumental outdoor structures, such as tombs, urns, and fountains. Today Obrist is widely recognized as the founder of twentieth-century architectural sculpture.<sup>121</sup> Obrist's sculptures and monuments featured architectural features such as

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<sup>120</sup> Obrist, *Neue Möglichkeiten*, 96, translation in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 5. "Wir haben gesehen, daß wir wenig Veranlassung haben, die Architektur und das Kunsthandwerk dieser letzterwähnten Zeiten sehnsüchtig und wie hypnotisiert zu bewundern, auch trotzdem vieles daran schön ist. Viel eher noch könnten wir solchen Völkern nachsinnen, die verhältnismäßig Ursprüngliches schufen, wie z. B. die ersten Griechen und die Gotiker, oder noch weiter zurück, etwa die alten Wikinger, ja sogar die Wilden der Südseeinseln. Doch auch das ist um keinen Preis so zu verstehen, daß wir nun diese Stile uns zu eigen machen sollten. Nein, sondern nur so sollen wir schaffen, wie sie schufen; unbewußt, wahr, einfach, wie es ihnen natürlich kam, ohne tausend Anregungen und Ablenkungen."

<sup>121</sup> Obrist trained as a sculptur. See Viola Weigel, "Herman Obrist und Die Fotografie zwischen 1900 und 1914," in *Hermann Obrist: Skulptur, Raum, Abstraktion um 1900*, eds. Eva Afuhs and Andreas Strobl (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2009), 177ff.

columns, capitals, and pyramids, demonstrating his concern with spaciality, a quality which has led critics to question “the erstwhile thesis of Jugendstil as a purely two-dimensional style.”<sup>122</sup> This was not lost on his contemporaries, however. The critic Willi Frank, writing for *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration* about Obrist’s *Oertel Monument (Grabmal Oertel, 1903/04)*, opined that “the work combines sculptural and architectural beauty in a completely new way.”<sup>123</sup> (See fig. 5.46.) Wilhelm Michel, writing for the same journal, observed that, regarding Obrist’s work, “the sculptors think it is not sculpture, the architects think it is not architecture.”<sup>124</sup> (See figs. 5.47 and 5.48.) Photographs of Obrist’s works were also frequently featured in *Pan* and *Dekorative Kunst*. Osthaus, as well, imagined a reform of industry through the reenvisioning of decorative arts, as did Fritz Schumacher, professor of structural engineering and Kirchner’s instructor at the Technical University in Dresden. This awareness of spaciality, and the importance of seeing art as part of its environment, was later expressed by Kirchner in his “Chronicle of the Künstlergruppe Brücke” (*Chronik der KG Brücke, 1913, fig. 5.8*), where he wrote that he and Heckel “attempted to bring the new painting into harmony with interior space.”<sup>125</sup>

In other words, the work of Obrist, Osthaus and Schumacher does not neatly fit the label of “ivory-tower aestheticism” with which Lloyd seeks to characterize Jugendstil. The vitalism that is found in the Brücke works should not, in this sense, be seen as a turning away

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<sup>122</sup> Willy Rotzler, “Hermann Obrist. Im Vorfeld abstrakter Skulpter,” in *Aus dem Tag in die Zeit. Texte zur modernen Kunst, mit einem Postskriptum von Stanislaus von Moos* (Zurich 1994), 35, quoted by Weigel, 180.

<sup>123</sup> Willi Frank, in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, vol. XV (Oct. 1904-March 1905), 168, quoted by Weigel, “Herman Obrist,” 180.

<sup>124</sup> Wilhelm Michel, “Eines neues Grabmal von Hermann Obrist,” in *Deutsche Kunst und Dekoration*, vol. XXI (1907/08), 225, quoted by Weigel, “Herman Obrist,” 180.

<sup>125</sup> Kirchner, *Chronik der KG Brücke*. “Heckel und Kirchner versuchten die neue Malerei mit dem Raum in Einklang zu bringen.” The original is reproduced in Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 212.

from Jugendstil, but an extension of the ethos into a new terrain. It was not a shift towards a more nostalgic or romanticized critique of the present, in the vein of Meier-Graefe; the Brücke artists, like Obrist, pursued an application of Jugendstil ideals to art and life.

The relevance of this distinction, between a reform movement and a critique of modernity, is further demonstrated in the pages of *Jugend: Münchner illustrierte Wochenschrift für Kunst und Leben*, one of the leading journals of the Jugendstil movement (along with *Pan* and *Simplicissimus*), which was read by the Brücke members in their early days studying architecture at the Dresden Technical University.<sup>126</sup> As Lloyd notes,

*Jugend* proposed, on the one hand, a direct and immediate relationship with nature, expressed visually in the pantheistic and botanical designs which filled its pages. On the other hand *Jugend* illustrators embraced modern-life subjects—park, café and circus scenes.<sup>127</sup>

This variety is apparent in the images from *Jugend* which Lloyd references (figs. 5.49 and 5.50). Lloyd poses this as a contrast, and yet as we have seen, the Jugendstil pioneers who had the most influence upon the early development of the Brücke did not in fact see an opposition here, but the potential for achieving harmonious experience, whether in natural settings or in urban ones. Lloyd is correct to point out, however, that in the images presented in *Jugend*, the natural world and the urban or social world are clearly separate “geographic locations”; but in both locations, the aim is to depict a harmony of form and content.

Adolf Münzer’s *Electrical Railway (Die Elektrische, 1900)*, although it is not in fact typical of his work, in particular demonstrates the Jugendstil synthesis of art and life, nature and society (fig. 5.51). Münzer generally favored images of young women, sometimes dancing or

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<sup>126</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 6. Lloyd cites Fritz Bleyl, “Erinnerungen,” in “Fritz Bleyl, Gründungsmitglied der Brücke,” *Kunst in Hessen und am Mittelrhein*, vol. viii (1968), 95.

<sup>127</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 6..

elegantly riding atop horses, simple works which in the typical Jugendstil manner, with their ornamental and stylized quality, often to the point of caricature (and sometimes intentionally cartoonish). Yet in this work, Münzer turns to examine a familiar scene of metropolitan life, and one in which, self-reflexively, Jugendstil design is in fact present in the subject itself. Münzer thus depicts the seamlessness between design and function, and the way in which the organic-botanical thrust of Jugendstil decoration blends into the urban environment. The familiar Jugendstil curves give shape not only to the windows of the tram but the tracks upon which it glides, and forms and objects which are distinct are brought into a formal harmony. There is for example the half-glimpsed wheel which visually joins with the curve of the track to seemingly suggest an organic-like spiral form (fig. 5.52). Less speculatively, there is the marked enthusiasm for industrial invention, for electricity, captured in the eagerness with which the children lean forward at the front of the train—and not only them, but the adult to the conductor’s left; even the conductor seems to betray a familiar silent joy or pride in his work.

The point here is not to deny that the Brücke diverged from Jugendstil aesthetics; they clearly would do so. Aesthetically, they would reject the “cult of line, decoration, form, significance, beauty”<sup>128</sup>—the elegance and aesthetic harmonies would be replaced by rough, edgy angularity and jarring contrasts. The important point however is that they absorbed from Jugendstil the desire to bring art and society into harmony, and in a manner that celebrated the vitalism of the moment, which included both nature and contemporary society. *Jugend* was a

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<sup>128</sup> Thomas Mann, “Gladius Dei,” *Stories of Three Decades*, trans. H.T. Lowe-Porter (1936; New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1976), 183, quoted by Timothy W. Hiles, “Reality and Utopia in Munich’s Premier Magazines: Simplicissimus (1896-1944) and Jugend (1896-1940),” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Vol 3: Europe 1880 – 1940, Part II*, eds. Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 719.

product of bustling *fin-de-siècle* Munich, which brought together a robust economic and industrial center with (in Thomas Mann's words) a "radiant" artistic community<sup>129</sup>; as Timothy W. Hiles writes, it was intended "to capture the vitality of this thriving atmosphere of innovation and cultural exchange."<sup>130</sup> George Hirth, who founded the journal in 1896, was a major promoter of the arts and crafts movement. Hiles notes, Hirth was "a progressive who saw the positive aspects of innovation in science, politics, and industry, he exemplified the quickly fading embodiment of the South German liberal thinkers."<sup>131</sup> In contrast to Munich's other new journal, *Simplicissimus* (also founded in 1896), with its biting satire and critical social and political commentary, Hirth's journal reflected his liberal optimism through its embrace of the present (*Daseinsfreude*). Hirth hoped to propagate this philosophy and the journal's low cost and accessible content (the editorial philosophy was "*Kurz und gut*," or short and sweet) were intentionally aimed at reaching a broad public (unlike its Berlin counterpart, *Pan*, for example).

*Jugend*, however, was in many ways a self-contradiction. It aimed at merging art and life, yet the focus on the aesthetic and literary (in contrast to a journal like *Simplicissimus*) implied a separation of art and politics. Similarly, the affirmation of the present could easily slip into the simplistic nature-worship of Fidus (a frequent contributor), or a sentimental escapism into a fantasy world—the pages were often populated with nymphs and satyrs, medieval knights and lovely maidens.<sup>132</sup> The latter were nevertheless sandwiched between advertisements for such modern accoutrements as bicycles, fashionable chocolates and wines,

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<sup>129</sup> Thomas Mann, "Gladius Dei," 183, quoted by Hiles, "Reality and Utopia," 720.

<sup>130</sup> Hiles, "Reality and Utopia," 721.

<sup>131</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>132</sup> *Ibid.*, 725.

and the latest cameras—producing above all a sense of contrast with the “aesthetic” content (fig. 5.53). The synthesis of nature and society, of the human and the nonhuman world, although the informing principle of Jugendstil leaders such as Obrist, were at times unintentionally reinforced in the pages of *Jugend*. In many ways, however, it would be the sensitivity to contrast that shaped the Brücke aesthetics even more greatly than Jugendstil’s harmonies, a point to which I will return below.

Lloyd interprets *Jugend*’s aesthetics as “an alternative to the charade of historicism”: “In *Jugend*,” she writes, “country and city subjects were located in opposite geographic locations, but they were analogous in terms of the double-pronged attack on historicism.”<sup>133</sup> Two errors must here be noted. First, the division between country and city is less clear than she suggests; as we saw both in Münzer’s image and in Obrist’s work, natural forms were discernible in the human environment, and architectural, structural principles were visible in nature. Second, Lloyd’s interpretation of the “attack” on historicism plays upon multiple meanings of the word. She means, initially, the rejection of the nineteenth-century tendency in art to return to historical subjects as well as recreate particular historical styles. She cites Nikolaus Pevsner, for whom historicism “is the tendency to believe in the power of history that suffocates originality and replaces it by an activity that is inspired by the precedent of a particular period.”<sup>134</sup> Yet she slides from this definition of anti-historicist aesthetics into the suggestion that die Brücke evinced a “turning away from history,” which is taken to mean “rejecting society.” It will therefore be necessary to once more distinguish between aesthetic aims and cultural orientation.

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<sup>133</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 6.

<sup>134</sup> *Ibid.*, 5.

Aesthetically speaking, the young artists' desire to throw off the yolk of classical aesthetics is clear. This is evident in the primary place that free drawing and drawing from nature took in their early work. In Dresden, Kirchner enrolled in such courses as "Figure Drawing from Live Models" and "Freehand Drawing and Ornamentation."<sup>135</sup> Although we should note that he also took courses in "Dresden's Museums and their Artistic Treasures" and "Nineteenth-Century Sculpture," and thus was not entirely seeking to break from the past—although he presented it as such in his *Chronik*:

[The artists] came together in Kirchner's studio to work there. Here they found the opportunity to study the nude—the basis of all visual art—in its natural freedom. From drawing on this basis resulted the desire, common to all, to derive inspiration from life itself, and to submit to direct experience.<sup>136</sup>

The Brücke artists rejected the constraints of academically sanctioned techniques, and demanded openness to present experience. Above all the influence from Obrist propelled them in this direction. Nicole Brandmüller writes that Obrist's studio, "unlike most art schools in those days . . . did not allow students to copy older works of art, but instead required them to do all their drawing from nature."<sup>137</sup> Moreover, the models "were allowed to move freely around the studio," instead of holding "rigid, highly artificial poses . . . and some of the nude classes were even held outdoors."<sup>138</sup> In Dresden, the artists initiated the practice of drawing "quarter-hour nudes," in which the models were not allowed to remain in any single position for longer than fifteen minutes. These intentionally hasty sketches compelled the artists to react quickly to their subjects, and thus they sought to free themselves from conventional

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<sup>135</sup> Brandmüller, "The Early Years," 55.

<sup>136</sup> Translated by Peter Selz, "E.L. Kirchner's 'Chronik der Brücke,'" *College Art Journal* 10, no. 1 (Autumn, 1950): 50.

<sup>137</sup> Brandmüller, "The Early Years," 56.

<sup>138</sup> *Ibid.*, 55-56.

representational practices (fig. 5.54). Writing in his diary in 1925, Kirchner recalled the scene in their Dresden studio:

We drew and we painted. Hundreds of drawings a day, with talk and fooling in between, the artists joining the models before the easel and vice versa. All the encounters of everyday life were incorporated in our memories in this way. The studio became the home of the people who were being drawn: they learned from the artists and the painters from them. The pictures took on immediate and abundant life.<sup>139</sup>

Thus, the Brücke's aesthetic aim of rejecting academic historicism, and creating from "life," is undeniable. Lloyd errs, however, when she connects this aesthetic aim to a "turning away from history," which amounts to a rejection of society. She bases this argument, as we have seen, on a purported alignment with Meier-Graefe and Simmel, writing, "This spirit of contempt for the petty bourgeoisie and the materialistic values of their times underlies the organization of die Brücke, rather than any specific ambitions for social reform."<sup>140</sup>

This realignment, she claims, paralleled a new primitivism, in which the "primitive" signified the authentic and unalienated, in contrast to modern life. She writes that the Brücke thus are responding to:

the themes treated by Simmel and Meier-Graefe at the turn of the century, concerning direct and authentic creative activity as an alternative to the alienating and fragmented conditions of divided labour. . . . [Kirchner's] notions of originality and authenticity stem from the early Dresden years in Schumacher's Studio. But whereas the arts and crafts movement sought a solution to the alienating conditions of the age in the cultivation of handwork and craft traditions, the Brücke artists tried to reclaim a sense of authenticity via their transforming notions of the "primitive."<sup>141</sup>

Yet we are now in a position to see that Lloyd interprets the Brücke's primitivism through the lens of this alleged "alignment" with the critique of modernity. As I will demonstrate in greater

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<sup>139</sup> Kirchner, *Davoser Tagebuch*, 78, translation by Dube, 29. See also Heller's description of Kirchner's second studio in Dresden: "Consisting of three rooms, the space functioned more as living quarters for the artist and his friends, models, and companions than as a working atelier." Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 25.

<sup>140</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 20.

<sup>141</sup> *Ibid.*, 80.



detail below, the Brücke's notions of authenticity were in fact less straightforward, and more paradoxical, than this interpretation suggests. The authentic was not ultimately posed in opposition to the alienating or artificial conditions of reproduction; their work questioned the distinction between artificial and authentic. To return then to the Brücke Program, authentic (*unverfälscht*) is more satisfactorily interpreted in opposition, not to alienation or fragmentation, as Lloyd would have us think, but to *verfälscht*, distorted or falsified. For the Brücke, *unverfälscht* suggested an interest above all in genuineness and vitality; yet this had more to do with perceiving and expressing the truth of experience, and not a critique of a particular state of "modernity." As Peter Selz writes,

Kirchner was convinced that art must be an expression of life itself and not a background for living. His historical studies had made him aware that Greek vase painting, Roman murals, the art of the South Seas, and Byzantine and medieval art were formed by and expressed the essences of their respective lives and cultures. This, he felt, must be the aim of the new generation of painters.<sup>142</sup>

The Brücke's vision for a new art was *not* predicated upon rejuvenating a "depleted" modern existence through recuperating a regenerative "primitive" authenticity (any more than this would have been the aim of Roman murals or carved Palau beams), but rather based on aesthetic principles of perception and expression that demanded that the artist honestly depict lived experience (an honesty which depends as much upon an awareness of style, an appreciation for formal precedent, as it does an immediate intuition); principles, in other words, that would hold true, in any type of society—the distinction between civilization and primitive rendered irrelevant.

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<sup>142</sup> Selz, *German Expressionist Painting*, 70.

Lloyd concludes that, on account of Brücke's "new" primitivism, which echoed the contemporary critique of modernity, their "redefinition of Jugendstil"—that is, the transformation of the original Jugendstil-inspired aim of "merging life and art" into a form of primitivism—was doomed to failure. Citing Georg Lukács, she writes, "German modernism was thus 'cut off from the mainstream of society,' despite its idealist attempts to counteract the reified conditions of the modern world and to bridge the gulf between art and its public."<sup>143</sup>

To underline the point, Lloyd records that in 1911 Kirchner and Pechstein founded in Berlin the Institute for Modern Instruction in Painting (Moderner Unterricht in Malerei, or MUIM-Institut), which was based upon the Obrist Studio. She notes that the MUIM-Institute "only attracted two pupils," a sign of their failure. She further suggests that the organizational structure of the Brücke produced a contradiction. In seeking to escape the "alienating commercial conditions of the art market," they created collectives based on membership—but in doing so ended up relying upon a small coterie of "bourgeois enthusiasts." She argues, citing a comment from Lucius Grisebach, that the bohemianism of the Brücke studios "was a topsy-turvy version of their own middle-class backgrounds, and that the visits their bourgeois intellectual supporters like Gustav Schiefler and Botho Graef made to the bohemian studio settings were 'flights in their own dreamland.'" Lloyd frames the Brücke's failure on this score in terms of Peter Bürger's *Theory of the Avant-Garde*. Bürger had drawn a distinction between bourgeois modernism and a more radical avant garde. Modernism, in its formalist self-referentialism and its celebration of the autonomy of art (captured in the motto, *l'art pour l'art*), had cut itself off from praxis, from ordinary life. Avant-garde, according to Bürger,

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<sup>143</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 20.

developed explicitly as a reaction to, and rejection of, modernism's self-amputation. As Lloyd writes, quoting from Bürger, "the crux of the avant-garde revolt was their ambition 'not to isolate themselves but to reintegrate themselves and their art into life.'"<sup>144</sup> In Lloyd's interpretation, the Brücke, "which in many ways occupies a transitional position in the history of modern art, also spans across Bürger's categories, relating to aspects of both." Lloyd's image of spanning categories, of course, plays off the image of the bridge, one which she interprets as ambivalence, caught between utopia and despair, or in this case, between a "primitive" ideal, and a "modern" reality. Although the Brücke begin with a desire to bring art and life into harmony, their particular form of primitivism ultimately prevents them achieving their aim, leading Lloyd to conclude that, "in Bürger's terms this constitutes a modernist counterculture rather than a radical avant garde."<sup>145</sup>

However, before drawing such a conclusion, it is worth citing the 1911 advertisement in which they explained their offerings (fig. 5.55):

Modern instruction in painting, graphic design, sculpture, rug design, glass and metal work, painting in architectural contexts. Instruction with new means in a new spirit. Life drawing in relation to composition. . . . Contemporary life is the point of departure for creation.

The most important lessons to draw from the MUIM are, first, the Obrist-influenced merger of art and design, aesthetics and engineering; and second, the devotion to "contemporary life." Brücke's interest in joining in art and life did not represent "turning away from history" or "rejecting society," as Lloyd has it; the manifold experience of life (private and public, natural

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<sup>144</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, ix.

<sup>145</sup> *Ibid.*, 20.

and urban), was for them the material for creation. The key to their aesthetics, inspired by the vitalism of Obrist, is precisely this openness to this life.

## Part 6. Brücke and the Vital Materialism of Walt Whitman

Hermann Obrist, however, is not the only important source for understanding the Brücke's particular vitalism and openness to contemporary life. Although it is seldom discussed in the scholarship, the Brücke members, and Kirchner especially, were great admirers of the poetry of Walt Whitman. As Peter Selz has written, "[Kirchner] wanted his paintings to be a vital image of the life of his time, the result of a creative imagination stimulated by the realities of its environment. He wanted to do paintings, he later wrote, similar in feeling to Walt Whitman's *Leaves of Grass*, 'the book which became his best friend.'"<sup>146</sup> This intriguing comment is the only mention Selz makes of Whitman in his important survey, *German Expressionist Painting*. It is unfortunate that aside from a few rare mentions in the general literature, noting that Kirchner described *Leaves of Grass* as his favorite book, the connection between Whitman and the Brücke has not been seriously pursued.<sup>147</sup> The Brücke's interest in Whitman further

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<sup>146</sup> Peter Selz, *German Expressionist Painting* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1957), 70. Selz attributes the quote to a "Short Biography of Kirchner"—"an unpublished typewritten manuscript written by Kirchner in English around 1932). This manuscript, as well as a wealth of further original Kirchner documentation, is in the possession of Hans Bolliger, Bern, who has made it available to me."

<sup>147</sup> The only work devoted to Whitman's influence on the Brücke is Dayna Lynn Sadow, "The Influence of Walt Whitman on the German Expressionist Artists Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, Erich Heckel, Max Pechstein and Ernst Ludwig Kirchner" (MA Thesis, Michigan State University, 1994). In the published scholarship the only extended discussion of which I am aware is in Donald Gordon's posthumously published *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 29-30. Gordon takes Whitman's influence seriously, yet sees his important only in terms of supporting the Brücke's interest in "frank eroticism" and a liberated sexuality.

undermines the prevailing inclination to link the Brücke to the “critique of modernity” and its exponents discussed above.

The first German translation of *Leaves of Grass* was published in 1889 as *Grashalme*. The translation was made by Thomas William Rolleston, an Irish nationalist, and Karl Knortz, a German immigrant to the United States. Rolleston, a friend of Whitman, had settled in Dresden around 1880. Rolleston translated a selection of poems from *Leaves of Grass*, which he printed with the progressive Swiss publisher Jakob Schabelitz, an edition that was well received.<sup>148</sup> In 1907, the German playwright Johannes Schlaf published an edition of *Grashalme* with the first German mass market book publisher Philipp Reclam.<sup>149</sup> Schlaf’s edition is generally credited with giving birth to the “Whitman Cult,” as Walter Grünzweig terms it, and Whitman’s poems began to appear in numerous periodicals, such as *Das Forum*, *Die Aktion*, and *Die Weissen Blätter*.<sup>150</sup> However it would seem that Kirchner and his group were ahead of the crowd, as Donald Gordon writes: “Heckel, during the group’s evenings together in 1905 and 1906, would read this or that poem out of Kirchner’s books, or would recite it from memory in a manner thrilling, moving, vitally brilliant—whether it was ‘*die Brück’ am Tah,*’ ‘*Zwei Füsse im Feuer,*’ or, from Walt Whitman’s *Leaves of Grass*.”<sup>151</sup>

Whitman’s signature importance to Kirchner is testified to in a letter Kirchner wrote to the art dealer Curt Valentin, dated April 17, 1937:

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<sup>148</sup> Walter Grünzweig, “Whitman in the German Speaking World,” in *Walt Whitman and the World*, eds. Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995), 163. Grünzweig writes: “While some critics did admit that they were puzzled about poems that looked as though they were copied from an encyclopedia, most admitted that something new had arrived on the German literary scene.”

<sup>149</sup> Johannes Schlaf, *Grashalme von Walt Whitman* (Leipzig: Reclam, 1907). The work contained translations of 83 poems.

<sup>150</sup> Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop, eds., *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Vol 3: Europe 1880 – 1940* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 807-8.

<sup>151</sup> Donald E. Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1968), 18.

That great poet, Walt Whitman, was responsible for my outlook on life. During my dismal days of want and hunger in Dresden, his *Leaves of Grass* was and still is my comfort and encouragement.<sup>152</sup>

Dayna Lynn Sadow notes that Heckel too was an ardent admirer.<sup>153</sup> Whitman is indeed all the more relevant due to what he symbolized to his German audience—namely, more so than in the US, he was looked to as an embodiment of primitivism. Whitman’s translators are quick to quote his “barbaric yawp” which he sounds “over the roofs of the world.”<sup>154</sup>

The few works of scholarship that do comment upon the influence of Whitman suggest that the primary interest for the Brücke would have been Whitman’s celebration of free sexuality, which would have aligned with their bohemian rejection of bourgeois standards.<sup>155</sup> Weikop, for example, writes that “the sexual vitalism of his verse made him a favorite.”<sup>156</sup> This is no doubt the case. Others focus on Whitman’s depiction of the human in communion with nature, in particular the bather paintings of 1912 and 1913, and this too seems evident.

However, as I argue, the particular relationship between human and nature on display in the Brücke’s work cannot fully be accounted for in this interpretation. The tendency has been to see Brücke images of humans in nature as a “longed for” or utopian image of unalienated life; these interpretations miss the fact that the same vitalism which comes across in the nature paintings is also found in still lifes and scenes depicting the built environment (which includes

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<sup>152</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, “Letter to Curt Valentin, April 17, 1937,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16 - May 10, 1952*, ed. Curt Valentin Gallery, trans. anonymous (New York: Curt Valentin Gallery, 1952).

<sup>153</sup> Sadow reports that Hans Geissler, the executor of the Heckel estate, confirmed that Heckel had owned a copy of *Grashalme* “and read it with great enthusiasm.” Sadow, “The Influence of Walt Whitman,” 55.

<sup>154</sup> Schlaf, Vorwort to *Grashalme*, 8. See also Schlaf’s article, “Walt Whitman,” *Freie Bühne für den Entwicklungskampf der Zeit* 3, no. 2 (1892): 978. The line is from the final section of “Song of Myself.”

<sup>155</sup> Donald E. Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1987), 29-30

<sup>156</sup> Christian Weikop, “Transitions: from Expressionism to Dada: *Neue Jugend* (1914; 1916-17), *Die freie Strasse* (1915-18), *Club Dada* (1918),” in *The Oxford Critical and Cultural History of Modernist Magazines, Vol 3: Europe 1880 – 1940, Part II*, eds. Peter Brooker, Sascha Bru, Andrew Thacker, and Christian Weikop (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 807.

not only small town life but the urban world)—it is, in other words, not a “return to nature” at work, but a vitalism based on material itself, experienced not in a utopian fantasy (as critique of the present), but experienced in the present, the modern, the “now.”

Scholars have invoked the Brücke’s interest in Whitman primarily when discussing a series of oil paintings which Kirchner made in the summer of 1912, depicting scenes on the island of Fehmarn, in the Baltic Sea. Kirchner had first visited Fehmarn in 1908. He returned in 1912 with Erna Schilling; Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel visited him there. Rhodes describes Kirchner’s *Ins Meer Schreitende* (Striding into the Sea, 1912, fig. 5.56), considered the high point of these works, as an example of Whitman’s “democratic” sexual equality (a line of argument Rhodes presumably picks up from Gordon’s posthumously published *Expressionism: Art and Idea*).<sup>157</sup> A man and woman in natural surroundings stride forward into the sea with ease and purpose, holding hands, their bodies radiant and healthy. Rhodes writes, “It is tempting here to invoke Kirchner’s favorite poet,” and cites Whitman’s line, “The Female equally with the Male I Sing”—a declaration from “One’s Self I Sing,” the very first “inscription” in *Leaves of Grass*.<sup>158</sup> In addition, the objects of the painting all seem to resonate with each other, as curves are duplicated and colors schemes are balanced; the figures seem to be made of the same stuff as their surroundings. As in many of Kirchner’s works, there is an inversion of forms. The downward curve of the bathers’ legs is inverted in the upward curve of the hills behind them. The curves of the female’s breasts are mirrored in the upward curves intended to suggest the male’s clavicle bones. The waves and stones reveal upward curves, the sky downward curves.

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<sup>157</sup> See Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, 29-31.

<sup>158</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 38.; Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader’s Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965), 1. The poem was included in Schlaf’s translation.

Rhodes writes, “The shapes used to delineate their taut, gothic forms are not only echoed in each body, but also in the waves, dunes, lighthouse and sky. The bathing pictures are images of communion, not only with nature, but also between human beings.”<sup>159</sup>

Rhodes’ depiction captures the vitalism of Kirchner’s engorged landscape. Yet this vitalism is consistently interpreted as a “longed-for” or “archaic” authenticity, symbolized by the “primitive.” In other words, as the sexual antithesis of bourgeois life, and as the natural antithesis of modern society. Ashley Bassie, for example, quotes a passage from “Song of Myself,” in which Whitman, she claims, “expresses ecstatically the longed-for fusion with nature itself that became so central to Expressionist thinking.”<sup>160</sup> Donald Gordon similarly invokes the “primitive” in his interpretation, writing, “Kirchner here comes closest to a vision of untamed dionysian man, at one with a state of primal nature.”<sup>161</sup> Two issues must thus be addressed: the erroneous focus in such interpretations on “nature” (as opposed to the *material*), and the way in which the “primitive” is said to operate in these works.

There can be no doubt that Kirchner approached the topic with the “primitive” in mind. In a letter, Kirchner compared his Baltic refuge with the exotic South Sea Islands: “Ochre, blue, green are the colors of Fehmarn, wonderful coastlines, sometimes with the abundance of the South Seas, great flowers with fleshy stalks.”<sup>162</sup> Donald Gordon notes that the proportions of the bodies in *Striding to the Sea* echo Kirchner’s wood sculptures from this period, which were

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<sup>159</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 38.

<sup>160</sup> Ashley Bassie, *German Expressionism* (New York: Parkstone International, 2012), 47.

<sup>161</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 83.

<sup>162</sup> Wolfgang Henze, ed., with Annemarie Dube-Heynig and Magdalena Kraemer-Noble, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner—Gustav Schiefler: Briefwechsel, 1910-1935/1938: Mit Briefen von und an Luise Schiefler und Erna Kirchner sowie weiteren Dokumenten aus Schieflers Korrespondenz-Ablage* (Stuttgart and Zurich: Belser, 1990), 61, quoted by Karin Schick and Heide Skowranek, “Thirteen Paintings from Three Decades,” in *No one else has these colors”: Kirchner’s Paintings*, ed. Karin Schick and Heide Skowranek (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantze, 2012), 119.



derived from Cameroon sculptures. (See for example *Sitzende Frau mit Holzplastik*, Seated Woman with Wood Sculpture, 1912, fig. 5.56.) Gordon's interpretation of a complementary Fehmarn work, Kirchner's *Badende zwischen Steinen* (Bather between Rocks, 1912), reveals the way in which, through the association of the "primitive," nature is cast as the antithesis of modernity:

The body of the *Bather* thus possesses the compactness of youth and the vitalist vigor of the nubile conceived in primitive terms. The over-all expression appears superficially archaic, suggesting a race of human beings confident and unselfconscious, possessing a casual and natural innocence possible only before the Fall. But it is a flawed innocence which is depicted here, expressing the fantasy wish of an anxiously urban age.<sup>163</sup>

While it is clear that the "primitive" offered the framework through which Kirchner approached his subject, it is less clear that this "primitive" is posed as simply "archaic" in opposition to modernity, as a "fantasy wish," as Gordon would have it. It is important to note that this was not the only work Kirchner made at Fehmarn. Although most of the works depict vivid landscapes, and often bathers, a full examination of Kirchner's output reveals that the same techniques, which supposedly depict a unity of human and nature, are also employed in such works as *Burg auf Fehmarn* (Burg on Fehmarn, 1912, fig 5.58), where red-roofed houses and forest grow together, merging into a dense foliage comprised of both the organic and the man-made, built environment, as rounded hills are echoed in rounded streets up to the rounded roof and steeple of what must certainly be St. Nicholas Church (see fig. 5.59). In addition, in *Striding*, the lighthouse is a small feature on the horizon; in several other works from the summer, however, it figures centrally, including *Grüner Leuchtturm auf Fehmarn* (Green Lighthouse on Fehmarn, 1912, figs. 5.60 and 5.61). Other works that depict a dynamic and

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<sup>163</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 82.

energetic unity, not just of human and nature, but of the built environment and nature, include *Hafen Burgstaaken, Fehmarn* (Burgstaaken Harbor, Fehmarn, 1913), *Bootshafen auf Fehmarn* (Boat Harbor on Fehmarn, 1913), *Gut Staberhof, Fehmarn, I* (Staberhof Countryseat, 1913, fig. 5.62) and *Gut Staberhof, Fehmarn, III* (Staberhof Countryseat, III, 1913, fig. 5.63).

One might be tempted to see these images of idyllic countryside landscapes as a reflection of *Heimatkunst*, the popular late-nineteenth century movement in Germany composed of artists and intellectuals who “saw the countryside and the traditional small town as the source of the nation’s health, the modern city as a threat to it.”<sup>164</sup> *Heimatkunst* revolved around images of cottages and country life; its proponents included Langbehn as well as Adolf Bartels, whose popular illustrated study, *Der Bauer in der deutschen Vergangenheit* (The Peasant in German History) was published in 1900. The artist community at Worpswede, established in the 1890s not far from Bremen, is often seen the most prominent example of this attempt at joining “spiritual integrity and national purity” in a bucolic rural setting.<sup>165</sup> Weikop has recently raised this very issue, suggesting (tentatively, he admits) that “the multifaceted notion of *Heimat* might be helpful in allowing us to reconsider the nature of Brücke’s cultural identity.”<sup>166</sup>

The contemporary interest in *Heimat* no doubt adds an important context to the Brücke’s work, but there are good reasons to resist aligning their own with the tradition of *Heimatkunst*. Schmidt-Rottluff, for starters, had visited Worpswede in 1907. In a letter dated 1909, he criticized their work as provincial, “a wholly temporary phenomenon in German

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<sup>164</sup> Blackbourn, *Long Nineteenth Century*, 395.

<sup>165</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 32. For more on Worpswede, Modersohn-Becker and the relation to Brücke, see Dube, *Expressionism*, 12-17.

<sup>166</sup> Christian Weikop, ed., *New Perspectives on Brücke Expressionism: Bridging History* (Farnham, Surrey: Ashgate, 2011), 1.

art.”<sup>167</sup> (Jill Lloyd notes that he had probably not seen the work of Paula Modersohn-Becker, whose paintings diverged from the lyrical landscapes of the Worpswede style, particularly in her turn to portraits and still lifes, and her adoption of a primitivism inspired by Gauguin.)

Perhaps the best response to such attempts to link the Fehmarn works and Brücke’s depictions of nature to *Heimatkunst* is the aesthetic development of Kirchner’s work itself; for example, among the works Kirchner executed during this same period, we find *Nollendorf Platz* (Nollendorf Square, 1912), *Zirkusreiterin* (Girl Circus Rider, 1912), and *Weiblicher Akt mit Badezuber* (Female Nude with Bathtub, 1912), some of Kirchner’s best known and most highly praised paintings, all of which are a far cry from *Heimatkunst* (figs. 5.64 – 5.66). Scholars generally present these animated works of contemporary life as distinct from the Fehmarn works, and attribute the contrast to ambivalence and alternating interests (moving between the “backward-looking” interest in nature or *Heimat*, the “forward looking” interest in modern life). This interpretation neglects the important similarities in the treatment of the subjects between the Fehmarn works and these works of “contemporary life”; only in the latter scenes, the vitalism of the human in “archaic” nature is found instead to manifest itself in the public urban city center, the world of popular entertainment, and private domestic space.

One should note, for example, the use of the same palette and serrated shading techniques used for both *Nollendorf Platz* and *Gut Staberhof I*. The scene on Fehmarn involves few humans and little action, in comparison to the busy city scene; and yet *Gut Staberhof I* shares the same glowing energy and the sense of movement of the material, from the earth to the treetops to the rooftops. These two works, though thematically varied (city versus country),

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<sup>167</sup> Gerhard Wietek, *Schmidt-Rottluff Graphik* (Munich: 1971), 58, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 245n6.

are linked to each other and to the other works just mentioned through an aesthetic trajectory that begins with *Fünf Badende am See* (Five Bathers at the Lake, 1911, fig. 5.67), as Donald Gordon has argued.<sup>168</sup> An important transitional work for Kirchner, *Five Bathers* was inspired by the Ajanta paintings which Kirchner encountered in Griffiths' illustrated volume of Indian Buddhist cave paintings. Gordon writes, "*The Five Bathers* marks the precise moment of departure from the Fauve style dominant in Kirchner's painting until this time. The colors chosen, for example, are green, brown, and lavender pink for the figures—recapitulating the secondary hues which dominate those Ajanta paintings illustrated in color by Griffiths. More muted oranges (browns), greens and violets were to dominate Kirchner's palette in 1912 and 1913, largely replacing the pure yellows, reds and blues favored during the years of Van Gogh and Fauve inspiration." Gordon notes that this new color scheme is most fully expressed in *Striding into the Sea*. In addition, Gordon notes that in *Five Bathers*, "the use of small, serrated halftone strokes to supplement the dark contours provides the first occasion when the graphic zig-zag equivalents for modeling are tentatively incorporated into the painting style. These strokes were soon to undergo a morphological transformation from the regularly spaced zig-zags in works from later 1911, through the looser 'scribble' strokes of 1912 and 1913, to culminate in those electric serrations of great amplitude characteristic of the Berlin street scenes in 1913 and 1914."

In other words, the minor use of this hatching brushstroke originally to suggest contours in *Five Bathers* has become, in these works from 1912, more pronounced and dramatic, providing more than contour and three-dimensionality but used to animate the bodies in

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<sup>168</sup> See Gordon, "Kirchner in Dresden," *Art Bulletin* XLVIII (1966): 360.

question. The interesting tension produced by this development is that, as Gordon notes, the use of this technique derives from a shorthand notation to suggest sculptural modeling – inanimate artistic creations. Thus the inanimate is here used to animate.

In the 1912 works the hatching remains largely tied to contours; in another work of 1912, *Porträt Dr. Alfred Döblin* (Portrait of Dr. Alfred Döblin, fig. 5.68), Gordon observes that “the zigzag stroke is here for the first time consistently used to animate interior areas of two-dimensional shapes themselves.” In some of the works from 1913 and 1914 (the Berlin street scenes, the 1914 *Zirkusreiter*), the animation spills over, not only animating shapes, but seemingly animating the relationships between shapes. When placed along this trajectory, works such as *Striding*, *Girl Circus Rider*, *Nollendorf Platz* and *Gut Staberhof I* reveal hatchwork that begins to tear itself away from edges, and to animate bodies and space. Indeed, in *Nollendorf Platz* and *Gut Staberhof I*, the human figures, although glimpsed from a distance in both works, both through positioning and uniform coloring (black in *Nollendorf Platz*, grey in *Gut Staberhof I*) echo the hatchings of the world around them. Thus the dynamism of the brushstrokes, which in *Striding into the Sea* both embeds the figures into their surroundings and evokes (through contours) the volume, materiality and life of the surroundings (the water and sky as well as the land) is equally present in *Nollendorf Platz* and *Gut Staberhof I*.

A second feature uniting these works is the use of spatial distortion. Gordon, in discussing *Zirkysreiterin*, speaks of the way in which spatial distortion creates a “kinesthetic empathy” —the creation of empathy for a body through observing movement, and being drawn into the movement. Gordon writes, “though introducing a marked degree of depth recession ... Kirchner’s work combines a nearly frontal view of the larger figures with an exaggeratedly

foreshortened view of the arena and the spectators upper left (where the two tent-supports converge downward).” The stage appears to the viewer as if seen from a great height, and yet the frontality and proportions of the horse and rider thrust the figures straight to the viewer.<sup>169</sup> Significantly, however, this use of combined perspectives leading to distorted spatiality is also present in the works discussed above, such *Striding* and *Staberhof I*. All have the combination of frontality mixed with foreshortened perspective; most often, it is the central figures which appear frontal; the background and foreground meanwhile are tilted forwards, to produce an aerial view. The effect heightens the movement and creates tension in the work, which produces animation.

In this context, placing *Striding into the Sea* in conversation with other works by Kirchner during the period, it no longer sense to say that the Fehmarn works represent the “unity of the naked human being and primordial nature,” or, as Gordon argues of *Striding into the Sea*, “In its abstract geometry and dynamic tensions . . . the picture (like others of its kind) was to remain inwardly for Kirchner the first embodiment of a cherished dream in a nightmare world.”<sup>170</sup> Rather, these works depict a vital materialism, of which the human is a part, but this vitalism is not confined to the natural, organic world. The works evoke things and the boundaries between them, only to blur them.

Schmidt-Rottluff’s work from the same period offers a further example undermining the ascription of a seemingly simple primitivism of the Brücke nature paintings. Schmidt-Rottluff also drew inspiration from the seaside landscapes of northern Germany, in particular from the Baltic coastal town of Nidden. Such works as *Summer* (1913) and *Three Nudes – Dunes at*

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<sup>169</sup> Schick and Skowranek, *No One Else Has These Colors*, 124.

<sup>170</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 83.

*Nidden* (1913) present another images of humans embedded in nature (figs. 5.69 and 5.70). Moreover, in *Three Nudes*, the “primitive” element is again discernible in the treatment of the figures, whose faces resemble the “primitive” figurines that Schmidt-Rottluff was then depicting in such works as *Still Life* (1913, fig. 5.71) and *Still Life with African Figures* (1913, fig. 5.72). Yet as Rhodes points out, in *Three Dunes* there is an absence of clear signification in the work: “They are not wearing jewelry or clothing in the picture and there is no conventional sign of either savagery or civilization. . . . The women in *Three Nudes* are not exclusively recognizable as white Europeans on vacation in the Baltic town of Nidden, as the title might suggest, since all identifying cultural markers have been omitted.”<sup>171</sup> We can compare this with a similar image from the pages of *Jugend* depicting an Arcadian scene (fig. 5.73). In the work by Wilhelm Volz, a founding member of the Munich Secession, the women “return” to nature, but their robes and the implied modesty of the bather serve as clear reminders not only of civilization but of European civilization, as markers of the boundary between humans and nature. In Schmidt-Rottluff’s work, however, the distinction between nature and human, primitive and modern, is effectively blurred. (One might also compare with Pechstein here, for example his work *Summer in the Dunes*, 1911; the motivation of depicting the human and nature in harmony through the nude is again the same, but by comparison Pechstein’s naturalism limits his ability to express the “embeddedness” found in Kirchner and Schmidt-Rottluff’s work.<sup>172</sup>)

To return to Whitman, then, it is worth quoting in full the “Inscription” from which Rhodes draws:

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<sup>171</sup> Rhodes, *Primitivism and Modern Art*, 89-90.

<sup>172</sup> See also Dube, *Expressionism*, 86-87.

One's-Self I sing, a simple, separate person,  
Yet utter the word Democratic, the word En-Masse.

Of physiology from top to toe I sing,  
Not physiognomy alone nor brain alone is worthy for the Muse, I say  
    the Form complete is worthier far,  
The Female equally with the Male I sing.

Of Life immense in passion, pulse, and power,  
Cheerful, for freest action form'd under the laws divine,  
The Modern Man I sing.<sup>173</sup>

Whitman's poetry, here and elsewhere, is about more than sexual democracy and a celebration of nature. Here, in the opening lines to *Leaves of Grass*, the poet boldly announces a rejection of alleged oppositions: not only between the female and the male, but the individual as opposed to the mass, the body to the mind, freedom to law. Whitman's poem is a passionate statement of authenticity, but there is no dichotomy between this authenticity and modernity. "Nature" pervades both. The "primitive" for the Brücke operated in the same fashion. There is indeed a celebration of nature, but not nature as "archaic," in opposition to the present or modern.

In other words, I would argue it is not a depiction of a lost, "longed-for," "primitive" connection of human and nature that is on display in this Brücke works; it is rather a depiction of the relationship (in the present moment) between the human and the *material*. I use the term "material" here in the sense given to it by Jane Bennett in her work *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, in which she invokes it as part of a philosophical project to resist

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<sup>173</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965, 1. The poem was included in Schlaf's translation.



“the idea of matter as passive stuff, as raw, brute, or inert.”<sup>174</sup> She seeks “to reject the life/matter binary”:

This habit of parsing the world into dull matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings) is a “partition of the sensible,” to use Jacques Rancière’s phrase. The quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations.<sup>175</sup>

Bennett re-examines such thinkers as Baruch Spinoza, Friedrich Nietzsche, Henry David Thoreau, Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, in order to develop a positive ontology of matter as alive. She seeks to “dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter, human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic.”<sup>176</sup> Her aim is that we “take seriously the vitality of (nonhuman) bodies.” By “vitality,” she refers to:

the capacity of things—edibles, commodities, storms, metals—not only to impede or block the will and designs of humans but also to act as quasi agents or forces with trajectories, propensities, or tendencies of their own. My aspiration is to articulate a vibrant materiality that runs alongside and inside humans.<sup>177</sup>

Bennett uses the term “vital materialism” in part to distinguish her conception from vitalism, the popular early-twentieth-century philosophy which is particularly associated with Henri Bergson and Hans Driesch. Bergson, in *L’évolution créatrice* (1907; published as *Creative Evolution* in 1910), and Driesch, in his Gifford lectures titled *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism* (1907-8), both developed philosophies of life out of a deeply felt opposition to a scientific materialist philosophy, which in their view offered purely mechanical or deterministic theories of the universe. Bergson and Driesch insisted that life could not be, indeed must not be reduced to matter. They asserted that matter required something extra, a life principle, which

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<sup>174</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

<sup>175</sup> *Ibid.*, vii.

<sup>176</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

<sup>177</sup> *Ibid.*, viii.

was not itself material, but which was the animating force. Bergson's name for this force was *élan vital*; Driesch's, *entelechy*.<sup>178</sup>

Bennett embraces their "attempts to give philosophical voice to the vitality of things," but ultimately rejects the fact that their work posits a difference, an ontological divide, between life and matter.<sup>179</sup> Although they insisted that matter was ultimately incalculable by the means of scientific rationalism, they felt that in order to make this argument, it was necessary to posit something "outside" of matter, which infused it, but was ontologically different. "The concept of *nature* must be enlarged," Driesch wrote, so that it "consists of one completely spatial and one only partly spatial portion."<sup>180</sup> The vital force, Bennett explains, or that "only partly spatial portion of nature," provided the impetus for change. She thus draws upon vitalism to develop her argument, but rejects its ontological divisions, in order to create an ontological picture of "vibrant matter" itself—she writes optimistically: "It might be only a small step from the creative agency of a vital force to a materiality conceived as itself this creative agent."<sup>181</sup>

The art of the Brücke, I would argue, was also inspired by the same cultural context of vitalism and *Lebensphilosophie* that fostered Bergson's and Driesch's ideas; but more than this, it in fact comes closer to the vital materialism as theorized by Bennett. In works like *Striding into the Sea*, we see a depiction of matter itself as vibrant and alive. This vibrant matter isn't found only in the bathing scenes, but in images of Dresden and in Berlin, whether in the bustling thoroughfares or circus entertainments.

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<sup>178</sup> Ibid., 62-81.

<sup>179</sup> Ibid., 63.

<sup>180</sup> Driesch, *The Science and Philosophy of the Organism* (1908), 321, quoted in Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 64.

<sup>181</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, 65.

Bennett, in outlining her theory of vital materialism, notes that her work is based on more than philosophical argument: “What is also needed is a cultivated, patient, sensory attentiveness to nonhuman forces operating outside and inside the human body.”<sup>182</sup> She explains that she has endeavored to develop attentiveness to things, in particular through close attention to the writings of Thoreau and Whitman. She has developed this aspect of her work in subsequent essays and lectures, attempting to recuperate the nineteenth-century notion of Sympathy, but to expand its definition beyond its human-centered focus, to designate a “peculiar cross-species rapport or exchange,” “a sphere that includes but is not limited to inter-*human* activity.” She terms this “impersonal mesh of attractions and affiliations between bodies” an OntoSympathy.<sup>183</sup> Thoreau, she says, suggests such a view when he writes: “Shall I not have intelligence with the earth? Am I not partly leaves and vegetable mould myself?”<sup>184</sup> She quotes from Whitman’s “Song of Myself,” where Whitman declares: “I find I incorporate gneiss, coal, long-threaded moss, fruits, grains, esculent roots.”<sup>185</sup> (Gneiss is a common type of foliated rock.) Bennett concludes: “I take Thoreau and Whitman to be saying that the Sympathy in which they participate is a function of a certain overlap or coincidence of *materials*.”

The Brücke’s interest in Whitman, I would argue, goes beyond the interest in free sexuality and an idealized nature; rather, the Brücke aesthetics were based on a similar notion of sympathy (although they didn’t term it such) with material, and a sense of vital materialism

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<sup>182</sup> *Ibid.*, xiv.

<sup>183</sup> Jane Bennett, “Vegetal Life and OntoSympathy,” unpublished paper presented in colloquium for the School of Criticism and Theory, Cornell University, Ithaca, NY (June 2013), 2-3. See also Jane Bennett, “The Solar Judgment of Walt Whitman,” in *A Political Companion to Walt Whitman*, ed. John E. Seery (Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 2011), 131-146.

<sup>184</sup> Thoreau, *Walden and Civil Disobedience* (1966), 93, quoted by Bennett, “Vegetal Life,” 4.

<sup>185</sup> Whitman, “Song of Myself,” Section 31, quoted by Bennett, “Vegetal Life,” 5.

as Bennett understands it. As it happens, Whitman's leading German translator, Johannes Schlaf, had quoted the same line as Bennett in his essay on Whitman from 1892. Schlaf went on to explain, "Everything lives in him, in you, in all of us, is contained and enclosed by us: humans, stars, times, animals, plants, stones."<sup>186</sup>

A few lines further, Schlaf quotes a line from a memorable section of "Song of Myself": "Urge and urge and urge / Always the procreant urge of the world."<sup>187</sup> Donald Gordon quotes this passage as well, when discussing the Brücke-Whitman connection. The surrounding verses are worth quoting in full:

I have heard what the talkers were talking, the talk of the beginning and  
the end,  
But I do not talk of the beginning or the end.

There was never any more inception than there is now,  
Nor any more youth or age than there is now,  
And will never be any more perfection than there is now,  
Nor any more heaven or hell than there is now.  
Urge and urge and urge,  
Always the procreant urge of the world.  
Out of the dimness opposite equals advance, always substance and  
increase, always sex,  
Always a knit of identity, always distinction, always a breed of life.<sup>188</sup>

Gordon sees this as an example of the "passionately written verses in which the sexual 'urge' is given direct expression," an evocation of "the sheer physical attraction existing between people"; in Gordon's view, Whitman served to reinforce the Brücke's bohemian

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<sup>186</sup> Johannes Schlaf, "Walt Whitman," *Freie Bühne für den Entwicklungskampf der Zeit* 3, no. 2 (1892): 982, translated by Walter Grünzweig, in *Walt Whitman and the World*, ed. Gay Wilson Allen and Ed Folsom (Iowa City: University of Iowa Press, 1995). "Alles lebt in ihm, in dir, in mir, in uns allen und ist in uns enthalten und beschlossen: Menschen, Gestirne, Zeiten, Tiere, Pflanzen, Steine."

<sup>187</sup> Ibid.

<sup>188</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass: Comprehensive Reader's Edition*, ed. Harold W. Blodgett and Sculley Bradley (New York: W.W. Norton & Co., 1965), 30-31. From "Song of Myself," Section 3.

“public celebration of sexual activity.”<sup>189</sup> Although the sexual element is clearly important, what Gordon misses is the immanence of desire across the material realm. Moreover, he misses the way in which Whitman here rejects the notion of the “modern” as historically unique or unprecedented. Yet these are the aspects that Schlaf in fact had stressed in his article on Whitman:

We are everything there was and everything there will be; there is no difference between these two; everything is one. Nothing is offensive or mean. Copulation is no more offensive than death. Everything is a miracle. The body is something miraculous that must be revered. In this spirit, he transfers the attributes of his body to everything that comes in touch with him. He speaks of broad and muscular fields etc. and yet also transfers attributes of lifeless objects to his body, speaks of “the mix'd tussled hay of the head, beard, brawn,” etc.<sup>190</sup>

Schlaf here is describing Whitman in the same manner as Bennett does. Bennett would note that for Whitman this is more than a poetic or metaphorical “transfer,” but an ontological assertion of sympathy, and aside from this word choice, Schlaf seems to agree that this is more than metaphor, but rather a matter of experience.

If we re-examine the works by Kirchner we have been discussing from this perspective, it becomes possible to view them as depictions of what Bennett terms “vital materialism.” Part of Bennett’s method, she explains, is not only a willingness to theorize the existence of “encounters between ontologically diverse actants,” but also involves an act of defamiliarization:

I will turn the figures of “life” and “matter” around and around, worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something the way a common word when repeated can

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<sup>189</sup> Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, 29.

<sup>190</sup> Schlaf, “Walt Whitman,” 982.

become a foreign, nonsense sound. In the space created by this estrangement, a *vital materiality* can start to take shape.<sup>191</sup>

In these works by Kirchner, a similar phenomenon takes place, through the juxtaposition and simultaneous dissolution of boundaries. This technique is present most explicitly in a series of still lifes from 1912, including *Stilleben mit Plastiken und Blumen* (Still Life with Sculptures and Flowers, 1912, fig. 5.74). In these paintings, Kirchner depicts small carved figurines and a bowl which he himself had carved in 1910 (Gordon suggests it was modeled upon African carvings; see fig. 5.20).<sup>192</sup> The coloring and treatment of volumes in these works produce a sense of animation, instilling the carvings with a lifelike quality. In comparison with Kirchner's other works, we find humans presented like carvings, and carvings like humans; the boundaries between "life" and "matter," as Bennett suggests, are effectively blurred.

Similarly, as we have already seen in Kirchner's paintings above, the vitality was not present only in nature, but found in contemporary life. In a letter to Carl Hagemann which Kirchner wrote near the end of his life, he explained:

I looked for scenes to paint from life, and to this end I drew everywhere: on the street, in drinking halls and theaters, etc. Rembrandt's freedom in figure treatment at the same time helped me attain a strongly abbreviated drawing manner. . . . Young student that I was, I would have liked so much also to have seen pictures, our life, movement color. How could one learn to paint this in pictures? The studios in which I was drawing and painting gave no answer, showed no way. But the drawings of Dürer, Rembrandt, the Flemish primitives, etc. in the museum print collection, these contained such things from their time. How hastily had Rembrandt sketched the woman sitting on the bed in the drawing of the sick woman! One had to draw like that; then one could perhaps find a way to give pictorial form to contemporary life."<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> Bennett, *Vibrant Matter*, vii.

<sup>192</sup> Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 24.

<sup>193</sup> Kirchner, Letter to Carl Hagemann, June 30, 1937, translated by Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 15.

It was around the same time that Kirchner had written to Curt Valentin praising Walt Whitman: "I wanted to express the richness and joy of living, to paint humanity at work and at play in its reactions and interreactions and to express love as well as hatred."<sup>194</sup> For Whitman, and for the Brücke, this experience is not limited to the natural or organic world. This wasn't lost on Schlaf, who writes of Whitman:

More than everything he loves the large cities and his "Manhattan." More than the still shining sun, the foliage, the corn and the wheat, more than solitude and the humming of the bees. Untiringly, he is wandering through her streets and losing himself in her traffic which becomes alive in his lines, containing broad, powerful, colorful shining visions. In countless images endlessly strung together, his loving surprise rushes by us. He does not want to leave anything out, does not want to miss anything.<sup>195</sup>

Bennett, in explicating Whitman's vital materialism, argues that for Whitman, objects seem to speak; she makes use of Bruno Latour's term "actants," to describe the way in which objects appear as more than matter to be manipulated, but as co-participants in experience.<sup>196</sup> Bennett notes that "Song of Myself" includes "one of Whitman's many lists of these vocal material actants, artifacts and nonhuman animals that possess a 'living and buried speech' or vitality elided by the category of object":

The blab of the pave, tires of carts, sluff of boot-soles, talk of the promenaders,  
The heavy omnibus, the driver with his interrogating thumb, the clank of the shod horses on the granite floor,  
The snow-sleighs, clinking, shouted jokes, pelts of snow-balls,  
The hurrahs for popular favorites, the fury of rous'd mobs,  
The flap of the curtain'd litter, a sick man inside borne to the hospital,  
The meeting of enemies, the sudden oath, the blows and fall,  
The excited crowd, the policeman with his star quickly working his

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<sup>194</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Curt Valentin, "Letter of April 17, 1937," in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16 - May 10, 1952*, ed. Curt Valentin Gallery (New York: Curt Valentin Gallery, 1952), unpaginated.

<sup>195</sup> Schlaf, "Walt Whitman," 986.

<sup>196</sup> Bennett, "Solar Judgment," 134.

passage to the centre of the crowd,  
The impassive stones that receive and return so many echoes,  
What groans of over-fed or half-starv'd who fall unstruck or in fits,  
What exclamations of women taken suddenly who hurry home and  
give birth to babes,  
What living and buried speech is always vibrating here. . . .<sup>197</sup>

Bennett calls our attention to the voices—the *blab* of the pave, the *clank* of the shod horses, the groans, the exclamations, and even the stones that “*return so many echoes.*”—all examples of the “living and buried speech.” She explains, for Whitman, “the machines, tools, and artifacts of mid-nineteenth-century urban life, along with the various human types and groups, all have something to say and something worth listening to.”<sup>198</sup> This echoes a comment Kirchner makes in a letter to Eberhard Grisebach, a professor of philosophy at the University of Jena:

What you write about art, and creation in general, is easy for me to understand. I also understand what you mean about the artist and philosopher creating their own world. Actually, such a world is only a means of making contact with others in the great mystery which surrounds us all. This great mystery which stands behind all events and things (sometimes like a phantom) can be seen or felt when we talk to a person or stand in a landscape or when flowers or objects suddenly speak to us.<sup>199</sup>

Kirchner ostensibly introduces a division, between “things” and the “great mystery which stands behind” everything, but upon close examination this seems rather a conciliatory

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<sup>197</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 36. “Song of Myself,” Section 8.

<sup>198</sup> Bennett, “Solar Judgment,” 34.

<sup>199</sup> Kirchner, Letter to Eberhard Grisebach, Dec. 1, 1917, in *Maler des Expressionismus im Briefwechsel mit Eberhard Grisebach*, ed. Lothar Grisebach (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1962), 76-77, translated in Miesel, *Voices*, 19. “Was Sie heute über das Künstlerische und das Schaffen überhaupt schreiben, ist sehr klar für mein Verständnis. So verstehe ich auch, was Sie meinen, daß sich der Philosoph und der Künstler ihre Welt schaffen. Diese Welt ist eigentlich nur ein Verständigungsmittel, um mit dem anderen Menschen in dem großen Geheimnis der Umwelt in Beziehung zu treten. Das große Geheimnis, das hinter allen Vorgängen und Dingen der Umwelt steht, wird manchmal schemenhaft sichtbar oder fühlbar, wenn wir mit einem Menschen reden, in einer Landschaft stehen, oder wenn Blumen oder Gegenstände plötzlich zu uns sprechen.”



gesture toward Grisebach, as he begins to introduce his own slightly different philosophical take on things. Kirchner is suggesting here that actually (*eigentlich*), the point for him is less about the subjective creation of the world (*Welt*), than it is about viewing the world as a means of communication (*Verständigungsmittel*, what Miesel translates here as “means of making contact”), enabling humans to enter into relationship and participate in the mystery of the “surroundings” (*Umwelt*). In this sense, the individual is embedded in its environment, and in fact not only people but objects can “speak to us.”<sup>200</sup>

This “democratic” experience of objects and environment is one of the core ideas which Bennett discerns in Whitman’s poetry. She quotes from Whitman’s “By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” where the poet says, “I am for those who walk abreast with the whole earth.”<sup>201</sup> She argues that this sense of co-participation with things is expressed not only in the content, however, but through the style of Whitman’s free verse:

The doggedly horizontal lists that frequent *Leaves of Grass* model a world where humans beings are positioned not as potential masters of, but as coparticipants with, other bodies in a world that vibrates. Persons, places, and things are arranged not in a hierarchy but stand “abreast.”<sup>202</sup>

For the *Brücke*, this horizontality is expressed in the embeddedness of the human in a cacophony of life and things, human and nonhuman. This reveals itself in the depictions of the natural world, but it is equally present in the social world, the studio, the circus, the urban

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<sup>200</sup> It is tempting to read Kirchner’s shift from *Welt* to *Umwelt* in the context of the biologist Jakob von Uexküll’s development of the notion of *Umwelt*. Uexküll developed a phenomenological-based species-specific interpretation of the organism embedded in its environment. Michael Ann Holly quotes Ludwig von Bertalanffy (*General Systems Theory*, 1968), who writes that Uexküll’s *Umwelt* “essentially amounts to the statement that, from the great cake of reality cuts a slice, which it can perceive and to which it can react owing to its psycho-physical organization.” See Holly, *Panofsky*, 70.

<sup>201</sup> Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 354. (“By Blue Ontario’s Shore,” Section 17.)

<sup>202</sup> Bennett, “Solar Judgment,” 136.

environment. To borrow Johannes Fabian's phrase (cited above in the context of Bastian's ethnology), Whitman was a poet of coevalness—the coevalness of all things—and it is this approach to life that emerges in the work of the Brücke.

## Conclusion

The foregoing discussion presents a distinction between the Brücke's aesthetics aims and their cultural stance. The art of the Brücke should not be seen as simply expressing a critique of modernity, whether from the left or right. A comment from Kirchner articulates and therefore justifies this distinction I have drawn. Moreover, Kirchner argues against the interpretation of the Brücke's work as a critique of modernity. The comment, cited above at the outset of the discussion of the Brücke's relationship to modernity, comes from Kirchner's diary, written during a time in which Kirchner was concerned to provide for posterity an account of his own position in relation to the art and culture of his time, as well as the history and significance of the Brücke. In the entry dated March 6, 1923, he recalled:

It was lucky that our group was composed of genuinely talented people, whose characters and gifts, even in the context of human relations, left them with no other choice but the profession of artist, whose ways of life and work, strange as they were in the eyes of conventional people, were not deliberately intended to *épater les bourgeois*, but were simply the outcome of a naïve and pure compulsion to bring art and life together in harmony. And it is this, more than anything else, that has had so enormous an influence on the forms of present-day art. Uncomprehended for the most part, and totally distorted; for with us [the will] shaped the form and gave it meaning, whereas now strange forms are stuck on to accustomed ideas, like a top-hat on a cow.<sup>203</sup>

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<sup>203</sup> Wolf-Dieter Dube, *Expressionism* (New York and Toronto: Oxford University Press, 1972), 28. "Es war ein glücklicher Zufall, daß sich die wirklichen Talente trafen, deren Charakter und begabung auch in menschlichen Beziehung ihnen gar keine andere Wahl ließ als den Beruf des Künstlers, deren für den regulären Menschen zum mindesten seltsame Lebensführung, Wohnung und Arbeit kein bewußtes *Epater les Bourgeois* war, sondern das ganz naïve reine Müssen, Kunst und Leben in Harmonie zu bringen. Und gerade dieses ist es, was mehr als alles

Kirchner gives voice here to that which Lloyd cites as their primary ambition, the desire to bring art and life together in harmony. It is clear that the Brücke felt that art needed to be rejuvenated, and that the inherited tradition no longer fulfilled this need. Yet strictly speaking this amounts to what I have suggested above is an aesthetic aim—and one that is best conceived as a perennial aim of art, not necessarily joined with a critique of modernity.

Such an understanding in fact was expressed by both Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel, in their responses to an invitation from the popular periodical *Kunst und Künstler*, asking German artists to offer their thoughts about the “new art programm.” The published responses included statements from such notable artists as Max Beckmann, Ludwig Meidner, August Macke, and Georg Tappert. The responses by the Brücke members, Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel, however, were distinguished not only by their brevity but their resistance to the very question. As Schmidt-Rottluff wrote:

I know of no “new art program.” I have moreover absolutely no idea what it could be. If one could speak of such a thing as an “art program,” then in my opinion it would be as old as the hills and eternally the same. Except of course that art itself changes again and again, as it is manifested in new forms, since there are always new personalities. Yet the essence of art, I believe, never changes. Possibly I am mistaken. But for myself, I know that I have no program, only the inexplicable desire to take what I see and feel, and to find the purest expression.<sup>204</sup>

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andere einen ungeheuren Einfluß gehabt hat auf die Formen heutiger [Zeit]kunst. Allerdings meist unverstanden und total verzerrt, denn dort bildete [der Wille] die Form und gab ihr Sinn, während hier die fremde Form auf Gewohnheit aufgepfropft wird, wie der Kuh der Cylinder.” Lothar Grisebach, ed., *E.L. Kirchner's Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften* (Köln: Verlag M. Dumont, 1968), 77-78.

<sup>204</sup> Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, “Das neue Programm,” *Kunst und Künstler*, XII, Heft 6 (1914): 308. “Ich kenne kein „neues Kunstprogramm.“ Ich weiss auch absolut nicht, was das sein könnte. Wenn man überhaupt von etwas derartigen wie einem „Kunstprogramm“ sprechen könnte, so ist das meiner Meinung nach uralte und ewig dasselbe. Nur das Kunst sich immer wieder in neuen Formen manifestiert, da es immer wieder neue Persönlichkeiten giebt—ihr Wesen kann sich, glaube ich, nie ändern. Möglich, das ich mich täusche. Aber von mir weiss ich, dass ich kein Programm habe, nur die unerklärliche Sehnsucht, das zu fassen, was ich sehe und fühle, und dafür den reinsten Ausdruck zu finden.”

Significantly, Heckel's contribution to the volume was even more circumscribed, and yet also powerful in its implications:

Your request, to write something, I am unable to complete. The formulation of a program is, I believe, a thing for academics and indeed for those that come after, those who do theoretic and scientific, not creative, work. The un-thought and the unintentional is the source of artistic power. The analysis of the final image is for me only possible intuitively.<sup>205</sup>

The comments of Schmidt-Rottluff and Heckel should provide occasion for further analysis, including the emphasis on the unconscious or unintentional as a necessary feature of artistic creation, which would prove to be a primary principle of Surrealist aesthetics. For the moment, it will suffice to note that their comments restrict themselves to aesthetic considerations, and, most explicitly in Schmidt-Rottluff's case, present the artistic process as essentially the same, despite changes in style or form. The "development" proclaimed in the Brücke Program accordingly should be understood as an affirmation of transformation, yet not evolution. Moreover, as we have seen, the existing scholarship on the Brücke interprets the manifest desire to merge art and life as an anti-bourgeois, anti-modernity stance. Yet to return to Kirchner's diary, he explicitly explains that this desire, to join art and life, did *not* amount to a conscious *épater les bourgeois*, which is to say, a simple rejection of the bourgeois world in which they found themselves. Kirchner's aesthetics pursued a vital materialism as a perennial ethos; not in contradistinction to a stultifying modernity, but in a way that scrubbed against the boundaries between human and nonhuman, nature and culture, primitive and modern.

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<sup>205</sup> Erich Heckel, "Das neue Programm," *Kunst und Künstler*, XII, Heft 6 (1914): 309. "Ihrer Aufforderung, etwas zu schreiben, kann ich nicht nachkommen. Denn die Formulierung eines Programms ist, glaube ich, Sache der Akademiker und besser noch der Nachkommen, die theoretische und wissenschaftlich, nicht schaffend, arbeiten. Das Ungewusste wie das Ungewollte ist die Quelle der künstlerischen Kraft. Die Kritik am fertigen Bild ist mir nur gefühlsmässig möglich."

## Chapter 6. Brücke, Aporetic Primitivism, and Impassable Bridges

Georg Heym. His poems are a vertigo of seeing. All things roll like orgies before his eyes. . . . Every thing [*sic*] “means” something, though its meaning is nowhere talked of.

—A critic writing in *Der Demokrat* (December 21, 1910)<sup>1</sup>

If we take these drawings into ourselves as we would read a letter dear to us or a book we treasure, then without being aware of it we will acquire a feeling for the key to this hieroglyphic script. Kirchner draws as others write.

—E.L. Kirchner, writing under the pen name Louis de Marsalle<sup>2</sup>

### Introduction

As argued in the previous chapter, Kirchner and the Brücke absorbed from Walt Whitman a mode of vital materialism: an affirmation of the abundance of life in things, a democracy of perception that applied not only to the organic but the inorganic, blurring the boundaries between the two. However, in their art, the reception of Whitman’s vital

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<sup>1</sup> Quoted in Rainer Rumold, *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde: From Expressionism Toward Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002), 12.

<sup>2</sup> Louis de Marsalle (E.L. Kirchner), “Zeichnungen von E.L. Kirchner,” *Genius* (Munich, 1920), 216-34, translated by Michael Hulse, in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 209.

materialism was conjoined with a counter-current, a particular sensitivity to contrast and the ellusiveness of signification. These formalist and self-reflexive aspects of the Brücke aesthetics form the subject of the following chapter.

The vital materialist affirmations of Whitman, and the synthetic or harmonious vitalism of Obrist, were balanced in the Brücke's work by a mimesis of tensions in which contrasts and contradictions become diffused. Through such practices, the Brücke developed an aesthetics that makes use of the primitivist discourse, yet undermines the oppositions it contains. Their work in fact bears a striking similarity to Dadaist photomontage; through parataxis, it undermines established definitions and relationships. Their work combined the images and tropes of primitives—as authentic, as unalienated—with a counterpoint, an oppositional tendency which disrupted that discourse and prevented it from achieving its aims. It is in this sense that their work may be deemed aporetic—it produces an interpretive impasse. It impedes the fulfillment of the primitivist discourse, which aims to secure the primitive as authentic “other,” in opposition to the artificial and alienated civilized modernity.

### **Part 1. From Vital Materialism to Vertigo**

One clue pointing towards this self-reflective and disruptive feature of the Brücke aesthetics emerges in the letter from Kirchner to Curt Valentin, in which Kirchner compared Whitman to the German Expressionist poet, Georg Heym (1887–1912): “[Whitman] possesses the true spirit of the artist who can give and love without desiring. We have a German who follows in his footsteps, Georg Heym, the poet of *Umbra Vitae*, who has prophetically perceived

and written of our last decade.”<sup>3</sup> Heym’s *Umbra Vitae* (Shadow of Life) was published in 1912, the same year that Heym drowned, at the age of 24, while trying to rescue a friend from an ice skating accident. Kirchner, who only discovered Heym’s poetry after his death, became a strong admirer, and illustrated the 1924 reprint of *Umbra Vitae* with a series of woodcuts (fig. 5.75).

Kirchner’s pairing of the two poets, however, at first seems startling. Heym is known for such poems “Die Dämonen der Städte” (“The Demons of the City”), written in 1910, published in April 1911 in his book *Der Ewige Tag* (The Eternal Day). Heym’s poetry offers stark, visceral images of alienation, madness, and disease; he is best known for his disturbing visions depicting the nightmarishness of the modern urban environment.<sup>4</sup> As Scott Horton writes of *Umbra Vitae*, “It paints a dark, mysterious and painful portrait of life. It is filled with great foreboding, a sense of impending doom, a society on the brink of destruction.”<sup>5</sup>

Heym and Whitman thus could not seem farther apart. Upon closer examination, however, it is possible to discern important similarities as well as differences which help account for Kirchner’s comparison. Roy Pascal, for example, writes of Heym:

[His] revolt against reality is embodied in the energy of his images, in the violent association of normally disparate fields of meaning through strange conjunctions of image or the use, for instance, of symbolical, nonnaturalist colour images, and a thematic development that does not accord with the logic of normal rational discourse. In these ways Heym accepts the modern city as his reality and speaks in its terms, but at the same time challenges it by re-composing it; the poet’s vision becomes embodied within, not in conflict with, the factualities of the city.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Ernst Ludwig Kirchner to Curt Valentin, “Letter of April 17, 1937,” in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: April 16 - May 10, 1952*, ed. Curt Valentin Gallery (New York: Curt Valentin Gallery, 1952), unpaginated.

<sup>4</sup> Rainer Rumold, *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde: From Expressionism Toward Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002); Peter Viereck, *Strict Wildness: Discoveries in Poetry and History* (New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction Publishers, 2008).

<sup>5</sup> Scott Horton, “Heym’s ‘Umbra Vitae,’” *The Stream* (blog), *Harper’s* (February 20, 2008), <http://harpers.org/blog/2008/02/heyms-umbra-vitae/>.

<sup>6</sup> Roy Pascal, *From Naturalism to Expressionism: German Literature and Society, 1880-1918* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 144.

Pascal calls attention to several important features here. Obvious points of interest for Kirchner would be Heym's visuality, his bold use of nonnaturalist color. But it is also worth noting that, like Whitman, Heym speaks in the "terms" of the city. He is in it and of it, a relation very similar to that which appears in Whitman's poetry. Although Whitman's relationship to contemporary life is largely affirmative and Heym's negative, both engage with contemporary life on its own terms.

The significance of this is most clear by way of a further comparison. Pascal notes, "All writers on the modern city in the 1880s stress the multiplicity and confusion of scenes and events, the rapidity of change and 'nervousness' of life."<sup>7</sup> Other poets, including the naturalists of which Pascal speaks and some of Heym's contemporaries, described the strangeness or agitation of the city from some external standpoint, a moral or humanist critique. In these works, Pascal observes:

If a looser form in free rhythms occurs, often as an adaptation of Whitman or of Verhaeren, it is accompanied by rhetoric, which no less than regular stanzas and meter conveys the poet's capacity to control this urban world, however confusing and terrifying, from some fixed perspective such as the security of his inner life, or the dignity of labour, or human compassion, or the prospect of revolution.<sup>8</sup>

Heym's exploration of the city, which Pascal calls "the most significant response [of literary Expressionism], that in one way or another underlies the others," is new in that it offers no external position, no stable discourse, from which to critique. One is simply in and of the city. Peter Viereck captures this well: "Readers of 'Demons' and of [Heym's] poems about war are troubled by the ambiguity of Heym's attitude; is he condemning or admiring? As if he were

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<sup>7</sup> Pascal, *Naturalism to Expressionism*, 143.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 143.



being asked: which side are you on? The condign word is neither 'admiring' nor 'condemning' but 'fascinated.'"<sup>9</sup> Viereck's point—his use of the word "fascination"—is not meant to suggest that there was no horror in Heym's works, for indeed there was, nor that there was no critical engagement, for there was that as well. The point is that Heym's vision is from the inside, and the only critique possible is a form of what we might call immanent critique. This requires, however, a radically new approach to literary form.

This new form, however, is in fact the crucial difference from Whitman, and it is this which provides a specific counterpoint to the Brücke's vital materialism. This new form, to which Pascal alludes, was characterized by "strange conjunctions" and the collision of "disparate fields of meaning." This can be glimpsed in Heym's poem "Umbra Vitae," the first two stanzas of which run as follows:

Die Menschen stehen vorwärts in den Straßen  
Und sehen auf die großen Himmelszeichen,  
Wo die Kometen mit den Feuernasen  
Um die gezackten Türme drohend schleichen.

Und alle Dächer sind voll Sternedeuter,  
Die in den Himmel stecken große Röhren.  
Und Zaubrer, wachsend aus den Bodenlöchern,  
In Dunkel schräg, die einen Stern beschwören.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Viereck, *Strict Wildness*, 251.

<sup>10</sup> Horton, "Heym's 'Umbra Vitae.'" Horton's translation:

The people stand forward in the streets  
They stare at the great signs in the heavens  
Where comets with their fiery trails  
Creep threateningly about the serrated towers.

And all the roofs are filled with stargazers  
Sticking their great tubes into the skies  
And magicians springing up from the earthworks  
Tilting in the darkness, conjuring the one star.

Horton, who translated “Umbra Vitae” for *Harper’s*, comments upon the “peculiar” and disorienting effect of Heym’s style. Heym uses words, Horton writes,

that seem at odds with accepted rules of ergometrics and physics. “Stehen” of course suggests standing, stagnation, a cessation of forward movement. But this is combined with words of action, “vorwärts,” for instance. The same dichotomy of action, inaction appears repeatedly in the poem.<sup>11</sup>

Horton continues, citing other salient examples from the poem: “Note the repetition of an indecisive angularity, an awkwardness of the human existence: ‘*In Dunkel schräg, ‘Sie springen, daß sie sterben, ‘Sie strecken alle viere/Begraben, ‘Wer stirbt, der setzt sich auf, sich zu erheben.’*” Heym develops in this manner a particular language of evocative contradictions, which can be understood as a form of parataxis based on contrasts. In throwing together such conflicting notions, the relationship between them is suppressed; the effect is ambiguous, either invoking the reader to reconsider, or recreate, the relationship, or in the absence, simply creating an abyss of meaning which the reader must face.

Heym’s innovative technique was not lost on his contemporaries. A reviewer of one of the poetry reading sessions held by “Der Neue Club” (a group to which Heym belonged) remarked in *Der Demokrat* (December 21, 1910): “Georg Heym. His poems are a vertigo of seeing. All things roll like orgies before his eyes. . . . Every thing [*sic*] ‘means’ something, though its meaning is nowhere talked of.”<sup>12</sup> The reviewer’s comment evocatively depicts both the similarities and differences between Heym and Whitman: it expresses the coevalness of things, the sexual vitality of the images, and the very “thingness” of the depicted reality. It also evokes

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<sup>11</sup> Horton, “Heym’s ‘Umbra Vitae.’”

<sup>12</sup> Rumold, *Janus Face*, 12.

the dislocations and disruptions, produced by stark absences of meaning through parataxis, which conjure up a “vertigo.”

The impact of Heym’s disruptive syntax, as Rainer Rumold argues, becomes obvious when compared for example with the contemporary poet Johannes Becher’s poem “Berlin”:

Berlin! You web-monster of white metropolis!  
Orchestra of the aeons! Field of iron battle!  
Your iridescent serpent-body was chafed as it rattled,  
Roofed over with the refuse and rot of running sores!<sup>13</sup>

Rumold astutely observes the contrast between the two poets, yet Rumold is too quick to see Heym’s poetry as an expression of “modernity,” rather than an interrogation of the concept. Rumold writes that Becher’s poem “censors the visceral experience of modernity, suppresses the urban environment’s disparate nondiscursive, sensorial stimuli, which Georg Heym’s poems gauge in their startling imagery.”<sup>14</sup> Rumold draws a contrast between “moralizing and physiological perceptions of the metropolis.” Noting, like Pascal, that Heym avoids the former, Rumold suggests that Heym expresses in poetry a physiological *reaction* to modernity. But Rumold presumes too much here, taking for granted that Heym’s poetry responds to the “obvious” fragmentation of modernity, produced by acceleration, technologization, and so on; Rumold neglects the recognition of Heym’s particular sensitivity to, and poetic engagement with, linguistic signification. For Heym, the representation of reality is not made possible through an unmediated physiological experience; instead, reality is itself already thoroughly mediated, and only a poetry which recognizes that can measure as an authentic response.

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<sup>13</sup> Rumold, *Janus Face*, 12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.

Peter Viereck argues similarly, in announcing: “Time to rescue Heym from the Heym cult. In the Germany of the late 1960s, too much was being made of his daemonic visions of big cities.” Viereck continues:

When examined closely, Heym’s cities embody a horror that looks backward to the pre-urban visions of [Hieronymus] Bosch (which Heym then works into an urban photomontage) rather than forward to megalopolis. Being based on his supposed urban modernity, the belated cult of Heym is a case of admiring an admirable writer for the wrong reason. The right reason, his lyricism, suffices.<sup>15</sup>

In what follows, I shall argue that the Brücke’s approach to the city (and modernity) did not simply echo the critique of modernity, as is found in Becher’s poem or the writings of Georg Simmel. Just as significant, their approach to primitivism did not simply express a naïve discourse in which the “primitive” represented authenticity and unalienated existence. Rather, like Heym, their work introduced contrasts of primitive and modern as a means of disrupting the relationship between the two—the effect of which might be described as an aesthetic vertigo.

It is commonly recognized in critical discussions of German expressionist prose that literary expressionism as a movement was intensely self-aware of language, media, and modes of representation. Geoffrey Perkins writes: “Expressionism must rank among the most self-conscious movements in history. There was more than enough theory to sink even a more robust movement than Expressionism—and sink Expressionism it surely did.”<sup>16</sup> Kurt Pinthus in

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<sup>15</sup> Viereck, *Strict Wildness*, 228.

<sup>16</sup> Perkins, *Theories*, 11. For German Expressionist literature and prose, see Neil H. Donahue, *Forms of Disruption: Abstraction in Modern German Prose* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1993), and Rainer Rumold, *The Janus Face of the German Avant-Garde: From Expressionism Toward Postmodernism* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 2002).

the 1919 introduction to his anthology of expressionist poetry *Die Menschheitsdämmerung*

(Dawn of Humanity), proclaimed:

Never before were aesthetics and the principle of *L'art pour l'art* as disdained as in this poetry. [. . .] For this reason it eschews the naturalistic depiction of reality as technique. [. . .] Instead, it creates with enormous and vigorous energy its own means of expression. [. . .] It catapults the world. . . in ecstatic paroxysm, [. . .] in a chaotic shattering of language.<sup>17</sup>

Yet there is a marked reluctance to recognize that the Brücke were engaged in similar techniques of a visual and aesthetic nature. Granted, Perkins' comment is meant to refer to the proliferation of manifestos and theoretical statements which accompanied Expressionism, and as I have previously suggested, the members of the Brücke were overwhelmingly averse to this kind of theoretical work. Yet their reluctance to theorize linguistically should not be taken to mean that their aesthetics were untheorized, and therefore simply spontaneous or intuitive.

Indeed, it is not even correct that scholars have interpreted Brücke aesthetics as untheorized or spontaneous (in the style of outsider artists, for example); quite the contrary, scholars have readily discerned a great deal of thought behind these artworks, analyzing connections to the artworks of their predecessors or contemporaries, pointing out intentional and complex re-workings of styles or themes from Jugendstil, Fauvism, cubism, futurism, and

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<sup>17</sup> Kurt Pinthus, ed., *Menschheitsdaemmerung / Dawn of Humanity: A Document of Expressionism*, trans. and introduction by Joanna M. Ratych, Ralph Ley, and Robert C. Conard (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1994), 35. Readers of Pinthus will note I have excerpted selectively; Pinthus's argument generally positions the aesthetic innovations of the expressionist poets as part of the critique of modernity—a response to “degenerate reality” marked by a “flagellantly screaming and enraptured longing for God and the good, for love and for brotherliness.” I argue that Pinthus's recognition of the poets' linguistic and aesthetic innovation applies to the Brücke as well, if not his framing of the relationship to modernity.

Impressionism.<sup>18</sup> When the discussion turns “primitivism,” however—the influence of significance of “primitive” art—critics too readily assume that naivety reigns. It is conceivable for such critics, apparently, that Kirchner may see himself responding theoretically through his work to the art of Matisse or Munch, but not to the art of Papua, Cameroon, or Ajanta—or even to the meanings of similar examples of “primitivism” in the works of other artists. Thus Lloyd sees Brücke’s primitivist decorations a wishful attempt to recreate an “unalienated” space for artistic creation; and the Brücke’s seemingly indiscriminate use of non-European references, whether “primitive” African sculpture, “exotic” ornamentation from the South Seas, Japanese prints, or sublimely sensual Buddhist wall paintings—as a naïve pastiche of “primitive” styles, elided difference, thereby recapitulating the homogenous “other” of colonial discourse.

Yet, as noted above, the Brücke’s primitivism is not simply an aspiration for a “return to nature,” but rather, they engage with the concepts of “life” and “matter,” in Bennett’s words, “worrying them until they start to seem strange, in something the way a common word when repeated can become a foreign, nonsense sound.” In the same way, their artworks “worry” the figures of primitive and civilized. The effect of this defamiliarization is *aporia*—an aesthetics which undermines the stability of the discourse of primitivism. As the discourse of primitivism, as I have argued, forms one of the fundamental discourses of modernity, their aesthetics can be understood as manifesting the constructedness of an imagined modernity.

There is no evidence to confirm that the Brücke members knew Heym’s poetry in the years before World War 1; Kirchner himself apparently did not discover Heym’s works at least

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<sup>18</sup> As Reinhold Heller has observed, the Brücke in fact seem to be subjected to this type of formal-influence analysis to an even greater extent than any other artist group in the “classical era of modernism prior to the First World War.” Heller, “Some Reconsiderations,” 63.

until after Heym's death.<sup>19</sup> My reference to Heym here is not tangential, however, as Kirchner's singling out of Whitman and Heym as his favorite poets provides a useful avenue in unraveling his aesthetics. In addition, the comparison between scholarly research on Expressionist literature and on the visual arts reveals a lingering reluctance to take into account the possibility that the Brücke, no less than their literate counterparts, were engaged in not simply an expression of a primitivist (or modernist) discourse, but rather engaged with these discourses critically, from within, and often in a manner of paratactic montage which characterizes the work of poets such as Gottfried Benn and Georg Heym. The source of this aspect of the Brücke aesthetics, as a counterpoint to their vital materialism, may not have been Heym, however; a more likely source is Friedrich Nietzsche.

## **Part 2. Brücke and Nietzsche**

The name Brücke, or bridge, is widely thought to be a reference to Friedrich Nietzsche. Before considering the significance of Nietzsche for the Brücke members, it is worth noting that the image of the bridge provides a key interpretive fulcrum, both in terms of assessing the Brücke's relationship to modernity, with which the above discussion has primarily been concerned, and the significance of their primitivism, to which the following discussion will turn. It will also allow for a return to the claims I made in the previous chapter, about the way in which the ambiguity of the Brücke's primitivist aesthetics are routinely occluded through critical discussions linking their aesthetics to "messianic" or "utopian" critiques of modernity.

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<sup>19</sup> It is conceivable however that the artists could have come across his poetry in *Die Aktion*.

In Erich Heckel's later recollection, the name Brücke was selected by Schmidt-Rottluff, precisely for its ambiguity. A bridge was, Heckel noted, "a multi-levelled word and it would not involve a programme but, in a certain sense, would lead from one shore to the other. It was clear to us what we had to leave behind—where we hoped to arrive was a lot less clear."<sup>20</sup> Heckel's comment, like the Programm der Brücke, underscores the ambiguity of the Brücke project. Reinhold Heller at first seems to accept this, noting that, in the usage of contemporaries, the image did not necessarily connote a naïve one-directionality, a passage from the past to the future, for example. He writes that, "at the time of the Brücke's founding [the image of the bridge] was used repeatedly by other progressive German artists and their advocates to reference goals of preparing the art of the future while taking leave of—but not dismissing—the past."<sup>21</sup> Heller, when speaking about aesthetics—"preparing the art of the future"—adheres to Heckel's ambiguousness about the goal; it was not simply a dismissal of the past. Yet as we saw in Heller's previous comments, this interpretive reserve quickly disappears when he asserts the group's "messianic" desires to usher in a new society.

Similarly, Heller's ambivalence disappears when he discusses the group in connection with Nietzsche. Nietzsche was widely popular in Germany at the time, and the artists of the Brücke were familiar with his work.<sup>22</sup> Several scholars have suggested that the image of the bridge should also be interpreted as a reference to Nietzsche, in particular a passage from *Thus*

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<sup>20</sup> Interview with Erich Heckel by Hans Köhn in *Das Kunstwerk* 12, vol. 3 (1958/9), 24ff, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 238n42.

<sup>21</sup> Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 14.

<sup>22</sup> Kirchner later recalled Heckel once entering his studio, "declaiming aloud from Zarathustra." Heckel made a woodcut of Nietzsche in 1905. Schmidt-Rottluff, during his first meeting with Nolde, discussed Nietzsche and Kant. In Kirchner's personal library, which was auctioned after his death, were at least two copies of *Also Sprach Zarathustra*, in addition to several other works by Nietzsche. See Gordon, *Expressionism: Art and Idea*, 14.



*Spoke Zarathustra* (1883–85), in which the protagonist of the work, the philosopher/prophet Zarathustra, declares:

Man is a rope, fastened between animal and Superman—a rope over an abyss. A dangerous going-across, a dangerous wayfaring, a dangerous looking-back, a dangerous shuddering and staying still. What is great in man is that he is a bridge and not a goal; what can be loved in man is that he is a going across and a down-going.<sup>23</sup>

Heller sees in the image of the bridge another sign of revolutionary determination: “Like the Brücke artists, Nietzsche/Zarathustra saw himself as a ‘transformer of values,’ pioneering the path for the future, not only accepting but heroically championing dramatically fundamental change—even though it might come at great cost.”<sup>24</sup>

Jill Lloyd makes a similar move, from maintaining interpretive reserve regarding aims to cementing a specified interpretation not just regarding aesthetics but cultural and political stance—in short, that their work represents a critique of modernity. Lloyd’s interpretation is admittedly more nuanced than Heller’s. She cites Georg Reinhardt, the first scholar to call attention to the passage from Zarathustra. Reinhardt associated the group’s name with the previously cited 1905 woodcut by Kirchner, which seems to have been an early group insignia (fig. 5.39). Reinhardt had suggested that the near shore represents “the conservative and conventional elements associated with bourgeois and academic traditions, while the far shore

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<sup>23</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*, trans. R. J. Hollingdale (Harmondsworth, UK: Penguin Books, 1961), 44, quoted in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 18. “Der Mensch ist ein Seil, geknüpft zwischen Tier und Übermensch – ein Seil über einem Abgrunde, ein gefährliches Hinüber, ein gefährliches Auf-dem-Wege, ein gefährliches Zurückblicken, ein gefährliches Schaudern und Stehenbleiben. Was groß ist am Menschen, das ist, daß er ein Brücke und kein Zweck ist; was geliebt werden kann am Menschen, das ist, daß er ein Übergang und ein Untergang ist.” Friedrich Nietzsche, *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), in *Nietzsche Werke: Kritische Gesamtausgabe*, Vol. VI., ed. Giorgio Colli and Mazzino Montinari (Berlin, 1968), 11.

<sup>24</sup> Heller, *Brücke: Birth of Expressionism*, 14.

signifies renewal of art and life towards which the Brücke strove.”<sup>25</sup> Lloyd critiques Reinhardt’s interpretation, which she suggests naively places too much emphasis on a progressive drive. Lloyd, recognizing the need to account for both the culturally progressive and regressive strains in the Brücke, focuses on Nietzsche’s own highlighting of the bridge, rather than the goal to which it leads. Lloyd thus makes a useful correction of Reinhardt here, noting that “the central motif in this woodcut is the bridge itself, and in Nietzsche’s text the emphasis is on the *process* of transformation, the halting and precarious position of man caught between two states, looking backwards and forwards.”<sup>26</sup> She continues: “Nietzsche’s philosophy as a whole spans between the aspiration to transcend the human condition and the danger of slipping backward into a state of barbarism, just as civilization hinges on a precarious balance between progress and degeneration.”

The bridge offers an image of tension; yet Lloyd’s reading ultimately reifies the polarities of the primitive and civilized distinction. She situates the Brücke within the popular evolutionary thinking of the time, in particular a social Darwinist view, a stance in which man is held to be on the path of evolutionary development. The present moment, which is to say modernity, is one of crisis—faced with the upheavals of modernization, the artists are driven either forward or backward. She thus poses the Brücke as responding to the crisis of modernity—their ambiguity is explained by their simultaneous looking backwards (i.e., to a nostalgic primitive ideal) and forwards (to a utopian future).

Lloyd sees the group’s primitivism in this context as a tool: the image of the “primitive” provided the means of “negotiating” the perils of modernity. Their primitivism is thus like a

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<sup>25</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 18.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*

bridge, or a tightrope (another image Lloyd invokes), on which they precariously tread. I maintain, however, that the Brücke's art should not be seen as an expression of a precarious position, caught between poles, between civilization and the primitive, but that their work calls these polarities into question. If indeed Nietzsche's bridge provided some inspiration for the group's name, then one must consider more closely the detail that, in Zarathustra's words, man is not just a going-across, but a down-going. *Untergang* is commonly translated as destruction, downfall, or perishing; it can mean going down, but also going under. In the latter sense, it is the common word for the setting of the sun. Nietzsche's text draws upon both meanings, which together, especially in light of the text's juxtaposition of the term with that of the Overman, suggest an image of transformation. For example, Zarathustra's descent from the mountain is described as a going down, to be among the people, as the sun goes down.

Thus the bridge is a complex symbol of transformation, achieved through destruction. Man therefore isn't simply caught between two poles; he cannot reach either. The focus on the bridge works precisely to call into question the opposing terminals, which together hold the bridge up. Yet the implied transformation represents the overcoming of this seeming opposition. From this perspective, therefore, the notions of "progress" and "degeneration" must lose their meaning. The work of the Brücke is not a naïve expression of the evolutionary view of progress, tinged with primitivist longing and utopian desire, but in fact an aesthetics that undermines this temporal construct of progress, one of the lynchpins of "modernity."

The image of the bridge is thus an important interpretive focal point, as the Brücke is traditionally seen as expressing an urge to transcend or overcome the present moment; their primitivism, whether nostalgic or utopian, is said to emerge from a critique of modernity. This is

evident in the more straightforward interpretations, which depict Brücke primitivism as a “back to nature” ethos, as well as in Lloyd’s more nuanced version, as negotiating the “crisis” of modernity. On the contrary, rather than a rejection of the present, combined with a nostalgic longing for the “primitive” past, or a striving for a “primitive”-inspired utopian future, the Brücke presents us with an affirmation of the possibilities of experience in the present,

It may be objected that Nietzsche’s Superman (or Overman, as Walter Kaufmann translates *Übermensch*), is clearly an image of overcoming, and that Nietzsche quite vehemently critiqued his contemporaries. Two points can here be made. For the prophet Zarathustra, the goal was the Overman; however, the significance and connection of the Overman concept to the rest of Nietzsche’s philosophy remains a topic of some debate. Moreover, as much as Nietzsche saw himself as a critic of contemporary society, he did not, by the time in which he wrote *Zarathustra*, see his philosophy as aspiring to “transcend the human condition,” as Lloyd terms it. He had by this time already developed, primarily in *The Gay Science* (*Die fröhliche Wissenschaft*, 1882), his concept of the eternal recurrence, a philosophical stance of profound life affirmation.<sup>27</sup> Second, his critique was not directed at rationality, positivism, or materialism, strictly speaking. These had indeed been the targets of his earlier works, beginning with *The Birth of Tragedy, Out of the Spirit of Music* (*Die Geburt der Tragödie aus dem Geiste der Musik*, 1872), in which he made use of the binaries of Dionysian and Apollonian to argue that modernity had succumbed to a rationalist negativity, and thus a revival of the Dionysian spirit was called for (and which he discerned in the music of Wagner). By *Zarathustra*, however, Nietzsche had moved away from this earlier phase. In *Beyond Good*

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<sup>27</sup> Whether the doctrine of eternal recurrence is interpreted as metaphysical reality or aesthetic will, the result is for our purposes the same; it marked the pinnacle of a healthy response to human existence.

*and Evil* (1886), considered to be the philosophical articulation of the literary/prophetic *Zarathustra*, Nietzsche had rejected any straightforward critique of rationality or positivism. Rationality could be negative, but so could instinct or irrationality. The problem was not rationality itself, but rationality when it interfered with, or worked against, “life.” Significantly, Kirchner’s personal library contained only works from Nietzsche’s late period, with *Zarathustra* the earliest.<sup>28</sup>

Nietzsche’s target in these works, perhaps his primary one, became what he saw as the transcendentalist philosophy behind Christianity, but which reared its head no less in rationalist doctrines than in contemporary *völkisch* anti-modernity pessimism; to this “asceticism” he preached life. In 1886 he added an “Attempt at a Self Criticism” to *Birth of Tragedy*, in which he invokes an imagined interlocutor:

My dear sir, what in the world is romantic if *your* book isn’t? Can deep hatred against “the Now,” against “reality” and “modern ideas” be pushed further than you pushed it in your artists’ metaphysics? believing sooner in the Nothing, sooner in the devil than in “the Now”? . . . Let us imagine a coming generation with such intrepidity of vision, with such a heroic penchant for the tremendous. . . *would it not be necessary* for the tragic man of such a culture, in view of his self-education for seriousness and terror, to desire a new art, the *art of metaphysical comfort*?<sup>29</sup>

To which Nietzsche responds:

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<sup>28</sup> Donald Gordon writes that the works by Nietzsche in Kirchner’s library included *Also sprach Zarathustra* (1883-85), *Ecce Homo* (1888), *Götzendämmerung* (1888), *Dionysos-Dithyramben* (1888, published 1892), *Der Wille zur Macht* (posthumously assembled notes, published 1901), and *Nietzsche in seinen Briefen und Berichten den Zeitgenossen*, ed. Alfred Baeumler (Leipzig: Alfred Kröner Verlag, 1931). Gordon’s list is based on the catalogue for the posthumous auction of the library contents (“Bibliothek Ernst Ludwig Kirchners,” nos. 1300-1867, in catalogue Bern, 1951), as well as an earlier inventory from April 29, 1946. Although it is impossible to be certain when Kirchner acquired the works, Gordon notes, “Because of the generally early publication dates of these books, It is probable that Kirchner’s basic library was formed in Dresden, beginning at the Technische Hochschule.” See Gordon, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 456n34.

<sup>29</sup> Friedrich Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, ed. and trans. Walter Kaufmann (New York: Modern Library, 1992), 25.

No! You ought to learn the art of *this-worldly* comfort first; you ought to learn to laugh, my young friends, if you are hell-bent on remaining pessimists. Then perhaps, as laughers, you may some day dispatch all metaphysical comforts to the devil—metaphysics in front.<sup>30</sup>

The image of the bridge may indeed have been a reference to Nietzsche, but it was not in the sense of a specific means to an end or goal. Nor was it a specific rejection of the “modern.” Man is something that stands between two shores, but the notion of moving from one to the other becomes impossible. The art of the Brücke deconstructs what we might call, in this context, the metaphysics of modernity—the alleged and hypostatized difference between primitive and civilized. Lloyd seems to have glimpsed as much in her emphasis on the “process” of the bridge, but she loses the thread, as do Heller and others, in positing determinate goals—namely the overcoming of the present. Lloyd’s interpretation of the Brücke clearly discerns the fundamental importance of the dialectic of primitive and modernity informing their work, yet ultimately she does so “through a glass darkly.” Rather than acknowledge the work’s disruptive potential, she reduces it to a critique of modernity.

### **Part 3. Primitivism as Immanent Critique**

The primitivism of the Brücke is more complex than has generally been acknowledged. As I have suggested above, the Brücke’s aesthetics in general was indeed more self-reflexive than has been assumed. In spite of what I have termed an ethos resembling a vital materialism, their work was not a naïve expression of experience, but was always paired with a recognition

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<sup>30</sup> Nietzsche, *Basic Writings of Nietzsche*, 26.

of the inherently mediated existence of art, and indeed of life. Beginning from this recognition, their work effectively addressed primitivism as a discourse, that is to say, as a set of mediating representations. They did not, in other words, simply echo the discourse of naïve primitivism. Through their paratactical deployment of the signifiers of primitive and modern, they in fact undermined the discourse of primitivism, and its postulated opposition between an “authentic” primitive and an “alienated” modernity.

One way of approaching this issue is to briefly summarize the Brücke’s response to Jugendstil. The Brücke derived from Jugendstil the belief in blurring the boundaries between decoration and art, between art and nature, between art and life—but, as I will show, their practice of doing so also diverged significantly from Jugendstil precedent. Whereas in Jugendstil, this blurring of boundaries took place through a practice of synthesis, of identifying harmonies, for the Brücke, their aesthetics proceeded negatively, through the interrogation of contrast and contradiction. Thus, where previous interpretations have stressed the Jugendstil *aesthetic influence* upon the Brücke, but neglected the *cultural outlook*, I am here arguing the reverse. From Jugendstil, the Brücke inherited a cultural outlook which was distinct from the popular critiques of modernity in currency at the turn of the century; yet their aesthetics, although developed in response to Jugendstil precedents, embarked on a new direction.

Jill Lloyd is therefore correct that the Brücke moved away from Jugendstil, but not in the direction that she maintains. In her view, they absorbed from Jugendstil the “cults of authenticity and renewal,” but sought to break away from what seemed to be Jugendstil’s “ivory-tower aestheticism,” by moving towards “a new vitalism,” which was symbolized in the

“primitive.”<sup>31</sup> They wanted, above all, “to bring art and life into harmony.” In Lloyd’s interpretation, their drive to do so was, as we saw above, a reaction to “the speed and drama of modernization in Germany at the end of the nineteenth century,” and “the dilemmas and contradictions that this involved.”<sup>32</sup> In other words, they moved from Jugendstil toward Georg Simmel, thus transforming a Jugendstil naiveté into an engaged critique of modernity, in particular the alienating forms of rationality, labor, and city life. The “primitive,” in this view, came to represent for the Brücke the unalienated and authentic, that which modernity had lost, but which a utopian art might tap into and use as a resource to renew society. Lloyd concludes that, as a result of their move towards a primitivist vitalism and driven by their bohemian urge to join art and life, they “found themselves in a problematic zone . . . affirming life but rejecting society.”<sup>33</sup>

I argue however that the Brücke never abandoned the Jugendstil ethos of dissolving boundaries; they did not, therefore (as the previous section demonstrated), end up by “affirming life but rejecting society.” The Brücke did differ from their Jugendstil predecessors in a fundamental way, however; their work did not perpetuate the Jugendstil mode of synthesis or rapprochement. Rather, emerging from this Jugendstil context, they honed a sensitivity to tensions, contrasts, and oppositions. Their work does not accept a naïve *synthesis* of categories, of human and nature, for example. Rather, it proceeds aesthetically in a manner that is most effectively understood as immanent critique, the critical method of philosophy advanced by Theodor Adorno. In the case of the Brücke, through techniques of parataxis and a resolute

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<sup>31</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 3.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, vi.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.



foregrounding of the existence of representation and mediation, their work presents and critiques such dichotomies from within.

Adorno first presented his notion of immanent critique in his lecture “The Actuality of Philosophy,” in which he argued for a rejection of philosophy as metaphysics in favor of philosophy as interpretation. He began here to develop a theory of philosophy as “immanent” critique, which could be distinguished from “transcendent” critique. As Simon Jarvis explains:

Whereas a “transcendent” critique, a critique from the outside, first establishes its own principles, and then uses them as a yardstick by which to criticize other theories, immanent critique starts out from the principles of the work under discussion itself. It uses the internal contradictions of a body of work to criticize that work in its own terms. . . . Unlike most “critiques,” that is, it is not so much trying to score a victory over the work criticized, as to understand the significance of the particular kinds of contradiction present in a given body of such work—in particular, to understand what these contradictions tell us about the social experience out of which the work was written.<sup>34</sup>

In the Brücke aesthetics, I argue, we find an aesthetic form of imminent critique of the contradictions of the primitivist discourse. The purpose of such a critique, as Jarvis explains, is not that it philosophically refutes a previous position (by highlighting its contradictions), but that through philosophical critique, the history embedded in such concepts could be materialized:

Because, Adorno suggests, concepts always carry buried in within them, even when they look entirely abstract, the traces of bodily pleasure or suffering, fear or desire, critically interpreting conceptual contradictions can be a way of critically interpreting our real social experience.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> Simon Jarvis, *Adorno: A Critical Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 1998), 6.

<sup>35</sup> Jarvis, *Adorno*, 6.

As I argued in chapter three, this notion of immanent critique would later be developed and refined by Adorno and Max Horkheimer in *Dialectic of Enlightenment*.<sup>36</sup> They began to develop a greater emphasis on the negativity of critique, as a tool to dismantle particular ideological or philosophical constructs, a position that Adorno would later develop more systematically in *Negative Dialectics*.<sup>37</sup> In *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, they borrow from Hegel the concept of “Determinate negation” (*bestimmte Negation*), in order to conduct a dialectical critique of Enlightenment. (Enlightenment here however standing not for the particular *historical* set of philosophical discourses, but rather for a particular mode of rationality, which they contend informs classical myth as much as it does Enlightenment thought.) Horkheimer and Adorno explain their appropriation of the concept of determinate negation as follows:

Determinate negation does not simply reject imperfect representations of the absolute, idols, by confronting them with the idea they are unable to match. Rather, dialectic discloses each image as script. It teaches us to read from its features the admission of falseness which cancels its power and hands it over to truth.<sup>38</sup>

Horkheimer and Adorno attempt to adopt the notion of Hegelian dialectic, but revise it into a “negative” form. What is valuable about dialectic for Adorno and Horkheimer is that it exposes “each image as script.” In the following, I shall argue that, aesthetically, the Brücke’s use of

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<sup>36</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in *Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940-1950*, Vol. 5., ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987).

<sup>37</sup> Theodor W. Adorno, *Negative Dialectics*, trans. E.B. Ashton (New York: Seabury Press, 1973).

<sup>38</sup> Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialectic of Enlightenment: Philosophical Fragments* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2002), 18. “Die bestimmte Negation verwirft die unvollkommenen Vorstellungen des Absoluten, die Götzen, nicht wie der Rigorismus, indem sie ihnen die Idee entgegenhält, der sie nicht genügen können. Dialektik offenbart vielmehr jedes Bild als Schrift. Sie lehrt aus seinen Zügen das Eingeständnis seiner Falschheit lesen, das ihm seine Macht entreißt und sie der Wahrheit zueignet.” Max Horkheimer and Theodor W. Adorno, *Dialektik der Aufklärung*, in *Max Horkheimer: Gesammelte Schriften: Dialektik der Aufklärung und Schriften 1940-1950*, Vol. 5., ed. Gunzelin Schmid Noerr (Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 1987), 46.

parataxis and self-reflexive attention to representation and mediation, in fact does precisely this—it exposes the figure of the primitive as script, as a feature of discourse.

To demonstrate this point, it will be instructive to compare the Brücke aesthetics with that of Dada, the European avant-garde movement which emerged during World War I. The Dada artists' use of photomontage, assemblage, mixed-media, and found objects, combined with a strident "anti-art" ethos, exerted a profound influence on modern art. In *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin*, Matthew Biro focuses on Berlin Dada to call attention to their "radical identity politics." Biro argues that these artists imagined "new forms of nonbourgeois, hybrid identity," in particular through developing a concept of the cyborg.<sup>39</sup> Although the term cyborg was not invented until later, Biro argues that Weimar artists produced a "flowering of cyborgian imagery," which formed "a significant cultural trajectory focused on reimagining human identity"<sup>40</sup>—a reimagining which would later be articulated by contemporary theorists such as Donna Haraway:

For Haraway, the cyborg defined a fundamentally hybrid form of human identity that undermined traditional distinctions between gender, race, and class. Furthermore, the cyborg also broke down three crucial distinctions that had previously defined the difference between humans and nonhumans. First, the cyborg broke down the boundary between human and animals. . . . Second, the figure of the cyborg broke down the boundary between organisms—both human or animal—and machines. . . . Third, the cyborg broke down the boundary between the physical and the nonphysical.<sup>41</sup>

I draw upon Biro's work here to both demonstrate a similar practice at work in the art of the Brücke, as well as to suggest a distinction between the Brücke and Dada. If the Dadaists can

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<sup>39</sup> Matthew Biro, *The Dada Cyborg: Visions of the New Human in Weimar Berlin* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2009), 10.

<sup>40</sup> Biro, *Dada Cyborg*, 9.

<sup>41</sup> Biro, *Dada Cyborg*, 9.

be said to construct or articulate a hybrid figure, the Brücke's work proceeds negatively. They do not offer a hybrid image of the human as both primitive and civilized; rather their work reveals and dismantles the discourse. The primary distinction is in regards to the conception of modernity in each case. Whereas the Dadaists provide a means of evolving "new and more balanced modes of being and acting in a rapidly transforming, technologically mediated," modern world, and "imagined ways in which human beings could best reconstruct themselves in response to these forces,"<sup>42</sup> the Brücke's aesthetics undermine the narrative that the modern world is in fact radically new. As Schmidt-Rottluff stated, in response to the questionnaire about the existence of a "new art program": it was, if anything, as "old as the hills and eternally the same." A similar rejection of modernity as a unique historical crisis in the grip of technological change finds expression in Heym's depictions of society cited above. In such works as Heym's *The Eternal Day*, as Peter Viereck argues, the "cities embody a horror that looks backward to the pre-urban visions of [Hieronymus] Bosch (which Heym then works into an urban photomontage) rather than forward to megalopolis."<sup>43</sup> The Brücke, I argue, deployed a similar aesthetics to that of Dada, but not as a critique of modernity; rather, their work functioned as a critique of the narrative of a disenchanting modernity

Nevertheless, at the level of aesthetic technique, the Brücke and Dada shared a certain similarity. As a paradigmatic example of how Dada aesthetics used montage and juxtaposition to challenge interpretive acts, Biro analyzes Hannah Höch's photomontage *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the Kitchen Knife Dada through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch of Germany, 1919-

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<sup>42</sup> Biro, *Dada Cyborg*, 23.

<sup>43</sup> Viereck, *Strict Wildness*, 228.

20, fig. 5.76). The large and imposing work, which Höch assembled from mechanically reproduced photographic and textual fragments clipped from the pages of *Berliner Illustrirte Zeitung*, presents “a turbulent image of Germany’s postwar revolutionary moment of 1918 and 1919.”<sup>44</sup> It confronts the viewer with a dizzying array of images, from metropolitan buildings and crowds to machines, babies, animals, and pieces of text; most prominently, however, are the numerous “cyborg”-like figures. Biro describes the latter as:

sutured-together images of Wilhelmine and Weimar personalities, including government, military, and political leaders; artists and writers; dancers and actresses; and scientists. These collaged, hybrid, and (sometimes) hermaphrodite figures represent recognizable individuals while suggesting—through their fragmented and recombined structures—a radical transformation of these modern individuals through war, revolution, and technological development.<sup>45</sup>

At first, a work like *Cut with the Kitchen Knife* seems far removed from the Brücke works under consideration, both in content and in style. Yet upon examination they share many of the same aesthetic strategies. Biro writes, for example, that the fragments of the image are “juxtaposed in a way that emphasizes heterogeneity. Not only does Höch allow gaps or white spaces to show between many of the montage elements, but she also cuts them together with a disregard for exact matches in scale and perspective.”<sup>46</sup> Aside from the fact that Höch is working with photographic fragments, and thus manually combining physically distinct objects, this description could just as well apply to the Brücke’s sense of composition, as well as the disregard for scale and perspective. Just as the method of photomontage demonstrates its constructedness, the Brücke actively rejected illusionism, and their works, whether the stark

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<sup>44</sup> Biro, *Dada Cyborg*, 71.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 74.

and stylized figures in the paintings, the rapid sketchwork, the bluntly etched woodcuts, or the roughly-hewed wood carvings, all uniformly call attention to their construction. Although in comparison to Dadaist montage, the effect is less pronounced, the historian must consider the effect such works would have had in the years before montage had been popularized as an aesthetic technique; the Dadaist photomontage appears less as a radical aesthetic break than a development of an Expressionist technique. Dada made explicit in a new media what had been previously attempted in traditional media formats.

Biro argues that, in such works as *Cut with the Kitchen Knife*, Höch drew attention to the artificial and constructed nature of the image in order to underscore “the perspectival nature of her representation—the fact that it represented one particular viewpoint in a potentially much larger discursive field.”<sup>47</sup> Since these works of the Berlin Dadaists are so radically composite, without providing any recognizable interpretive center or focus, they:

necessitate constructing multiple interpretations and rejecting any sense of totality or the end of interpretation. Their all-over, nonhierarchical compositions empowered their original viewers to identify the elements that mattered the most to them, and by bringing them together, to reimagine their contemporary world.<sup>48</sup>

In the case of the Brücke, a similar rejection of interpretive totality takes place, presenting an invitation to reimagine the contemporary world. However, there remains an important distinction. With Höch’s montage, the aim is to call attention to the interpretive act itself, and thereby underscore the existence of multiple possible interpretations.

With the Brücke, however, there is, as it were, a particular focus. Whereas Höch’s montage opens itself to multiple readings, die Brücke’s work engages with a specific interpretive

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 78.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

narrative, that of primitivism (in particular, romantic primitivism understood as critique of modernity), and aims at its disarticulation.

For the Brücke, the point is not simply revealing one's own subject position as one among many, but undermining a particular subject position, which had depended upon fixed binary significations of self and other. Brücke aesthetics can thus be understood, in the terminology of Horkheimer and Adorno, as a form of determinate negation that "discloses each image as script." Similarly, it operates at the level of immanent critique. The Brücke participated in the discourse of primitivism, but through their use of a paratactical aesthetics, in which the signifiers of primitive and modern were juxtaposed while the relationship between them was suppressed, the Brücke undermined the stability of those significations. Their work was not therefore about encouraging multiple interpretations, but undermining in particular the discourse of primitivism.

#### **Part 4. The Aporetic Primitivism of the Brücke**

In the art of the Brücke, I argue, we find a mode of aesthetics that "discloses each image as script." In other words, they develop a primitivist aesthetics that discloses the discourse of primitivism as a discursive construct. It may be objected that there is little in the Brücke members' own writings to suggest that they intended to critique the popular discourse of primitivism, nor that they understood their art to operate in a manner resembling what I have called immanent critique. Most critics, as noted previously, focus upon statements in which the artists discuss their work as aspiring to a type of aesthetic "immediacy," and argue that they

sought to break with traditional ideas of aesthetic representation in favor of a utopian vision of avoiding mediation. I argue, however, that the consensus view has distorted the interpretation of the available material, which in fact reveals both an awareness and embrace of aesthetics as inevitably mediated. The Brücke conception of aesthetics aspired to honesty and directness, but this should not be understood as a rejection of mediation in an attempt to produce art “naively,” or, as this is commonly interpreted, as a mode of “primitive” creation.

Donald Gordon presents the standard argument in his article “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: By Instinct Possessed.”<sup>49</sup> Gordon quotes from an essay Kirchner published in *Genius* in 1920, titled “E.L. Kirchner’s Drawings.”<sup>50</sup> Kirchner, eager to enter into the discussion about his own work, published the article under a pseudonym, Louis de Marsalle. Gordon quotes a few lines from the essay, wherein Kirchner (as Marsalle) advises his readers that, in order to understand Kirchner’s drawings, “all aesthetic ways of seeing must be avoided.”<sup>51</sup> Kirchner writes that his drawings “are without conscious design and intent; they mirror the sensations of a man of our time.” According to Gordon,

What he means . . . is the same thing he meant when he wrote in a 1918 letter that “I am only the instrument of the work, so that it doesn’t depend on the person.” . . . As far as he himself was concerned, that is, the drawings just happened. They were notations, images of external experience that seemed to him to flow directly from eye to hand while bypassing the mind and all rational intention.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> Donald E. Gordon, “Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: By Instinct Possessed,” *Art in America* (Nov. 1980): 80-95.

<sup>50</sup> Louis de Marsalle (E.L. Kirchner), “Zeichnungen von E.L. Kirchner,” *Genius* (Munich, 1920), 216-34, reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner’s Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften*, ed. Lothar Grisebach, new edition with contributions from Lucius Grisebach (Wichtrach/Bern: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 220-225.

<sup>51</sup> Quotes from Kirchner’s essay are taken from Michael Hulse’s translation rather than Gordon’s. Louis de Marsalle (E.L. Kirchner), “Zeichnungen von E.L. Kirchner,” translated by Michael Hulse, in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 209.

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.*, 210.



Gordon argues, in other words, that Kirchner's spontaneous style represents a rejection of mediation, an attempt to circumvent "rational" thought through spontaneous composition. On the one hand, Gordon acknowledges an ambiguity in Kirchner's description. He cites from a 1926 manuscript, in which Kirchner recognizes that images work through a mode of abstraction that is not necessarily referential in nature:

In the picture we must work with abstractions. These result from the limitation of our pictorial means—line, point, surface, color—which in themselves have the peculiar effect of only expressing the feeling-value of things and beings, not the things themselves.<sup>53</sup>

Although Gordon observes that for Kirchner, images are not seen as representing things in themselves, Gordon picks up on Kirchner's notion of the "feeling-value," and suggests that this becomes the true referent of the image. Gordon argues that this "feeling-value" is the essence of whatever it is that the artist wants to depict. Gordon explains, "There is an irrational, emotional, or even spiritual quality to the perceived image—not just an optical one—and it is this visionary quality that must be expressed in fleeting forms."<sup>54</sup> Thus in Gordon's interpretation, the spontaneity of the work was the only means of accessing this otherwise inaccessible reality of the "feeling-value." There is still an essential reality to be expressed, it is simply not, in Gordon's view, the object world. Gordon writes: "It is as if reality for Kirchner *preceded* any subject-object dichotomy, as if reality had to be caught *before* it was verbalized or

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<sup>53</sup> Eberhard W. Kornfeld, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Nachzeichnung seines Lebens* (Bern: Kornfeld, 1979), 339-341, quoted in Gordon, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: By Instinct Possessed," 84.

<sup>54</sup> Gordon, "Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: By Instinct Possessed," 84.

intellectualized—precisely because intellectualization would mean bringing old image memories and drawing habits into play.”<sup>55</sup>

Gordon’s interpretation however glosses over a crucial feature of the essay, which is Kirchner’s description of his aesthetics as a type of language. Gordon fails to consider the way in which Kirchner figures his drawing as a type of “notation.” As Kirchner explains at the beginning of his article, “If we take these drawings into ourselves as we would read a letter dear to us or a book we treasure, then without being aware of it we will acquire a feeling for the key to this hieroglyphic script. Kirchner draws as others write.”<sup>56</sup> Kirchner’s analogy of his pictorial work to hieroglyphics is not an arbitrary one, but one that Kirchner employed elsewhere in letters to friends and in other writings on aesthetics. For Kirchner, hieroglyphics were a useful comparison, but not because they can be said to combine figurative images with words; rather, he invoked the idea as type of script that could be both representative and non-representative. He writes:

[The images] are hieroglyphics in the sense that they render natural forms in simpler two-dimensional forms, and suggest significance to the beholder as the written word “horse” presents the form of a horse to the eyes. They are not hieroglyphics in the familiar sense of the word, in which a particular form invariably stands for the self-same object or concept.<sup>57</sup>

As hieroglyphics, the images must be read. Pictorial work, therefore, like language, was necessarily involved in the act of mediation. Kirchner’s images represented reality, but only through a mode of mediation that functions like a language. Moreover, Kirchner took care to stress that his use of hieroglyphics was not intended to suggest that an image, as a sign, has a

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 88.

<sup>56</sup> Kirchner, “Zeichnungen von E.L. Kirchner,” translated by Michael Hulse, in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, 209.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid.

precise signified object: “None of these images are representations of particular objects; it is only through their position, their size, and their relation to other items on the sheet that they acquire their specific meaning.”<sup>58</sup> Kirchner goes on to explain that the signification process at work in his drawings is not about particulars representing things or ideas; rather, the part and the whole must be seen as interdependent, inseparable from each other:

In moving from the larger whole to the smaller part, the individual part becomes dependent on the overall form. The individual part is thus derived from the whole, and so there cannot be any such thing as a detail proper. Thus the form of a hand or a tree, for example, is determined by the total composition that occupies the entire sheet.<sup>59</sup>

Kirchner’s theory of aesthetics thus comes remarkably close to the linguistic theory of Ferdinand de Saussure (1857-1913), in particular as expressed in *Course in General Linguistics*, which was published posthumously by two of Saussure’s students in 1916.<sup>60</sup> Saussure reframed the focus of linguistics through his concept of the linguistic sign. A sign was composed of a signifier and a signified. However, Saussure argued that the relationship of a signifier to the signified (the word “tree,” for example, to the idea “tree”) was arbitrary. He declared therefore that “the linguistic sign is arbitrary”—and, accordingly, that the referent of the signifier to the signified was not the proper focus of linguistics. He moved the study of language away from theories based on linguistic correspondence to reality, toward a study of how language works internally as a system of signs. In Saussure’s account, words acquired their meanings, not through their correspondence to fixed objects or concepts, but only through their relationships to each other.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

<sup>60</sup> Ferdinand de Saussure, *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Charles Bally and Albert Schehaye, with Albert Riedlinger, trans. with introduction and notes by Wade Baskin (New York: McGraw-Hill Book Co., 1966).

Kirchner's primary examples of signification—the above mentioned “tree,” and elsewhere in the essay Kirchner uses the image “horse”—are, as it happens, the same examples chosen by Saussure in his *Course in General Linguistics*. My point here, however, is not to assert that Kirchner's aesthetics was influenced by Saussure's semiotics, but merely to note their fundamental similarity. Language, in Saussure's understanding, does not simply reference a pre-existing reality, but is fundamentally involved in the construction of that reality. Kirchner's theory of images operating as a language does not therefore posit a pre-rational reality, either as an object world that images attempt to reproduce, or, in Gordon's interpretation, as a “feeling-value” which images can “capture” if they are spontaneous and avoid intellectualization.

Rather, the meaning of such signs is determined through the internal composition and relationships of the pictorial work. Kirchner's aesthetics, then, were not about bridging the gap between an image and a “feeling-value,” as Gordon argues, through a kind of circumvention of rationalization. Kirchner's understanding of aesthetics as language meant that mediation was unavoidable. The spontaneity of artistic creation was not an attempt to skirt rationality and grasp, through “instinct,” a reality that was otherwise inaccessible.

Interestingly, Gordon attempts to support his argument with a quotation from the letter Kirchner had written to Eberhard Grisebach in 1917. In the letter Kirchner attempts to describe his understanding of his artistic process. Gordon argues that it represents the inaccessibility of this reality as “feeling-value” to rational thought, but, I argue, it in fact demonstrates the reverse, Kirchner's assertion that this reality was indeed accessible through a process of

mediation. Kirchner, apologizing for his awkward attempt to put his feelings in words, writes to Grisebach:

Think of it, a person sits across from us and we talk, and suddenly there arises this intangible something which one could call mystery. It gives to his features his innate personality and yet at the same time it lifts those features beyond the personal. If I am able to join him in such a moment, I might almost call it ecstasy, I can paint his portrait.<sup>61</sup>

Gordon interprets this as a statement that Kirchner wants to express this “intangible something,” but can only record this “fugitive truth” if he can respond to it immediately—“as if reality had to be caught *before* it was verbalized or intellectualized.” Gordon, however, as before, leaves out the crucial context of Kirchner’s description. Kirchner goes on to explain: “And yet this portrait, as close as it is to his real self, is a paraphrase of the great mystery and, in the last analysis, it does not represent a single personality but a part of that spirituality or feeling which pervades the whole world.” Kirchner’s talk of a “spirituality” or “feeling” should not be misinterpreted as a transcendent (or as Gordon terms it, “fugitive”) reality. It is a reality that is very much present in the moment. As Kirchner explains:

This great mystery which stands behind all events and things (sometimes like a phantom) can be seen or felt when we talk to a person or stand in a landscape or when flowers or objects suddenly speak to us. We can never represent it directly, we can only symbolize it in forms and words.<sup>62</sup>

On the one hand, Kirchner states that this reality is not transcendent or inaccessible, but present to the artist through a type of communication. (If we consider this in conjunction with Saussure’s theory, this interestingly solves the problem of how signs refer to things—because

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<sup>61</sup> Kirchner, Letter to Eberhard Grisebach, Dec. 1, 1917, in *Maler des Expressionismus im Briefwechsel mit Eberhard Grisebach*, ed. Lothar Grisebach (Hamburg: Christian Wegner Verlag, 1962), 76-77, translated in Miesel, *Voices*, 19.

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*

things are in fact participating in the dialogue.) On the other hand, Kirchner states explicitly that the artistic image is inherently a matter of mediation, and can never represent reality “directly.” This aesthetic mediation, however, is not an unbridgeable gap between subject and object, artist and world; it is rather this mediation, as a form of communication, which the artist inhabits, which cannot be transcended.

Kirchner’s portrait, which ostensibly signifies particulars, in fact relinquishes claims to representing particulars, but rather becomes a statement about the operation of aesthetic representation. Images here work like language—but they do not provide a phrase, but rather a paraphrase. It represents, but not as a mode of direct correspondence between word or image and thing.

In fact, Kirchner’s description in the letter to Grisebach could be described as an attempt to put in words the situation that I described in chapter three, wherein Odysseus encounters the other qua other, and responds to this encounter with an act of aesthetic creation—driving the oar into the ground. It is an aesthetic object that results from a dialogic encounter, and encounter in which one listens to the voice of the other. It is not, however, an attempt to “capture” that particularity, to access it “directly” or “immediately” outside of rational thought. It is an attempt to respond “honestly” to the inevitable mediation of this dialogic encounter with otherness.

## Part 5. “Ideals of Authenticity”—Undoing a Critical Idyll

Kirchner’s rejection of an aesthetic “immediacy” is equally apparent in some of his comments about sculpture and woodcuts. However, here too it has been a mainstay among the Brücke scholarship to interpret the interest of Kirchner and the Brücke artists in woodwork as an expression of a desire to engage “directly” and “immediately” with the “raw” substance of wood. Their carvings and etchings are interpreted therefore as an attempt to create in accordance with a “primitive” ideal of authenticity. As before, the interpretation of the available commentary is distorted through the assumption that Brücke’s primitivism was built upon a rejection of the rational, as a way of achieving an unmediated relationship with one’s artistic product.

Jill Lloyd, for example, quotes from a slightly later article by Kirchner written under the Marsalle pseudonym, “E.L. Kirchner’s Sculptural Work,” which he published in 1925. In the article, Kirchner rejects the idea of using clay and plaster models in sculptural work, and praises working directly and spontaneously with the material:

How different a sculpture looks, which the artist himself forms with his own hands from genuine materials, where every rise and fall is shaped by the sensitivity of the maker’s hand, where the strongest blows and the gentlest carving, directly express the artist’s feelings.<sup>63</sup>

Kirchner, Lloyd argues, expresses “the themes treated by Simmel and Meier-Graefe at the turn of the century, concerning direct and authentic creative activity as an alternative to the

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<sup>63</sup> Louis de Marsalle (E. L. Kirchner), “Über die plastischen Arbeiten von E.L. Kirchner,” *Die Cicerone* 17, no. 14 (1925): 695-701. Reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner’s Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften*, ed. Lothar Grisebach, new edition with contributions from Lucius Grisebach (Wichtrach/Bern: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 255.

alienating and fragmented conditions of divided labour.”<sup>64</sup> She argues that the notions of originality and authenticity that Kirchner espouses are the product of Jugendstil, “but whereas the arts and crafts movement sought a solution to the alienating conditions of the age in the cultivation of handwork and craft traditions, the Brücke artists tried to reclaim a sense of authenticity via their transforming notions of the ‘primitive.’”

Lloyd thus sees the Brücke’s interest in carving in the context of the critique of modernity espoused by Simmel. I argue, however, that Kirchner’s own commentary in fact describes woodwork in a way that does not erect a fundamental opposition between a rational, superficial approach to artistic creation and an instinctual and authentic one. Rather, his aesthetic statements call this dichotomy into question. This is demonstrated in an earlier article Kirchner penned for *Genius* (also under the pseudonym), “On Kirchner’s Graphic Works.”<sup>65</sup> The article not only makes clear the way in which Kirchner rejects the idea of an opposition between mediation and creation, but it also offers an insight into the way in which ideas about the “primitive” informed his work—specifically, it amounts to a rejection of the idea of the “primitive” artwork as an “ideal of authenticity.” Through a closer reading of the article, it shall be possible therefore to dislodge this critical idyll of Brücke scholarship.

In the article on his graphic works, Kirchner discusses his approach to creating images through the use of woodcuts, etchings and lithographs. Although the focus is on carving to produce graphics, Kirchner concludes the article with the following analogy, comparing the artist to a “savage” who is carving a figure from wood:

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<sup>64</sup> Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 80.

<sup>65</sup> Louis de Marsalle (E.L. Kirchner), “Über Kirchners Graphik,” *Genius* (Munich, 1921), 250-63. Reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner’s Davoser Tagebuch: Eine Darstellung des Malers und eine Sammlung seiner Schriften*, ed. Lothar Grisebach, new edition with contributions from Lucius Grisebach (Wichtrach/Bern: Verlag Gerd Hatje, 1997), 226-230.



Just as a “savage,” with infinite patience, carves from hard wood a figure that embodies his longing, so too in his arduous and complex technical endeavor the artists achieves what may be his purest and strongest works in the spirit of the ancient curse, if it may be thus understood: in the sweat of thy brow shalt thou eat bread.<sup>66</sup>

This reads at first like a simple romanticization of “primitive” authenticity, and is often interpreted as such. Kirchner seems to suggest that an authentic relationship to artistic creation is like that of a “primitive” or “savage”: it is intuitive and instinctual, rather than rational and deliberative. On the hand, it is true that in some parts of the article, Kirchner emphasizes the intuitive response to his creations, and the spontaneous or unforced achievement of aesthetic effects. A carved figure, he writes, will “evolve freely from the imagination that shapes it.” In woodcuts, “the proportions follow from the emotion out of which the work arises. . . . If a figure’s head particularly interests the artist, the head will be larger while the other parts of the figure will be underdeveloped.” In etching, “strokes that seem carelessly to have been drawn too long in fact have a lively part to play in the structure, while elements that run through a composition but are strictly speaking not visible . . . open up the composition of the sheet.”

To focus however on these isolated comments obscures the principle thrust of Kirchner’s article, which is in fact to provide a long and detailed explanation of the processes involved in producing graphic works, offering insights into the methods he employs in woodcuts, lithographs, and etchings. He begins by making a contrast between the “loose” and

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<sup>66</sup> “Wie der ‘Wilde’ mit unendlicher Gedult aus dem harten Holz die Figur schnitzt, die verkörperung seines Sehns, so schafft der Künstler in mühsamer, komplizierter technischer Arbeit seine vielleicht reinsten und stärksten Arbeiten nach dem uralten Fluche, wenn man ihn so verstehn darf: Im Schweiß Deines Angesichts sollst Du Dein Brot essen.” Kirchner, “Über Kirchners Graphik,” *Genius* (Munich, 1921), 250-63; reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner’s Davoser Tagebuch*, 229; translation by Michael Hulse in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 213.

rapid technique of drawing and the more complex work involved in producing graphics. The former is a more spontaneous mode of creation; with the graphics, however,

the technical procedures doubtless release energies in the artist that remain unused in the much more lightweight processes of drawing or painting. The mechanical process of printing gathers the individual stages of the work into a single result. . . . To return to a piece time and again, over a period of weeks or indeed months, reworking it and achieving the ultimate in expression and perfected form, without the plate losing its freshness, is extremely stimulating.<sup>67</sup>

Kirchner writes that etchings, at this point his “technique of choice,” in their first states (the original cuts made by the artist in the presence of his subject) can be “highly expressive . . . The unconstrained caprice of this art comes fully into its own.” But he continues:

There are also plates that have been fully and repeatedly worked and reworked, till the once smooth surface has been transformed into hills and valleys by repeated etching. There are plates with two-millimeter-thick etched strokes alongside others fine as a hair, thin aquatint applied to the polished surface with a brush and deep-etched areas that have the effect of enamel. . . . The second phase of etching superimposes lines, and this is followed by further, deeper-etched areas, and so on until the work is completed. . . . Etching is a subtle technique.<sup>68</sup>

Spontaneity, in other words, is not a requirement for artistic “authenticity.” Kirchner describes his etchings and lithographs as necessitating a highly rational and deliberative process, a process that can lead to one’s “purest and strongest works.” Etching is not presented as an attempt to circumvent rationality and create “instinctively.” With this in mind, Kirchner’s comment about the “savage,” quoted above, reveals a different significance than scholars tend to allow. Kirchner is expressing not a return to, or recuperation of, “primitive” authenticity. Rather, he asserts a parallel with the “savage”; they both are involved in an “arduous and

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<sup>67</sup> Ibid., 211.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid., 213.

complex technical endeavor,” and both share the patience needed to see it through. Both are driven by the desire to create, to reproduce their longing, but this desire is realized in a rational, technical, mediated process, involving patience, work, and deliberation.

Moreover, Kirchner’s allusion to the passage from Genesis is telling. The biblical story about the expulsion of Adam and Eve from the Garden of Eden is a primary example of a disenchantment tale, in which humans acquire knowledge at the expense of alienation from their god, from nature, and from each other. Kirchner, however, converts the “ancient curse” into a fortune, and in doing so, undermines the narrative of disenchantment. Moreover, the “savage” is here quite explicitly not represented as a pre-lapsarian Adam before the fall from Eden, existing in a state of “primeval innocence” (in Heller’s phrase),<sup>69</sup> able to create in an “authentic” manner of “unalienated” expression. Rather, Kirchner places both the creative artist and savage in the same position, compelled to work, bound to an aesthetics that is inherently an act of mediation, yet is nonetheless an act of honest creation. Kirchner’s analogy therefore not only undermines the disenchantment narrative. It is in this sense, as an example of primitivist discourse that simultaneously undermines the significations of that discourse, that the Brücke aesthetics constitutes an example of aporetic primitivism.

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<sup>69</sup> Heller, “Brücke in Dresden and Berlin,” 27.

## Conclusion: The Critical Illusion and Impassable Bridges

In 1919, the German art critic Wilhelm Hausenstein lamented the “collapse of Expressionism.”<sup>70</sup> Hausenstein, not too many years before, had looked with great enthusiasm to Expressionism, not only as an aesthetic advance, but as a source of immense revolutionary potential. Critics such as Hausenstein and Worringer believed that the new art would bring about a transformation of society. Yet, the revolution failed to arrive, and Hausenstein wrote bitterly of his dashed hopes: “We, who at one time expected everything from [Expressionism], are not spared the admission that after our dire efforts, we are slipping into bankruptcy.”<sup>71</sup>

Hausenstein’s hopes were not arrived at arbitrarily. The utopian dream of an aesthetics that would usher in a new world had been announced by the artists Franz Marc and Wassily Kandinsky. In the *Blue Rider Almanac*, which Marc and Kandinsky published in 1912 (and which became a focal point for interpreting the aims of Expressionism), Marc had written in praise of Germany’s “savages,” a group of artists that included “the Brücke in Dresden, the Neue Sezession in Berlin, and the Neue Vereinigung in Munich.”<sup>72</sup> Marc’s use of the term savages echoed the use of “Fauves” (or “wild beasts”) to describe the radical French painters, such as Matisse, Derain, and Vlaminck, who had rattled the artistic establishment with their bold use of color and departure from naturalist techniques. Marc’s primary point, however, was that this new art was more than an aesthetic achievement—it signaled the “awakening of mysticism”:

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<sup>70</sup> Wilhelm Hausenstein, “Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick,” *Der neue Merker* 3, Sonderheft no. 2 “Werden,” undated (late 1919): 119.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.

<sup>72</sup> Franz Marc, “Die ‘Wilden’ Deutschlands,” in *Der Blaue Reiter: Dokumentarische Neuauflage von Klaus Lankheit*, eds. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1965), 28-32.

It is not possible to explain the recent works of these “savages” as a formal development and reinterpretation of Impressionism. The most beautiful prismatic colors and the famous Cubism have become meaningless goals for these “savages.” Their thinking has a different goal: through their work to create *symbols* for their time, symbols that belong on the altars of the dawning spiritual religion.<sup>73</sup>

For Marc, the new aesthetics was merely a window into the coming cultural revolution.

Similarly, Kandinsky, in his major theoretical contribution to the *Almanac*, “The Problem of Form,” had written: “The features of a great spiritual era (which was prophesied and today manifests itself in one of the first initial stages) we see in contemporary art.”<sup>74</sup>

By 1919, however, for Hausenstein and other critics, Expressionism appeared to have lost its way. In his essay, Hausenstein compared it to Impressionism, which, he claimed, had withered because it had attempted too little; Expressionism, on the other hand, had failed by attempting too much: “It wanted to embrace God and the heavens. It wanted more than it could manage.”<sup>75</sup> The result was catastrophe. The catastrophe was compounded, however, by the seeming ubiquity of the Expressionist style in the years after the war. Hausenstein wrote that Expressionism was everywhere: “Today Expressionism has its crystal palace. It has its salon. No cigarette advertisement, no bar can get along without Expressionism. It is nauseating.”<sup>76</sup> Expressionism, in other words, had not only failed to bring about a spiritual revolution, but had been completely coopted by bourgeois society, deprived of its radical potential, and turned into merely a fad, another cog in the materialist machine. “We, after having consciously

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<sup>73</sup> Ibid., 30-31.

<sup>74</sup> Wassily Kandinsky, “Über die Formfrage,” in *Der Blaue Reiter: Dokumentarische Neuausgabe von Klaus Lankheit*, eds. Wassily Kandinsky and Franz Marc (München: R. Piper & Co. Verlag, 1965), 143.

<sup>75</sup> Hausenstein, “Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick,” 120.

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

experienced Expressionism, after having loved it and pulled its cart along, live today with the consuming feeling of having come face to face with nothing.”<sup>77</sup>

Hausenstein’s critique of the tragic failure of Expressionism is revealing for the insight it offers into Hausenstein’s understanding of the movement. Although Hausenstein had earlier praised Kandinsky, he now considered the move to abstraction to be the single greatest error. He still praises some of the early expressionist, such as Alfred Kubin, Ludwig Meidner, Kirchner and others, whose work held onto a figurative element. Abstraction, however, which was supposed to tap into the essences of God and thing, had undermined the ability of art to communicate and create a collective impact.<sup>78</sup>

Continuing his comparison of Expressionism with Impressionism, Hausenstein argues that Expressionism not only failed to communicate its aims, but suffered from a fundamental contradiction. This contradiction has been obscured, he argues, because the “scheme” of Expressionism remains difficult to identify. The scheme of Impressionism, by contrast, was “singular” and “precise.” He explains:

[Impressionism] means: *Place de la Concorde* by Degas; *Place Pigalle* by Renoir; *Rue de Berne* by Manet; it means Lautrec. It means therefore: periphery as center. This is a highly paradoxical—but also a highly precise—position. The situation [of accounting for Expressionism] would be easy if we could simply turn the formula around—if we could say it was the center as the periphery: God and the divine projected onto the edge, as a representation of our miserable existence in relation to the whole. But it hasn’t been made so convenient for Expressionism.<sup>79</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

<sup>78</sup> See Rose-Carol Washton Long, ed., *German Expressionism: Documents from the End of the Wilhelmine Empire to the Rise of National Socialism* (New York: G.K. Hall & Company, 1993), 280.

<sup>79</sup> Hausenstein, “Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick,” 120.

The formula for Impressionism, Hausenstein writes, was an understandable one. They focused on the surfaces of things, impressions, the play of light, details, negative space—they took the periphery and made it the center, the focus of art. Hausenstein suggests it would be easier for the critic if it were possible to say that Expressionists merely reversed this formula. If they took the center of things—their interest in the abstract form and the spiritual essence—and made this peripheral; if they had banished meaning to the outskirts, as a way of representing the fallen state of modern man, with God dead and things reduced to commodities.

But, Hausenstein writes, it isn't so easy as all that. Expressionism, in his view, wants to go after the center of things—it wants to make God and nature the center. But the irony, he says, is that in going toward the center, towards the absolute, by way of abstraction, it ends up placing *itself* on the periphery: "In Expressionism, the demand for the absolute has brought forth only that which is relative."<sup>80</sup> According to Hausenstein, this is the central and unavoidable "problem" for Expressionism. It tried, without realizing it, to go after both the center and the periphery, the absolute and the abstract, the essence and the surface. But in trying for both, it achieved neither: "[Expressionism] hardly knows how much it knows of God and of things. It is a convulsion that comes just as close to the all as to the void."<sup>81</sup>

Hausenstein thus washed his hands of Expressionism; the following year, a "deeply shattered" Wilhelm Worringer would do so as well, pronouncing his own "funeral oration" over the movement (as Georg Lukács later described Worringer's "Questions about Contemporary

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<sup>80</sup> Ibid., 119.

<sup>81</sup> Hausenstein, "Die Kunst in diesem Augenblick," 120.

Art,” a lecture given by Worringer first in Munich and then published as a book in 1921).<sup>82</sup> I have argued, however, that Hausenstein and Worringer (and those who have been influenced by their critique) have deeply misread the aesthetics of the Brücke, by attempting to find in it, or locate it as a part of, the critique of an alienating modernity. Charles Haxthausen has diagnosed this “critical illusion,” in which critics formulated a theory of expressionism wherein stylistic changes in modern painting were celebrated as pointing to “an imminent transformation in the whole of life.”<sup>83</sup> Influenced by new developments in art historical theory, above all Riegl and his idea of *Kunstwollen*, these critics sought to understand the relationship of aesthetics to society; wedded to a belief that modernity was riven by materialism, capitalism, rationalism, and secularism, the critics interpreted the aesthetics of the Expressionists as the first glimmer of an aesthetic revolution that would have cultural, societal consequences—a spiritual rebirth. From such a perspective, Expressionism seemed caught between utopia and despair. However, as Haxthausen writes, “What collapsed with the concept of expressionism was a grand illusion, an illusion fostered above all by critics, with reinforcement from a few artists like Marc and Kandinsky, but which had little to do with the goals and practice of European art between 1910 and 1920, the art it purported to define.”<sup>84</sup>

This critical illusion has deeply imprinted itself upon subsequent attempts to interpret Expressionism. As a result, the primitivism of expressionist artists has been cast as an attempt

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<sup>82</sup> Georg Lukács, “Größe und Verfall des Expressionismus” (1934), published in English translation as Georg Lukács, “Expressionism: Its Significance and Decline,” in *Essays on Realism*, ed. R. Livingstone, trans. David Fernbach (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1981), 76. Cited in Charles W. Haxthausen, “Modern Art After ‘The End of Expressionism’: Worringer in the 1920s,” in *Invisible Cathedrals: The Expressionist Art History of Wilhelm Worringer*, ed. Neil H. Donahue (University Park, Pennsylvania: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1995), 119.

<sup>83</sup> Charles W. Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion: ‘Expressionism’ in the Writings of Wilhelm Hausenstein,” in *The Ideological Crisis of Expressionism: The Literary and Artistic German War Colony in Belgium, 1914-1918*, ed. Rainer Rumold and O.K. Werkmeister (Columbia, S.C.: Camden House, 1990), 169-191.

<sup>84</sup> Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion,” 188.



to recapture a primitive “authenticity” and an aesthetic “immediacy,” both of which have been thwarted by an alienating modernity. However, as I have argued in this study, the Brücke were not in fact motivated by this critique of modernity. Their vitalist vision, their Whitman-like insistence on the coevalness of all things, and their embrace of the present moment were not a utopian project, but an aesthetics that were “as old as the hills.” It therefore makes little sense to speak, as most critics do, of the Brücke’s primitivism as “tool” used to critique modernity. It becomes possible to ask anew, what was purpose of their primitivism?

Interestingly, although Hausentsein misreads Expressionism, I would suggest that the “scheme” that he offers to describe it—as “a convulsion that comes just as close to the all as to the void”—comes surprisingly close to the mark. Rather than read this as failure, I argue that it constitutes an aesthetic achievement. If we take up Hausenstein’s comment in light of the previous discussion of Kirchner’s theorizing about aesthetics, we can read Hausenstein as offering an unintentional insight into the Brücke’s relationship to modernity and to primitivism.

Kirchner, in his aesthetic ruminations, attempted to express the relationship of the artistic product to the “great mystery” that compelled artistic creation. The artist’s task, for Kirchner, can be understood a response to the “great mystery which stands behind all events and things,” but which “we can never represent directly.” Kirchner’s art aims for absolutes, but insists upon the fact of inherent mediation. It can be seen as the merger of a vital materialism (the influence of Obrist, Jugendstil, and Whitman) with an approach to aesthetics based on exposing the image as script. It does not offer an “immediate” access to the spiritual, to the “great mystery”—which can then enter into and transform the fallen world. This art begins in the presence of the mystery, the encounter with otherness—and offers, in the end, a work of

art that acknowledges its role as both signifying all and signifying nothing. In other words, Kirchner's work could compellingly be described as coming "just as close to the all as to the void."

Rather than read this as failure, I argue that Kirchner's aesthetics can be seen as a successful mode of abiding in this paradox. This tension only appears as a failure from a perspective in which art was supposed to achieve a total revolution, ushering in a new spiritual authenticity, but this was never in fact the Brücke's aim. Kirchner's description of art as hieroglyphics presents an aesthetics that is paradoxical—an aesthetics in which an image signifies, but yet does not attain signification. A hieroglyph in this sense is a bridge to signification, yet a bridge which cannot be crossed. This produces an interpretive impasse—in other words, *aporia*.

The Brücke's use of primitivism in this context, then, was not part of a critique of modernity; rather, it was about undoing the discourse of primitivism, disclosing it as script. Popular primitivist conceptions of authenticity and immediacy are present, but simultaneously prevented from achieving their signification. The Brücke's primitivism therefore erects impassable bridges. To thwart the discourse of primitivism, however, does more than prevent one from either disparaging or romanticizing the primitive. Since primitivism has been fundamentally tethered to the critique of modernity, the *aporias* of Brücke primitivism work to undermine the narrative of modernity imagined as disenchanted. The Brücke were not engaged in the critique of an alienated modernity; they were engaged in a critique of the narrative *in which modernity appears as alienated*—the disenchantment narrative. Their art offered a critique that gestured toward pulling out the rug from under Hausenstein's feet.

As Charles Haxthausen writes, the theory of Expressionism put forth by Hausenstein and the other early writers on the topic was less a theory about what defined or unified an artistic movement, than it was a theory of what constituted the role of the avant-garde. Haxthausen explains,

In the original critical meaning of “expressionism” [e.g. for Hausenstein et al.], the goal of this avant-garde was to liquidate the conditions which gave birth to it and to all avant-gardes, to overcome the estrangement, the alienation between artist and society. It was, in short, an avant-garde to end all avant-gardes.<sup>85</sup>

With this as their standard, the critics ended up nursing disappointment. The work of the Brücke did indeed contain a shimmer of revolutionary potential, simply not where Hausenstein was looking for it. It was not an avant-garde to end all avant-gardes. However, through their aporetic primitivism, the Brücke offered an aesthetics that threatened to dispense with the disenchantment narrative, a project that should be understood as radical, if not revolutionary.

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<sup>85</sup> Haxthausen, “A Critical Illusion,” 172.

## Conclusion

In this study I have advanced two principal arguments. The first is that a particular interpretation of modernity, namely the disenchantment narrative, has been fundamentally shaped by the discourse of primitivism. The second is that some examples of primitivism can be said to challenge the discourse from within. In deploying primitivist tropes, while simultaneously undermining their signification, these latter types of primitivism can be described as aporetic.

The significance of the first thesis is that it provides a new means of critiquing the disenchantment narrative. The disenchantment narrative is shorthand for a story about the development of an autonomous, rational subject; it is the belief that such a subject exists, combined with the melancholy view that the achievements of rationality and autonomy have objectified and thereby disenchanted the world, separating that subject from nature, from meaning, from relationships—from anything that would compromise one's rationality and autonomy.

New materialist and posthumanist thinkers have diagnosed the shortcomings of disenchantment narrative and the humanist notion of the autonomous, rational subject, although we might say they come at it from slightly different angles. Posthumanists have critiqued the negative consequences of this view for understanding the human—the difficulties it poses for theorizing consciousness, agency, and subjectivity. Posthumanist thought (with a bit

of a head start) has sought to overcome the resistance to embodiment and materiality by developing new theories of the human. As Diana Coole and Samantha Frost write, such theorists have taken up materialist approaches to subjectivity, “discovering its efficacy in constructing even the most apparently natural phenomena while insisting upon its embeddedness in dense networks of power that outrun its control and constitute its willfulness.”<sup>1</sup> New materialists, on the other hand, have critiqued the problems this view poses for thinking about materiality. As Coole and Frost explain, from such a position, “there is an apparent paradox in thinking about matter: as soon as we do so, we seem to distance ourselves from it, and within the space that opens up, a host of immaterial things seem to emerge: language, consciousness, subjectivity, agency, mind, soul; also imagination, emotions, values, meaning, and so on.”<sup>2</sup> New materialists have therefore sought new approaches to theorizing material causality and the agency of matter.

The division of the world into the human and the nonhuman makes it difficult to think about both, and a good deal of theoretical work has gone into developing new ontologies, that refuse the traditional oppositions of the disenchantment narrative. The result has been a compelling set of philosophical and ethical critiques, but such critiques have not yet attempted to map out its history. Jane Bennett, for example, has argued that “the quarantines of matter and life encourage us to ignore the vitality of matter and the lively powers of material formations.”<sup>3</sup> In *Vibrant Matter*, Bennett retheorizes assemblages, non-human actants, stem cells, and publics in order to “dissipate the onto-theological binaries of life/matter,

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<sup>1</sup> Diana Coole and Samantha Frost, eds., *New Materialisms: Ontology, Agency, and Politics* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 1.

<sup>3</sup> Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), vii.

human/animal, will/determination, and organic/inorganic.”<sup>4</sup> In *The Enchantment of Modern Life* she draws attention to “the wonder of minor experiences,” cross-species encounters, and television advertisements in order to open up new ways of experiencing the enchantment of things.<sup>5</sup> Bennett offers a vital body of work for rethinking the present dilemmas of sustainability, and the necessary theoretical tools for reconsidering the “political ecology of things.”

Nevertheless, at a certain point, the appeal of a new approach to experiencing life rests on more than well-founded arguments. It takes more than theoretical persuasion, but a will to see things differently. My own work attempts to fill in this gap by outlining the historical basis for the disenchantment narrative. By exposing the roots of the disenchantment narrative in the discourse of primitivism, I seek to reframe the issue, to shift the focus from a problem of thinking (either as a problem of theory, or as problem of “rationality” itself) to a problem of history.

In arguing that the disenchantment narrative is structured by the discourse of primitivism, I have sought to demonstrate that it is in fact a historical product of imperialism. There is, accordingly, no inherent problem with something called rationality that classifies, masters, and objectifies nature. Technology, for example, produces “objects” upon which it acts—but so do hands, and yet hands do not necessarily alienate us from nature. Hands enable us to touch, to gesture, communicate, and so on. Moreover, the idea that we live in a “modern” society defined by the dominance of “objectifying” modes of thought and action is a discursive

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid., x.

<sup>5</sup> Jane Bennett, *The Enchantment of Modern Life: Attachments, Crossings, and Ethics* (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2001).

construct, an imagined modernity—indeed, it is an ethnocentric imaginary that developed out of a series of encounters with otherness in the imperial era.

This study therefore has two aims. It is offered, on the one hand, as a critique of the autonomous, rational subject; and on the other, as a critique of the ethnocentric *identification* of this view of the subject with the history of a people—most commonly delineated as the history of “the West.” The traditional narrative locates the origin of this disenchanted subjectivity in European thought and culture, finds it expanding through imperialism into the idea of the West, and then, as present-day globalization and acceleration disperses knowledge and power (and “the West” simultaneously comes under scrutiny as an analytic term), the West morphs into a nebulous but pervasive modernity. This modernity is, ostensibly, open to all who want to participate in it—or alternatively, it is the unavoidable juggernaut that globalization is spreading around the world, whether individuals want to participate or not. But the price of entering into this modernity is the price of achieving this autonomous, rationalist subjectivity—namely, the disenchantment that this subjectivity entails.<sup>6</sup>

As a critique of the notion of the autonomous, rational subject, this study is intended as a contribution, then, to the growing body of new materialist and posthumanist theory. In the discourse of primitivism, civilization is identified as the achievement of the autonomous, rational subject. In other words, this particular conception of subjectivity is not simply a product of humanist philosophy, but of imperialism. As a critique of the ethnocentric identification of this form of subjectivity with “the West,” this study is positioned as a

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<sup>6</sup> The theoretical descriptions of “alternative” or “multiple” modernities are in this sense not a solution, for in spite of whatever difference exist between them, their identification as “modernities” must suggest, if anything, merely different ways of dealing with this package of knowledge and power, and its accompanying autonomy and alienation.

contribution to postcolonial thought. I hope therefore to bring these important critiques together, in a way that enables us to see how historical practices of imperialism have produced a particular set of ideas about the modern and the primitive, and how this has developed into an ethnocentric discourse of modernity.

New materialist and posthumanist thought has generally approached the critique of the autonomous, rational subject as a product of “Western” thought. This is not to suggest that new materialists have romanticized other cultures as offering the “solutions”; this is not a case of “lingering” primitivism in that sense. Indeed, new materialists have, it seems, rather studiously refrained from looking to “other” cultures for alternatives (as earlier critics of “Western” rationalism were prone to do); instead they look for theoretical support in the “Western” tradition, from Lucretius to Whitehead to Kafka. Nevertheless, there has been a lack of attention to the history of this conception. In drawing attention to this history, I hope to demonstrate that this notion of autonomous, rational subjectivity is not simply a matter of an erring philosophical discourse, but a discourse that has been shaped by the history of imperialism.

This leads to the second principal thesis that I mentioned above: I have argued that not all examples of primitivism work the same—some instances of primitivism operate aporetically. My aim here has been to show the way in which some uses of primitivism dismantle the effectiveness of the primitivist discourse. They do this through a critique of the binary distinctions between progressive history and timelessness, rationality and fetishism, culture and nature, human and nonhuman. In doing so, they undermine the notion of modernity



imagined as a historical time characterized by autonomy and alienation, in opposition to the primitive.

These instances of aporetic primitivism that I examine, however, do more than conflate the primitive and civilized. They are not simply assertions that, for example, “we” (we Westerners, we moderns, etc.) are all “primitive” underneath a civilized exterior (as in, for example, Torgovnick’s argument in *Primitive Passions*<sup>7</sup>); nor are they claims that what we thought was “civilization” is actually only “savagery” and “fetishism” in a state of self-denial. Critiques such as these only seem to undermine the distinction between primitive and civilized, while in fact they reproduce the discourse at a different level of critique. Rather, examples of aporetic primitivism call into question the utility of the discourse to describe experience—they use primitivism to question the characterization of a disenchanted modernity. More specifically, they do this not through theory alone, but through a mode aesthetics. I use the term aesthetics here not only to designate artistic primitivism, as in the case of the Brücke, but to aporetic primitivism in ethnology as well. Bastian’s ethnology, in other words, has an aesthetic element to it that must be taken into account. These modes of primitivism treat the discourse of primitivism itself as an aesthetic object—they put a frame around it, we might say, and make it a subject for aesthetic contemplation. They treat the discourse of primitivism, in other words, as Odysseus eventually treats his oar—they plant it in the ground.

Moments of aporetic primitivism therefore demonstrate the chinks in the armor of the notion of the autonomous, rational subject, and its exposition in the disenchantment narrative. Suzanne Marchand, in her recent erudite study of German Orientalism, has argued:

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<sup>7</sup> Marianna Torgovnick, *Primitive Passions: Men, Women, and the Quest for Ecstasy* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1997)

We need . . . a synthetic and critical history, one that reassesses Oriental scholarship's contributions to imperialism, racism, and modern anti-Semitism, but one that also shows how modern Orientalism has furnished at least some of the tools necessary for constructing the post-imperialist worldviews we cultivate today.<sup>8</sup>

I have sought a similar approach to the history of German primitivism, in order to show how primitivism has propped up an ethnocentric understanding of modernity and the West, but also how some instances of primitivism have worked to undermine this understanding. This study is therefore aimed at dislodging this narrative, and argues that examples of aporetic primitivism provide resources for postcolonial and new materialist critiques.

If the above takes a presentist approach to history, delving into the past for resources with which to engage present philosophical and political dilemmas, the results of this study nevertheless entail some important consequences for the work of German history. On the one hand, my theoretical model of a historical network imposes some (I believe helpful) constraints on the kinds of historical claims I can make. It prevents me from attempting to picture German culture as a monad, or German history as singular continuous path of development. If one wants to talk about "a" German culture, it must be understood as polyphonic; alternatively, it might be better to speak about German cultures and German histories, some of which overlap, others pass by each other blindly in the night.<sup>9</sup> The culture and history that appear to the historian will depend to some degree upon the questions one brings to the material. Nor is it feasible, based upon the few examples I have chosen for this study, to begin making

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<sup>8</sup> Suzanne L. Marchand, *German Orientalism in the Age of Empire: Religion, Race, and Scholarship* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009), xx.

<sup>9</sup> Konrad Jarausch and Michael Geyer, *Shattered Past: Reconstructing German Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2003).

comprehensive conclusions about a German primitivism, or a German relationship to otherness. There are no doubt other types of primitivism at work in other corners, and even the work of those I have studied may appear to serve different ends when approached from a different perspective. By demonstrating the existence, however, of aporetic primitivism in the ethnology of Adolf Bastian and the artwork of the Brücke, I have provided important new readings of pivotal figures in the history of German anthropology and German modernist art.

The Brücke, the first German expressionists, are considered by many the most important German artistic movement of twentieth century. They enjoy critical as well as popular acclaim, in Germany and abroad. Their work became especially popular among West German politicians during the years of the Federal Republic—Helmut Schmidt praised Emil Nolde as the “absolute crown,” and after him, Kirchner.<sup>10</sup> Such admiration should be seen in historical context as part of an act of self-definition in response to the condemnation of the Brücke and other expressionists by the National Socialists. In 1975 Schmidt decorated the chancellor’s office in Bonn with Brücke artwork, and Helmut Kohl followed suit, until the relocation of the capital to Berlin. Today, Kirchner’s large-scale *Sonntag der Bergbauern* (The Mountain Farmers’ Sunday; the painting is about thirteen feet long and over five feet tall) dominates the cabinet room of the Berlin chancellery. The Brücke clearly remain a resource for self-representation and a focal point of national and cultural identity. The significance of their work therefore has important political and cultural meanings. I have argued that the traditional understanding of Brücke primitivism as a naïve or utopian view of “primitive” life in opposition to an alienated modernity incorrectly simplifies and distorts their engagement with the

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<sup>10</sup> Christian Saehrendt, “Hottentots in tails’: The turbulent history of “Die Brücke” in Germany,” signandsight.com (June 17, 2005), <http://www.signandsight.com/features/216.html>.

discourse of primitivism; and that accordingly, it is insufficient to read their work as simply expressing the critique of modernity that was popular among many of their contemporaries.

I have also pressed the case for increased critical attention to Adolf Bastian. Unlike the Brücke, Bastian is today a largely neglected figure, yet one whose prominence for nineteenth-century Germany anthropology is indisputable. His legacy has been largely occluded by the attention paid to the disciplinary turn to nation and race around the turn of the century, motivated by interest in understanding the history of the relationship of German anthropology to the developments of National Socialism. Bastian was the leading figure in his field for decades, and although his writings were less frequently read (and even less frequently understood) as the years went by, he nevertheless had an impact, attested to by his influence upon figures as varied as Carl Jung and Walter Benjamin. Aside from his readership, Bastian's direction of the ethnological museum in Berlin made his ethnological theory into a palpable experience for the interested public. If Virchow's *Schulstatistik* of the 1870s influenced a generation of German students to see physical features as markers of Germanness, it stands to reason that the generations of museum goers who experienced Bastian's vision of a universal psychology in his Berlin museum (and other ethnological museums that followed his lead) were exposed to a disorienting approach to otherness, in which the distinctions between primitive and modern, German and other, were increasingly undermined.

Taken together, the existence of these instances of aporetic primitivism at such a level of prominence in the domains of anthropology and art may help us say a few things about what German history is not, and thus act as a corrective to some common generalizations about Germans' relationships to cultural otherness, on the one hand, and to modernity on the other.

Most significantly, of course, German historians have long grappled with the record of vocal, popular critiques of reason, progress, and politics—stretching from romantic and nationalist-inspired critiques of the French occupation of Prussia to Thomas Mann’s *Reflections of a Nonpolitical Man*.<sup>11</sup> Different historians have framed this material in different ways, but, as is well known, they most often have done so in terms that center upon ideas about German antipathy to modernity and modernization. Fritz Stern and George Mosse embossed such a view of German history as characterized by a deep tradition of “volkisch” thinking and a “politics of cultural despair,” the fallout of which contributed to the demise of the Weimar Republic and the ascendance of National Socialism.<sup>12</sup> Henry Turner summarized this view of a “crisis of modernization” in his description of National Socialism as “utopian antimodernism . . . an extreme revolt against the modern industrial world and an attempt to recapture a distant mythic past.”<sup>13</sup>

Jeffrey Herf in the 1980s revised this approach and presented the case for what he called a “reactionary modernism,” in an attempt to explain the “paradox” of the reconciliation between a reactionary German nationalism and an embrace of technology and modernization. Herf argues that reactionary modernists presented a new ideology of technology in which it was understood as a spiritual manifestation of German *Kultur*; they rejected the *volkisch* longing for a pre-industrial past, but preserved a romantic-nationalist idea of a German soul

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<sup>11</sup> Thomas Mann, *Betrachtungen eines Unpolitischen* (Berlin: S. Fischer Verlag, 1918).

<sup>12</sup> Fritz Stern, *The Politics of Cultural Despair: A Study in the Rise of the Germanic Ideology* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1961); George L. Mosse, *The Crisis of German Ideology: Intellectual Origins of the Third Reich* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1964). See also Leonard Krieger, *The German Idea of Freedom: History of a Political Tradition* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1957); Fritz Ringer, *The Decline of the German Mandarins: The German Academic Community, 1890-1933* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1969).

<sup>13</sup> Henry A. Turner, “Fascism and Modernization,” in *Reappraisals of Fascism* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1975), 117-39.

opposed to materialism and civilization. Herf's argument, although it makes room for technology, preserves the idea of a profound German aversion to Enlightenment ideals of reason and politics: "What proved so disastrous for German history was the separation of the Enlightenment from German nationalism. German society remained partially—never 'fully'—enlightened."<sup>14</sup>

More recently, the respected German sociologist Wolf Lepenies has revisited the issue of a cultural version of the German *Sonderweg*—claiming, oddly, to offer a critique but in fact substantiating its most questionable features.<sup>15</sup> Lepenies, in *The Seduction of Culture in German History*, objects to the lessons in "diminished particularity" that have shaped the historiography in recent decades, as evident in:

the reconstruction of German national doctrines whose ideological transitions, rather than ideological persistence, are seen as characteristic; and in the assurance that cultural pessimism was not a German speciality, but rather a feature of bourgeois societies in general. These attempts, persuasive in different ways, yet convergent in counteracting "the chronic overstatement of the unfolding and ultimate triumph of modernity," . . . have sought to reduce German particularity to a European normality.<sup>16</sup>

Lepenies' argument is not focused on the German relationship to technology, but rather attempts to expose a long-lasting tension in German history between culture (as a value) and politics. In a reworking of Stern's argument, Lepenies suggests that German history reveals a consistent "overrating of culture at the expense of politics": "Culture was the arena of the absolute, a realm without compromise. Its exaltation nourished the illusion that culture could

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<sup>14</sup> Jeffrey Herf, *Reactionary Modernism: Technology, Culture and Politics in Weimar and the Third Reich* (Cambridge and New York: Cambridge University Press, 1984), 10.

<sup>15</sup> Wolf Lepenies, *The Seduction of Culture in German History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2006).

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, 10.

be a substitute for power and therefore a substitute for politics.”<sup>17</sup> The rejection of politics as rational, superficial and alien to the “German spirit” emerged in the opposition to Napoleonic ideals, and paved the way for the collapse of Weimar and the rise of Nazism:

After the Napoleonic Wars, freedom from foreign occupation did not bring political freedom to the German people. During the Restoration period that followed, a coalition between culture and a specific kind of politics was sealed in Germany. Politics meant the submission of civil society to the state, the surrender of the individual to the community, and the propagation of national values and racial pride rather than the pursuit of universal ideas. It kindled a romantic revolt against modernity and rejected “civilization” for the sake of “culture.”<sup>18</sup>

From Stern to Lepenies, these views all share a core belief in something like a “German mind,” a determining feature of German culture and history<sup>19</sup>; they also share a common assertion that this cultural essence is marked by antipathy to modernity. From this starting point, Germans’ tendencies to deviate from the framework appear as “paradoxes”—when Germans embraced technology, or industrialization, or even (somehow!) politics, they must have done so while retaining their belief in an autochthonous, national purity and cultural authenticity in opposition to a superficial, rationalist civilization. As Herf, for example, expresses it:

The “Prussian path” was a form of capitalist industrialization that fostered a peculiarly intense cultural and ideological protest, the politicization of which constituted a decisive chapter in the history of German nationalism. The language of romanticism, soul, *Volk*, *Gemeinschaft*, *Kultur*, life, blood, inwardness (*Innerlichkeit*), stood for specifically German virtues confronted with the danger of *Zivilisation*—capitalism, liberalism, science, soulless rationality, international communism, and, of course, the Jews.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>17</sup> Ibid., 16.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 25.

<sup>19</sup> Lepenies quotes approvingly from G.P. Gooch et al, *The German Mind and Outlook* (London: Chapman & Hall, 1945).

<sup>20</sup> Jeffrey Herf, “Reactionary Modernism: Some Ideological Origins of the Primacy of Politics in the Third Reich,” *Theory and Society* 10, no. 6 (Nov. 1981): 807.

This interpretation sorely distorts our understanding of the complexities of Germans responses to social, economic, and political change. The effect of this critique on German historiography of the Kaiserreich, the period with which this study is primarily concerned, has been the lingering impression that, as Geoff Eley has written,

Kaiserreich German society was always already the incubator for a set of cultural traits that, under conditions of crisis, would dispose its bourgeois citizenry towards irrationalist, mystical, anti-democratic, authoritarian, and other kinds of “illiberal” behavior less likely to be embraced in Britain, France, and other countries further to “the West.”<sup>21</sup>

My own study is not concerned with the German right, nor with the history of German nationalism; it is however concerned with German culture and ideas about modernity. My argument for the existence of aporetic primitivism in this context suggests two important consequences for German historiography. On the one hand, I have examined two prominent moments in German culture, leading figures in the fields of anthropology and art, figures that have traditionally been seen as lending support to the notion of a more widespread German antipathy to modernity, either in the form of an anthropological idealization of “civilization,” or an artistic romanticization of the authentic (anti-modern) primitive. I have argued however that it is a misreading of Bastian and the Brücke to see them as participating in the critique of modernity; their primitivism was in fact more complex, involved in a subtle critique of its own claims to signification. The existence of aporetic primitivism in such pivotal cases provides some measure of a bulwark against attempts to renew the myth of the anti-modern German mind.

It will be noted, however, that I have suggested that aporetic primitivism *does* offer a critique of progress, rationality, and modernity. This may sound like a contradiction; yet the

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<sup>21</sup> Geoff Eley, “Clearing the Ground: German Continuities,” unpublished paper.



difference between my claim and the idea of an anti-modern revolt is that aporetic primitivism suggests a way in which Germans distanced themselves from the ideas of progress, rationality, and modernity, *not* by criticizing the effects of these “things” upon society, but by questioning their validity as descriptions of contemporary society. Aporetic primitivism offers therefore an *alternative* means of thinking about how some Germans critiqued the idea of an autonomous, rational subject, but in a way that did not entail a romanticization of the collective, the submission of the individual to authority, or a commitment to the “German idea of Freedom.” It offers, in other words, a notion of German resistance to modernity that does not entail an aberrant embrace of fascism.

Finally, if we accept the aporias offered by Bastian and the Brücke, and the undermining of the analytic category of “modernity,” defined as a moment in time and a people marked by instrumental reason and alienation, it problematizes the utility of this category as an explanatory tool for the history of German violence and ruthless politics. The notion of a cultural *Sonderweg*, after all, has leaned heavily upon a rather vague picture of modernization, which, in the absence of helpful liberal release-valves and power-checks (or a more close-knit *Gemeinschaft*, depending upon one’s politics), presented powerful psychological and sociological disruptions that proved deeply damaging to German society. As Thomas Röhkrämer summarizes this view, “The psychological strain of a fast and crisis-ridden industrialization process is supposed to have provoked an antimodern sentiment in large parts of the population.”<sup>22</sup> Thus the ailments of “modernity” produced the horrors of Nationalism Socialism:

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<sup>22</sup> Thomas Röhkrämer, “Antimodernism, Reactionary Modernism and National Socialism: Technocratic Tendencies in Germany, 1890–1945,” *Contemporary European History* 8, no. 1 (March 1999): 29.

The critique of modern technology, capitalism and a pluralistic society on the one hand and the irrational dream of a harmonious, truly German “community of the people” on the other allegedly reached its logical culmination in the Nazi ideology of “blood and soil,” the cult of the charismatic leader and the totalitarian integration of all “worthy” members of society, connected with the annihilation of all “unworthy” members.<sup>23</sup>

This view relies, however, on a simplistic understanding of modernization, reducing a complex amalgam of social, political, and economic changes into a monolithic modernity, the cause of an alienation and fragmentation and the ensuing ideologies of “blood and soil” as a form of recompense. The political nightmares and human atrocities of the twentieth century should not be understood as a product of modernity, nor a result of a deep-set aversion to modernity. The aporias of primitivism suggest that we must rethink this narrative of historical crisis, and devote greater attention to the particular alignments of individual wills, the specifics of social cohesion, institutional forms of power, contests over resources, relationships to others (human and nonhuman), and ideas of the self. Racial, cultural, national, and *modern* identities have played prominent roles in such developments, and this study argues that in order to understand their roles, we must grasp the ways in which, during at least the last two centuries, they have been deeply influenced by the discourse of primitivism.

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<sup>23</sup> Ibid.

## Figures

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**Figure I. E.L. Kirchner, *Mit Schilf werfende Badende* (Bathers Throwing Reeds), 1909.**

Published in the 1910 *Brücke Portfolio*. Woodcut, black, green and red-orange ink on paper, 20.2 x 29.3 cm; Sheet: 40.3 x 54 cm. Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, *Brücke Highlights: 297 Werke aus dem Brücke-Museum Berlin* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2012), no. 50.

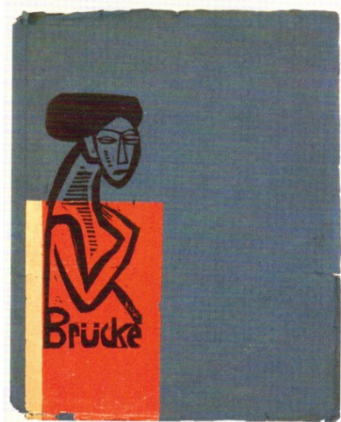


**Figure II. Erich Heckel, *Stehendes Kind* (Standing Child), 1911.**

Woodcut printed in black, green and red on paper. Image: 37.5 x 27.8 cm (irregular), sheet: 42.70 x 32.23 cm. Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, *Brücke Highlights: 297 Werke aus dem Brücke-Museum Berlin* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2012), no. 128.



**Figure III. E.L. Kirchner, *Nude Seated with Crossed Legs*, 1912.**  
Painted wood, approx. 47 x 22.9 x 19 cm. Werner and Gabrielle Merzbacher Collection, Zürich-Küsnacht. Reproduced in Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller, eds., *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years* (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003).



**Figure IV. E.L. Kirchner, Cover of the catalogue for the exhibition at the Galerie Fritz Gurlitt, Berlin, 1912.**  
Woodcut on paper. Brücke-Museum Berlin. Reproduced in Reinhold Heller, ed., *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009).

**Figure V. Female commemorative figure. Master of the Bangwa region, 19<sup>th</sup> century.**  
Wood, height 82 cm. Musée Dapper, Paris.  
Reproduced in Lorenz Homberger, ed., *Cameroon: Art and Kings*, with contributions by Christaud M. Geary and Hans-Joachim Koloss (Zurich: Museum Rietberg, 2008).





**Figure 1.1. Mask. Fang. Gabon.**

Painted wood and fiber, height 63.4 cm. Collection Gustave and Franyo Schindler, New York. Reproduced in William Rubin, ed., *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern*, Vol. 1 (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1984), 13.

**Figure 1.2. Mask. Dan. Ivory Coast or Liberia.**

Height, 22.9 cm. Private Collection. Reproduced in Rubin, *"Primitivism" in 20th Century Art*, 4.



It should be noted that the above images of ethnographic objects, intended as a reference for the reader, should not be understood as an “objective” presentation of the objects in question. The isolation of individual items, in a manner designed to highlight their aesthetic quality as well as evoke their mysterious and indeterminable nature (suspended in space, severed from the context of their production and use), is a product of modernism. The above are therefore ethnographic objects as they would be encountered in a museum or catalog prepared under the influence of this modernist aesthetic (the above examples come from the catalog to the 1984 MoMA “Primitivism” exhibition). This is not how the artists (or the general public) of the early twentieth century would have encountered such objects. This list of images must therefore be contextualized and historicized. The following images present a few examples of how such objects were most frequently displayed.

Ethnographic objects, encountered on display in an ethnographic museum:



**Figure 1.3. Museum for Ethnology, Hamburg. Congo Gallery, 1912.**

Reproduced in Ursel Berger and Christiane Wanken, eds., *Wilde Welten: Aneignung des Fremden in der Moderne* (Berlin: Koehler & Amelang, for Georg-Kolbe-Museum, 2010), 119.

Objects encountered in an artist's studio:

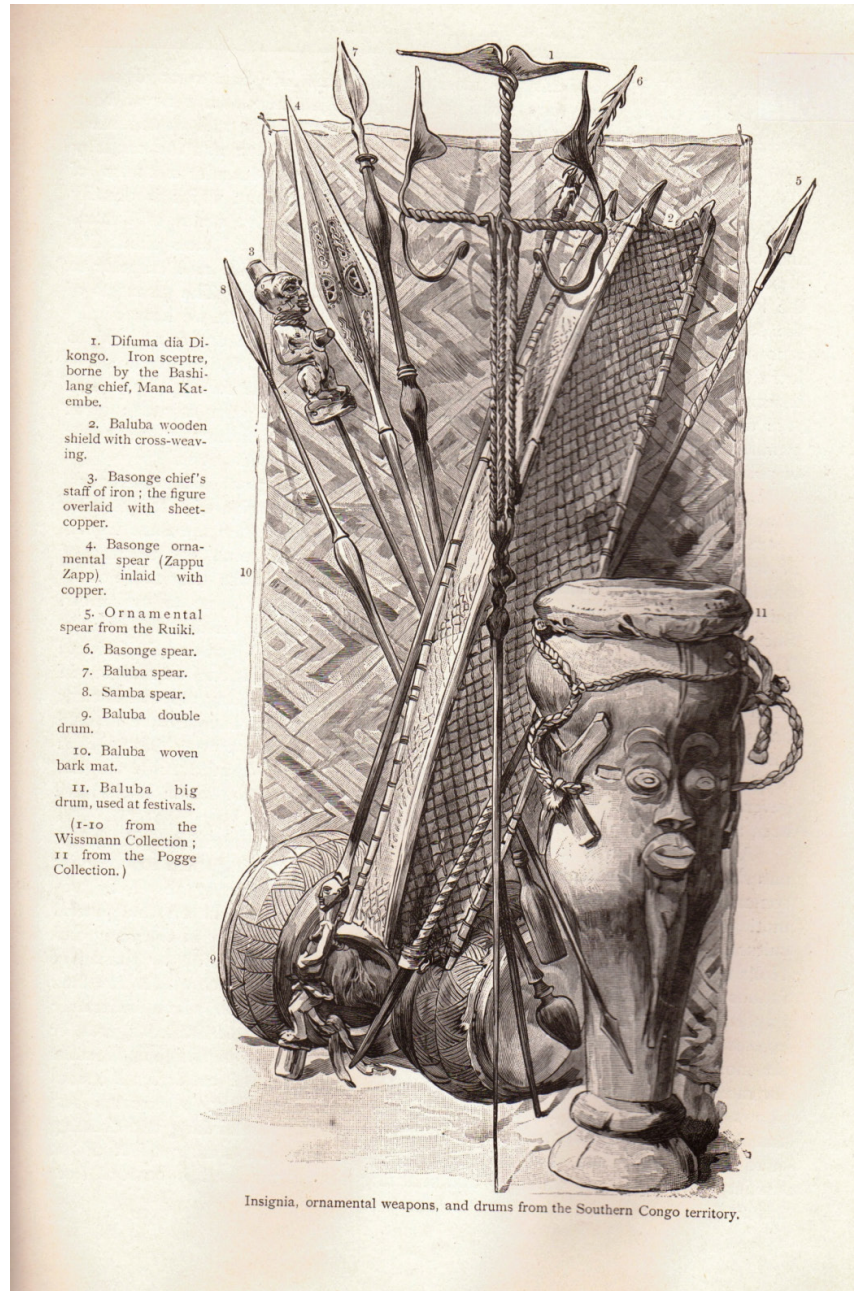


**Figure 1.4. Picasso in his studio, 1908.**

Reproduced in Ursel Berger and Christiane Wanken, eds., *Wilde Welten: Aneignung des Fremden in der Moderne* (Berlin: Koehler & Amelang, for Georg-Kolbe-Museum, 2010), 119.



Objects in a late nineteenth-century anthropological text (at a time when anthropology had not yet acquired a firm place in the university, such texts were written not only for other anthropologists, but also for a broader audience):



**Figure 1.5. "Insignia, ornamental weapons, and drums from the Southern Congo territory."** Reproduced in Friedrich Ratzel, *The History of Mankind*, Vol. 1, trans. A.J. Butler (London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd., 1896), 139.



**Figure 1.6. Pablo Picasso, *Les Femmes d'Alger (O.J.) Version O*, 1911-12.**  
Oil on canvas, 243.9 x 233.7 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.



**Figure 1.7. The Kanaka Village (New Caledonia), Exposition Universelle, Paris, 1889.**  
Engraving after a drawing by Louis Tinayre, published in *Le Monde illustré*, June 27, 1889.  
Reproduced in Rubin, "Primitivism" in 20th Century Art, 104.




**Figure 1.8. Paul Gauguin, *Te aa no areois* (The Seed of the Areoi), 1892.**  
Oil on burlap, 92.1 x 72.1 cm. The Museum of Modern Art, New York.

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PHOTO PROGRAMS AT

Figure 2.1. Advertisement for 1984 MoMA exhibition. Reproduced in Sally Price, *Primitive Art in Civilized Places* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1989), 95.

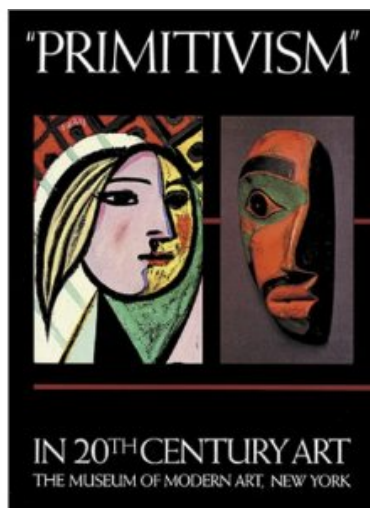


Figure 2.2. Catalogue for the 1984 MoMA exhibition.



**Figure 2.3. Brian Jungen, *Prototype for New Understanding #9*, 1999.**

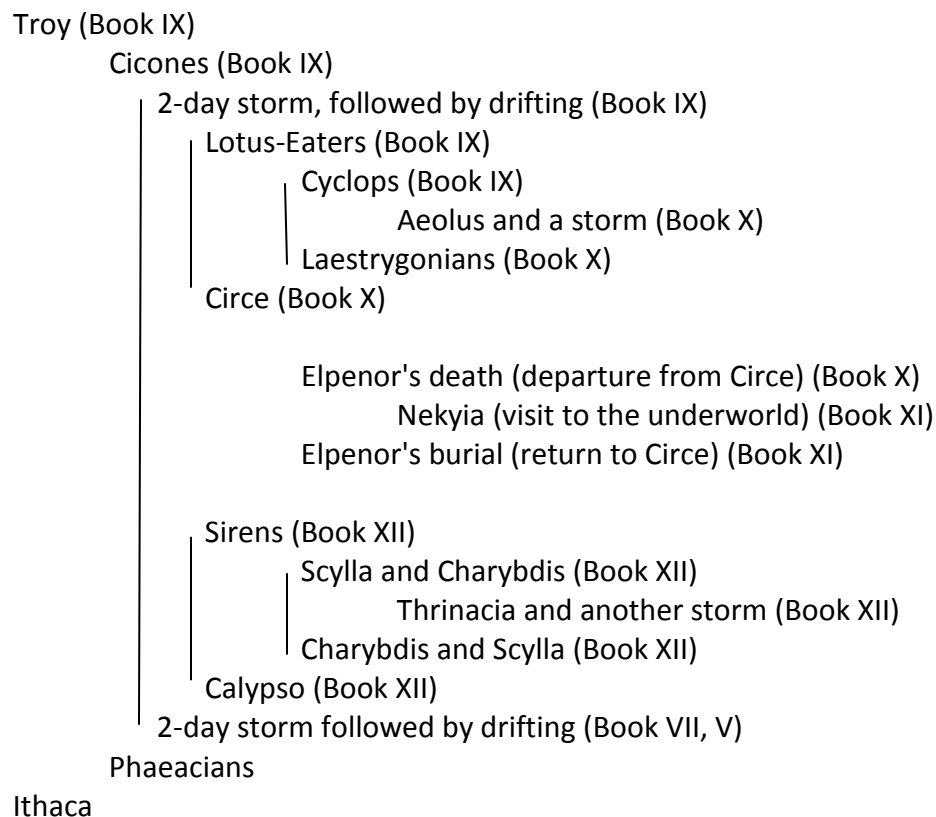
Nike Air Jordans, human hair, 60.5 x 25.4 x 12.7 cm.

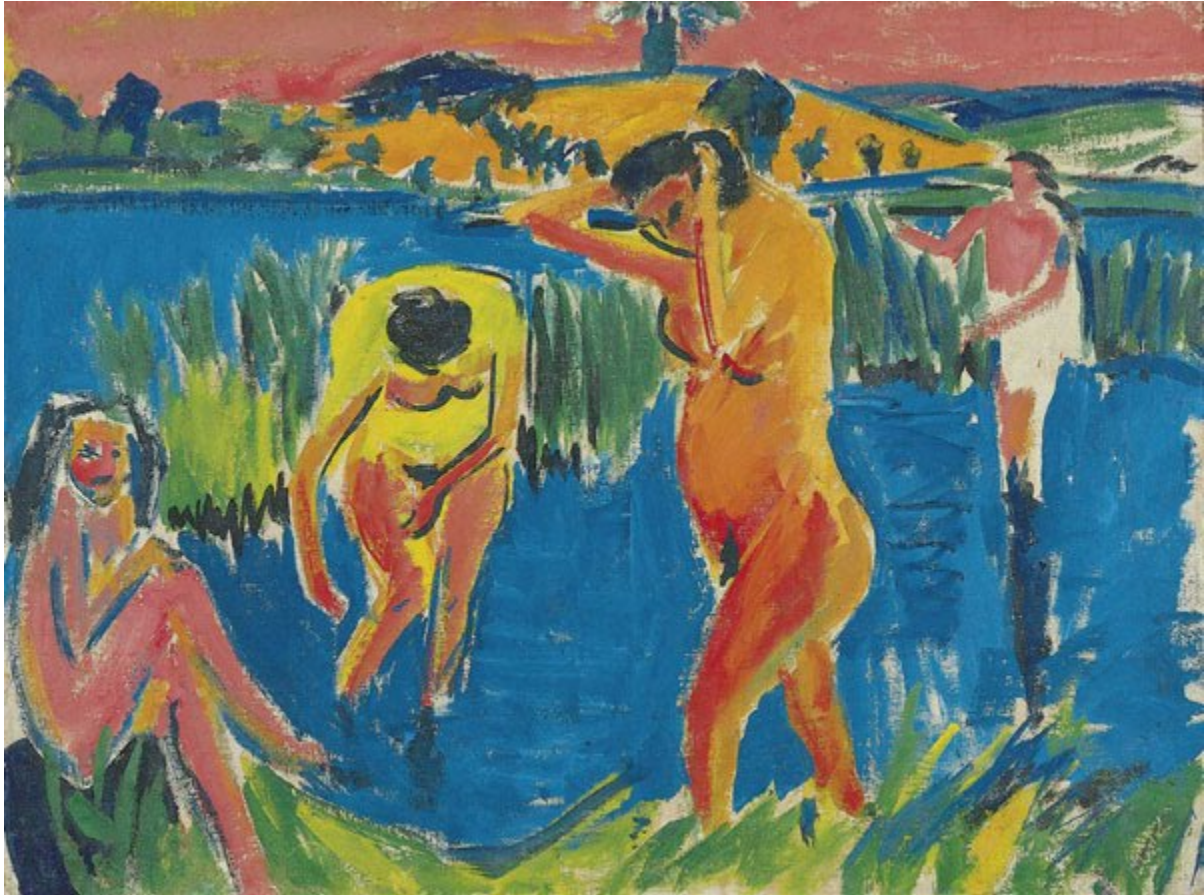
Collection of Greg and Lisa Kerfoot, West Vancouver/Whistler. Photo: Trevor Mills, Vancouver Gallery.  
Reproduced in Bill Brown, "Objects, Others, and Us (The Refabrication of Things)," *Critical Inquiry* 36,  
No. 2 (Winter 2010): 183-217.

### Figure 3.1. The Ring Structure of Odysseus's Tale

Adapted from Glenn W. Most, "The Structure and Function of Odysseus' *Apologoi*," *Transactions of the American Philological Association* 119 (1989): 15-30. I have also relied upon D. F. Felluga's version of Most's diagram (<http://web.ics.purdue.edu/~felluga/ring.html>).

The following diagram presents the chronological structure of Odysseus's *nostos*, as he presents it to the Phaeacians in Books 9-12 of the *Odyssey*. After departing from Troy with his men, Odysseus lands on the island of Cicones, then the Lotus-eaters, and so on. (The narrative action in the epic begins with Odysseus on Calypso's island. It is only after he makes his way to the island of Phaeacians, and is asked to recount his tales, that the reader is presented with the chronological narrative. ) The diagram demonstrates that the adventures "are grouped in a fully symmetrical ring-composition around the *Nekyia* [the visit to the underworld] as center." (21) The Cicones and Phaeacians belong to the "human" world, whereas the encounters that take place in between, the mythological or "fabulous" episodes, are separated from this world by a "*cordon sanitaire*" of twin two-day storms. As I have argued, this ring structure supports a reading in which Odysseus's failed encounters with cultural alterity is evident through his interpretation of these encounters in the language of myth. It further highlights the crucial significance of the *Nekyia*, where Odysseus receives the prophecy of Tiresias.





**Figure 5.1.** E.L. Kirchner, *Vier Badende (Four Bathers)*, 1910.  
Oil on canvas, 75 x 100.5 cm. Von der Heydt-Museum Wuppertal.





**Figure 5.2.** E.L. Kirchner, *Fünf Frauen auf der Straße* (Five Women on the Street), 1913.  
Oil on canvas, 120 x 90 cm. Wallraf-Richartz Museum, Cologne.  
Image from the Museum of Modern Art website, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).



**Figure 5.3.** E.L. Kirchner, *Zwei Frauen auf der Straße* (Two Women on the Street), 1914.  
Oil on canvas, 120 x 92 cm. Image from the  
Museum of Modern Art website, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).



**Figure 5.4. E.L. Kirchner, *Friedrichstraße, Berlin* (Friedrich Street, Berlin), 1914.**

Oil on canvas, 125 x 91 cm. Image from the Museum of Modern Art website, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).

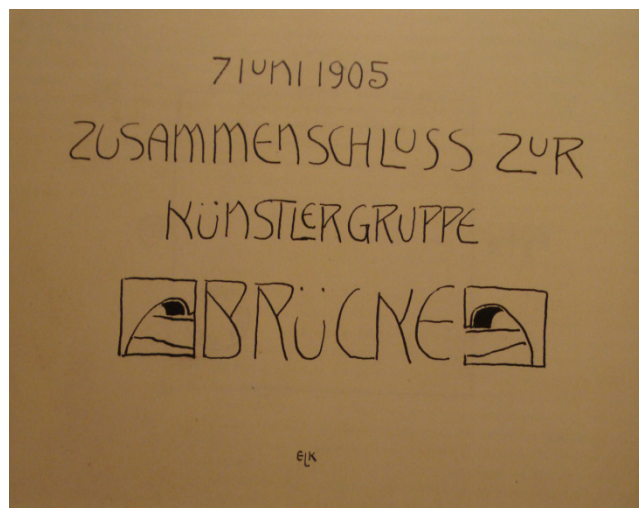


**Figure 5.5. E.L. Kirchner, *Potsdamer Platz, Berlin* (Potsdamer Squar, Berlin), 1914.**

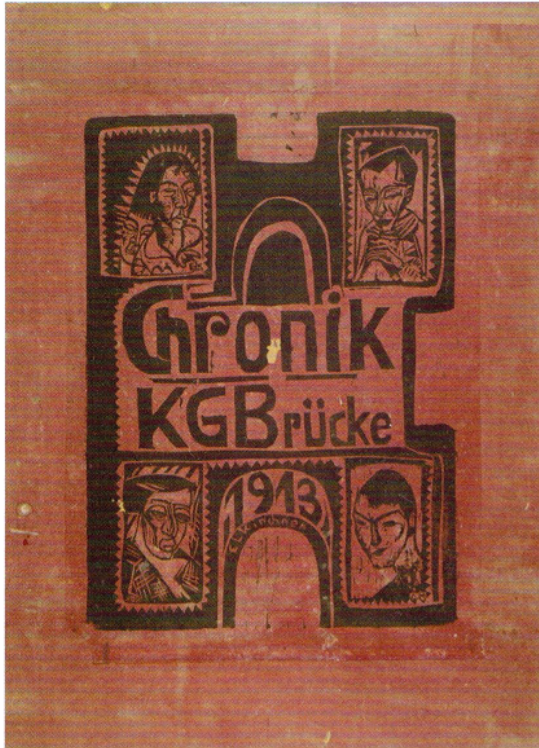
Oil on canvas, 200 x 150 cm. Private Collection.

From the Museum of Modern Art website, [www.moma.org](http://www.moma.org).


**Figure 5.6. Plate from the fashion magazine *Damenmode*.**  
Reproduced in Jill Lloyd, *German Expressionism*,  
150.




**Figure 5.7. E.L. Kirchner, Founding document of the Artists' Group Brücke, June 7, 1905.**  
Pen and Ink on Bütten paper. 18.4 x 22.5 cm. Brücke-Museum Berlin, Gift of Siddi Heckel.  
Reproduced in *Dokumente: Künstlergruppe Brücke*.




Im Jahre 1902 lernten sich die Maler Bleyl und Kirchner in Dresden kennen. Durch seinen Bruder, einen Freund von Kirchner, kam Heckel hinzu. Heckel brachte Schmidt-Rottluff mit, den er von Chemnitz her kannte. In Kirchners Atelier kam man zum Arbeiten zusammen. Man hatte hier die Möglichkeit, den Akt, die Grundlage aller bildenden Kunst, in freier Natürlichkeit zu studieren. Aus dem Zeichnen auf dieser Grundlage ergab sich das allen gemeinsame Gefühl, aus dem Leben die Anregung zum Schaffen zu nehmen und sich dem Erlebnis unterzuordnen. In einem Buch "Odi profanum" zeichneten und schrieben die einzelnen nebeneinander ihre Ideen nieder und verglichen dadurch ihre Eigenart. So wuchsen sie ganz von selbst zu einer Gruppe zusammen, die den Namen "Brücke" erhielt. Einer regte den andern an. Kirchner brachte den Holzschnitt aus Sddeutschland mit, den er, durch die alten Schnitte in Narnberg angeregt, wieder aufgenommen hatte. Heckel schnitzte wieder Holzfiguren; Kirchner bereicherte diese Technik in den seinen durch die Bemalung und suchte in Stein und Zinnfluss den Rhythmus der geschlossenen Form. Schmidt-Rottluff machte die ersten Lithos auf dem Stein. Die erste Ausstellung der Gruppe fand in eigenen Räumen in Dresden statt; sie fand keine Anerkennung. Dresden gab aber durch die landschaftlichen Reize und seine alte Kultur viele Anregung. Hier fand "Brücke" auch die ersten kunstgeschichtlichen Stützpunkte in Cranach, Beham und andern deutschen Meistern des Mittelalters. Bei Gelegenheit einer Ausstellung von Amiet in Dresden wurde dieser

zum Mitglied von "Brücke" ernannt. Ihm folgte 1905 Nolde. Seine phantastische Eigenart gab eine neue Note in "Brücke", er bereicherte unsere Ausstellungen durch die interessante Technik seiner Radierung und lernte die unseres Holzschnittes kennen. Auf seine Einladung ging Schmidt-Rottluff zu ihm nach Alsen. Später gingen Schmidt-Rottluff und Heckel nach Dangast. Die harte Luft der Nordsee brachte besonders bei Schmidt-Rottluff einen monumentalen Impressionismus hervor. Währenddessen führte Kirchner in Dresden die geschlossene Komposition weiter; er fand im ethnographischen Museum in der Negerplastik und den Balkenschmitzereien der Südsee eine Parallele zu seinem eigenen Schaffen. Das Bestreben, von der akademischen Sterilität frei zu werden, führte Pechstein zu "Brücke". Kirchner und Pechstein gingen nach Gollverode, um gemeinsam zu arbeiten. Im Salon Richter in Dresden fand die Ausstellung der "Brücke" mit den neuen Mitgliedern statt. Die Ausstellung machte einen grossen Eindruck auf die jungen Künstler in Dresden. Heckel und Kirchner versuchten die neue Malerei mit dem Raum in Einklang zu bringen. Kirchner stattete seine Räume mit Wandmalereien und Batiks aus, an denen Heckel mitarbeitete. 1907 trat Nolde aus "Brücke" aus. Heckel und Kirchner gingen an die Moritzburger Seen, um den Akt im Freien zu studieren. Schmidt-Rottluff arbeitete in Dangast an der Vollendung seines Farbenrhythmus. Heckel ging nach Italien und brachte die Anregung der etruskischen Kunst. Pechstein ging in dekorativen Aufträgen nach Berlin. Er versuchte die neue Malerei in die Sezession zu bringen. Kirchner fand in Dresden den Handdruck




der Lithographie. Bleyl, der sich der Lehrtätigkeit zugewandt hatte, trat aus "Brücke" 1909 aus. Pechstein ging nach Dangast zu Heckel. Im selben Jahre kamen beide zu Kirchner nach Moritzburg, um an den Seen Akt zu malen. 1910 wurde durch die Zurückweisung der jüngeren deutschen Maler in der alten Sezession die Gründung der "Neuen Sezession" hervorgerufen. Um die Stellung Pechsteins in der neuen Sezession zu stützen, wurden Heckel, Kirchner und Schmidt-Rottluff auch dort Mitglieder. In der ersten Ausstellung der N.S. lernten sie Mueller kennen. In seinem Atelier fanden sie die Cranachsche Venus, die sie selbst sehr schätzten, wieder. Die sinnliche Harmonie seines Lebens mit dem Werk machte Mueller zu einem selbstverständlichen Mitglied von "Brücke". Er brachte uns den Reiz der Leimfarbe. Um die Bestrebungen von "Brücke" rein zu erhalten, traten die Mitglieder der "Brücke" aus der neuen Sezession aus. Sie gaben sich gegenseitig das Versprechen, nur gemeinsam in der "Sezession" in Berlin auszustellen. Es folgte eine Ausstellung der "Brücke" in sämtlichen Räumen des Kunstsalons Gurlitt. Pechstein brach das Vertrauen der Gruppe, wurde Mitglied der Sezession und wurde ausgeschlossen. Der Sonderbund lud "Brücke" 1912 zu seiner Kölner Ausstellung ein und übertrug Heckel und Kirchner die Ausmalung der darin befindlichen Kapelle. Die Mehrzahl der Mitglieder der "Brücke" ist jetzt in Berlin. "Brücke" hat auch hier ihren internen Charakter beibehalten. Innerlich zusammengewachsen, strahlt sie die neuen Arbeitswerte auf das moderne Kunstschaffen in Deutschland aus. Unbeeinflusst durch die heutigen Strömungen, Kubismus, Futurismus usw., kämpft sie für eine menschliche Kultur, die der Boden einer wirklichen Kunst ist. Diesen Bestrebungen verdankt "Brücke" ihre heutige Stellung im Kunstleben. E. L. Kirchner.



Figure 5.8. E.L. Kirchner, *Chronik der KG Brücke (Chronicle of the Artists' Group Brücke)*, 1913. Reproduced in *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2009), 212.



**Figure 5.9.** E.L. Kirchner, *Kopf einer Negerin* (Head of a black woman), 1910.

Letter to Erich Heckel, May 15, Dresden. Pencil, pen and ink, crayon. 14 x 8.9 cm. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Postkarten und Briefe an Erich Heckel im Altonaer Museum in Hamburg*, ed. Annemarie Dube-Heynig (Cologne: DuMont, 1984), no. 37, p103.



**Figure 5.10.** E.L. Kirchner, Drawings of Performers in "the African Village," May 1910.

Colored Crayon, 18 x 15.5 cm. Reproduced in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 32.



Figure 5.11. E.L. Kirchner, *Programm der Künstlergruppe Brücke* (Program of the Artists' Group Brücke), 1906.

Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, et al., *Dokumente der Künstlergruppe Brücke* (Munich: Hirmer, 2007).



**Figure 5.12. Curtains, Kirchner's studio, Berlinerstr. 80, Dresden, 1910-11.**

Photograph by E.L. Kirchner. Reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner: Dokumente: Fotos, Schriften, Briefe*, ed. Karlheinz Gabler (Aschaffenburg: Museum der Stadt Aschaffenburg, 1980), 66.



**Figure 5.13. Kirchner's studio, Berlinerstr. 80, Dresden, 1910-11.**

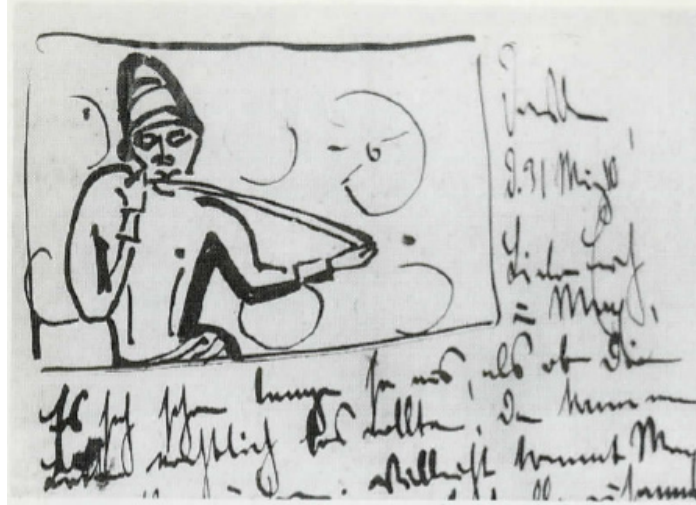
Photograph by E.L. Kirchner. Reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner: Dokumente: Fotos, Schriften, Briefe*, ed. Karlheinz Gabler (Aschaffenburg: Museum der Stadt Aschaffenburg, 1980), 65.



**Figure 5.14. Fränzi and an unidentified youth, Kirchner's studio, Berlinerstr. 80, Dresden, 1910-11.**

Photograph by E.L. Kirchner. Reproduced in *E.L. Kirchner: Dokumente: Fotos, Schriften, Briefe*, ed. Karlheinz Gabler (Aschaffenburg: Museum der Stadt Aschaffenburg, 1980), 69





**Figure 5.15. E.L. Kirchner, *Querhornbläser* (a.k.a., Benin bronze relief), Mar. 31, 1910.**  
 Letter to Heckel and Pechstein. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Postkarten und Briefe an Erich Heckel im Altonaer Museum in Hamburg*, ed. Annemarie Dube-Heynig (Cologne: DuMont, 1984), no. 30, p78.



**Figure 5.16. E.L. Kirchner, *Mutter-Kind-Plastik* (Mother and child sculpture), Mar. 31, 1910.**  
 Letter to Heckel and Pechstein. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ed. Dube-Heynig, no. 30, p80.



**Figure 5.17. Carved wooden beams from a men's clubhouse (*bai*) in the Palau Islands (Njabuket, Aubikit, Palau), dated pre-1860.**

Carved and painted wood. Museum für Völkerkunde, Dresden. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003), 16.

**Figure 5.18. E.L. Kirchner, Drawing after a Palau beam, June 20, 1910.**

Postcard to Erich Heckel. Pencil, ink, and crayon on paper, 9 x 14 cm. Altonaer Museum für Kunst und Kulturgeschichte, Hamburg. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ed. Dube-Heynig, no. 50, p143.





**Figure 5.19. Erich Heckel, *Nude (Dresden)*, 1910.**  
Oil on canvas, 80 x 70 cm. Reproduced in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 41.



**Figure 5.20. E.L. Kirchner, *Obstschale I*, 1910.**  
Wood, 17 x 24 x 38 cm. Reproduced in Heller,  
*Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin*, 175.



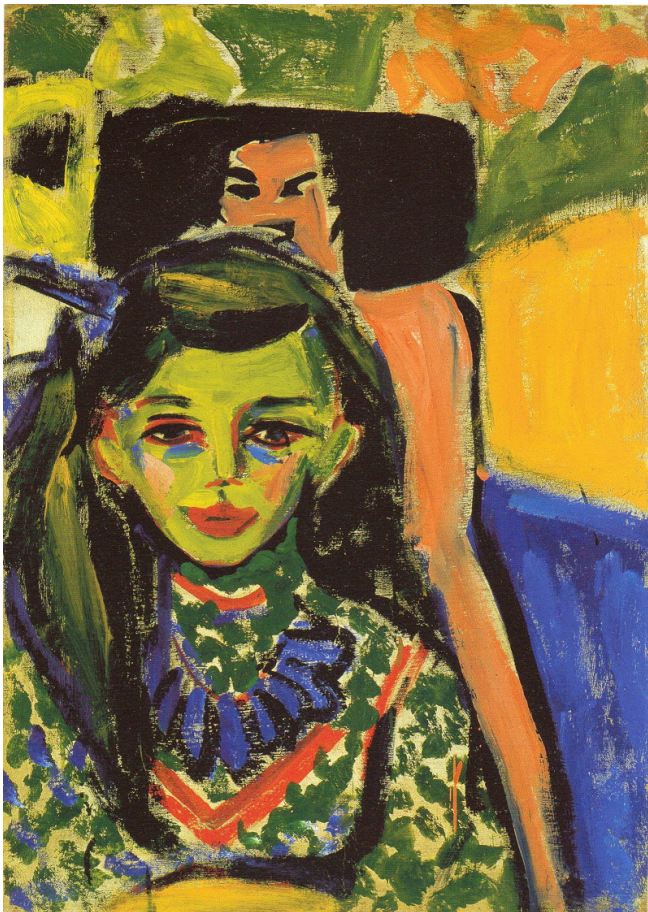
**Figure 5.21. E.L. Kirchner, "Holzplastik. Sitzender Akt mit Schale," June 14, 1911.**

Postcard to Erich Heckel. Pen, 14 x 9 cm.  
Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ed. Dube-Heynig, no. 67, p178.



**Figure 5.22. Kirchner's Berlin atelier, Körnerstraße 45, dated 1914/15.**  
Photograph. (Left, detail of squatting female with bowl.)

**Figure 5.23. Erich Heckel, *Kirchner*, Dec. 16, 1910.**  
Colored Crayon. Reproduced in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 74.



**Figure 5.24. E.L. Kirchner, *Fränzi vor geschnitztem Stuhl* (Fränzi in front of Carved Chair), 1910.**

Oil on canvas, 71 x 49.5 cm. Museu Thyssen-Bornemisza, Madrid. Reproduced in Lloyd and Moeller, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, no. 47.

**Figure 5.25. E.L. Kirchner, *Nude Girl in a Bath*, 1909.**  
Woodcut, 28.5 x 34.25 cm. Reproduced in Lloyd,  
*German Expressionism*, 75.

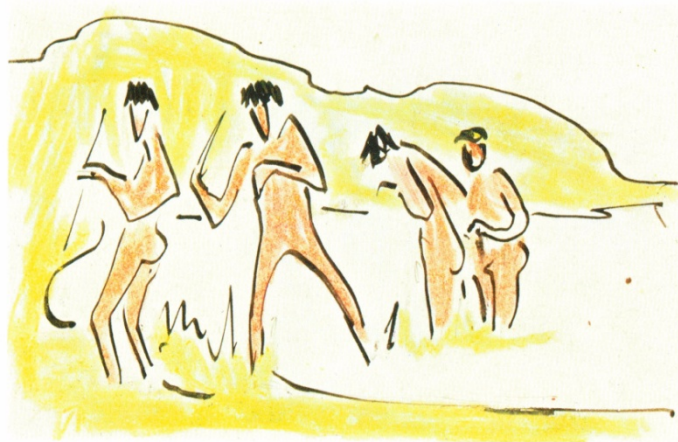


**Figure 5.26. Stool, Bafum, Cameroon Grasslands.**  
Wood, height 27.4cm. Reproduced in Lloyd,  
*German Expressionism*, 75.



**Figure 5.27. Erich Heckel, *Weiblicher Akt im Atelier* (Female Nude in the Studio), Feb. 16, 1910.**

Postcard to Frl. Dr. Rosa Schapire. 14 x 9 cm. Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, ed., *“Besten Gruß. . .” : Künstlerpostkarten der “Brücke”* (Munich: Brücke-Museum and Hirmer Verlag, 2012), no. 28.



**Figure 5.28.** E.L. Kirchner, *Mit Schilf Werfende Badende (Bathers Throwing Reeds)*, Sept. 6, 1909. Postcard to Erich Heckel. Pen and ink with crayon on paper, 9 x 14 cm. Altonaer Museum, Hamburg. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner*, ed. Dube-Heynig, no. 4, p19.



**Figure 5.29.** E.L. Kirchner, *Mit Schilf werfende Badende (Bathers Throwing Reeds)*, 1909. Published in the 1910 *Brücke Portfolio*. Woodcut, black, green and red-orange ink on paper, 20.2 x 29.3 cm; Sheet: 40.3 x 54 cm. Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, *Brücke Highlights: 297 Werke aus dem Brücke-Museum Berlin* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2012), no. 50.





**Figure 5.30. Max Pechstein, Das gelb-schwarz Trikot, 1909.**

Oil on canvas, 68 x 78 cm. Reproduced in Magdalena M. Moeller, *Brücke Highlights: 297 Werke aus dem Brücke-Museum Berlin* (Munich: Hirmer Verlag, 2012), no. 218.



**Figure 5.31.** Erich Heckel, *Mädchen mit Puppe - Fränzi (Girl with Doll - Fränzi)*, 1910. Oil on canvas, 65 x 70 cm. Reproduced in *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller, 157.



**Figure 5.32.** Erich Heckel, *Atelierszene (Studio scene)*, 1910-11. Oil on canvas, 70 x 48 cm. Reproduced in *Brücke: The Birth of Expressionism in Dresden and Berlin, 1905-1913*, ed. Reinhold Heller, 156.



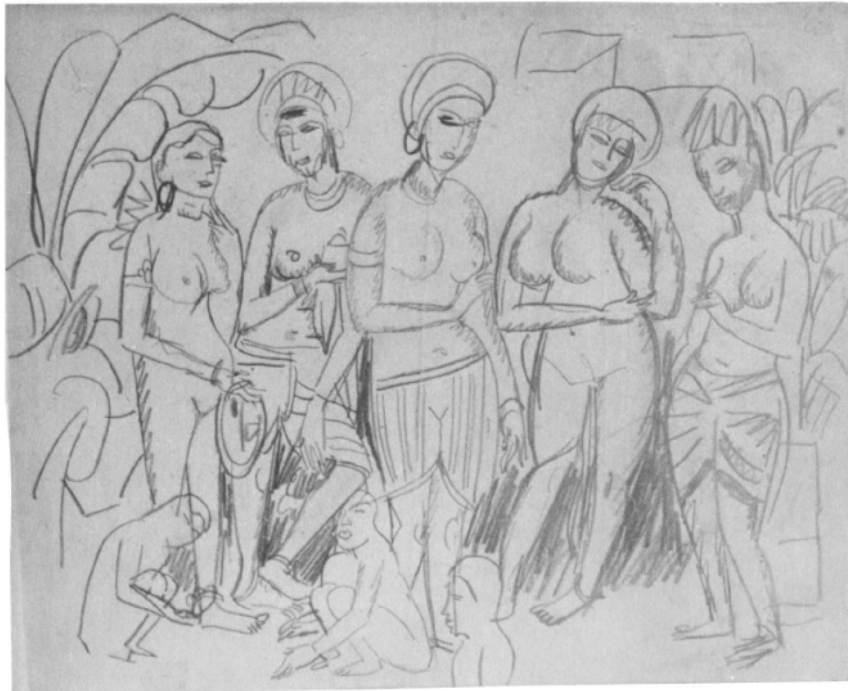
**Figure 5.33. Erich Heckel, *Fränzi liegend* (Fränzi Reclining), 1910.**  
Woodcut on paper (irreg.), 22.7 x 41.9 cm, sheet (irreg.), 35.6 x 55.5 cm.



**Figure 5.34. Erich Heckel, Sketch for a mural in Berlinerstr. 65, Dresden-Friedrichstadt, Feb. 5, 1909.**  
Pen and Ink. Altonaer Museum, Hamburg. Reproduced in Lloyd, *German Expressionism*, 23.



**Figure 5.35. Ajanta, Detail of Cave II, wall painting.**  
Photo: Griffiths, plate 31. Reproduced in Gordon, "Kirchner in Dresden."



**Figure 3.36. E.L. Kirchner, *Five Women*, 1911.**  
Pencil drawing. Reproduced in Gordon, "Kirchner in Dresden."



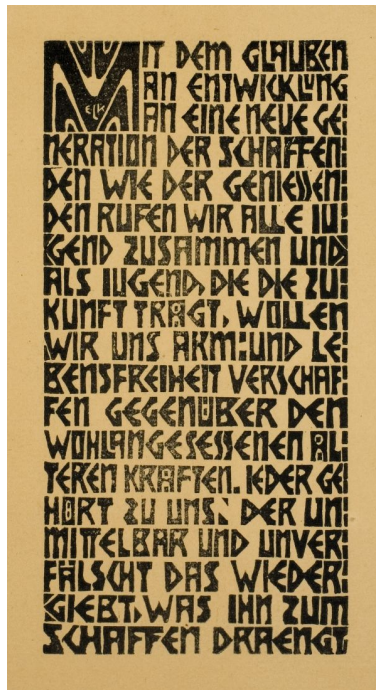
Figure 5.37. E.L. Kirchner, *Fünf Badende am See* (Five Bathers at the Lake), 1911.  
Oil on canvas, 151 x 197 cm.

**Figure 5.38. E.L. Kirchner, *Programm der Künstlergruppe Brücke*  
(Program of the Artists' Group Brücke), 1906.**

Woodcut Prints, 12.6 x 5 cm; 15.1 x 7.5 cm; Magdalena M. Moeller, et al.,  
*Dokumente der Künstlergruppe Brücke* (Munich: Hirmer, 2007).



Programm der Künstlergruppe Brücke (Detail)



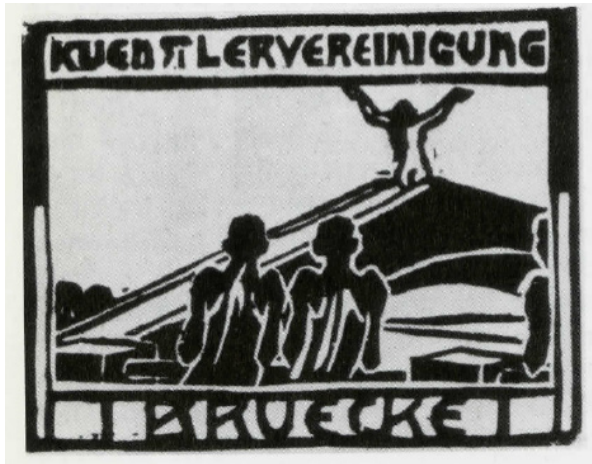


Figure 5.39. E.L. Kirchner, *Brücke Insignia*, 1905.  
Woodcut, 5 x 6.5 cm. Brücke-Museum, Berlin

Figure 5.40. Fidus (Hugo Höppener), *Lichtgebet*  
(Prayer to the light), date unknown.  
Oil on canvas, 150 x 100 cm. Berlin, Deutsches  
Historisches Museum.



Figure 5.41. Koloman (Kolo) Moser, *Ver Sacrum 1*,  
Heft 1 (January, 1898), 3.





**Figure 5.44.** Hermann Obrist, *Bewegung (Movement)*, before 1914.  
Mounted photograph.



**Figure 5.45.** Obrist, *Bewegung*, detail.





**Figure 5.46. Hermann Obrist, *Grabmal Oertel* (Oertel Monument),  
Cemetery Schmiedebach Lehesten, 1903/04.**

Photo: Museum für Gestaltung Zürich Kunstgewerbesammlung, Betty Fleck© ZHDK.



**Figure 5.47.** Hermann Obrist, *Krupp-Brunnen im Hof des Münchner Kunstgewerbehauses* (Krupp Fountain in the courtyard of the House of Arts and Crafts in Munich), 1912.  
Mounted photograph, 795 x 498 mm.



**Figure 5.48.** Hermann Obrist, *Design Model for a Hill-Top Church*, circa 1900.  
Carved Plaster. Munich, Germany.



Figure 5.49. Wilhelm Volz, *Persina, Jugend*, 1903.



Figure 5.50. Cover Design, *Jugend*, 1903.

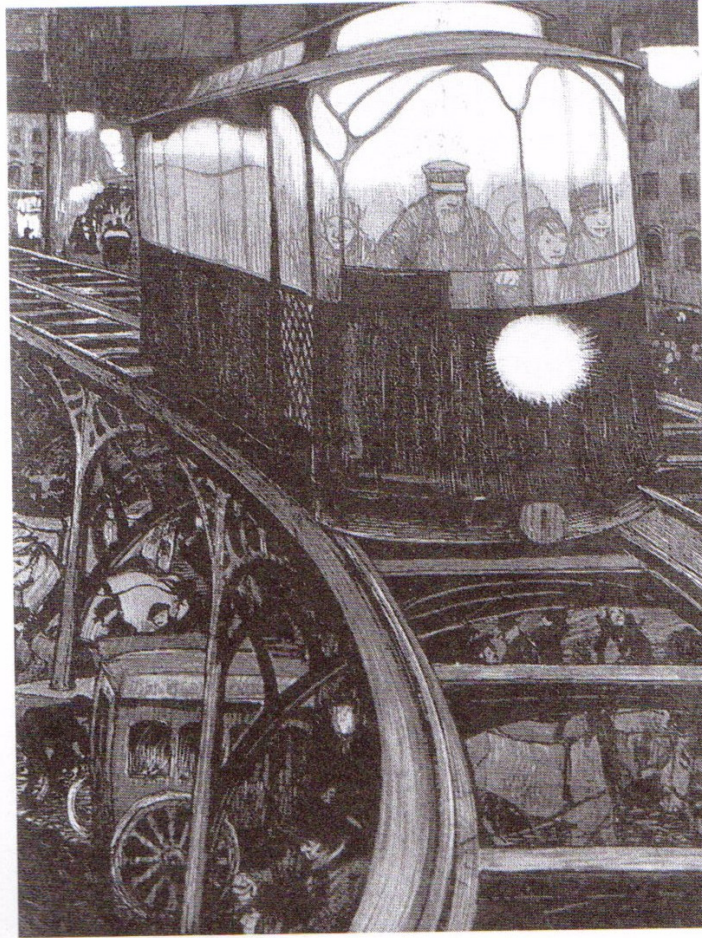


Figure 5.51. Adolf Münzer, *Electrical Railway, Jugend*, 1900.



Figure 5.52. Nautilus half-shell  
(Cutaway exposing  
an approximately  
logarithmic spiral)



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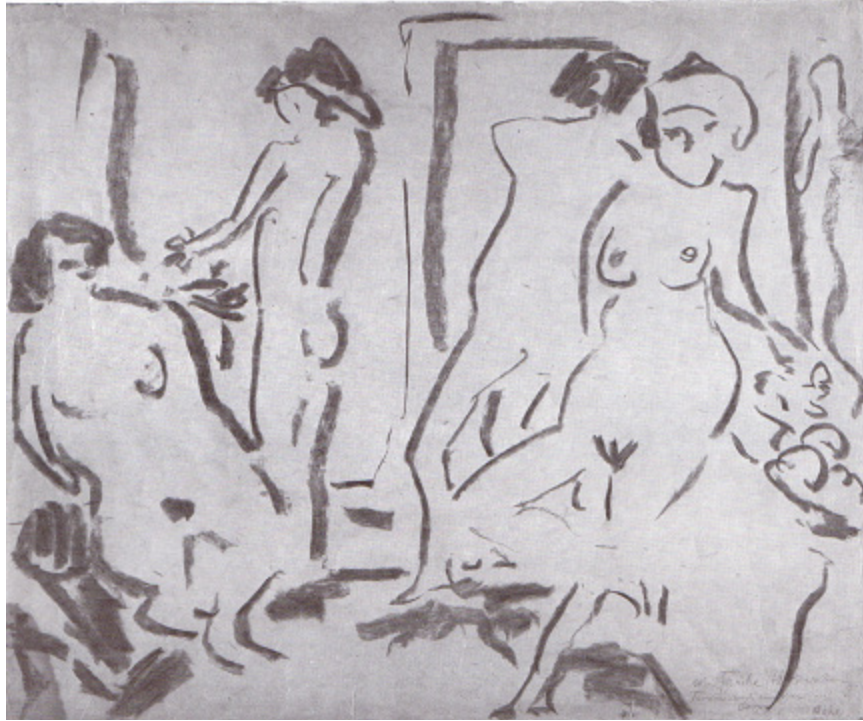
Wir erneuern hiermit unsere frühere Mitteilung, dass das Kaiserliche Patentamt in Berlin uns den Schutz für die von uns zuerst als „Dr. Hommel's Haematogen“ in den Handel eingeführte Wortmarke „Haematogen“ wegen verspäteter Anmeldung definitiv versagt hat. Das Wort „Haematogen“ ist damit zum Freizeichen geworden und kann von Jedermann für irgendwelche Zubereitung (trocken oder flüssig) benützt werden. Bei der Güte und der dadurch bedingten grossen Beliebtheit unseres Original-Präparates ist die Zahl der Nachahmungen naturgemäss in besänftigendem Wachsen begriffen und es befinden sich darunter solche, die mit Haemoglobin, welches wir nach D. R.-Pat. No. 81391 in völlig gereinigter Form darstellen, gar nichts zu tun haben. Gegen eine derartige Konkurrenz haben wir leider keinen anderen Schutz als die öffentliche Warnung und die dringende Bitte, stets ausdrücklich das bewährte „Dr. Hommel's“ Haematogen zu verlangen und sich **Pseudo-Haematogene nicht aufreden** zu lassen. Dazu machen wir wiederholt darauf aufmerksam, dass die Originalmarke weder in Pillen noch in Pulverform, noch mit Cacao oder Chocolate gemischt, sondern nur in Flaschen mit dem eingepprägten Namen „Dr. Adolf Hommel's Haematogen“ echt ist.

Nicolay & Co., Hanau a. M.

Man verlange ausdrücklich **„Dr. Hommel's“ Haematogen.**

Bei etwaigen Bestellungen bittet man auf die Münchener „JUGEND“ Bezug zu nehmen.

Figure 5.53. Jugend (1904, Band 2, no. 27), 541a.



**Figure 5.54. E.L. Kirchner, Viertelstundenakt (Quarter-hour nude), 1905-6.**

Charcoal. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Nachzeichnung seines Leben; Katalog der Sammlung von Werken von Ernst Ludwig Kirchner im Kirchner-Haus Davos*, ed. Eberhard W. Kornfeld (Bern: Kornfeld & Co., 1979), 18.

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Komposition. Unterricht im Institut oder  
Atelier des Einzelnen. Institut tagsüber zur  
Verfügung. Im Sommer Freilichtakt an der  
See. Fördernde Korrektur aus der Eigenart  
des Einzelnen heraus.

Das neuzeitliche Leben ist der Aus-  
gangspunkt des Schaffens. Die  
Konversation gibt Einblick in die  
neuen Kunstbestrebungen.

.....

Anleitung zum Verständnis und An-  
regung durch Anschauung und Er-  
leben (auch für Nichtausübende).

Eintritt jederzeit 1 Monat 60 M.  
1/2 Monat 40 M.

Unterricht im Atelier des Einzelnen  
1 Monat 100 M. — 6 Monate 500 M.

Auskunft und Anmeldung  
Wilmsdorf, Durlacher Straße 14, II.  
Montag und Sonnabend 12 bis 1 Uhr



Titelseite und Prospekt  
MUIM-Institut, 1911

**Figure 5.55. MUIM-Institute advertisement, 1911.**

Reproduced in Eberhard W. Kornfeld, *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: Nachzeichnung seines Leben; Katalog der Sammlung von Werken von Ernst Ludwig Kirchner im Kirchner-Haus Davos* (Bern: Kornfeld & Co., 1979), 36.

Figure 5.56. E.L. Kirchner, *Ins Meer Schreitende* (Striding into the Sea), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 146 x 200 cm. Stuttgart, Staatsgalerie.



Figure 5.57. E.L. Kirchner, *Sitzende Frau mit Holzplastik* (Seated Woman with Wood Sculpture), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 97 x 97 cm.





**Figure 5.58.** E.L. Kirchner, *Burg auf Fehmarn* (Burg on Fehmarn), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 122 x 91 cm.



**Figure 5.59.** St. Nicholas Church, Burg, Fehmarn.  
<http://www.panoramio.com/user/5849081/tags/Fehmarn>.



**Figure 5.60.** E.L. Kirchner, *Leuchtturm Staberhuck*,  
Fehmarn (Staberhuck Beacon Fehmarn), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 117.5 x 88.3 cm.



Figure 5.61. E.L. Kirchner, *Grüner Leuchtturm auf Fehmarn* (Green Lighthouse on Fehmarn), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 90 x 120 cm.



Figure 5.62. E.L. Kirchner, *Gut Staberhof, Fehmarn, I* (Staberhof Countryseat, Fehmarn, I), 1913.  
Oil on canvas, 121 x 151 cm.

**Figure 5.63. E.L. Kirchner, *Gut Staberhof III (Staberhof Countryseat III)*, 1913.**  
Oil on canvas, 82 x 91 cm. Reproduced in *Ernst Ludwig Kirchner: The Dresden and Berlin Years*, eds. Jill Lloyd and Magalena M. Moeller (London: Royal Academy of the Arts, 2003).



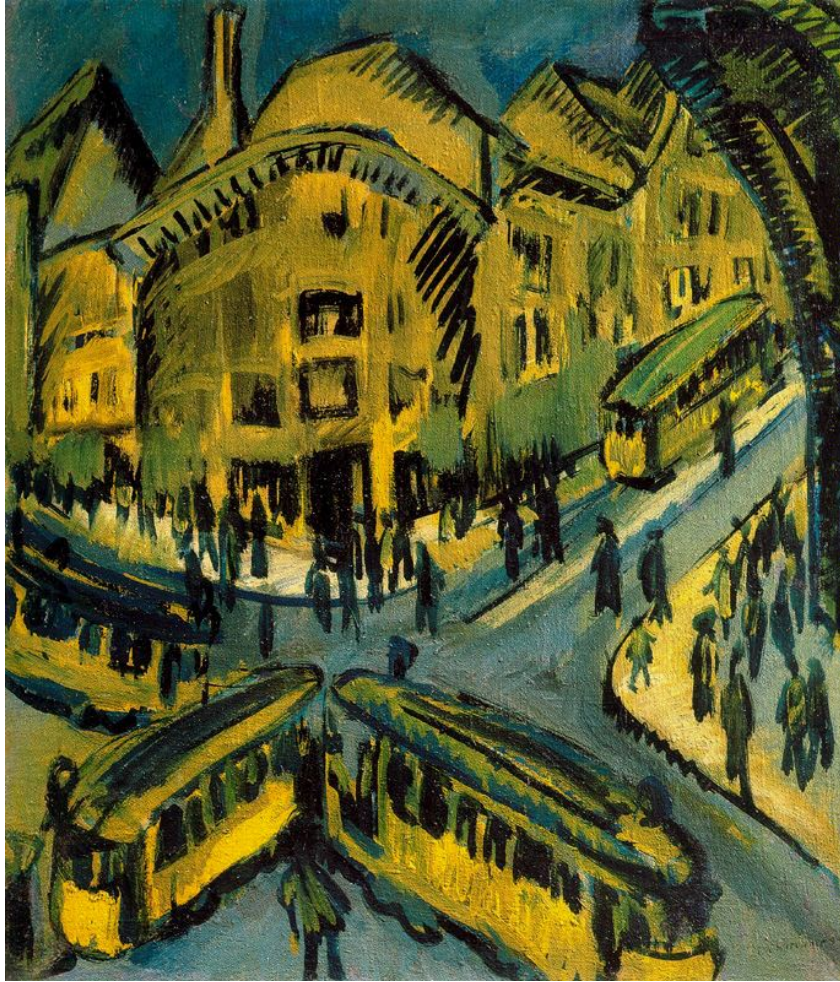


Figure 5.64. E.L. Kirchner, *Nollendorf Platz* (Nollendorf Square), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 69 x 59.7 cm.

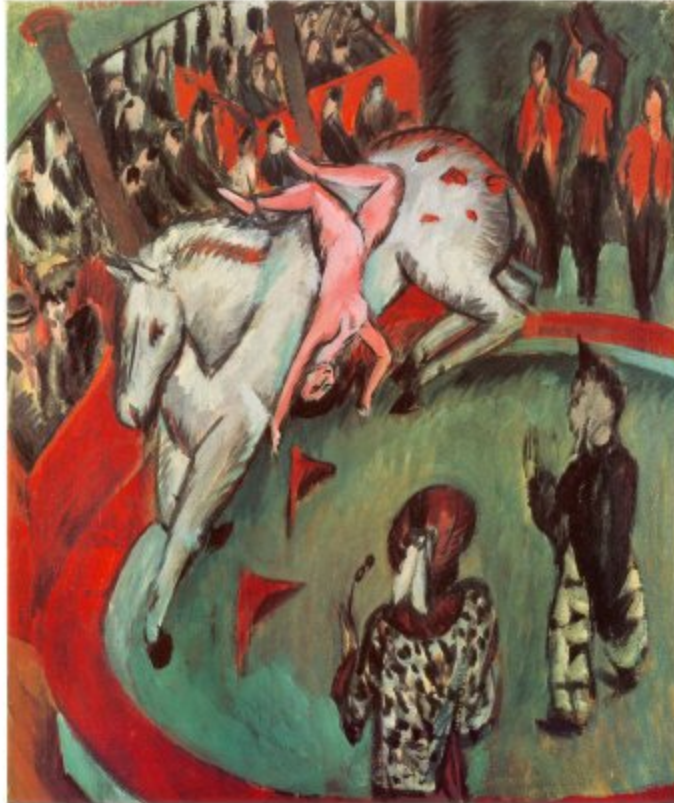


Figure 5.65. E.L. Kirchner, *Zirkusreiterin* (Girl Circus Rider), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 99.6 x 119.5 cm.

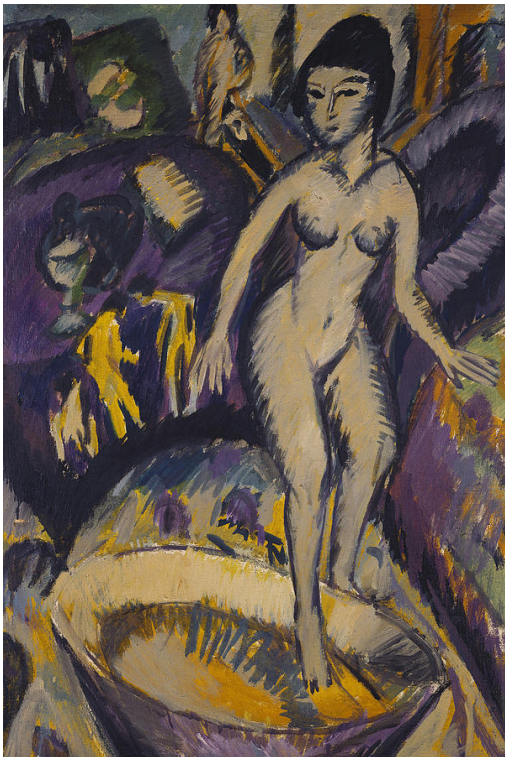


Figure 5.66. E.L. Kirchner, *Weiblicher Akt mit Badezuber* (Female Nude with Bathtub), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 96 x 64.5 cm.



Figure 5.67. E.L. Kirchner, *Fünf Badende am See* (Five Bathers at the Lake), 1911.  
Oil on canvas, 151 x 197 cm.

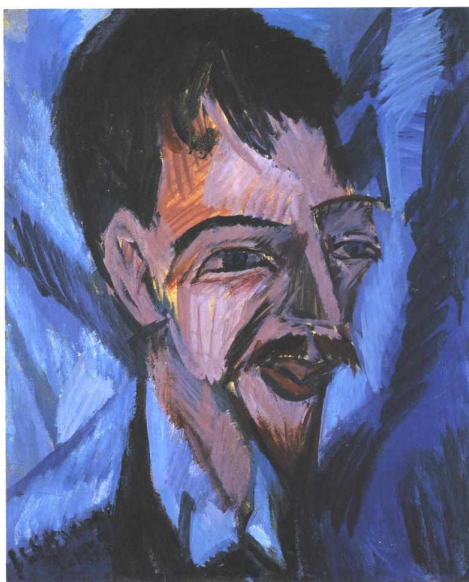


Figure 5.68. E.L. Kirchner, *Portrait of Dr. Alfred Döblin* (Portrait of Dr. Alfred Döblin), 1912.  
Oil on canvas, 51 x 42 cm.

**Figure 5.69. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Summer*, 1913.**

Oil on canvas, 88 x 104 cm.  
Sprengel Museum, Hannover.



**Figure 5.70. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Drei Akte – Dünenbild aus Nidden (Three Nudes – Dunes at Nidden)*, 1913.**

Oil on canvas, 98 x 106 cm.  
Nationalgalerie, Berlin. Reproduced in  
Moeller and Arnoldo, *Brücke: Die Geburt  
des deutschen Expressionismus*, no. 117,  
p312.



Figure 5.71. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Still Life*, 1913.  
Oil on canvas, 67 x 76 cm. Fogg Museum, Cambridge, MA.



Figure 5.72. Karl Schmidt-Rottluff, *Still Life with African Figures*, 1913.  
Oil on canvas.





Wilhelm Volz † (aus „Mopsus, eine Faunscomödie“)

Figure 5.73. Wilhelm Volz, Aus “Mopsus, ein Faunscomōdia,” Jugend, 1903.



Figure 5.74. E.L. Kirchner, *Stilleben mit Plastiken und Blumen* (Still Life with Sculptures and Flowers), 1912. Oil on canvas, 90 x 80.5 cm.

Figure 5.75. E.L. Kirchner, Illustrations to Georg Heym's *Umbra Vitae*, 1924.

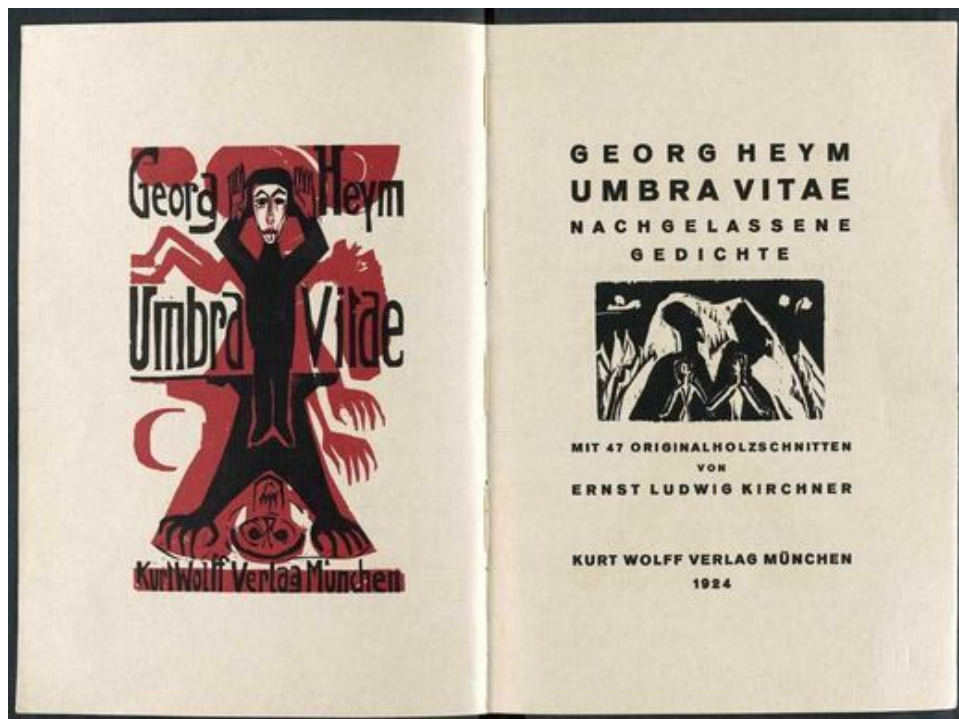




Figure 5.76. Hannah Höch, *Schnitt mit dem Küchenmesser Dada durch die letzte Weimarer Bierbauchkulturepoche Deutschlands* (Cut with the Dada Kitchen Knife through the Last Weimar Beer-Belly Cultural Epoch in Germany), 1919-20. Photomontage and collage with watercolor, 114 x 90 cm. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin, Nationalgalerie, Berlin.

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*Pan*

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