

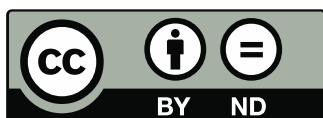
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EPISTEMOLOGIE UND
GENERAL INTELLECT DER KÜNSTE

STEWART MARTIN

SOHN-RETHEL'S CRITIQUE OF EPISTEMOLOGY AND ART

This essay explores an enquiry into art from the perspective of Alfred Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology. The prospect is a radical rethinking of art's relationship to knowledge and labour. But the originality of this proposition may be attributed in large part to its unlikelihood.

In the first place, Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology does not seem to offer an unproblematic starting point from which to set out on further enquiries, whether into art or anything else. Despite convincing a considerable number of supporters – especially amongst followers of the Frankfurt School of Critical Theory, to which it is widely acknowledged as a decisive contribution, but also within other theoretical lineages – it remains the source of profound controversies, even within these scenes.¹ More broadly, its impact remains marginal. Its radical critique of modern science has won notoriety, but little conviction. This essay will not engage explicitly with these controversies, but rather attempt to reconstruct Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology in its internal coherence with a view to exploring its extension into an enquiry about art. Such a reconstruction suggests a refutation of its critics, but this has inherent limits, since internal coherence cannot refute criticisms concerning what is excluded from this coherence.

Of course, an enquiry into art appears to be precisely the occasion for criticising the exclusions of Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology, since he neither develops nor projects such an enquiry. Whatever Sohn-Rethel's considerations

1 Sohn-Rethel's impact on the Frankfurt School is most famously registered in Theodor W. Adorno's admiring response to his unpublished manuscripts in their correspondence from the mid 1930s, although this failed to convince Max Horkheimer to agree to their publication in the *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*. (See Theodor W. Adorno und Alfred Sohn-Rethel: *Briefwechsel 1936–1969*, ed. by Christoph Göttsche, Munich 1991; in particular Adorno's letter from 17 November 1936.) The bibliography of Sohn-Rethel's subsequent reception within this tradition is far too extensive to even indicate here, but one of its landmarks is Postone, Moishe: *Time, Labor, and Social Domination: A Reinterpretation of Marx's Critical Theory*, Cambridge 1993, which appropriates Sohn-Rethel's approach to social synthesis, while criticising his treatment of its relation to labour. Another notable trajectory in Sohn-Rethel's reception derives from his impact on Autonomist theories of 'immaterial labour' or 'general intellect', in which his critique of epistemology has been transformed into an account of post-industrial societies. Sohn-Rethel's obscure but profound significance for the work of Paolo Virno appears to be seminal here. See, for instance, Virno's injunction to reread and develop the work of Sohn-Rethel in Joseph, Branden W.: "Interview with Paolo Virno", in: *Grey Room*, vol. 21, 2005, pp. 26–37, here: p. 31.

of art, of which there is some evidence in his writings, his principal works scarcely mention art at all. Art is ostensibly external to the target of his critique, which is the autonomy and sovereignty of scientific knowledge. *Intellectual and Manual Labour* (1978), Sohn-Rethel's magnum opus, is the result of an extraordinarily single-minded intellectual career dedicated to exposing how the scientific idea of knowledge, which finds its culminating justification in the epistemology of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, is the ideological form of bourgeois society.² At the heart of this project is Sohn-Rethel's notorious attempt to demonstrate that this form of knowledge originates from the form of money. Money, he argues, is the apparatus of a society of exchange where the coherence of society is maintained, not through the production process, but through an exchange process, in which the usefulness of things and the manual labour that produces them is imperceptibly suspended or abstracted. Money is the abstract form determining how things appear in this realm of exchange. And it is precisely this abstract form of things that, Sohn-Rethel argues, becomes conscious in the abstract form of knowledge. This knowledge is not merely illusory, but the form of knowledge needed to understand how things appear to those engaged in a society of exchange. It is the form of consciousness needed by the class of exchangers, as opposed to the class of labourers whose activity is excluded from exchange. It is, in other words, the form of ideology of a bourgeois class.

The absence of an enquiry into art here appears entirely appropriate. Indeed, this is a more obvious source of both the originality and unlikelihood of proposing one, especially without transgressing the internal coherence of Sohn-Rethel's project. Nonetheless, there are a few clues to its presence. Insofar as Sohn-Rethel is ultimately dedicated to developing the critique of ideology initiated by Karl Marx – who famously included art as one of the principal forms of ideology; indeed, one of the very few references to art in *Intellectual and Manual Labour* refers to this – then his account of scientific knowledge should include an account of art as part of the internal coherence of the critique of ideology in general, even if he does not pursue it himself.³ This raises the crucial issue of how to understand this coherence between knowledge and art without dissolving their distinction. The contention of this essay is that this issue can be negotiated through another clue in Sohn-Rethel's manifest project, namely, the significance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* in exemplifying the bourgeois ideology of knowledge, and the fact that this book is only one part of a systematic account

2 Sohn-Rethel, Alfred: *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, London 1978. This is a translation by Martin Sohn-Rethel with amendments of *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Theorie der gesellschaftlichen Synthesis*, Frankfurt/M. 1970. A subsequent edition, excluding Part 3 of the previous editions, was published as *Geistige und körperliche Arbeit. Zur Epistemologie der abendländischen Geschichte*, Weinheim 1989.

3 For Sohn-Rethel's reference to Marx's list of forms of ideology, see Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 5. For Sohn-Rethel's insistence that his critique of epistemology makes no claims on other forms of ideology, see *ibid.*, p. 34.

that includes a substantial treatment of art or, rather, the beauty of art – that is, Kant's *Critique of Judgement*. This essay will, in other words, explore an enquiry into art through the systematic elaboration of Sohn-Rethel's critique of Kant. This will transgress the ostensive limits of Sohn-Rethel's work, without seeking to transgress the projected limits of his critique of Kant or his critique of ideology. This imposes strict constraints on an enquiry into art, but its rigorous deduction from Sohn-Rethel's work demands that they are carefully observed.⁴

1. Consciousness of social synthesis

Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology is conceived as a contribution to the historical-materialist account of human societies inaugurated by Marx, which Sohn-Rethel both adopts and seeks to develop. This account establishes the encompassing limits within which Sohn-Rethel's critique is set. Historical materialism is conceived by Sohn-Rethel principally as a method, rather than a doctrine or worldview, which analyses human societies primarily in terms of the forms of production they develop in order to maintain themselves within nature. These forms of production involve forces and relations, which constitute the base or infrastructure of societies, and from which emerges a superstructure of forms of ideology or consciousness of this infrastructure. The historical-materialist analysis of consciousness approaches it, therefore, as dependent on the form of production underlying it, not as independent – an error it attributes in general to idealism.

This notorious 'base-superstructure' model formulated by Marx underpins Sohn-Rethel's whole project, which is intended as its application and exten-

4 Probably the most explicit and sustained attempt to derive an account of art from Sohn-Rethel's work has been made by Jochen Hörisch, particularly the five chapters he dedicates to this task in his *Tauschen, sprechen, begehren: Eine Kritik der unreinen Vernunft*, Munich 2011, pp. 29–134. This is scholarly and insightful, especially in illuminating Sohn-Rethel's influence on Adorno and Benjamin. The consequences it draws for art are, however, not rigorously pursued from Sohn-Rethel's critique of Kant, or even from Sohn-Rethel's work more broadly, and appear dislocated, presumably as a result of the problems this faces. (See the chapter concluding his treatment of Sohn-Rethel, "Die Kunst des Kapitals und das Kapital der Kunst – Strukturen einer Affaire", in: *ibid.*, pp. 113–134.) Given Sohn-Rethel's impact on Adorno, which is certainly less equivocal than on Benjamin, Adorno's writings on art might be regarded as the most sustained response to Sohn-Rethel's work. Even in his famous letter to Sohn-Rethel from 17 November 1936, Adorno indicates their affinities in his criticism of Jazz in terms of a false synthesis. See Adorno / Sohn-Rethel (as fn. 1), p. 32. Adorno is referring to his essay "Über Jazz", first published in: *Zeitschrift für Sozialforschung*, no. 5, 1936, pp. 235–259.) But Sohn-Rethel's impact on Adorno's aesthetics remains obscure and cannot be presupposed. Its theoretical assessment would require illuminating the approach to art opened by Sohn-Rethel's work, insofar as this is possible.

sion.⁵ This involves decisive innovations. Sohn-Rethel's principal innovation is to extend the scope of Marx's conception of ideology to include science. But this is grounded in a more fundamental innovation with regard to Marx's conception of infrastructure. Sohn-Rethel distinguishes two levels of analysis that appear to be fused in the infrastructure: on the one hand, an analysis of the form of production in terms of the coherence or synthesis necessary to the maintenance of a particular society; and, on the other hand, an analysis of how this form of social synthesis determines production. Sohn-Rethel claims that Marx develops both levels of analysis in his critique of political economy, but indistinctly.⁶ He argues that Marx's analysis of the *form* of value is an analysis of the form of social synthesis, whereas his analysis of the *magnitude* of value is an analysis of how this form of social synthesis determines the production process or labour. Since the form of value is presupposed by the magnitude of value, the former determines the latter. Sohn-Rethel does not object to the combination of these levels of analysis in Marx's critique of political economy insofar as it is orientated towards the production process. However, he insists that they must be distinguished in order to develop a critique of epistemology, since this must be derived from the analysis of the form of social synthesis, and not from how production is determined by this form. This is especially significant in bourgeois societies, where there is a division of intellectual and manual labour.

Sohn-Rethel's distinction of these levels of analysis creates deep questions about its conformity to Marx's method or model. It appears as if, in relegating labour to something determined by the form of social synthesis, the form of production itself has been relegated. Sohn-Rethel's consistency might be maintained insofar as it simply emphasises the *relations*, if not the forces, of production as the form in which production is determined. Hence, the infrastructure is not production or labour as such, but the form of relations in which production is composed. It is also evident that Sohn-Rethel's innovations concern peculiar characteristics of bourgeois society, such as the form of money, or the form of a pure consciousness, and, more crucially, the fact that social synthesis does not take place through production, and it appears as if his emphasis on the infrastructural significance of social synthesis results from these peculiarities. However, Sohn-Rethel maintains that this is not the case; that social synthesis is the primary condition of possibility for the reproduction or maintenance of all societies, and that production needs to be understood as determined by this synthesis, not vice versa.

In any event, it is clear that the reconstruction of Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology is obliged to understand its specificity within a general methodo-

5 The Preface to *Intellectual and Manual Labour* opens with the words: "This enquiry is concerned with the relationship between base and superstructure in the Marxian sense. This, to a large extent, leads into new territory." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. xi.

6 For this claim and much of the argumentation it involves, see "Economics and Knowledge", chapter 5, Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2) pp. 29–34.

logical and social-historical discourse, from which it is derived and delimited. This understanding is all the more important given the prospect of extending it into an enquiry about art.

1.1. Social synthesis in general

Sohn-Rethel defines social synthesis as “the network of relations by which society forms a coherent whole”. Adding: “It is around this notion that the major arguments of this book”, namely, *Intellectual and Manual Labour*, “will revolve”.⁷ Social synthesis is a trans-historical condition insofar as every society must combine a multitude of individuals and their activities in order to produce what it needs and so maintain or reproduce itself as a society.⁸

What is historical is the character or form that this synthesis takes. Sohn-Rethel identifies two fundamental forms of social synthesis: production and appropriation. A society of production

has the form of its synthesis determined by the labour relationship in the production process, thus deriving its fundamental order directly from the labour process of man's acting upon nature [...]. Labour is either done collectively by members of a tribe, or[,] if done individually or in groups[,] the workers still know what each one does, and work in agreement. People create their own society as producers.⁹

A society of appropriation, by contrast, has the form of its synthesis determined by the appropriation of the products of the production process and the labour of those engaged in it. It is a social relationship that separates the activity of appropriation from the activity of production, and that subordinates the latter to the former.¹⁰ It is for this reason that Sohn-Rethel treats societies of appropri-

⁷ Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 4.

⁸ “Every society made up of a plurality of individuals is a network coming into effect through their actions. How they act is of primary importance for the social network; what they think is of secondary importance. Their activities must interrelate in order to fit into a society, and must contain at least a minimum of uniformity if the society is to function as a whole. This coherence can be conscious or unconscious but exist it must – otherwise society would cease to be viable and the individuals would come to grief as a result of their multiple dependencies upon one another. Expressed in very general terms this is a precondition for the survival of every kind of society; it formulates what I term ‘social synthesis’. This notion is thus nothing other than a constituent part of the Marxian concept of ‘social formation’, a part which, in the course of my long preoccupation with historical forms of thinking, has become indispensable to my understanding of man's social condition.” Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 5.

⁹ Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 83.

¹⁰ “We understand appropriation as functioning between men within society, as the appropriation of products of labour by non-labourers; not, as sometimes described, as man appropriating his needs from nature.” Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 83. “The common feature of all societies of appropriation is a social synthesis effected by activities which are

ation as inherently divided into a ruling class of appropriation and a ruled class of labourers, whereas he treats societies of production as inherently classless.

Sohn-Rethel's principal examples of societies of production are "primitive communistic society", such as tribal communities that produce their needs in common, without relying on trade, which he does not examine in detail despite their significance, and "technologically advanced communism", which he discerns in certain tendencies within nominally communist societies, but by no means all.¹¹ His examples of societies of appropriation are discussed in far more detail, but the focus is on categorical differences in their form. He proposes essentially two forms: societies of appropriation as such, for example, the appropriation of the products of labour in ancient Egypt by a Pharaoh, administered by his priesthood and scribes; and societies of "reciprocal appropriation" or exchange, where, subsequent to the appropriation of products, a further relationship between appropriators emerges, in which they exchange their products, appropriating from each other, but to their mutual benefit and agreement. Sohn-Rethel's principal examples of such societies of reciprocal appropriation or exchange are ancient Greece, especially in its use of coined money, and modern bourgeois society, which he treats as the culmination of the determination of social synthesis through the form of monetary exchange. It is money that provides the, otherwise surprising and problematic, unity of an epoch stretching from ancient Greece to 19th century England and beyond. Sohn-Rethel also considers 'monopoly capitalism' as a fundamental shift in the production process, which demands a co-ordination of industrial production processes that exceed monetary exchange, inducing a new, non-monetary form of social synthesis, which a technologically advanced communism is tasked with realising.¹²

1.2. Social synthesis and its consciousness in general

Sohn-Rethel conceives of ideology according to the "general epistemological proposition that the socially necessary forms of thinking of an epoch are those in conformity with the socially synthetic functions of that epoch".¹³ This proposition encapsulates his principle that ideology is not derived simply from production or labour, but from the form of social synthesis that organises production. Social synthesis consists nonetheless of activities primarily, rather than ideology, even when these activities take place outside of production, such as the activity of exchange.

qualitatively different and separated in time from the labour which produces the objects of appropriation." *Ibid.*, p. 84.

11 See, for instance, his distinction between the Soviet Union and the People's Republic of China with regard to automation in chapter 34, "The Curse of Second Nature", Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), pp. 175–178.

12 See Part 3, "The Dual Economics of Advanced Capitalism", Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), pp. 139–188.

13 Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 5.

Ideology is secondary to these activities and hereby determined by them.¹⁴ The proposition emphasises that what is at stake is primarily the *form* of consciousness, rather than its contents, or how its contents are determined by its form. It is also important to note its emphasis on the *necessity* of the form of ideology. Sohn-Rethel's conception of social synthesis also concerns its necessity; the extent to which, for instance, exchange is necessary to the synthesis of a society of individual appropriators, given that other forms of synthesis are incidental or inadequate, such as familial relations. Ideology is therefore approached as the necessary form of consciousness that is determined by the necessary form of social synthesis.

In order to illuminate Sohn-Rethel's general conception of ideology, especially its approach to the relationship between ideology and labour, and how they are determined by the form of social synthesis, it is instructive to consider his account of 'human labour'. Following Marx, Sohn-Rethel defines human labour as consisting of a unity of ideology and labour, a "unity of head and hand", as opposed to 'animal labour':

First of all it must be stated that no human labour can take place without a degree of unity of head and hand. Labour is not animal-like and instinctive, but constitutes purposeful activity; the purpose must guide the physical endeavour, no matter what kind, in its intended goal as a consequential pursuit.¹⁵

Sohn-Rethel refers to two forms of human labour: personal and social. 'Personal labour' concerns a human individual who unifies head and hand, purpose and execution, independently of society. Since it exists outside of society, personal labour stands outside the account of social synthesis.¹⁶ 'Social labour' concerns a unity of head and hand, purpose and execution, amongst a multitude of humans, with different humans engaged in different activities, none of which are absolutely personal or independent, but rather dependent upon each other in order to produce all that these humans need or want. The unity needed to organise these humans and their activities constitutes social synthesis, which presupposes a social synthesis of head and hand, purpose and execution.

With societies whose form of synthesis takes place through the activities of production there is a social unity of head and hand, purpose and execution of purpose or labour. By contrast, in societies of appropriation, whether direct or

¹⁴ "Every society made up of a plurality of individuals is a network coming into effect through their actions. How they act is of primary importance for the social network; what they think is of secondary importance." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 5.

¹⁵ Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 84.

¹⁶ Personal labour might be regarded as an instructive, but mythological idea, insofar as humans have never existed outside of social relations, except for very brief periods. Sohn-Rethel seems to have these brief periods in mind. Insofar as the unity of human labour is grounded in a myth that is then projected into the future, Sohn-Rethel's whole project would appear mythically grounded. The unity of human labour within societies, by contrast, would be a non-mythological ground, and this is provided by the example of primitive communism. The vagueness of Sohn-Rethel's account is unfortunate to say the least.

reciprocal, the form of social synthesis takes place through the activities of appropriating the product of production, with the purpose or head of production ruled by a class of appropriators, and the hand or execution of production separated into a subordinate class of labourers.¹⁷

1.3. Social synthesis in the form of exchange

Sohn-Rethel's analysis of social synthesis in the form of reciprocal appropriation or exchange revolves around the peculiar form of money, insofar as this crystallises or brings into appearance the form of social synthesis through exchange. The peculiarity of money in this regard is the extent to which it is irreducible to the materiality of the stuff from which it is made, such as gold or paper, this being ultimately incidental to the essential capacity of money to represent the value of things besides itself and, thereby, to provide the means of equating these values in an act of exchange. The existence of money consists, therefore, essentially of the activity of exchange and the common value it posits between everything that is exchanged. Without this common value produced through the activity of exchange, money would cease to be money, and exist merely as the materiality from which it is made.

The common value posited by exchange is essentially abstracted from the materiality and usability of everything that is exchanged or represented by money. The act of exchange can involve two completely different things, exchanged by different individuals with different needs. Indeed, exchange tends to presuppose that it only exists in order to transfer different things to different people. However, Sohn-Rethel argues that exchange both presupposes and abstracts from this difference. The reason is that the act of exchange is nothing other than an equation of differences, an agreement that something is exchangeable with something else because they both consist of the same value. Even where the exchange appears unequal, where a drink of water is exchanged for all one's earthly goods, the act of exchange itself posits their value as being nonetheless equal. Sohn-Rethel insists on this radically abstracted equality produced by virtue of exchange itself, in opposition to other substantiations of value, including the amount of labour involved in the items.¹⁸ In other words, the act of exchange abstracts completely from the things it exchanges and posits

¹⁷ "Social unity of head and hand, however, characterises communist society[,] whether it be primitive or technologically highly developed. In contrast to this stands the social division between mental and manual labour – present throughout the whole history of exploitation and assuming the most varied forms." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 85.

¹⁸ This appears to contradict Marx's conception of value, however Sohn-Rethel argues that Marx recognises abstract equality and then analyses how this determines labour, rather than how labour determines value. This is the source of major controversies in the reception of Sohn-Rethel.

a value that is common to them, despite this commonality consisting of nothing that is in the things or how they are used or produced.

Money, according to Sohn-Rethel, is the appearance of this form of abstract common value produced by exchange. Insofar as exchange is the necessary form of synthesis in a society, money is a necessary form of its expression.¹⁹ Furthermore, Sohn-Rethel suggests that money is not only an expression of something underlying it, but a social institution, which substantiates the synthetic unity required for a society of exchange otherwise consisting of a multitude of independent property owners and their commodities. Sohn-Rethel even suggests that money can be a cause, advancing exchange.²⁰

1.4. Form of exchange and its form of consciousness

According to Sohn-Rethel's 'general epistemological proposition', the form of ideology necessitated by a society of exchange corresponds to the form of synthesis presented by exchange, particularly its expression in the form of money. Given that this synthesis does not take place in and through production, the form of its ideology does not either. Rather, it corresponds to the separation of products from the production process and its class of labourers, and the existence of these products as the property of a class of appropriators, who exchange them as items of exchange or commodities, that is, ultimately as objects of value in the form of money. The form of ideology corresponds, in other words, to this division of the social unity of human labour, in which its head or purpose is separated from its hand or execution, and located in the sphere of exchange. This independence of ideology from manual labour gives it the form of a purely intellectual labour, a pure knowledge, which reflects the synthesis of society through exchange or money.

19 "In societies based on commodity production the social synthesis is centred on the functions of money as 'the universal equivalent', to use Marx's expression. In this capacity money must be invested with an abstractness of the highest level to enable it to serve as the equivalent to every kind of commodity that may appear on the market." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 6.

20 "[...] that which constitutes the form of exchangeability of commodities is *the singleness of their existence*. The question remains: how does this form of exchangeability contribute in effecting the social synthesis through exchange? The answer is simply that it gives the social synthesis its unity. When trading in commodities has reached the stage where it constitutes the all-decisive *nexus rerum* then the 'duplication of the commodity into commodity and money' (Marx) must already have occurred. But the reverse is possible too – that this duplication very soon leads to commodity exchange becoming a decisive medium of social synthesis (a stage first reached in Ionia in the seventh century B.C.). Money, then, acts as the concrete, material bearer of the form of exchangeability of commodities. That this form can be expressed as the oneness of the commodities' existence explains why there attaches to money an essential, functional unity: there can at bottom, be only one money in the world." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), pp. 43–44.

Insofar as 'epistemology' is the scientific discourse of purely intellectual labour, Sohn-Rethel's critique of it is oriented to exposing its foundations in the abstraction produced by exchange and presented by money. This critique is partly directed at the traditional discourse of epistemology, culminating in Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason*, however, its fundamental objective is constituted independently of this discourse, and can be grasped and analysed independently from it. That is to say, its foundation is the form of social synthesis through exchange or money, and its elaboration can be derived exclusively from this. This results in a historical-materialist reconstruction of epistemology, not simply its destruction as an illusion. The independence of knowledge is true to its social and historical reality, and remains true so long as this reality remains. Exposing the fact that its independence derives from the division of head from hand through exchange does not destroy the reality of this division. Moreover, it does not destroy the truth of independent knowledge, which does in fact grasp the world, as it is determined within a society of exchange. Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology is therefore orientated to reconstructing the validity of knowledge's independence within the socio-historical limits proper to it.

The fundamental problem faced by Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology is the contradiction presented by its foundational claim that social synthesis through the form of exchange or money results in knowledge that appears independent of, not only manual labour, but also any social or historical basis, including any explicit consciousness of exchange. In short, the independence of knowledge contradicts its dependence on exchange. Sohn-Rethel's solution derives from Marx's observation that the act of exchange involves a relation that is not apparent to those engaged in it.²¹ Sohn-Rethel points out that the consciousness of those engaged in exchange is naturally absorbed in the potential use to which they will put the commodity that they are considering. As such, they are altogether distracted from the complete abstraction from this use that is posited in the act of exchange itself. Indeed, Sohn-Rethel claims that this distraction is necessary to exchange, insofar as, if they were to observe this abstraction itself, it would altogether distract them from their motivation to exchange in the first place. Moreover, insofar as the abstraction is only produced by and in exchange, without exchange there would be no abstraction to observe. It is for this reason that the form of social synthesis through exchange is hidden from consciousness, especially to the consciousness of the uses that are exchanged.

This indicates the significance of the money form, since, as Sohn-Rethel argues, it is in the confrontation with money – a thing whose only use is to abstract from all other uses in order to represent their common value – that consciousness encounters the abstractness of exchange. However, even this consciousness is hidden from itself insofar as it is distracted by the thinghood of money, unable to grasp it as the appearance of the abstract form of synthesis

21 See Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 20.

necessary to the unity of everything within a society. The consciousness of this synthetic unity is therefore articulated as pure or scientific knowledge, without recognising its origins in the money form. The identity of this abstract form of knowledge with the abstract form of money is the explanation and solution of their apparent contradiction.

Sohn-Rethel's demonstration of this identity revolves around the identity of their form of synthesis. In money this synthesis takes the form of a commensurability that is presupposed by the measure or valuation of all the commodities with which it can be exchanged, despite being abstracted from the uses of these commodities. Sohn-Rethel argues that this is precisely the same form of synthesis as that presented by the mathematical form of knowledge – inaugurated contemporaneously with coined money in ancient Greece – which posits a form of commensurability that is presupposed by the measure of everything, enabling a knowledge of everything through the purely intellectual labour of contemplation, in abstraction from manual labour. The subject or subjectivity of this synthetic unity constituted by mathematical knowledge is identified with the subjectivity constituted by money. Consequently, the determination of objects by mathematical knowledge is identified with the determination of objects by money. These basic principles underpin Sohn-Rethel's analysis of the 'categories' or constitutive elements of this form of synthesis, in which he attempts to demonstrate how the categories of the form of exchange or money results in corresponding categories of the form of knowledge.

2. Critique of Kant

Having expounded the general framework of Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology, we are now in a position to approach his critique of Kant in its specificity and limits. This is particularly instructive, since, while Sohn-Rethel identifies Kant as the principal target of his critique of epistemology, his discussion of his writings is not as extensive as this would suggest.²² Kant is targeted as a representative of idealist epistemology, but his significance is symbolic to the extent that Sohn-Rethel's historical-materialist reconstruction of epistemology and its foundations is independent of a detailed reconstruction of Kant's epistemology. However, Kant's significance for this reconstruction should not be underestimated. Its correct estimation requires understanding its relation to Sohn-

²² "A critique needs a well-defined object at which it is directed; we choose philosophical epistemology. What is the salient feature which marks it as our particular object? Which philosophy most significantly represents it and is most rewarding to criticise? From the Introduction [i.e., p. 7] it is clear that our choice has fallen upon the Kantian theory of cognition. This does not, however, mean that the reader must be a specialist in this particularly daunting philosophy – far from it." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 13.

Rethel's general framework, which is all the more important if we are to rigorously extend his critique of Kant into a consideration of art.

The symbolic significance of Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* resides, for Sohn-Rethel, in its culminating expression of a bourgeois ideology of pure intellectual labour or scientific knowledge.²³ As such, it is the classical or epochal expression of a form of social synthesis through exchange that stretches from the emergence of coined money in ancient Greece to its fulfilment in modern bourgeois capitalism, and at least up to its crisis in the industrial determination of exchange emerging with monopoly capitalism, despite the social and ideological transformations within this epoch.²⁴ This underpins the apparently disproportionate and anachronistic status Sohn-Rethel accords to Kant. The targeting of Kant is also intended to reflect the relation of Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology to Marx's critique of political economy. Just as Marx's critique focussed on the classical representatives of political economy, culminating in Adam Smith, Sohn-Rethel's critique is directed at the corresponding representatives of epistemology, culminating in Kant.²⁵ However, just as Marx is not preoccupied with a comprehensive critical commentary on Smith's writings, but a reconstruction of political economy on historical-materialist foundations, exposing its historical limitation as a science valid for capitalist societies, but not all societies, so too is Sohn-Rethel's critical commentary on Kant subordinate to his reconstruction of epistemology on historical-materialist foundations. But this does not result in simply discarding the foundations of Kant's epistemology. These foundations are rather critically reconstructed, exposing both their historical validity and their trans-historical invalidity.

This issue is evident from Sohn-Rethel's critical commentary on the question that Kant proposes in order to focus on the foundations of his epistemology, namely, "How are *a priori* synthetic judgements possible?"²⁶ In other words, how

23 "[...] we describe philosophical epistemology as the theory of scientific knowledge undertaken with the aim of elaborating a coherent, all-embracing ideology to suit the production relations of bourgeois society. This endeavour culminated in the main works of Kant (1724–1804), especially his *Critique of Pure Reason*. I therefore confine my main attention to Kant's philosophy of science which I consider to be the classical manifestation of the bourgeois fetishism of intellectual labour." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 14.

24 One such transformation is the Galilean and Newtonian transformation of the ancient Greek notion of science, which occasions the response of Kant's epistemology, following Descartes. Clearly, Sohn-Rethel regards this transformation as realising, rather than departing from, the consequences of social synthesis through exchange. See Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), pp. 13–14.

25 "Adam Smith's *Wealth of Nations* of 1776 and Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* of 1781 are, above all others, the two works which, in completely unconnected fields and in total systematic independence from each other, strive towards the same goal: to prove the perfect normalcy of bourgeois society." Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 35. See also *ibid.*, pp. 13–17.

26 From "Introduction, [section] VI. The General Problem of Pure Reason", in: Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Pure Reason*, Basingstoke 1993 [1929], p. 55 [Ak. B 19]. Preceding clause: "Now the proper problem of pure reason is contained in the question: ..."

is it possible for judgements to constitute knowledge of objects independently of the experience of these objects? This question is evidently a point of contact and a point of departure between Kant's and Sohn-Rethel's enterprises. As an attempt to expose the foundations that make knowledge possible from purely intellectual activities, it is a question that they both seek to pose and answer. Sohn-Rethel clearly regards this question as a decisive moment of self-reflection in Kant, and in bourgeois thought more generally. Sohn-Rethel seeks to deepen and transform its scope, but he nonetheless intends to retain or repose it within that scope, not discard it. It is also clear that Sohn-Rethel does not discard what the question presupposes, namely, that synthetic *a priori* judgements are indeed possible. What he disputes is the source and constitution of their possibility.

Sohn-Rethel's departure from Kant concerns then, in the first instance, a deepening of Kant's enquiry into the origin of knowledge, extending its scope from a purely epistemological enquiry into a historical and social enquiry into the form of social synthesis from which knowledge originates. In other words, he exposes that the question into the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements presupposes a more original question into the possibility of social synthesis, and proposes that the answer to this question is the basis for reconstructing Kant's question. If one recalls that mathematics is the principal example of the actuality of synthetic *a priori* judgements for Kant, we can discern the reformulation of his question in Sohn-Rethel's proposition that: "The question we ask is, what is the historical origin of our logical ability to construct mathematical hypotheses and the elements contributing to them?"²⁷

Sohn-Rethel's answer to the question of the possibility of social synthesis is, as we have already seen, that it consists of exchange in the form of money. In societies of independent property owners, their dependence on one another and the coherence of society as a whole is provided by exchange and the synthetic unity brought to social recognition by the form of money. This then provides the basis for answering the question of the possibility of knowledge, since it exposes the form of social synthesis that makes possible cognitive synthesis.

This social and historical grounding of knowledge appears illegitimate in Kant's terms, since his own answer to the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements is that they derive from spontaneous intellectual capacities of subjectivity revolving around the notion of 'transcendental apperception', according to which the multiplicity of experience appearing to a subject is subjected to its capacity to see them all as appearances to itself, thereby synthesising their multiplicity in the unity of this subjectivity as a necessary condition of their very appearance.²⁸ Insofar as these intellectual capacities are spontaneous, that is, deriving from no other origin than their own functioning, it is erroneous to at-

²⁷ Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 38.

²⁸ See, for instance, "§ 16. The Original Unity of Apperception", in the second edition of the "Transcendental Deduction of the Pure Concepts of Reason", in: Kant 1993 (as fn. 26), pp. 152–155 [Ak. B131–5].

tribute them to a social or historical origin, as Sohn-Rethel proposes. This independence of intellectual activity underlies his conception of transcendental subjectivity and his characterisation of his philosophy as ‘transcendental idealism’.

Sohn-Rethel describes Kant’s answer as a fetishism of intellectual labour, insofar as it obscures the real origin of intellectual labour, treating it as a cause of itself rather than an effect.²⁹ It is, in short, an idealist answer, which blocks the possibility of a social or historical-materialist answer. Sohn-Rethel obviously rejects this idealism, however he does not altogether reject the answer. Rather, he seeks to reconstruct its validity within its proper social and historical limits. This revolves around his diagnosis of the identity of transcendental subjectivity and money. The validity of Kant’s answer is that transcendental subjectivity describes a form of consciousness that is necessitated by the form of social synthesis presented by money. The original synthetic unity of transcendental subjectivity, abstracted from the multiplicity of experience, is a form of consciousness that reproduces the original synthetic unity of money, which abstracts from the multiplicity of use.³⁰ Transcendental subjectivity is therefore not invalid and neither is the form of scientific knowledge that it underpins, according to Sohn-Rethel. What is invalid is rather the transgression of the socio-historical limits of their validity.

On the basis of this critical reconstruction of Kant’s epistemology, Sohn-Rethel proceeds to a deduction of the categories of social synthesis and their foundation for categories of cognitive synthesis. However, it is evident that Sohn-Rethel’s categories do not respond to Kant’s.³¹ Indeed, Sohn-Rethel does not examine the various capacities of transcendental subjectivity and how they

29 “Kant gathers the contributory factors [to ‘our logical ability to construct mathematical hypotheses and the elements contributing to them’ – previous sentence –] into one fundamental principle: the ‘original synthetic unity of the apperception’, but for this principle itself he knows no better explanation than to attribute it to a ‘transcendental spontaneity’ of its own. The explanation turns into the fetishism of what was to [39] be explained. From then on, in the idealist’s mind, a time- and space-bound account of the ‘capacity of pure understanding’ simply cannot exist. The mere suggestion of one becomes one of the holiest taboos in the tradition of philosophical thought.” Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), pp. 38–39.

30 “Kant was right in his belief that the basic constituents of our form of cognition are preformed and issue from a prior origin, but he was wrong in attributing this preformation to the mind itself engaged in the phantasmagorical performance of ‘transcendental synthesis *a priori*’, locatable neither in time nor in place. In a purely formal way Kant’s transcendental subject shows features of striking likeness to the exchange abstraction in its distillation as money: first of all in its ‘originally synthetic’ character but also in its unique oneness, for the multiplicity of existing currencies cannot undo the essential oneness of their monetary function.” Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2), p. 7.

31 Compare Kant’s deduction of categories in his first book of the “Transcendental Analytic” of *Critique of Pure Reason* with Sohn-Rethel’s in his “Analysis of the Exchange Abstraction”, chapter 6 in Sohn-Rethel 1978 (as fn. 2).

interact with one another. For instance, he does not deal with Kant's crucial distinction between the transcendental deployment of the capacities for understanding, imagination and sensibility. This leaves crucial issues unresolved for a comprehensive critical commentary on Kant's *Critique of Pure Reason* from the perspective opened by Sohn-Rethel. Opening a critical commentary on Kant's *Critique of Judgement* from this perspective compounds these issues.

3. Critique of art

The aim of this section is to consider an extension of Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology into an account of art, despite the fact that such an extension appears to transgress the limits of his critique. The contention that an account of art can be derived without transgressing these limits takes its clues from, on the one hand, the inclusion of art in the sphere of ideology encompassing Sohn-Rethel's critique of epistemology, and, on the other hand, his critique of Kant and the inclusion of art in Kant's elaboration of the epistemology laid out in his *Critique of Pure Reason*, namely, in his *Critique of Judgement*. The rigorous investigation of these clues requires a precise understanding of how Sohn-Rethel's theory of ideology informs his critique of Kant, which the preceding exposition has attempted to offer, before extending this into a consideration of Kant's account of art, to which we will now proceed.

The basis of Kant's extension of his account of knowledge into an account of art is their common origin in his conception of transcendental subjectivity. Given that this is decisive for Sohn-Rethel's account of the form of ideology corresponding to social synthesis through exchange or the form of money, this emerges as a decisive further clue to extending Sohn-Rethel's account of knowledge into an account of art. That is to say, if transcendental subjectivity is common to knowledge and art, then their difference need not exclude art from an account of the ideology of exchange or the money form. However, this unity may be insufficient to demonstrate that art corresponds to the form of exchange or money. Indeed, Sohn-Rethel's focus on the mathematical form of knowledge clearly suggests it is not. In any case, understanding the difference between art and knowledge, despite their common derivation from transcendental subjectivity, is crucial to understanding art's ideological form. This requires a deepening of the exposition of Kant's epistemology offered by Sohn-Rethel.

The difference between knowledge and art for Kant concerns the difference between two employments of the capacities of transcendental subjectivity. His account of knowledge derives from the possibility of synthetic *a priori* judgements that posit a concept or rule, which determines the intellectual capacities that are presupposed and necessary for the cognition of an object. For example, the judgement 'there are five' posits the concept 'five' as a rule determining the synthetic capacities of sensation and understanding involved in grasping what is 'there' as 'five'. The judgement ' $5+7=12$ ' posits the concept '12' as a rule deter-

mining the synthetic capacities involved in grasping what is in the concepts '5' and '7' and their addition. The necessity of this judgement, for Kant, derives from the necessary form of experience, independently from the unnecessary contents of experience.

Kant's account of this necessary or *a priori* form of experience is given in the "Transcendental Aesthetic" that forms part of his *Critique of Pure Reason*, which, despite its decisive significance there, is not acknowledged or examined as such by Sohn-Rethel. However, transcendental aesthetic concerns sensibility as such and is certainly not intended by Kant as an account of art, which he locates in the distinct theoretical discipline of the "Critique of Taste", and which he examines in his *Critique of Judgement*. This already indicates something significant in Kant's determination of art. His principal concern is the capacity of judgement. This involves a treatment of judgements of taste, that is to say, judgements concerning the beautiful. But this concerns beauty in general, including natural beauty, and art appears here as another kind of beauty, namely, as 'beautiful art'. He does offer an account of the production of beautiful art, which he explains in terms of the inspired production of a genius, who produces without a concept or rule determining their activity. But Kant maintains that this does not necessarily result in beauty; that it can result in ugliness. Art's beauty remains therefore the result of the activity involved in making a judgement of taste, which the activity of a genius only enables and does not fulfil. Thus, Kant approaches art essentially as an occasion for judgements of taste and it is misleading to attribute to him 'an account of art' as such, unless this framing is understood.

The difference between judgements of knowledge and judgements of taste, for Kant, is that, while the latter also concern synthetic *a priori* judgements, they do not posit a concept determining the intellectual capacities. Kant argues that the judgement that an artwork is beautiful does not posit the concept of an object, as would be required for knowledge, because 'beautiful' is not a concept or rule like 'five' or '12'. Rather, Kant describes beauty as the response to a "purposiveness without a purpose".³² The beautiful artwork displays a purposiveness without this resulting in a purpose or rule by which it can be known. Its purposiveness displays a form of unity that is sufficient for judging it, but no purpose determining this unity that would enable the formation of a concept in judging it. It gives the impression that it can be known, and yet it cannot. 'This is beautiful' testifies to this unity without a rule. A judgement of taste is, as a result of this purposiveness, far from arbitrary. And insofar as this purposiveness without a purpose is observed strictly in making judgements of taste, these judgements are necessary to those who make them, even though this necessity cannot be

³² Kant also uses this phrase synonymously with the idea of 'formal purposiveness', for instance, "the beautiful, which we judge on the basis of a merely formal purposiveness, i.e., a purposiveness without a purpose....", Kant, Immanuel: *Critique of Judgment*, Indianapolis, Cambridge 1987, p. 73 [Ak. 226]. "Beauty is an object's form of purposiveness insofar as it is perceived in the object *without the presentation of a purpose*." Ibid., p. 84 [Ak. 236].

proved or demanded of others by recourse to a purpose or rule.³³ They are subjectively necessary without being objectively necessary.

This understanding of judgements of taste then informs Kant's understanding of the production of beautiful art. Because judgements of taste concern purposiveness without purpose, they are not occasioned by objects insofar as they are determined by a purpose. Products are precisely objects produced according to a purpose and do not therefore occasion judgements of taste, but rather judgements of knowledge that grasp the purpose of the product in a concept, such as 'this is a hammer', where 'hammer' is the concept of the purpose determining its production. This indicates why Kant does not conceive of beauty as a quality of perfection, where perfection is precisely the ultimate realisation of a purpose or concept.³⁴ But Kant's conception of beauty creates a contradiction in the idea of producing beautiful art, since beauty is not available to it as a purpose of production. Kant's appeal to the genius dissolves this problem insofar as a genius produces without a purpose or concept regulating their production, but, instead, with an inspiration that is unregulated and unknowable.³⁵ However, since unregulated production can result in an absence of purposiveness as well as purpose – that is, the *purposelessness* that Kant attributes to the ugly – the inspired production of a genius does not necessarily result in beauty. This verdict remains the preserve of judgements of taste and the subjective activities constituting them, to which the products and activities of genius are ultimately subjugated.³⁶

It is evident that Kant's account of judgements of taste corresponds broadly to Sohn-Rethel's stipulations for the form of ideology corresponding to societies of exchange. Judgements of taste are clearly the result of intellectual labour that is divided from, and governing over, manual labour. However, the form of this division of labour has a peculiar inflection with the figure of the genius. Kant's account of the genius offers an indirect confirmation of Sohn-Rethel's approach to the division of labour, especially in his distinction of the genius's inspired production to purposeful production. Kant's conception of purposeful production corresponds broadly to Sohn-Rethel's conception of human labour as a unity of purposes and their execution. But Kant does not acknowledge a social separation between these parts or the constitution of a class of labourers. Rather, the labour of execution is presupposed and obscured by the notion of purposeful production, which is presented as grasped by the concepts given to it by in-

33 "Beautiful is what without a concept is cognized as the object of a necessary liking." Kant 1987 (as fn. 32), p. 90 [Ak. 240].

34 See "§ 15. A Judgment of Taste is Wholly Independent of the Concept of Perfection", Kant 1987 (as fn. 32), pp. 73–75 [Ak. 227–229].

35 See "§ 46. Fine Art is the Art of Genius", Kant 1987 (as fn. 32), pp. 174–176 [Ak. 307–308].

36 See "§ 48. On the Relation of Genius to Taste", Kant 1987 (as fn. 32), pp. 179–181 [Ak. 311–313]; and "§ 50. On the Combination of Taste with Genius in Products of Fine Art", *ibid.*, pp. 188–189 [Ak. 319–320].

tellectual activity. In other words, the government of production by intellectual labour is presented as involving no social division of labour. It is then a matter of some significance that Kant's account of genius does present a certain tension in the division of intellectual and manual labour. This tension is ostensibly due to the fact that, on the one hand, the genius's activity knows no purpose and is therefore not governed by the purposes given to it by judgements of taste, which, in any case, knows no purposes; while, on the other hand, the judgement of taste and its practitioner remains the final arbiter of the worth of the genius's activity. The genius is not a manual labourer precisely insofar as he does not labour under the rules given by intellectual labour. Furthermore, the genius acts as an individual, rather than a class, whose inspiration comes from a natural drive rather than social needs. Nonetheless, we might say that the genius presents a curious correspondence to manual labour in its radical separation from intellectual labour, as a purposeful activity without purposes, or perhaps even as a purposeless activity. However, judgements of taste remain the arbiters of the beauty or worth of this production. The freedom of the genius ironically means that the government or judgement of his product is all the more external or violent.

If this demonstrates that judgements of taste conform to Sohn-Rethel's characterisation of the consciousness demanded by a form of social synthesis that does not take place through production, but rather through an appropriation of production by a social class of appropriators, there remain residual issues about the nature of this appropriation and whether it corresponds to reciprocal appropriation or exchange. Kant's account of judgements of taste is clearly not intended to account for property in exchange. Indeed, in some respects, it is explicitly intended to account for non-commercial relations to nature and human productions. Nonetheless, there is no doubt that Kant contributes to a general discourse on taste that emerges with modern bourgeois society and its forms of free association between individual property owners. And he explicitly conceives of judgements of taste as socially valid for free and equal individuals, even if this validity cannot be proved or demanded according to a rule. Certainly, they are not arbitrarily sovereign, as one might expect of appropriation as such. However, from the perspective of Sohn-Rethel's account, the decisive issue raised is the correspondence of judgements of taste to the form of money. This may be implicit or unconscious, but it must nonetheless be demonstrable if we are to identify judgements of taste with the consciousness of money.

This issue requires a reconsideration of the obvious objection in extending Sohn-Rethel's identification of the form of knowledge and money to the form of taste, namely, the significance of his focus on the scientific form of knowledge presented by mathematics and its ostensive evidence in the identity of numbers and prices. As concepts, these cannot be grasped by judgements of taste, suggesting that the latter do not constitute a consciousness of money. However, numbers and prices are only the effect of a more profound identity in their condition of possibility, namely, an abstracted form of commensurability that is

presupposed in measurements by numbers or prices. It is this synthetic unity of commensurability that Kant traces from mathematics back to its origins in transcendental subjectivity, and which Sohn-Rethel then traces back further to money, not in its expression as prices, but in its expression of social synthesis through exchange. Judgements of taste present this synthetic unity of commensurability in its purely subjective form, without resulting in rules for determining objects. In comparison to money, it is as if judgements of taste presented the synthetic unity of commensurability expressed in money, but without its determination of objects in terms of prices. Alternatively, one might say that judgements of taste correspond to the consciousness of commensurability in the act of exchange, prior to it being measured or its measure being objectified in money. This would be confirmed by the extent to which judgements of taste do not explicitly concern commercial transactions, or measurements, or knowledge, or production, but that they do concern nonetheless what is common to things despite their diversity, and finds commonness in a subjectivity that abstracts from their diversity. Given that this transcendental subjectivity underlies its objective expression in measurements and so on, one could say that judgements of taste expose the form of consciousness of money in its non-objective or purely subjective existence. The fact that this does not amount to its expression in numbers would therefore demonstrate no more than the fact that the synthetic unity of money itself is not grasped in numbers, but in what numbers presuppose.

In this extraordinary conclusion we encounter a powerful abstraction in thinking and reality: that the beautiful is how things appear to the consciousness of money without it determining them according to their price; that the beautiful is the self-consciousness of the subjectivity of money as such.