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lewis levenberg
The Frankfurt School
Dr. Paul Smith

Meditation. On the sentence:

**"Criticism is an indispensable element of culture that is itself contradictory:
in all its untruth, still as true as culture is untrue."**

- T. W. Adorno. "Cultural Criticism and Society." (1951)
in Prisms. Trans. Samuel and Shierry Weber. Cambridge: MIT, 1967. p. 22.

This meditation cannot claim an authoritative interpretation of the sentence it takes as its object. Problems based on translation, context, and historical difference could be noted, among many others. However, it assumes that the concepts mediated by this sentence remain immanent in its linguistic construction and deformation, even across translations. In other words, it takes the literal seriously. Reading slowly, dividing the sentence into rather small syntactic units, and annotating wherever possible (perhaps to the point of triviality), the meditation proceeds through the sentence in the order given, as quoted above, and repeated in a header on each page for convenience. It starts at the beginning of the quotation, and when it comes to the end, it stops.

"criticism": Even before reading the sentence, the reader must understand that the criticism in play here is cultural criticism, that is, criticism of both epistemological and ontological objects. It takes as those objects both social formations and cultural expressions. It operates by both analysis and negation.

"is" - The verb establishes criticism as the subject of the convolutions that follow.

"an indispensable": This reflexive adjective (a line of criticism referring to itself as indispensable) seems to have been staked for the importance of its own formulation, as a kind of self-justification or rationalization. And yet, one cannot argue the point that even if it is indeed indis-

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pensable, criticism is not 'the' (only or essential) indispensable, but one of many possible; "an
indispensable

element": Associations to both the chemical periodic table and ancient animistic natural
forces accompany the term. In addition to revealing the dual secrets of nature that form the bases
or building blocks of science and belief, the term suggests a neutrality, and an ability to combine
with other simple elements to form more complex, even organic, structures and processes. This
suggests that criticism works constructively, as well as (proto-)(de)constructively. The elemental
distinction isolates criticism from culture, even as it locates criticism within culture. So: indis-
pensable, but already contradictory.

"of culture": "Culture" contextualizes criticism's elemental character. Compare "culture"
to 'society,' 'the world,' 'modernity,' or any other word choice here, and the significance begins to
emerge. "Criticism is an indispensable element of culture" in particular. That is to say, the sen-
tence proposes the historical specificity and contingency of criticism on culture, without which it
would become, precisely, dispensable. The valence of criticism already implied that its objects
include social formations and specific expressions, epistemological and ontological concerns.
That criticism is an indispensable element of culture also means that criticism reflects and contra-
dicts both cultural objects, and culture as a subject, in and from within the cultural context from
and against which it emerges. So far, the sentence shows that cultural criticism addresses and
constitutes itself as well as its conditions of possibility. However, for criticism to move beyond

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possibility into indispensability, into elemental importance, requires that it exist and act in relation to (a) specific culture.

"that is itself contradictory": Here, the problem of translation rears its ugly head. In the Webers' translation, no punctuation appears between "culture" and "that"; this provides a productive ambiguity. "itself" might refer to criticism, or to culture. As the sentence so far has shown, however, culture and criticism determine one another dialectically. So, even though "itself" more likely refers to criticism, because of the first passive intransitive verb shows that "criticism is" all these things discussed so far, and because parallel construction of the sentence implies a continuity of reference between pronoun and subject, the construction might also invoke a false parallel, just like the false parallel between criticism and culture already at stake. The contradictory purpose of criticism - to reflect and negate itself along with its conditions of possibility - contradicts the culture in and from which it emerges. And in contradicting culture, criticism reveals the contradictions inherent in culture. Contradiction multiplies: criticism can make false claims to truth, internally; it can also contradict falsities in culture by telling the truth about them. In this way, the ambiguity of reference in this independent clause maintains tension between its various meanings, reconstituting the indispensable contradiction itself.

":": Here, the sentence pivots, from independent to dependent clause, and in so doing, hints that the dependent clause will reinterpret, modify, and even contradict the dependent clause. The colon tangentially assumes the metaphors of ontological punctuality, the valence of a

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duality rather than a singularity (a period), to connect, even as it divides, the clauses of the sentence and their making of one another's meanings.

"in all its untruth": Having been broken from the previous clause by strong punctuation, the reference of the possessive pronoun "its" remains ambiguous. However, the same false parallel as the above phrase holds here. "Its" seems more likely to give "criticism" the possession of "untruth," and so to refer to its internal contradictions again, of pretending to truth while speaking subjective lies. The same modification as that which precedes it would support this interpretation: the pronoun would follow the rules of parallel construction; the use of "that is itself" to qualify "contradictory" would serve as punctuation to mark the "itself" as a reference to "criticism," pointing out its internal inconsistencies as well as the mode by which it operates within and against culture. However, the same indeterminacy as above provides another iteration of the productive tension between the mutually constitutive contradictions of culture and criticism. Leaving unresolved for the moment the question of reference, consider instead "in all": spatial location of both criticism and culture invokes the problem of historical specificity. The totalizing "all" contradicts the spatializing "in." This reinscribes the ambiguity between the universal or transcendental category of truth/untruth and the contingency of truth or untruth on a punctual or specific existence in time and space. that is to say, the cultural context of criticism, as it conflicts with the desire to think beyond a particular situation, appears again in this linguistic construction. Of course, colloquially, "in all" can also mean 'despite.'

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",": Every sentence must breathe. The comma inflects the sentence with an implicit critique of the conditional distinction between organic and technical thought. It establishes, against that duality, the anthropocentric existence of the concept, as mediated through language, with a moment of reflection and self-awareness - a pause. The fracturing and recombining of language through punctuation reflects and refracts thought, as a rationalized, technical sentence-object, and concomitantly, as an organ of the the body of criticism/culture. It does all this precisely on the basis of reintroducing temporality. In other words, it reminds the reader that the sentence that Adorno wrote, and which they read, occupies real historical time in its operation: Adorno took time to write the sentence, and they take time to read it. In so doing, the comma provides the reader with an important dialectical reading strategy: the hermeneutic reversal of linear syntax; the ability to double back on a sentence and change the meaning of a previous word, phrase, or clause on the basis of one that follows. Indeed, such a strategy becomes the only means by which the reader can make sense of this sentence. And so, after this pause, the sentence continues, with the dialectical reader 'now' aware that a change is gonna come.

"still": And yet...

"as true": Culture/criticism (the reference remains uncertain) holds truth within and against "its untruth". The indispensable contradiction finds some explanation here, for what is at stake in culture's and/or criticism's contradictoriness must now address a claim to truth, not merely an admission of untruth. The truth-untruth dualism inherent in both culture and criticism also carries the ambiguity of a false parallel construction. Until this point in the sentence, the main-

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tenance of ambiguity among the referential pronouns "its" and "itself" have allowed a multiplicity of interpretations to emerge: perhaps Adorno means that culture is itself contradictory, and/or that criticism is itself contradictory; perhaps he means culture's untruth, and/or criticism's untruth. Now, however, the sentence allows truth-itself to enter into the possible modes of existence - both for culture, and for criticism.

"as culture": Another shift of valences occurs here, for up to this point the phrase can be interpreted to mean that criticism is as untrue as culture. If criticism carries within itself the contradictions inherent in culture, then it must also carry the truths that inhere in the same culture. The particular repetition of "culture" here, rather than another pronoun, also allows a return to the ambiguous pronouns of the independent clause: On the basis of a differentiation between "its untruth" and "as culture," we can infer that "its untruth" finally refers to criticism. However, such an inference leaves the truth-untruth contradiction in place. The "as ... as" formation might also operate as an "if ... then" function. If so, then the sentence would read, to this point, "if (criticism is) true, then culture ..." And we know, or can predict, that "culture

is untrue": And so the referential cycle completes another revolution. Whether on the basis of a conditional (if-then) reading, or the given similitude (as-as), finally, culture's untruth makes possible criticism's truth-within-its-own-untruth. This last movement also indicates that culture does not merely exist, but acts, just as criticism acts - contradictorally, yes, but also explicitly. Through the verb "is," passive but not implied, the sentence proclaims its chiasmic asymmetry.

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".": At last.