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The Authentic Artwork? *The Paris Review* Author Interview

By Becky Roach, University of Oxford

The interview is a peculiar form. Ranging from good cop bad cop interrogations to Prime Minister's Question Time to Plato's dialogues to the chat show, the interview is multipurpose and pervades modern culture. The literary interview (a term which is used variously to refer to the interviewee, the content or the style of presentation) is so popular that one critic has complained that poets don't write essays anymore, they give interviews (Bawer 424). Search "interview" in Project Muse or JSTOR and the hits number in the hundreds of thousands. Yet critical analysis of the use of the interview for literary (as distinct from more scientific) purposes is limited to a handful of articles. We must ask why this is.

One of the most beneficial articles on the interview from this perspective is by academic and professional interviewer Ronald Christ. In an insightful article written in the form of an interview and published back in 1977, Christ points out that though the interview is often considered to be a source of information, in fact its purpose "is to allude to data while being about the real business of creating character" (114). He further comments that interviews are "virtually useless scholarship and potentially wonderful criticism, if you'll allow me that distinction", and I think we will (114). If we consider the interview as a "portrait" (a more useful term than "literary"), rather than as a source of data, we might more easily address and explain the interview's enduring popularity and its critical neglect.

In order to focus the discussion, I want to look at one particular interview series in *The Paris Review*, which since 1953 has almost single-handedly popularised the author interview. Similarly, though the interview portrait benefits from being read in tandem with numerous critical perspectives (I think particularly of Barthes' "Death of the Author", Foucault's "What is an Author?" or Derridean deconstruction), I want to focus on one particular framework: that of the Frankfurt School. Not only do their theories around the work of art and the "culture industry" proffer explanations for the critical neglect of the interview portrait, but their theories are repeatedly cited in discussions of the *Review* interview portrait..

This essay begins with a brief introduction to *The Paris Review* and the Frankfurt School before focusing on the pairing of an essay by Walter Benjamin, a critic associated with the Frankfurt School, and a *Review* interview with Graham Greene. This essay intends to show how many of the anxieties demonstrated by writers and critics in response to the interview form can be usefully

explored through this theoretical framework.

The Magazine

In 1953 a group of young American ex-pats established *The Paris Review* whilst living in the French capital. From its inception, the *Review* proclaimed that it would “emphasize creative work” (Issue 1 11) over “learned chatter” (10). The journal has been successful in its mission to promote little known writers: Jack Kerouac, Samuel Beckett and Richard Yates were all published in early editions.

The Paris Review (PR) is most renowned for its interview series. E. M. Forster was interviewed for the first issue, T. S. Eliot, Marianne Moore and many illustrious names followed suit. The interview has proven immensely popular, with twenty anthologies and numerous copy-cat series.¹

The interviews have also been exploited by intellectuals keen to examine the author’s view of his own work. The critic Usha Wilbers points out that William Faulkner’s interview was considered “vital” in analysing his “intentions towards his works” (208). The methodology used also increased the interviews’ significance for critics. Rather than a straightforward question and answer exchange, the interviews developed over a series of face to face meetings, followed by written communication whereby the author was given the opportunity to revise and substantially alter answers, and often reshape the interview completely (e.g. Vladimir Nabokov).

The academic Christopher Bains demonstrates the critical significance of this methodology in a forthcoming article when he states: “Looking back upon the principal actors of the period, the *Review* shaped and re-enunciated not only a genealogy of modernism but also its mythology... *The Paris Review* took modernism back from the critics and universities, rendering it to the writers, giving them a central role in shaping the reception of their work” (Bains no pag.). These interviews are a tool by which artists can be portrayed within literary culture and for that reason are a significant resource for scholarship and significant artworks.

The Frankfurt School Theories as Critical Framework

The Frankfurt School refers to the work produced by a group of intellectuals including Theodor W. Adorno, Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and others who were associated with the Institute for Social Research in Frankfurt, begun in 1923. It is the Frankfurt School’s overwhelming interest in a Marxist interpretation of the function of the aesthetic object in the modern age and the concurrent analysis of culture that is of particular relevance to our discussion here.

In their seminal work *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (1972) Adorno and Horkheimer coin the

term “culture industry” to refer to both the industry that has sprung up around culture in the twentieth century, and the industrialisation of the cultural sphere. More particularly it posits a fundamental change in this sphere as a result of technological advances and the widening mass market for culture: the drive towards equivalence (Adorno and Horkheimer 12). This concept is crucial as it underpins much of the response to the *Review* interview, including the response of the magazine itself.

Take for example the introduction to the fifth anthology of *Review* interviews, written by writer Francine du Plessix Gray. Prefacing a volume which includes Henry Green, Joan Didion and Pablo Neruda, the most notable feature of the introduction (like the majority in the series) is its ambivalence about the position and authority of the interview within the wider critical community.

Gray is extremely concerned by the sway of the culture industry in her introduction. She opens with the reflection that “Of the many changes that have occurred in the United States since World War II, few strike me as being more alarming than our ravenous appetite for the Artist’s Personality” (ix). Then follows a tirade against the glamorisation and public consumption of the artist in the modern era, with the interview used as prime example.

Clearly a graduate of the Marxist school, Gray would seem to whole-heartedly agree with the suggestion that culture and entertainment have been nefariously fused. She comments: “under grilling from talk-show hosts who barely know the difference between Bacon and Bakunin, they [artists] are frequently invited to reveal to national audiences many secrets of their craft” (ix). What could easily be read as elitism is also a plea for distinction within culture and a rejection of the levelling drive of the culture industry.

Gray admits as much herself. She is “ambivalent, in this series, toward the more ephemeral personal gossip that these interviews share with TV talk shows ... Alas ... there is no absolutely clear line to be drawn between the gossip and the meat of the artist’s craft” (xiv-xv). So far we have a rather lacklustre champion in our introducer.

The introduction makes explicit reference to an essay by a colleague of Adorno and Horkheimer. Walter Benjamin’s “Das Kunstwerk im Zeitalter seiner technischen Reproduzierbarkeit” (1936), which translates as “The Work of Art in the Age of Mechanical Reproduction” or “its Technological Reproducibility”, is one of the most fully expressed analyses of the effect of modern technology on the experience of the aesthetic.² Citing the essay, Gray comments that Benjamin’s essay offers “splendid metaphors ... true art *absorbs* the viewer ... whereas in the contemporary media (TV, glossies) it is the viewer who *absorbs*, blotterlike, the artist’s personality” (xi).

Whilst this essay utilises Frankfurt School theories directly, I want to examine the pairing of

Benjamin's essay and an example *Review* interview to demonstrate not only that Gray's "splendid metaphors" are a legitimate continuation of an anxiety that exists somewhat buried Frankfurt School criticism, but also that such anxiety has a profound impact on the way we read the interview.

Benjamin and Greene: Framework and Interview

One of the earliest *Review* interviews was with Graham Greene. Whilst Greene never refers to Frankfurt School theory, unlike interviewees such as Carlos Fuentes, his interview has been chosen as a test-case. This is to demonstrate that even with those interviews silent on the subject of the culture industry or the work of art in the modern era, Benjamin's essay provides a useful counter-text to clarify some of the concerns the *Review* interview evinces over its form in wider literary culture. Greene's interview proves an illuminating introduction to both the form and the issues at stake.

Benjamin's essay explores the impact of modern technology upon art, concluding that the new ease of reproduction and mass apperception has led to a fundamental change in the way art is perceived. The traditional artwork's "authenticity" is based upon "all that is transmissible from its beginning, ranging from its substantive duration to its testimony to the history which it has experienced" (1097). In the modern work of art this authenticity is "jeopardized by reproduction when substantive duration ceases to matter" (1097), with a resulting loss of its "authority". Benjamin renames this threatened "authority" the artwork's *aura*.

This theory of the transformation of the aesthetic object becomes significant when examining the *Review* interview as the writers and interviewers themselves often express anxiety about the authority of the interview utterance within a culture of mass media, as Gray indicates. The technological innovations of the twentieth century have created a world saturated by "idle chatter" (Adorno 162). In such an environment can the words of the interview be conceived of as art, as an extension of the writer's recognisably artistic works, or are they merely the chat of the culture industry? The interviews enact a worry over the definition of the work of art in the ambivalent critical response to their status or claim to authenticity. It is this anxiety that shall now be our focus.

The Essay

In "The Work of Art" Benjamin comments that the "the cult of the movie star ... preserves not the unique aura of the person but the 'spell of the personality,' the phony spell of the commodity" (1103, cf. *Schriften* 492). As we have seen, his colleagues Adorno and Horkheimer go much further in analysing the repercussions of the technological reproducibility of the age, indicting the culture industry for its commodification of art, but Benjamin's main thesis holds firm. Without its auratic

basis, its “authenticity”, which constitutes the “traditional” artwork, art is particularly vulnerable to modern forces of commodification (1097). The cult of the movie star or artist is indicative of precisely this transition.

Benjamin differentiates between the film and stage actor in his essay. The latter presents his performance to the public, the former’s “is presented by a camera” (1101). As a consequence, the film actor “has to operate with his whole living person, yet forgoing its aura. For aura is tied to his presence” (1102). Benjamin’s correlation between artist, artwork and aura is problematic. The neutral pronoun in the quotation, sandwiched between two masculine versions, demonstrates Benjamin’s difficulty in attaching the aura to artwork or man. In the age of mechanical reproduction, the aura has been wrested from the traditional work of art, yet Benjamin seems to have difficulty in deciding whether it “withers” or floats elsewhere. The film actor is auraless, invested instead with the spell of personality by the culture industry, yet a distinction is made here between the aura surrounding the film actor and that surrounding the performed role, a decidedly odd division to insist upon if both are auraless in the modern age (1102). Elsewhere in the essay, the film actor is repeatedly conflated with his performance, he is both artist and artwork. The point of this critique is not to highlight Benjamin’s theoretical uncertainties, but rather to demonstrate that Gray’s substitution of artist for artwork is in fact a legitimate continuation of a trend in Benjamin’s essay.

Why is this of such importance for my reading of *The Paris Review*? If the artist is placed at the centre of critical focus, then the interview gains a higher status in literary culture. Intriguingly too, the conflation of artist and artwork, or at least the ambivalence surrounding their separation, has suggestive implications when looking at the interview as a work of art. Most telling in the Greene interview are the repeated and problematic attempts to perform what Benjamin’s contemporary Bertolt Brecht usefully refers to as the “literarization” of the text (43). By this I mean the attempt to turn Greene into a fictional character within the interview by framing him with devices normally employed in novels and plays. Let us analyse this process in light of Gray’s interest in the cult of the artist. First, though, we must examine the aura (and the spell) within the Greene interview.

The Interview

Benjamin is troubled when conceiving of the aura’s relation to the work of art, it is at once the “object’s shell” and the “core”, at once internal and external (*on Media* 286, 22).³ The same anxiety is evident in the Greene interview. Before the formal interview commences, the interviewers comment that “In the retreat of the man within the novelist, the man whom we had come to besiege,

[a collection of bottles] were a welcome discovery” (Gourevitch *vol 2 2*). The “man within the novelist” is a surprising formulation. The distinction suggests an ability to differentiate between artistic creator and individual. Yet the man is positioned inside the novelist, as a kind of castle keep to be “besieged”, the core to be mined. This reverses the expected formulation of artist within man: what then is man if he is encompassed by the artist? The phrasing suggests the man is the more significant figure, yet whether this is based on the logic of the aura or the spell is not clear. All that is apparent is that the eccentricity of the bottle collection is somehow reassuring for the interviewers.

This physical detail is part of a repeated concern of the interviewers. They admit:

What worries us is that you yourself seem to be so much happier than we had expected ... the expression on your face, so different from the fixed, set look of your photograph, the whole atmosphere, seem to be the products of something much more positive than the very limited optimum of happiness that you described in *The Power and the Glory*. (10-11)

Greene responds, “I think that you have misjudged me and my consistency” (11). The disjunction between art and life “worries” the interviewers, yet Greene’s one word “consistency” relegates the entire subject to inconsequence.. If the man is located within the novelist, Greene troubles any simplistic conception of the relation between them.

The passage also makes reference to Greene’s photograph and physiognomy. Given that Benjamin describes the photography portrait as the last resting place of the aura in the era of mechanical reproducibility, it is significant that the interviewers discuss the variation between the technical representation of the face and the expression in life (1100). If the aura resides in the photograph and not the face, then the artist conceived of as a work of art is either a Benjaminian modern artwork without an aura, or Gray’s conception is inapplicable. Or a third alternative exists, one which denies the simplistic relationship ascribed by the interviewers: the aura is not reliant upon any notion of “consistency” between art and artist; perhaps the aura is not determined by an unhappy visage. The assumption behind the interviewers’ point relies upon the Romantic myth of the suffering artist wherein pain feeds creativity and the ability of the artist to create meaningful art is predicated on their suffering. Here Greene denies the valence of the myth for himself by being happy and an artist.

Moreover, the interviewers themselves invoke an alternative conception of artistic creation in the same passage, suggestive of a rather different framework from which to evaluate “consistency”. They refer to “products”, a term which appeals to a Marxist critic: artist and artwork become producer and commodity. If consistency is not based upon emotion but economics, then the interviewers are still puzzled: Greene lives in a “moderately comfortable hole”, despite writing

about those with little money (11). Note that the “products” here are not artworks, but the features of the man’s (not novelist’s) life, his facial expressions and household comforts. If we apply the Marxist framework to which the passage alludes, we are still no closer to resolving the interviewers’ own quandary. The nature of the Benjaminian aura is still ambiguous.

Let us pause and consider the manuscript page and the portrait sketch that prefaced the original version of the interview. The reproduction of the manuscript page is a type of fetishisation: the authorial artefact. A suggestion of handwriting analysis hints that the piece conveys a meaning outside of itself. In this, the suggested meaning becomes almost the Benjaminian aura: the central essence which is yet external to the artefact. However, the manuscript page also speaks of revisions and process; the annotations testify to the sum of creative labour and undermine the phantasmagoria which both creates and sustains reification. By shattering such phantasmagoria, this is also undermined. The page is annotated with the note that “*It appears on pages 121-123 of the Uniform Edition*” (24). The document has not yet attained the cultural *éclat* of publication and with it the possibility of straightforward reification. Such a document only has a claim to cultural prestige through reference to the mechanical printed version.

Meanwhile the profile sketch is at once a work of art, a reification of the artist’s image, and a supplement to the absent photo and absent author.⁴ The sketch encourages reification – or the spell of the cult of personality – but also indicates the existence of an essence that the sketch is trying to reproduce. It is interesting that neither the sketch, nor the manuscript page have been reproduced for the 2007 volume. Copyright restraints seem to play a part; the legal concept of reproducibility is worth considering. The reproducibility of the artwork is protected by the law; in the 2007 version, the aura of the artist, or the cult of personality is transmitted only through the words on the page. The medium through which the writer’s art is created is also used to transmit the author. Yet this would seem to undercut precisely the claim to status the interview might have. If the printed word is the ultimate utterance, then surely it should be the artist’s writing – not the interview – that has the final say. As John Updike comments in the introduction to *Writers at Work Seventh Series*, there is a justifiable fear in the interviewee that the words “will be taken as a worthy substitute for the words he has with such labour and love and hope of imperishability written down” (xii). Here the interview form assigns the ultimate utterance to the “speaking” artist.

Where does this leave us? We still have not been able to fix the relation between aura, artwork and artist. We have nevertheless illuminated moments of the Greene interview that have particular valence for our discussion. Let us now turn to the spell of personality, in the hope that it shall lead us towards greater comprehension.

The Character

The issues raised by the Frankfurt School's critique of the culture industry have a curious commonality with some of those raised by the *Review* exchange with Greene. The interviewers comment that he is "a man shy of the contacts that congeal to fame" (1). Here a *series* of contacts constitutes fame. Whether these "contacts" are meetings or individuals remains unsaid, yet it does point to the repetitive nature of culture industry fame. If Benjamin fears the potential of reproducibility to enable the spell of the commodity to attend the artwork, then Greene's shyness might also be a hesitancy regarding the culture industry's potential to commodify the artist.

Greene's few remarks seem to support this. The original interview opened with the statement that "the author constantly reminded the interviewers that the key to his craft was to be found among the works themselves. Thus the following quotes are offered" (Issue 3 25). A series of quotations from Greene's work are reproduced, out of context and with the occasional pronoun alteration. It might be considered unsurprising that in an interview Greene points the reader in the direction of his fictional works as the "ultimate" statements or utterances. This is also understandable given the labour involved in their creation, but also given the uncertainty surrounding the interview utterance – as art, or culture industry chatter. The quotations are wrenched from their setting, made to stand apart from their original context, yet the interview utterance is supplemented by these very quotations. Whether the quotations could indeed supplement, to the point of supplanting, the interview itself is left unsaid.⁵

Greene's are not the only quotations; the interview is littered with comments from critics and other such references to literary culture. Greene makes reference "to what the critics are pleased to call my fixations", an aside which suggests both the irrelevance of critical opinion, but also a fascination on Greene's part (quoting it invests the remark with status) (9). Yet it is another quotation, this time an utterance by Greene in another interview, that causes the biggest problem for the interviewers. "But you told Kenneth Allott, who quotes it in his book about you, that Mauriac had a distinct influence. / Greene: Did I? That is the sort of thing that one says under pressure" (8). Such a remark is significant in several ways. Firstly, the interviewers' desire for consistency is evident again. It also implies a need for such utterances to stand the test of time and to "stand" through a change in context. Greene's response denies this and illuminates the contextual aspect of such talk; literary culture exerts a "pressure" on the speaker, influencing what is said and the meaning of those utterances. This simultaneously implies that Greene's current response might be the result of a similar pressure, in which case the authenticity of the utterance (closely related to the authenticity of the artwork in Benjamin) can never be established. The interview is tied to the forms and pressures of literary culture and the culture industry.

This is not to say that the interview is simply a tool of the culture industry. Greene's most provocative statement regards literary culture and the creative process. When asked if he spends much time with fellow authors, he comments that "for a writer to spend much of his time in the company of authors is, you know, a form of masturbation" (16). The comparison is striking for its explicitness, especially by a man who has maintained such standards of decorum up until this point. It is also notable for its multiple implications. Masturbation is the pleasure of the individual, implying that spending time with authors is a kind of narcissistic enjoyment. Masturbation is also fruitless procreation; a reproduction which will not lead to creation. Indeed, it is the form of reproducibility that Benjamin finds so alarming: reproduction merely of the self, it is a copy rather than the creation of an original. Too much involvement with literary culture marks a threat to the auratic creative process.

Yet we still have not established whether the interview itself marks an example of the spell of personality or a form of art; if, as Gray implies, the aura might reside in the artist and not the art, then we must examine this cult of the artist in more detail.

The Form

Given that the Greene interview was written so early in the series it is not surprising to see the formal aspects of the interview wrestling with questions of presentation. What is surprising are the attempts given to securing the interview the status of art through literarizing formal techniques, and crucially, the lack of finesse exhibited in the use of these techniques.

The interview itself is prefaced by an introduction by the interviewers. The prologue is a risible attempt at literary description: "It's an area black with smartness; the Rolls-Royces and the bowler hats of the men are black, the court shoes and the correct suits of the women are black, and in the most august flats even the bathing pools set into the floors of the bathrooms are paved with black marble" (1). The use of "august" borders on the comedic but the prize must go to the simile over the page which comments that the light bulbs in Greene's study "made as much difference to the watery April light as a pair of afterburners to a flagging jet engine" (2). Such ornate language, whilst highlighting the interviewees' literary pretensions, also indicates a strong desire to frame Greene as a novelistic character. He is mediated through the interviewers' impressions of the outside and inside of his flat, which marks the reader's introduction to Greene.

This attempt to make Greene a literary character and frame the interview text within the genre of "literature" is not confined to the introduction; the interviewers insert italicised "stage directions" or "asides" into the main body of the Q&A session. The theatrical or dramatic aspect of this methodology is emphasised through the discussion's focus on Greene's own playwriting, but of

most significance is the framing effect this process has: Greene becomes a character in a play. The italicisation and square brackets interrupt the flow of the exchange, inserting an extra “level” of interpretation. They allow the interviewers to play the role of both playwright and actors; they are both art and artwork. The stage direction points to the space between play text and performance, to the extra-literary dimension. Effectively it allows the interviewers to go “off piste”: “[*The telephone rang and when ... Greene came back to his long low seat between the electric fires and topped up the glasses, the conversation was not resumed, for the point, we thought, if not implied, was difficult for him to discuss.*.]” (9). The interviewers insert further novelistic description about Greene – both setting and actions – which again literarizes Greene the character. Also, it grants them an opportunity to interpret the halt in conversation as deliberate on Greene’s part, investing it with a more dramatic reading. Note though that this is precisely the point of the aside where the syntax becomes interrupted, “for the point, we thought, if not implied” is incredibly clumsy, the tone hesitant and qualified. The dramatic reading of this moment and thus of Greene’s personality, though attempted, is never stable. Greene is not quite defined or totalised by this reading.

Part of the reason for this is the problematic formulation of the interviewers in the series in general. Whilst the character of the author is centralised, literarized and examined in detail, the interviewers are blanketed out of the account like criminals leaving court. The two are merged into the characterless “Interviewer” in the 2007 version, in keeping with other *Review* interviews; the dual perspective is replaced by the singular Interviewer in a bizarre performance wherein the pair is identified through its function only. In the *Review* interview the performance, or record of personality (rather than role), is decidedly one-sided.

That said this interview is distinctive for the resistance the interviewers display towards this formal movement. Most notable in the Greene interview is that the interviewer utterances make up almost half the text. At the beginning particularly, Greene is almost crowded out of his own interview. The first question is more of a lengthy expostulation about aims, beginning: “Mr. Greene, we thought that we could make the best use of our time here if we brought along a few focal questions” (2). The pronouns are plural (though hinting towards the formal singular use of the plural) and the passage is populated with the interviewers’ sensations: “we thought”, “we felt”, “we wanted”, taking over the textual and affective space usually apportioned to the interview subject. Indeed, the collective “our time” could be read as excluding Greene entirely. The cult of personality extends seamlessly to the interviewers in this meeting, sitting uncomfortably against the formal role of “Interviewer” and *The Paris Review* series as a whole.

Ultimately Greene, like all *Review* interviewees, was granted the possibility of revising his answers and did sign off on the interview. Thus we cannot simply view the interviewers as framing

Greene, as producing either a cult of the artist, or an artwork in Greene. The lack of finesse exhibited in the interviewers is suggestive of an overwhelming desire to transform Greene into a literary character who can be read and interpreted in certain ways, yet we can still come to no definitive answer as to whether such a dramatisation marks the creation of a spell, or an artwork (with the possibility of an aura). What the Greene interview has shown us, however, is how inherent these Benjaminian concerns are to the *Review* interview itself.

Let us return then to Gray. Having made the substitution of artwork for Artist Personality, and concluding that “The nefarious glamorization of contemporary artists thus debases their aura into another phoney commodity”, she does suggest that the *Review* interview has “made a uniquely salubrious contribution to the cult of the artist in our time” (xi, xiii). Whilst we may lack a conclusive response to Gray’s reading, this essay hopes to have demonstrated how valuable Frankfurt School theories are in providing a critical framework for examining the *Review* interview as a form and as presented to the wider literary culture. There is still a world of work to be done, even in the narrow confines that this essay specified. Other critics writing in the tradition of the Frankfurt School suggest numerous perspectives for future study: Leo Lowenthal’s essay on biography and the culture industry or Jürgen Habermas’s discussion of the public sphere (given the interview is seen to pry into the private sphere of the author’s workroom) are two such potential aspects. More widely, the history of the interview is still to be definitively traced, to say nothing of the exciting possibilities to be explored in the form’s reliance on ideas of intimacy, immediacy and finitude. To return to where we began, the sooner that we acknowledge Ronald Christ’s distinction between the datum and dramatic aspects of the interview, between the scholastic and critical uses, the sooner we can begin on this re-viewing of the interview.

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- ¹ Including series in *The Washington Post*, *Interview* and, surprisingly, *Playboy*.
- ² I have used the 1936 Second Version of the essay, which was Benjamin's preferred text. All references are to the Zohn translation; the Jephcott and Zohn translation and German original were also consulted.
- ³ Compare John Updike's introduction to the seventh anthology: "Our consumerist appetite for interviews... derives in part from the hope that the disguise will slip, the constructed authorial persona will be poked away, and the 'real' person behind the words will be revealed as ignominiously as a shapeless snail without its shapely shell" (xiii).
- ⁴ See too Christ's comparison of the interview's relation to literary studies and the photograph's relation to art (114-15).
- ⁵ For a productive reading of the correspondences in the work of Derrida and the Frankfurt School, see Hart. His analysis of their shared negative dialectics offers a valuable future means of appraising the interview form.