

## Belabored: the work of style

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# Belabored: Style as Work

John David Rhodes

Style, then, is a verb, not as grammar alone might mislead us, a noun.

–Berel Lang<sup>1</sup>

The world is labor.

–Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri<sup>2</sup>

What or where is style? Is it everywhere in a work of art? Surely not, for then it would be merely a tautological designation of something for which we have a word: form. And yet, if it is not spread equally across the work or is not consubstantial with all of the work's parts and their coordination, we are still left with an impression of the general rightness of Susan Sontag's remark that when we speak of style, we speak "about the totality of a work of art."<sup>3</sup> To speak about the work's "totality" is not, however, necessarily to speak about all of its parts, or to speak about them all at once. Style is everywhere in the work, but perhaps not everywhere in the same measure.

For instance, if we regard an unusual piece of framing in a film by Douglas Sirk as striking, formally particular, we would tend (as many critics have done) to suggest that this framing is exemplary of Sirk's style—a style that distinguishes him from his anonymized Hollywood contemporaries (those directors whose works we do not study on the basis of their particularity). If we note that this framing, this shot is remarkable and is indicative of Sirk's style, what of the shots that came before and will follow after it? Why do we not also talk about them? Are they merely the neutral ground against which

the stylistically particular shot stands out? But surely its standing out as such depends on this ground. If this is so, then how can that ground be separated from the remarkable image? Is style the energy, agency, or intelligence that has suffused the work as a whole, and that has determined the remarkable image and its relation to the less-remarkable parts with which it is coordinated, and to which it is connected? Style then, would not merely consist in the remarkable image, but in the temporality of its appearance in relation to the temporality of the entire film's duration. Style might feel more palpably dense in one moment in the film, but that density would depend—vitaly—on the lighter, more transparent moments of the rest of the film.

The problem is a tricky one—perhaps more so for modern aesthetics than for aesthetic theory in earlier periods in which style was the name and taxonomizing agent for the apprehension of types of aesthetic production bound together by geography, historical period, or school. Our contemporary understanding of style tends to hinge on our valuation of the individual, the stylist, the author/director/artist who has distinguished him- or herself from others. (If everyone had the same style, style might not exist, we fear.) But what connects this later understanding of style as “individual” to earlier understandings is the fact that whether we tend to think of style as something “belonging” to an individual or to a group of individuals, the fact of its “belonging” remains the same. Style is something a person or a group *has*. It is a manner and a means of settling property disputes. (If it were not, authenticating works of art would not be the expensive business that it is.)<sup>4</sup>

What if, instead of thinking about style as something that an artist or artwork *has*, we thought of it as something the artist or artwork *does*? That is, what if we thought of style not as property, but as labor? We know that works of art get to be what they are because some labor has been expended in producing them, but what if we place the emphasis exactly here—on the work of the work, and on the making visible of that work as style? What follows are some attempts at thinking about the implications of such an emphasis. These are written as notes: provisional, partial, and incomplete.<sup>5</sup>

\* \* \*

If style is the signature of a group or an individual, then style is individuation-as-such, and individuation-as-subsumption (not quite disappearance, but certainly a form of deindividuation), which is also to say that style is signature *and* erasure. Style is a way of laying claim to one's work and the work one has done, but it is also the divestment of ownership as it is experienced by the individual. When talking about a group or period style, then style is the making obscure of the signs that give evidence of the relation between the work of art and the work—that of the individual, at least, who is recognizable as such—that has gone into it. Another way of approaching this would be to say that style is the materialization of particularity and is the appearance-as-effacement of a particularism by way of naming that particularism as the sign of its belonging to a larger generality (that of the group or

school, or that of the individual artist's oeuvre). Style is also, we might say, a way of being one thing while also being another.

\* \* \*

When Meyer Schapiro refers to style as personality made visible, he means that style is a process of exteriorization, of making an inside an outside.<sup>6</sup> And in a nontrivial manner, we might want to emphasize his reference to style as a made thing, something that has been produced. It is a sign, or a trace, of human effort. Many commentators agree that style is an inappropriate category to bring to bear on the objects of nature. Kendall L. Walton argues that “if the style of something depends on what actions seem to have been performed in creating it, a necessary condition for something's having a style is its seeming to have been created by the deliberate performance of some action.”<sup>7</sup> This proposal—which seems fairly incontrovertible, or at least uncontroversial—should make us feel comfortable in thinking about style as work, or the mark of labor, the evidence that work has been done. But what special work has produced style, or what is special about the work that style embodies and discloses?

\* \* \*

When we “see” style, we see the mark of human labor, a density, an opacity in the image/work/text. Style, when we “see” it, is something we cannot see through. We stare at it, but not through it. It is the material register—the substratum—of the work. It is no less material than other parts of the work's surface that do not strike us (as style), but unlike those parts of the work's surface, the part that “is” style (that is marked as style) returns us to the materiality of the work.

\* \* \*

Style gathers together and separates and is, moreover, the name of this gathering and separation. It is a kind of effortful activity, perhaps a kind of labor. Style is repetition. Style, for us to understand it, has to be present or take place at least twice. Style is produced through repetition.

Labor is also repetition. It is labor's repetition, as well as its repetitive privacy that encourages Hannah Arendt to oppose the category of labor to the category of work. In Arendt's terms, labor is related to the fecundity of the world and the reign of necessity. Labor is inseparable from the life process itself, from the things that are necessary for life to sustain itself. Work, or a *work*, meanwhile—and here I am interested in thinking about the work of art—requires a kind of specialized labor to come into existence; it is the product and the practice (in Arendt's terms) of “reification,” of bringing something with some permanence into the world. A work has been produced “when an entirely new thing with enough durability to remain in the world as an independent entity has been added to the human artifice.”<sup>8</sup>

The work, for Arendt, extends from and, in a sense, or in *some* sense is mimetic of “the image or model whose shape guides the fabrication” of the work. This model, or idea, however, “does not disappear with the finished

product”<sup>9</sup> in the way that, say, a peasant’s labor seems to be hard to trace in the fruit of agricultural labor—an apple, a pumpkin, a sack of cornmeal—fruit that will disappear in its consumption. Arendt’s distinction between work and labor is provocative but fails to account for the permeable boundary between these categories. Style may be the term that shows the distinction to be, if not entirely false, then at least faulty; the distinction obscures some of the things that might be most interesting about works of art. For if style is always—as it must be—a mode of repetition, this is because it always summons more work, more works. The artwork is never complete in itself: it is planted and cultivated in the humus of earlier work—the tilled soil of history and the history of the arts—and it demands that other works be produced in response to it. The work’s distinguishing style is the answer to and demand for other works; its call and response is necessarily incomplete.<sup>10</sup>

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In early modern art criticism and literary theory, good style, correct art making was a mode of being and making that eschewed style (in Schapiro’s terms), but that was, of course and nonetheless, something learned, performed, made. The mode of stylized performance that effaces itself as style has gone, since Castiglione, under the name of *sprezzatura* (nonchalance).

*Sprezzatura* is the practice of making the difficult look easy. Labor disappears into a seamless social performance, sublimated away by its own invisible efforts. If it starts looking hard, if it extrudes into the social and leaves a trace or a mark, the result is failure.

Avoid affectation in every possible way as though it were some very rough and dangerous reef; and (to pronounce a new word perhaps) to practice in all things a certain *sprezzatura*, so as to conceal all art and make whatever is done or said appear to be without effort and almost without any thought about it. And I believe much grace comes out of this: because everyone knows the difficulty of things that are rare and well done; wherefore facility in such things causes the greatest wonder; whereas, on the other hand, to labor and, as we say, drag forth by the hair of the head, shows an extreme want of grace, and causes everything, no matter how great it may be, to be held in little account.

Therefore we may call that art true art which does not seem to be art; nor must one be more careful of anything than of concealing it, because if it is discovered, this robs a man of all credit and causes him to be held in slight esteem.<sup>11</sup>

Would the failure to produce *sprezzatura* be style: the visibility of the artwork as such, as a made thing? Is style the excess of visibility, or just bad visibility? The disappearing act by which art disappears into itself through its own performance suggests an art that directs our attention not to art itself, not to the signifier or to art’s material substrate, but rather to the things that art wants to say, depict, or describe. Having *sprezzatura* is to make art vanish into signification—into the world, away from itself as a *work* of art, to disappear into

what Arendt calls the “fecundity” of the world, as if the work of art were a work of nature.

There is no residue in the performance of *sprezzatura*. It no sooner appears than it withdraws into the seeming naturalness of its own appearance, its apparent identity with the natural fecundity of the world. Leaving no trace of its having been (art), however, according to Arendt, is not the mark of the “work” but rather “the mark of all laboring”: “it leaves nothing behind, that the result of its effort is almost as quickly consumed as it is spent.”<sup>12</sup> The effort that has been poured into the performance of *sprezzatura*—and performance must be taken implicitly and obviously to mean something that has been done in public—must evaporate or else be condemned to being seen as nothing other than labor. Disappearance (the dematerialization of its effort), however, is a fate it must share with labor, the thing it most wants *not* to be.

Entirely successful *sprezzatura*—and surely there is no such thing or performance—would no longer interest us as art because it would be mistaken for nature. Kant’s definition of the relation between the work of art and the object of nature sounds awfully close to the discourse of *sprezzatura*:

Thus the purposiveness in the product of beautiful art, although it is certainly intentional, must nevertheless not seem intentional; i.e., beautiful art must be *regarded* as nature, although of course one is aware of it as art. A product of art appears as nature, however, if we find it to agree *punctiliously* but not *painstakingly* with rules in accordance with which alone the product can become what it ought to be, that is, without the academic form showing through, i.e., without showing any sign that the rule has hovered before the eyes of an artist and fettered his mental powers.<sup>13</sup>

The crucial—if at times nearly indistinguishable—distinction between art and nature is central to what Alexander García Düttmann calls “serious” art. In his discussion of Kant’s definition of art “as a work that must act upon the beholder ‘as if it were a mere product of nature,’” Düttmann places the emphasis squarely on the “as if”: “the ‘as if’ means that one should never actually mistake an artistic product for a product of nature” if one is not to lose a sense of what he (Düttmann) calls “the reality of the artwork.”<sup>14</sup>

The term *sprezzatura* is derived from the Italian word for disdain: *sprezzo*. The courtier-artist prescribed by Castiglione treats his social performance or the production of the work of art (itself always a form of social performance, indeed of social labor) with disdain. His attitude suggests that he is disdainful (*sprezzante*) of labor itself. Disdain is, moreover, reserved for those who fail to achieve *sprezzatura*’s weightlessness, or those who know little enough to believe that it really was all that easy.<sup>15</sup> Thus, *sprezzatura* not only delimits an extremely ambivalent attitude toward work but also reveals itself to be a fierce means of policing the social.

Of course, Castiglione nearly fails at the task he sets for art: to express himself, he must introduce into language the turgidity of a neologism—one

whose conjugation of sibilants, trills, plosives, and affricates means to *perform* weightlessness—thus giving the game away.

\* \* \*

Alexander Pope speaks the language of *sprezzatura*, though the question of whether he actually performs it may be another matter. His work testifies to the durability and the seductiveness of (not) being seen to work (too hard) as the model for artistic production.

From *The Essay on Criticism*:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd; ... (297–298)

Others for *Language* all their Care express,  
And value books, as women men, for Dress:  
Their praise is still,—the Style is excellent:  
The Sense, they humbly take upon content ... (305–308)

But true Expression, like th'unchanging Sun,  
Clears, and improves whate'er it shines upon,  
It gilds all objects, but it alters none.  
Expression is the dress of thought, and still  
Appears more decent as more suitable;  
A vile conceit in pompous Style express'd,  
Is like a clown in regal Purple dress'd;  
For diff'rent *styles* with diff'rent subjects sort,  
As several garbs with country, town, and court.  
Some by old words to fame have made pretence,  
Ancients in phrase, meer moderns in their sense:  
Such labour'd nothings, in so strange a style,  
Amaze th' unlearn'd, and make the learned smile. (315–327)<sup>16</sup>

To be concerned or impressed by “Style” is to be caught up in exteriority, to miss the point. However, true style, the style propounded (and presumably exemplified) by the poem is also caught up in surface effects. “True expression” is the phrase Pope invents for authentic style. Much of the conceptual and poetic work is accomplished here through the tension and harmony between two words: express and dress. To express is to make an outside of an inside and to do so by an act of laborious force: it is to squeeze or force something out. Thus, “true expression” already wobbles ambivalently: it wants to summon effortlessness, but it is borne of work. This etymological ambivalence is, perhaps, one too easily claimed, and its ironies are slight in comparison to other tensions in the poem.

It is surprising that “true expression” should so insistently be invoked through a sartorial imaginary: it is the “dress of thought,” and therefore a surface effect, able to be changed and discarded as occasion fits. “Expression” (an interiority rendered exterior) and “dress” (a pure exteriority, one that covers and, moreover, hides many of the organs of base “expression”) are most



forcefully related to one another when they function as the rhyming agents of several couplets:

True Wit is Nature to advantage dress'd,  
What oft was thought, but ne'er so well express'd; ...

Others for *Language* all their Care express,  
And value books, as women men, for Dress: ...

A vile conceit in pompous Style express'd,  
Is like a clown in regal Purple dress'd; ...

If to express correctly is to dress in the same manner, such dressing must still be “suitable” (a word that registers both a weak rhyme—with “still”—and a sartorial pun that reinforces the clothing metaphors deployed throughout and also summons, if only shadowily, the labor of the tailor).<sup>17</sup> These two terms are not united in mere antagonism, as we might initially expect. Expression and dress are themselves neutral categories: both can be bad or good, true or false, suitable or ill-fitting. Bad expression is a kind of bad wearing and suggests, moreover, a confusion of the part for the whole, and of social categories, but a confusion that is obvious to spectators and listeners: we know when a clown is gussied up as a king—no one (at least of any substance) is fooled. Achieving good style—true expression—requires a versatile and extensive wardrobe, one more likely possessed by those with the means and occasion to wear “several garbs.” I doubt Pope thinks that only the born aristocrat has purchase on true expression, but true expression endows one—poetically at least—with something like the aristocrat’s demeanor, social knowledge, and power.

The fool, the practitioner of bad style, produces “labour’d nothings” that “in so strange a style, / Amaze the unlearn’d, and make the learned smile.” Even to have or exhibit a style is in itself already suspect: style is “strange” when and because it appears as such—as style—whereas “true expression” masks itself, appears so as to disappear. Labor names the problem of the *appearance* of style, not the problem of whether the style that appears is good or bad. The problem of the “labour’d nothing” is that it constitutes appearance at all: it is heaviness, a kind of drag (in the several senses of that word). Good style leaves no residue and provides no occasion for the contemptuous smiles of the “learned.” As for the “unlearn’d,” they would probably be better off getting back to work.

Pope’s account of style as bad appearance that is bad because it appears at all finds an interesting analogue in Marx’s account of the badly made tool in *Capital Volume I*: “A knife which fails to cut, a piece of thread which keeps on snapping, forcibly remind us of Mr. A, the cutler, or Mr. B, the spinner. In a successful product, the role played by past labour in mediating its useful properties has been extinguished.”<sup>18</sup> Bad making interrupts the process of

consumption or the functioning of the labor process. However, a little later, Marx tells us that the labor process, accounted for in what he calls “its simple and abstract terms elements,” names a “universal condition,” one that obscures the individual laborer’s stake in the labor process: “The taste of porridge does not tell us who grew the oats.”<sup>19</sup> But, of course, it is the bad making of Mr. A and Mr. B that tells us exactly who made the faulty knife and the weak thread. These makers make their labor—in its imperfection—too known to us and in so doing, they make the labor process itself harder, that much more laborious, time-consuming, inefficient, and costly.

Without forcing too obstinately the analogy between Marx’s account of the labor process and the production and appreciation of Pope’s “true expression” (itself an example of *sprezzatura*), we can connect the problem of “bad” art to bad labor, bad work—work that is imperfect because the labor condensed in it has revealed itself as such—as labor and as labored. The labor of Mr. A and Mr. B should not have been brought to our attention; their work should have remained private and unknown to us—locked in the twilight world of repetitive labor. But as products of a kind of wrong making, Mr. A’s knife and Mr. B’s thread become objects of public notice. If style appears as such only when it is bad (or in Pope’s terms, “strange”), then maybe it would be fair to say that style is bad publicity (in both the weak and strong senses of that term).

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Viktor Shklovsky pursues the theorization of modern poetics in terms that sound curiously like Marx’s account of the badly made commodity. Shklovsky thinks of art as a kind of tool—“as device,” an instrument of labor, in other words. Art, like Mr. A’s knife, ought to make us work harder than would otherwise be necessary (if our tools were perfect and perfectly made): “By ‘estranging’ objects and complicating form, the device of art makes perception long and ‘laborious.’”<sup>20</sup> The laboriousness that is desired here is meant to wrench us out of accustomed habits of perception in which we do too little work, or else work like automata. The stakes, for Shklovsky, are high: “Automization eats away at things, at clothes, at furniture, at our wives, and at our fear of war.”<sup>21</sup>

“Automization” also names the industrialization of drudgery that has characterized the working conditions of the laboring classes in modernity. Shklovsky’s invocation of the term raises the specter of socially oppressive forms of laboriousness. His account of the awkward laboriousness of serious art emits more of the artisanal workshop than the factory. For Theodor Adorno, serious art has been “bought with the exclusion of the lower classes,” with whom it nonetheless “keeps faith precisely by its freedom from the ends of the false universality.”<sup>22</sup> (“False universality” is the pseudo-emancipation of the culture industry: the reduction of existence to exchange value.) The culture industry is a mode of art that also entails laboriousness: its products

“bear the impress of the labor process” that its spectators “have to sustain throughout the day.”<sup>23</sup> Adorno describes the spectator’s labor in front of the movie screen as so much routinized hard work—work that is made necessary by the movies themselves:

They are so designed that quickness, powers of observation, and experience are undeniably needed to apprehend them at all; yet sustained thought is out of the question if the spectator is not to miss the relentless rush of facts. Even though the effort required for his response is semi-automatic, no scope is left for the imagination. Those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie—by its images, gestures, and words—that they are unable to supply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell on particular points of its mechanics during a screening.<sup>24</sup>

Broadly, therefore, we seem to have two types of artworks: (1) those that are made badly and whose awkward materiality slows the laborious process by which they are perceived, consumed, and understood; and (2) those that demand a different sort of labor, one that is much closer to the types of work performed elsewhere in the world of paid wage labor. (Adorno: “Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work.”)<sup>25</sup> In either case, modern aesthetic theory testifies to the enduring centrality of work as a metaphor (or accurate description) of what we do when we traffic with works of art. Style—the manner in which something has been made—will determine and name the kind of work required of us by works of art.<sup>26</sup>

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The concern with work as metaphor for and substance of the aesthetic experience is evidenced by serious modern art’s ambition to undo and overturn the hegemony of *sprezzatura*. Adorno hints at this in his entry on “Morality and Style” in *Minima Moralia*: “A writer will find that the more precisely, conscientiously, appropriately he expresses himself, the more obscure the literary result is thought, whereas a loose and irresponsible formulation is at once rewarded with certain understanding.”<sup>27</sup> Adorno agrees with Castiglione and Pope insofar as, like them, he recognizes that true expression requires hard work. The difference now lies in the fact that this work is unconcealed by the work of art itself. Everyone now can see how much work has been expended in producing the artwork—and can consent, perhaps, in their mutual contempt for it. Once the work’s laborious origins are revealed to all (and not appreciated only by the learned), its stock suffers.

The artwork reveals the labor of its making through its style, the particular way in which it has been made, and the way that this particular way of being made is made public. Its way of being made, in fact, becomes the constituting and defining feature of its social existence. For Adorno, the traces of the serious (or autonomous) work’s coming into being, the marks of its making, are exactly what make it serious:

Each and every important work of art leaves traces behind in its material and technique, and following them defines the modern as what needs to be done, which is contrary to having a nose for what is in the air. Critique makes this definition concrete. The traces to be found in the material and the technical procedures, from which every qualitatively new work takes its leads, are scars: They are the loci at which the preceding works misfired. By laboring on them, the new work turns against those that left these traces behind.<sup>28</sup>

Adorno's account of the work's coming into being emphasizes the residue of actual labor, the agon of art making. We can call these "scars" the (serious) work of art's style.

The scars of material labor that distinguish the work make it less easy to live with Arendt's division of work from labor. Adorno's use of this corporeal metaphor evokes other types of epidermal disfiguration—callouses, bruises, abrasions, skin rough and dark from long exposure to the elements—all of them marks of the laboring body. At the level of metaphor, at least, Adorno's work of art will need to bear adequate witness to a world of work on the surfaces of its own disfigured body. The work's negativity may refuse false forms of emancipation offered by the culture industry. Whether this negativity actually constitutes a utopian promise, or at the very least "express[es] the negativity of the culture which the different spheres [serious art and the culture industry] constitute,"<sup>29</sup> the serious work of art's style will at least demand that the problem of work remain unsublimated, a materially present, obdurate, and quite possibly ugly imposition on the landscape of social existence.

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What bothers Adorno about the cinema—which overdetermines his conceptualization of the culture industry—is that it delivers us right back into the logic of *sprezzatura*. For Adorno, the problem with the products of the culture industry is not that they do not possess style. The "culture industry," actually, has "ceased to be anything but style" and is, moreover, "the most rigid of all styles."<sup>30</sup> In becoming only style, the culture industry reveals style's "secret": "obedience to social hierarchy."<sup>31</sup> Although this style is achieved at the expense of enormous labor, the reality of that labor, ideally—if the style is to achieve its aim—should remain invisible, or should at least seem effortless.

The entire point of Bordwell, Thompson, and Staiger's *The Classical Hollywood Cinema*<sup>32</sup> is to trace what Rosalind Galt has called a "transvaluation of the obvious";<sup>33</sup> the book is a monument to latter-day, industrially produced *sprezzatura*. Bordwell in particular "gives privileged place not to the aberrant film that breaks or tests the rules but to the quietly conformist film that tries simply to follow them."<sup>34</sup> *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* is its own laborious monument to the self-effacing (or else coercively effaced) labor power operative in the studio system. As latter-day *sprezzatura*, "classical" style is style-as-effacement. If it is seen or noticed, as such, it has failed its stylistic ambitions. However, given its historical situation inside modernity, a

period in which group style, if it exists, must exist alongside and in competition with a (perhaps hegemonic) understanding of style as the signature of the person or the personal, a classical film that is “aberrant,” or that gets itself noticed, will also be that film that expresses and materializes style as signature.

At the same time, and often (as in the case of Maya Deren or Kenneth Anger) just next door to Hollywood, avant-garde filmmaking exerts itself in the performance of heroic feats of cinematic labor that also intend themselves as (miniature) monuments to the force of individuating style.<sup>35</sup> Here, though, labor may seem to exist in inverse proportion to the artifact’s legibility as an example of “style.” For the total labor power required to make a single frame of a “classical Hollywood” film may exceed the total labor power required to make an hour-long avant-garde film, no matter how furiously the latter has been labored over.

Failure in the pursuit of cinematic *sprezzatura* entails spectators to become aware of the work required of them. Their labor, if it becomes palpable to them, is the negative effect or index of the failure of labor power (that expended in the film) to efface itself as labor. Somehow it has labored into the view—a dropped boom mike, peculiar editing, overacting. However, this failure may figure the triumph of individuation (within the system).<sup>36</sup> Or, in the case of art cinema, that mode that lies somewhere between the industrial mode of Hollywood and the artisanal mode of the avant-garde film, the entire point would seem to be to coerce spectators into a more laborious relation to the film. In front of a notoriously “difficult” film, they must begin working on it or with it in order to capture a sense of its intended effects, which are provided for them by the self-effacing labor of the Hollywood film.<sup>37</sup>

Manny Farber’s anti-intellectual division of cinema (or really all art forms) into “white elephant art” or “termite art” is derived entirely from the discourse of *sprezzatura*. “Termite art” (which is good) is mostly found in Hollywood cinema and is marked by its “eager, industrious, unkempt activity ... It feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any object in mind other than eating away at the immediate boundaries of his art.”<sup>38</sup> If industriousness is the sign of good art (or the name by which such art is called), then, as of old, “laborious” is the term by which the bad object, “white elephant art” is named and shamed.<sup>39</sup> (Farber’s term of abuse might owe something to H. G. Wells’s characterization of Henry James’s style being akin to a hippopotamus trying to pick up a pea.) The bad objects of white elephant art (whose makers include Truffaut, Antonioni, and Tony Richardson, but also De Kooning, Warhol, and Robert Motherwell) all exemplify “a yawning production of overripe technique shrieking with preciousness, fame, ambition.”<sup>40</sup> Too intent on having style (the term itself is used as an insult in reference to Truffaut’s possession of it),<sup>41</sup> these artists embarrass themselves

by making obvious their efforts at making work. Maybe in Farber's terms, laboriousness names the work of the masterpiece, or an eight-hour factory shift, whereas industriousness better describes that of the entrepreneurial freelance critic, or the unself-conscious artist who feels that his work is "all expendable," who profits by "forgetting this accomplishment [that of the work] as soon as it has passed."<sup>42</sup>

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We might well be impatient with Adorno's condemnation of the culture industry's ease. Modernism's love affair with difficulty could be discounted as a mimetic fantasy. T. S. Eliot's famous imperative that "poets in our civilization, as it exists at present, must be *difficult*" is predicated precisely on a mimetic relation between aesthetic practice and social reality: "Our civilization comprehends great variety and complexity, and this variety and complexity, playing upon a refined sensibility, must produce various and complex results." Being difficult—working hard at producing works of art that require hard work in return—is, for Eliot, a means by which the poet may "dislocate ... language into his meaning."<sup>43</sup> The making equivalent of the artwork's surface and the world to which it responds and bears witness is something we more ordinarily associate with realism (or at least with some powerful accounts of realism), in which the transparent availability of the realist text is meant to coincide with and mirror the world's transparent availability to our senses. Adorno shares with Eliot a belief in modernism's difficulty as curative mimesis. From our contemporary vantage point, we might reasonably want to counter their (over)estimation of the difficult. Where exactly do we look for the evidence of what has been saved, salvaged, or else staved off by difficult works of art? And how do we neatly and conclusively separate the culture industry's "vernacular modernism" from those difficult forms of modernism that seem to require greater acts of concentration and attention from us?<sup>44</sup> And yet, it would be too easy to blame the invocation and practice of difficulty. Difficulty at least seems to have the virtue of making our consumption of artworks present to ourselves as such. The doxa of difficulty may stake too much on a mimetic fallacy, but it is at least dedicated to making us sharers (however unequal) in some sort of burdensomeness.

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In his meditation on the work of Luchino Visconti, Alexander García Düttmann has elaborated, embroidered, and extended Adorno's insight that "'artistic utopia' would consist in making things 'in ignorance of what they are.'"<sup>45</sup> If art is not to be the repetition of what is given or the iteration of what is merely possible, it must contain "a not-knowing with regard to the making and a not-knowing with regard to what is being made."<sup>46</sup> Such making is not reducible to spontaneity, is not "a compulsive or unintentional movement"; indeed, it may draw on "technical training, experience, and expertise."<sup>47</sup> But what results is unpredictable and cannot be foreseen. If what results could have been predicted, the work would not have been worth making.

For García Düttmann (in his sustained reading of Adorno via Visconti—and vice versa), the artwork that results from such a process of making

has a transformative effect; it signals a difference ... But it can only have a transformative effect because the artist does not know what he is making; he is unaware of what he is doing the moment he makes something in ignorance of what it is. It is not thus a matter of realizing possibilities, of awaiting their realization, or indeed of mourning their missed or impossible realization. To clear the paths, to provide access to obstructed places, to shake off the shackles of heteronomy, it is essential that a reality be recognized which is nothing other than the change which has occurred. We see the world (differently).<sup>48</sup>

Such an account of the work of art's production might sound something like Farber's termite artist who has no "object in mind other than eating away at the immediate boundaries of his art." Perhaps in their imagination of the moment of production, there is some affinity between these two accounts. Farber's termite art, however, is "all expendable," to be forgotten as soon as it is made. Farber's account is too enraptured of what García Düttmann calls "a compulsive or unintentional movement." Farber's termite art can account for a kind of "making in ignorance," but misses seriousness. Seriousness enters in the work's demand for "recognition," which, in García Düttmann's terms, is not just a seeing of something as what it is or intends itself to be, but also the site of an unpredictable encounter that is "the basis for the production of another reality."<sup>49</sup> Recognition is a more serious and demanding enterprise than the "forgetting [of] this accomplishment as soon as it has passed."

Our vision and our awareness of style—of what the work is and how it is—could be thought of in relation to an understanding of the work as the embodiment of a recognition of a change being made, of an action that has been taken in relation to the real, and of the unpredictable consequences of this action, this making. In this sense, style, as the sensible and sensual effect of an action taken, a decision made, suggests the "utopian" dimensions of the work of art. Art is not a surrogate for or a model of social action, but rather a medium for action that exists in the social world, and in which we can see the effects of actions and decisions and labors. Art—which is in the world and a part of the world's real materiality—may make us wonder how impoverished our actions are in the world.

\* \* \*

Style is labor and the trace of labor (what labor leaves behind), an imposition of the will on the world, and in a manner that has not been prescribed. It is thus unlike other forms of labor in which the outcome is predicted and predictable. Described in these terms, the laboriousness of the stylized work of art would seem to offer an account of labor that is happier than the familiar story of labor's alienation. Is it happier—we might wonder initially—because style's particularizing force has deanonymized the abstraction of labor and rendered its conditions and achievements legible? As Keston Sutherland has



argued, such “indexical inscription” would be a poor cause for celebration. Knowing how and by whom commodities are made and appreciating the particularity of their making does not absolve us from the crime of “eat[ing] human beings transubstantiated by industrial reduction ... in every commodity on the market.”<sup>50</sup>

The telos of labor under capitalism (early, late, industrial, postindustrial) is always value. The capitalist extracts surplus labor from the worker so as to produce surplus value: this is the process by which value is multiplied and capital is accumulated. The extraction of value from labor is the crux (and calvary) of the system of capitalism and depends—if surplus value is to be produced—on efficiency, a disciplined labor force, and well-made commodities that can be used to produce more commodities and therefore more surplus value. As David Harvey has written, “The use-value of labor-power to the capitalist is that it is the one commodity that can produce value and hence surplus-value.”<sup>51</sup> It would be unfortunate if the assimilation of style to labor were to result in another victory for the valorization process. However, it is exactly the valorization process that may provide a better account of what thinking of style as labor offers us. If style is, as I have argued earlier, a kind of bad making that points back to its producers and their imperfect labor, then presumably labor like this is labor that will be inefficient for the production of value. If the knives and thread of Mr. A and Mr. B are simply too awkward, too faulty, and slow down the labor process too completely, then they will have to be returned, or a refund will have to be demanded for their expense. Otherwise, they will foreclose the production of any value whatsoever. Works of art are certainly commodities and circulate in the commodity system. While we do not exactly use them in the same way that we might use knives or thread in the production of new commodities, they constitute a part of the social materiality through, with, and in which we reproduce our own lives and our relationships to each other and the world. Style that reveals itself as such, presses its awkwardness on us, points back to the maker of its labor, and demands labor from us in turn is a means of making awkward the reproduction of our lives as always the same. Style might offer a bad way of producing surplus value, or a good way of producing new forms of value that do not support an economy of exchange, that do not function as exchange value.

Style is often a method of frustration, of dissatisfaction—or of an over-satisfaction, a cloying surfeit, which produces disgust: it gives us too little, or too much, or else gives us the wrong thing altogether. Adam Phillips has described the value of frustration as an impediment to the reproduction of the same: “the reason that frustration is important is because frustration contains the possibility of discovering a new want. What usually happens is because we can’t bear frustration, we fill it with a known want.”<sup>52</sup> Presumably, the failure of an artwork to satisfy a known want was what some filmgoers at Stamford, Connecticut’s Avon Cinema were complaining about when they



recently demanded a refund for the price of their tickets to see Terrence Malick's *The Tree of Life* (USA, 2011).<sup>53</sup> I do not mention this incident in order to belittle or condescend to the Avon's disgruntled customers. They went into the theater expecting one thing and felt cheated when they were given something else. Presumably they were turned off by *The Tree of Life's* intense stylization. While they did not get their money back, their indignation at the film's style clearly upset the normal process by which the commodity would ordinarily be consumed, assimilated, or put to work. While they may not have yet discovered a new want (or at least a desire for more films by Terrence Malick), their encounter with the film has, at the very least, decelerated the valorization process. They may not have liked the film, but their dislike of it is likely to have left an unforgettable impression.

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As Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri have argued, it is exactly in the postindustrial era that "the presence of labor at the center of the life world and the extension of social cooperation across society become total."<sup>54</sup> Perhaps making labor central to our understanding of the work of art's style could offer a desublimated account of artworks as laborious, but in a way that does not (pace Adorno) merely make a mockery of the hard work of "actual" labor (industrial, affective, intellectual, and so forth). Understanding style as labor might be a way of asserting an interest in art's inevitable dependence on such forms of labor and of asserting as well the desire that the conditions of labor and the nature of the value produced by it be other than what they are.

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## Notes

I would like to thank Michael Lawrence, Keston Sutherland, and Damon Young for their helpful responses to an earlier draft of this essay.

1. Berel Lang, "Looking for the Styleme," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 181.
2. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, *The Labor of Dionysus: A Critique of the State Form* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1994), 11.
3. Susan Sontag, "On Style," in *Against Interpretation* (New York: Dell, 1966), 17.
4. Richard Neer has recently argued that "the evidence of style" is at the very center of what art historians and archaeologists do. Cf. "Connoisseurship and the Stakes of Style," *Critical Inquiry* 32, no. 1 (Autumn 2005), 1–26.

5. My thinking has been contaminated by many writers, texts, and practices. Not all of these are named here.
6. Meyer Schapiro, "Style," in *Theory and Philosophy of Art: Style, Artist, and Society* (New York: George Braziller, 1994), 51: "But the style is, above all, a system of forms with a quality and a meaningful expression through which the personality of the artist and the broad outlook of the group are visible."
7. Kendall L. Walton, "Style and the Products and Processes of Art," in *The Concept of Style*, ed. Berel Lang (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1987), 88.
8. Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 2nd ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998 [1958]), 143. This passage occurs in the subsection entitled "Reification" (139–144) in the chapter on "Work," which follows the chapter entitled "Labor."
9. *Ibid.*, 141.
10. The distinction that Arendt makes, however, does make clear that many or most forms of labor do not possess/exhibit style, nor does style bear the mark of necessity in the same way that labor does. Maybe style is a form of labor that is both public and unnecessary. The point will not be to collapse the categories but to understand their generative instability. (I thank Damon Young for these considerations.)
11. Baldesar Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier*, trans. Charles S. Singleton (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1959), 43. Italics in the original.
12. Arendt, *Human Condition*, 87.
13. Immanuel Kant, *Critique of the Power of Judgment*, trans. Paul Guyer and Eric Matthews (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), 185–186. Italics in the original.
14. Alexander García Düttmann, *Visconti: Insights into Flesh and Blood*, trans. Robert Savage (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2009), 29.
15. Cf. Castiglione, *Book of the Courtier*, 43–44.
16. Alexander Pope, *An Essay on Criticism* [1709], in *Pope: Poetical Works*, ed. Herbert Davis (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1978), 72–73. Italics in the original.
17. For an interesting discussion of some of the features of Pope's sartorial punning in this section of the poem, see Max Bluestone, "The Suppressed Metaphor in Pope," *Essays in Criticism* 8, no. 4 (October 1958): 347–354. Bluestone argues that Pope attempts to suppress the central sartorial metaphor through its interplay with more "abstract" or "mute" terms that softly reinforce the central term. We could also say that he is masking his own effort, in the tradition of *sprezzatura*.
18. Karl Marx, *Capital Volume I*, trans. Ben Fowkes (London: Penguin, 1990 [1867]), 289.
19. *Ibid.*, 290.
20. Viktor Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, trans. Benjamin Sher (Champaign, IL, and London: Dalkely Archive Press, 1991[1929]), 6.
21. *Ibid.*, 5. Shklovsky's thinking here is prompted by a passage from Tolstoi's diary in which he describes his performance of "habitual and unconscious" tasks that leave no trace in our memory. Performing an action unconsciously is, according to Tolstoi, "tantamount to not having done it at all" (cf. Shklovsky, *Theory of Prose*, 5).
22. Theodor Adorno and Max Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, trans. John Cumming (New York: Continuum, 1996 [1944]), 135. While this citation indicates that *Dialectic of Enlightenment* was written by Adorno and Horkheimer,

- the culture industry chapter is understood to be the work of Adorno, thus I refer to him in the text as the author of these passages.
23. Ibid., 131.
  24. Ibid., 126–127.
  25. Ibid., 137.
  26. The kind of work performed by Adorno's spectator is exactly the sort of "activity" that David Bordwell, in his *Narration in the Fiction Film* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1985), proposes as counterevidence to theories of spectatorial "passivity." Bordwell claims that his spectator is "active" because she has been "cued" by a film "to execute a definable variety of *operations*" (29). Bordwell is surely right that film viewing is "a complicated, even skilled activity" (33), but his terms coincide exactly with Adorno's account of film spectatorship as the "prolongation of work": skilled activities are exactly what is demanded of workers on the factory floor. The very fact that Bordwell must go to such pains to make apparent the spectator's work is proof of the fact that this skilled labor is routinized.
  27. Theodor Adorno, *Minima Moralia: Reflections from Damaged Life*, trans. E. F. N. Jephcott (London: Verso, 1978 [1951]), 101.
  28. Theodor Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, ed. Gretel Adorno and Rolf Tiedemann, trans. Robert Hullot-Kentor (London and New York: Continuum, 2004), 45. Here, Adorno goes on to describe how "works are also critics of one another." Implicit throughout this discussion is the concept of style, although the term, as such, does not appear.
  29. Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 135.
  30. Ibid., 131.
  31. Ibid.
  32. David Bordwell, Janet Staiger, and Kristin Thompson, *The Classical Hollywood Cinema* (London: Routledge, 1988), especially 3–11.
  33. Rosalind Galt, "The Obviousness of Cinema," *World Picture 2* (Autumn 2008), [http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_2/Galt.html](http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_2/Galt.html) (accessed July 24, 2011).
  34. Bordwell, Staiger, and Thompson, *Classical Hollywood Cinema*, 10. I refer to Bordwell on his own here because he is credited as the single author of this section of the book.
  35. Deren, however, would have resisted the notion of a "personal" style.
  36. We should feel free to disagree with him, but we should note that Adorno has no patience with this sort of individuation: "Whenever Orson Welles offends against the tricks of the trade, he is forgiven because his departures from the norm are regarded as calculated mutations which serve all the more strongly to confirm the validity of the system" (Adorno and Horkheimer, *Dialectic of Enlightenment*, 129); "the Lubitsch touch: finger prints on identity cards which are otherwise exactly the same" (Ibid., 154).
  37. This sort of attention directed toward the film is central to Jonathan Beller's conception of the "attention theory of value," elaborated in his *The Cinematic Mode of Production: Attention Economy and the Society of the Spectacle* (Lebanon, NH: Dartmouth College Press/University Press of New England, 2006). Obviously, Beller's theory is similar to Adorno's "prolongation of the working day."
  38. Manny Farber, "White Elephant Art vs. Termite Art," in *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies* (New York: Praeger, 1971), 135–136.
  39. Cf. Ibid., 139–140: "The common denominator of these laborious ploys is, actually, the need of the director and writer to overfamiliarize the audience

with the picture it's watching: to blow up every situation and character like an affable inner tube with recognizable details and smarmy compassion." Here, Farber's problem seems to be that the director "overfamiliarizes" his audience with the fact that what they are watching is a work of art.

40. Ibid., 135.
41. Cf. Ibid., 140: "An exemplar of white elephant art, particularly the critic-devouring virtue of filling every pore of a work with glinting, darting Style and creative Vivacity, is François Truffaut."
42. Ibid., 144. Funnily enough, appreciations of Farber hinge on the consistency of his own style.
43. T. S. Eliot, "The Metaphysical Poets" [1921], in *Selected Prose of T. S. Eliot*, ed. Frank Kermode (London: Faber and Faber, 1975), 65.
44. See Miriam Hansen's influential essay, "The Mass Production of the Senses: Classical Cinema as Vernacular Modernism," *Modernism/Modernity* 6, no. 2 (April 1999): 59–77.
45. García Düttmann, *Visconti*, 4.
46. Ibid., 7.
47. Ibid., 8, 10.
48. Ibid., 119–120.
49. Ibid., 127. See also García Düttmann's book on recognition (which preceded the Visconti book and from which the latter clearly extends), *Between Cultures: Tensions in the Struggle for Recognition*, trans. Kenneth B. Woodgate (London and New York: Verso, 2000).
50. Keston Sutherland, "Marx in Jargon," *World Picture* 1 (Spring 2008), [http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_1.1/KSutherland.html](http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_1.1/KSutherland.html) (accessed July 23, 2011).
51. David Harvey, *A Companion to Marx's Capital* (Verso: London, 2010), 124.
52. Jane Elliott and John David Rhodes, "'The Value of Frustration': An Interview with Adam Phillips," *World Picture* 3 (Summer 2009), [http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP\\_3/Phillips.html](http://worldpicturejournal.com/WP_3/Phillips.html) (accessed July 24, 2011).
53. This story circulated widely on the Internet. I encountered it here: [http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2011/06/tree\\_of\\_life\\_refund\\_sign.html](http://nymag.com/daily/entertainment/2011/06/tree_of_life_refund_sign.html) (accessed July 23, 2011).
54. Hardt and Negri, *Labor of Dionysus*, 11.