

(UN)DOING CRITICAL PHILOSOPHY: REFLECTIONS ON ADORNO'S *AESTHETIC THEORY*

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An Introduction to Adorno's Thought and Elucidation of Terminology

Theodor Adorno (1903–1969) was the foremost theorist of the Frankfurt School. Originally established as an institute of social research, the Frankfurt School evolved as an informal grouping of German philosophers and social critics, including Max Horkheimer, Walter Benjamin, and later Herbert Marcuse and Jürgen Habermas. The Frankfurt School advanced a critical theory of society, which deepened theoretical understanding of late capitalism, the rise of European fascism, and the state of late modernity. This proceeded by synthesizing elements of Marxism, Psychoanalysis, and the German critical tradition (inaugurated by Kant). The core of this position was arguably best captured in Adorno and Horkheimer's *Dialectic of Enlightenment* and Horkheimer's *Traditional and Critical Theory*.

For Adorno, critical theory grounded itself as a historically self-reflexive sociological critique. As a mode of philosophical-sociological inquiry, critical theory takes aim at the ideological, scientific, and economic conditions of post-industrial capitalism. These conditions reflect the development of refined instruments of social control that prolong and intensify mass unfreedom and absorb avenues of resistance, such as those originally articulated by Marx.

My interpretation of Adorno's thought thus foregrounds its Marxist elements. These

elements coalesce in the task of critical theory: to imagine the world differently by subjecting it to critical negation. As I argue in this essay, *Aesthetic Theory* advances an understanding of art against the backdrop of a world in which this task becomes increasingly difficult to fulfill. *Aesthetic Theory* thus integrates the principles of critical theory with an account of art in its contemporary context. What is art? How does art affect us in the modern era? And, most significantly, how should philosophy engage art? These questions guide *Aesthetic Theory* in its effort to revive the power of philosophy and art in an era that blunts the critical potential of both.

1. Decline of metaphysics ("a post-metaphysical world"): refers to an ontology of becoming, which this paper credits to Friedrich Nietzsche's assault on metaphysical certainty. This view holds that there exists no abstract (Platonic) realm of stability beyond the physical world; instead, the world is composed of struggle among competing forces. Thus, physics best describes our world, as one in constant motion, reducible only to the activity of which it is composed.
2. Instrumental rationality: can be understood as a mode of thought that converts the inherent value of something into its use-value. Money, for example, is purely instrumental; its only value is its ability to purchase other items, as no bill is worth anything beside the instrumental use to which it is put. For Adorno, instrumentalization is the dominant mode of thought in late modernity.
3. Violence of the concept: refers to the consumption of all objects under the

conceptual control of the subject. This is an epistemological counterpart to instrumental rationality, which imposes the concept of identity¹ on things to render them know-able. We come to know society and nature through identity-thinking when all that is real must harmonize with our own conceptual system.

4. Negative dialectics: attempts to limit the dominance of identity-thinking by reflecting on the limits of our concepts: to think what is un-thought. The task is to negate the identity of what appears immediate to us, and therefore think of what falls outside identity. For Adorno, negative dialectics is the central task and driving thrust of critical theory.

The beginning moments of *Aesthetic Theory* offer the author's reflections on the contemporary status of art; "nothing concerning art is self-evident anymore, not its inner life, nor its relation to the world, not even its right to exist."² My project takes Adorno's reflections as its point of departure. I will begin by identifying the socio-historical conditions that efface art's self-evidence: a post-metaphysical world circumscribed by instrumental rationality. It is in response to these two conditions that Adorno crafts his negatively dialectical aesthetics. The question I am interested in asking is how philosophy responds to these same conditions. In order to answer this question I probe the style of the philosophical text *Aesthetic Theory*. My analysis will uncover a negatively dialectical

style of philosophical construction that adapts itself to the philosophic conditions of a post-metaphysical world and resists instrumentalization by the demands of instrumental reason. This will unfold as I trace the development of the central theses of *Aesthetic Theory*, analyzing the style of the text, which opposes the traditional logical and narrative form of philosophical texts.

I. Historically philosophy has built theories of aesthetics upon an ambivalent relationship between their constituents, philosophy and art. On the one hand, art, in its production and reception, is often understood to be inherently subjective. The subject's aesthetic experience of its engagement with an artwork seems to be confined to the particularity of that experience. On the other hand, philosophy aims to conceptualize what is universal in that experience. Adorno recognizes "the fundamental difficulty, indeed impossibility, of gaining general access to art by means of a system of philosophic categories." At the same time "aesthetic statements have traditionally presupposed theories of knowledge."³ Thus, aesthetics must negotiate these twin dimensions, the philosophic demand to articulate universal categories and the particularity of the work of art. This duality motivates a dialectical aesthetic that mediates between the philosophical concept and the work's resistance to conceptual consumption.

Adorno's dialectic mediation between these oppositional dimensions owes its groundwork to the seminal aesthetics of Kant and Hegel. Kant's contribution to the aesthetic tradition is his transcendental critique of aesthetic judgment. In the *Critique of Judgment* judgment is a timeless faculty of knowledge; it functions as

1 Identity is that which renders an entity definable and recognizable. This is an axiom of logic, according to which the identity relation holds only between a thing and itself: $x = x$.

2 Aesthetic 1

3 Aesthetic 332.

"the ability to think the particular as contained under the universal."⁴ Aesthetic judgment, in particular, grounds itself in the a priori faculty of taste, confirmed by "the fact that whenever we judge any beauty at all we seek the standard for it a priori in ourselves, and that the aesthetic power of judgment itself legislates concerning the judgment as to whether something is beautiful or not."⁵ Thus, the subject who deems a work of art beautiful does so on the basis of universal and necessary conditions. Hegel's philosophy of art responds to Kant's transhistorical account of aesthetic judgment. For Hegel, art has a history of its own. Its understanding is not guided by universal categories; instead, Spirit speaks through individual works within their historical era. In its opposition to the Kantian primacy of the subject, whereby the concept subsumes the particular work of art, Hegel's aesthetics reveals the work's own cognitive comportment.

Drawing upon these contributions, Adorno crafts an aesthetics that builds upon the autonomous historicity of the work of art, yet recognizes that the subject who engages the work cannot dispose of its conceptual apparatus. The work is a product of history, but comprehension of its uniqueness depends upon its subjective mediation. *Aesthetic Theory* orients this subjective mediation in new directions attuned to the intrinsic temporality of the work. He writes of aesthetics, "as an investigative procedure subsumption never reveals aesthetic content, but if subsumption is rejected altogether, no content would be thinkable."⁶ Hence, what is necessary is an aesthetics that curbs the conceptual subsumption of the work. Dialectics, in its movement between the work and the concept, responds to this demand to preserve the particularity of the work in the

face of the violence done to it by the concept: "Aesthetics is not obliged, as under the spell of its object, to exorcise concepts. Rather, its responsibility is to free concepts from their exteriority to the particular object and to bring them within the work."⁷

This is a daunting project that Adorno takes up. The trick is to deploy philosophy successfully against its own medium : the concept. But before moving to whether Adorno succeeds in his task, we should note the socio-historical circumstances that an aesthetics must also address. These are the historical conditions philosophy now faces in a post-metaphysical world and the barbarity imposed on that world by the logics of late capitalism. In the face of such conditions, aesthetics finds its task to "free concepts from their exteriority" more demanding.

The decline of metaphysics marks the rise of a world wherein the stable ground upon which to found an aesthetics dissolves. Aesthetics can no longer ground itself in the lofty Kantian position of a transcendental subject. This is because faculties of knowledge do not submit themselves to transhistorical investigation. Nor can Adorno work within the logics of the "end of history," in which Hegel's dialectic culminates. Theory must dispense with the search for a stable starting point from which investigation of the artwork proceeds. This has become the case following Nietzsche's dismantlement of the truth of metaphysics in his revelation that "the 'apparent' world is the only true one: the 'true' world is merely added by a lie."⁸ Heidegger's reflections on Nietzsche illustrate the world philosophy must now address:

[I] If the world were constantly changing and perishing, if it had its essence in the

4 Kant 18.

5 *Ibid.* 225.

6 *Aesthetic* 18.

7 *Ibid.* 181.

8 Nietzsche 481.

most perishable of what perishes and is in-constant, truth in the sense of what is constant and stable would be a mere fixation and coagulation of what in itself is becoming; measured against what is becoming, such fixation would be in-appropriate and merely a distortion... A knowledge that – as true – takes something to be "being" in the sense of constant and stable restricts itself to beings, and yet does not get at the actual: the world as a becoming world.⁹

A world of becoming is one in which philosophy cannot content itself with the stability of the apparent. The notion of a stable reality becomes mythical. Rather, reality is disunified, fragmented, constituted by the sedimentation of power and history. Historical contingency resists the thrust toward universality which motivated the aesthetics of Adorno's predecessors. Adorno's project reorients this thrust in philosophy, as he writes, "The great philosophical aesthetics stood in concordance with art to the extent that they conceptualized what was universal in it; this was in accordance with a stage in which philosophy and other forms of spirit, such as art, had not yet been torn apart."¹⁰ Aesthetics must now attune itself to the processual and therefore fragmented nature of reality, within which the subject engages the work of art, and through which philosophy must position itself.

Hence, "art" is neither a stable category nor a catalog of exemplary works. Aesthetics cannot begin with reflections on art, but must ground itself in the individual artwork. Indeed, art does not exist apart of a world of becoming, which only knows individual works. Moreover, the work itself is not anything stable, whose value and meaning transcend historical interpretation. "The artwork is a process essentially in the relation of its whole and parts. Without being reducible to one side or the

other, it is the relation itself that is a process of becoming." Whatever the theorist labels the totality of the work cannot be a "structure that integrates the sum of its parts."¹¹

The immediate consequence for aesthetics is this crisis of art's self-identity. If the post-metaphysical worlds strips artworks of their ideas, aesthetics cannot aim to reach behind the work to capture its truth. Aesthetics must critically engage, and not blindly surrender itself to a fractured reality. The relationship between subject and work is not immediate, nor can philosophy penetrate what truths hold in this relation. Aesthetics must mediate the intersection of work, society, and history. This mediation is necessary because no aesthetics grounded in a systematic conceptual apparatus can do justice to the individual work. If the world is becoming, then theories of aesthetics must relinquish their reliance upon systematicity; to understand the work is not the same as pumping it full of philosophic concepts. In short, form must give way to experience. Only the latter is equipped to address art in a world of becoming:

The exertion of cognition is predominantly the de-struction of its usual exertion, of its using violence against the object. Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experience. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency, the primacy of the object sh-immers through; that in the object which is not a subjective addition.¹²

While the "subject is the agent," aesthetics cannot allow it to be "the constituent of object."¹³ The requirement that the subject rend "the veil it weaves about the object"

9 Heidegger 64.

10 *Aesthetic* 334.

11 *Ibid.* 178.

12 *Critical* 254.

13 *Ibid.*

demands more than that the abdication of aesthetic systems. The subject, too, finds itself interwoven within the forces of power and history. Thus a dialectical aesthetics performs the requisite task by submitting the reification of systematic thought to critical revision. It must resist positivity in its construction of concepts, and dispense with identity thinking which represents the object in the image of the concept. The violence done by the concept compels Adorno to posit as a criterion of an aesthetics' success the capacity to draw from the artwork a critical revision of our representation of reality.

This imperative to advance socio-historical critique heightens against the backdrop of the universal instrumentalism late capitalism imposes upon life. Aesthetics must not only pry itself loose from the rigidity of conceptual systems, but also save the work of art from the spell of its commodification. I would like to suggest that this is the central objective of *Aesthetic Theory*, and the work of the Frankfurt School generally: resistance to the valueless fungibility we face in a world circumscribed by instrumental rationality. The latter takes as its operating principle the reduction of all aspects of life, including art, to their use value. Under these conditions, the work of art is reduced to a unit of pure exchangeability, a commodity circulated in the market. As a result, Adorno recognizes that "art no longer has a place" in our society. Under instrumental reason, "art fragments on one hand into a reified, hardened cultural possession and on the other into a source of pleasure that the consumer pockets and that for the most part has little to do with the object itself."¹⁴

The modern era marks the culmination of rational-Enlightenment thought, whereby the empirical world succumbs to the Kantian

transcendental subject – object becomes subject. As a consequence, "thought makes itself mere tautology."¹⁵ Late capitalism embodies the socio-economic concretization of instrumental reason, which reifies consciousness as identity thinking. The market, through its rational-economic modes of thought, has seized the subject from the world, thereby neutralizing the subject's critical relationship to the world. The subject now unknowingly becomes the object of a world in which one-dimensional thought dominates. This makes the subject increasingly unable to perform the task Adorno demands of aesthetics, to subject reality to critical revision through the artwork, to see the world otherwise. Instead, everywhere the subject goes, it confronts only itself: "The man of science knows things to the extent that he can make them. Their "in-itself" becomes "for-him." In their transformation the essence of things is revealed as always the same, a substrate of domination."¹⁶ The complete administration of society instrumentalizes all spheres of life to such a degree that knowledge hypostasizes into the operations of a machine. Experience has completely given itself away to form. Adorno takes these consequences as the central target to which dialectical thinking must respond, which lays the foundations of negatively dialectical thinking:

To grasp existing things as such...to think of them as surface, as mediated conceptual moments which are only fulfilled by revealing their social, historical, and human meaning – this whole aspiration of knowledge is abandoned. Knowledge does not consist in mere perception, classification, and calculation but precisely in the determining negation of whatever is directly at hand. Instead of such negation, mathematical formalism, whose medium,

14 *Aesthetic* 15.

15 *Dialectic* 20.

16 *Ibid.*

number, is the most abstract form of the immediate, arrests thought at mere immediacy.¹⁷

Adorno, in collaboration with Max Horkheimer, thus crystallizes the project of a dialectic aesthetic theory. This notion of dialectic, however, differs from its original Hegelian and Marxist variations. Dialectics must be negative. This means it neither submits itself to the positivity of idealism's synthesis (the sublation of thesis and antithesis), nor does it operate according to the objective laws of historical materialism. Instead, dialectic thought must dwell in the "determining negation of whatever is directly at hand." It must take as its object the concretization of a fragmented and antagonistic reality.

It is from the objectives set forth by Adorno's critical project that I take this essay's investigative point of departure. *Aesthetic Theory* offers a response to a completely administered post-metaphysical world – it presents a dialectical aesthetics that dislodges the artwork from its social appropriation by instrumental rationality. The question I am posing is how does the philosophical work, in particular that of Adorno, respond? How does the philosophical text resist its appropriation by a reified world that strips objects of their inherent value, reduced to market commodities. My own experiences as a young philosophy student are illustrative of the predominance instrumental reason has claimed over the modern era. Indeed, it is difficult for me to recall an instance where I revealed my major and did not receive the surefire response, "what are you going to do with that?"

Admittedly, unlike art, philosophy is not so much an exchanged commodity. The humbling truth is that it is more commonly confined within the walls of the academy. But nonetheless, I am interested in asking

how the philosophical work resists the spell of instrumentality that has seized our world. I will argue that *Aesthetic Theory* provides an answer in its philosophic style, achieved through a constellational and negatively dialectical construction. Adorno does this by modeling his philosophy in aesthetic experience. This is not to say that *Aesthetic Theory* is an artwork, but that it integrates elements unique to art that preserve its critical capacity. These elements, however, cannot be brought out independent of the text's internal development of its ideas. *Aesthetic Theory* is not a work of literature that subjects itself to aesthetic analysis. The text offers a theory that unfolds through its manner of presentation, but the theory reflexively shapes the text's presentation. Thus, my investigation will begin by drawing from the text what it means for a philosophical work to resist its instrumentalization. I will first argue that the work must overcome its utility as a method, from which I will uncover how *Aesthetic Theory* performs this task.

II. Artworks retain a critical dimension given their situation both within and outside the world. This is what distinguishes artworks from inert objects – their resistance to the world within an explanatory context. Adorno writes, "Only by virtue of separation from empirical reality...does the artwork achieve a heightened order of existence."¹⁸ Great artists Adorno looks to, such as Rembrandt, Beckett, or Beethoven, were among those whose "sharpest sense of reality was joined with estrangement from reality."¹⁹ Hence the necessity for a dialectical aesthetics arises from what is artful in the work. For aesthetics to tend to the work, it must preserve art's autonomy negatively – its own negative participation within reality:

18 *Aesthetic* 4.

19 *Ibid.* 9.

17 *Ibid.*

"That art on the one hand confronts society autonomously, and, on the other hand, is itself social, defines the law of its experience."²⁰

But how can aesthetics engage a work that is both within and outside reality, given the position of the theorist within society? The subject must understand the work as an antagonistic movement between its inner parts. If the work's own determination opposes reality, it cannot be understood as a self-enclosed identity. A world of becoming precludes the possibility of aesthetic comprehension that exhausts the work's meaning. Rather, "a relation, not identity, operates between the negativity of the metaphysical content and the eclipsing of the aesthetic content."²¹ The question thus persists, a relation between what? The traditional aesthetic categories such as form-content or universal-particular cannot capture this relation; they must give way to an experiential aesthetics. No framework of binaries can capture the antagonistic *processes* in the work, as Adorno specifies:

Whatever may in the artwork be called totality is not a structure that integrates the sum of its parts. Even objectified the work remains a developing process by virtue of the propensities active in it. Conversely, the parts are not something given, as which analysis almost inevitably mistakes them: Rather, they are centers of energy that strain toward the whole on the basis of a necessity that they equally perform. The vortex

of this dialectic ultimately consumes the concept of meaning.²²

That the parts of the work are "not something given" forecloses their capacity to ground an aesthetics. There exists nothing for the subject to grasp a hold of in the work, despite instrumental reason's claim to do so. Adorno instead couches the work's elements in a discourse of becoming: "developing process," "centers of energy," "vortex of dialectic." But what allows Adorno to assert such claims about the artwork? Could we not say that he has injected the work with a dialectic method of process, thereby sacrificing experience to form?

Quite the contrary, Adorno's account presupposes an aesthetic experience on the part of the reader without proactively pointing to a particular work. The philosophy we read does not take its object as given. It suspends reliance upon ground and thereby engages a world of becoming. All that Adorno can rely upon is the experience of artworks, and not solely what is determinate within them. Hence he turns to our experience, upon which he invites us to reflect. What Adorno points out is what he sees taking place as he experiences the work, as if to say, "there it is; do you see it too?" In short, *Aesthetic Theory* offers a philosophy of reflection and not conceptual projection. This is what allows Adorno to posit the sorts of reflective identity statements we continuously find in the text: "The artwork is X, art does Y," and so forth.

This means that Adorno dispenses with the task of demonstration. He does not begin with the work's elements and move outward in order to identify the work any more than he injects the work with concepts external to

20 *Ibid.* 348.

21 *Ibid.* 358.

22 *Ibid.* 178.

it. The movement is not unidirectional, but mediates what is experienced in the work. This is confirmed by the position of the above passage within the text. It rests between a preceding paragraph that spans three pages, a fragmented discussion of Mozart, Beethoven, "Stockhausen's concept of electronic works," and "Picasso's rayonism," and an ensuing account of aesthetics' relation to Kant and Stravinsky. The passage is a brief moment of clarity caught within a discussion whose movement is suggestive of the artwork's antagonistic elements. Adorno's insight is not the conclusion of a logically developed argument but an instant of reflection that allows the artwork's internal friction to shine.

Adorno's style allows his dialectic aesthetics to reflect on an experience of the artwork. The text's construction is not a hierarchical presentation of concepts; it instead subjects itself to dialectic thought. Thus *Aesthetic Theory* models itself in aesthetic experience. Indeed, if the artwork is a movement of antagonisms, then aesthetics' response must attune itself to this processual experience. Aesthetics cannot rigidify itself anymore than the work of art can abdicate its internal movement. Thus art calls for an aesthetics that is dialectical, and thereby allows the subject to engage the work without appropriating it:

To whoever remains strictly internal, art will not open its eyes, and whoever remains strictly external distorts artworks by a lack of affinity. Yet aesthetics becomes more than a rhapsodic back and forth between the two standpoints by developing their reciprocal mediation in the artwork itself.²³

This means the subject's consciousness must "remain constantly mobile both internally and externally to the work."²⁴ We witness this

mobility unfold through the stylistic strategies Adorno deploys in the development of his theory. The text's ideas linger, they do not explain away the meaning of either art or their own theory. What makes the latter in fact dialectical is not just its capacity to reflect upon the particularity of the work in its non-identity; a dialectical aesthetics must maintain its coherence through its own dialectic mediation. And this occurs in the fragmentary style in which *Aesthetic Theory* grounds its aesthetics.

A dialectical aesthetics thus jettisons conceptual systems in order to afford the work its autonomy. This allows the work to exist apart from the world that struggles to pull it back. Instrumental reason endeavors to harden the work in order to fetishize its value as a commodity within the market. At the same time, a post-metaphysical world of becoming renders conceptual aesthetic methods untenable. Adorno recognizes, "the tendency of philosophical aesthetics toward those abstract rules in which nothing is invariable... is transient; the claim to imperishability has become obsolete."²⁵ Yet what prevents the petrification of Adorno's dialectic aesthetics into "abstract rules"? In other words, how does an aesthetics, amid an instrumentalized world, ward off its conversion into method, thereby offering itself as a dispensable tool to the art critic?

This concern is eminent for Adorno, who warns, "the over-valuation of method is truly a symptom of the consciousness of our time...this tendency is related to the nature of the commodity: to the fact that everything is seen as functional, as a being-for-another" (Goldmann 129). Thus, dialectical aesthetics must turn its negation back on itself. That is, it must make a concerted effort to resist reliance upon conceptual schemata in order

23 *Ibid.* 350.

24 *Ibid.*

25 *Ibid.* 339.

to understand the artwork. Yet Richard Wolin suggests *Aesthetic Theory* fails in this task. Wolin asserts that Adorno's aesthetics "remained undialectically wedded to the concept of an esotericized, autonomous art as an absolute model of aesthetic value."²⁶ Consequently, *Aesthetic Theory* "runs the risk of a false sublation of autonomous art, whereby a crucial refuge of negativity and critique would be prematurely integrated with facticity as such."²⁷ Yet Wolin's claims that Adorno remains "undialectically wedded" to autonomous art undervalues the critical comportment of such art, and moreover, Adorno's incorporation of similar elements into his own work. I would like to suggest that criticism such as Wolin's neglects this latter point, the critical style of *Aesthetic Theory*, which dialectically preserves its coherence in the face of its instrumentalization. It is toward this insight that I direct the following section.

III. Nowhere in *Aesthetic Theory* do we find a definition of what it means for an aesthetics to be negatively dialectical, at least not one that exhausts the multiplicity of its dimensions. Nor do we find examples that demonstrate the theory's proper application. This feature secures the complexity of the work, its multiple layers and hypnotic affect in its series of digressions and philosophic excursions. But rather than dispel the force from the text, these qualities ensure its successful resistance to its instrumentalization as a method.

Aesthetic Theory, in short, is enigmatic, a term Adorno uses to describe the artwork's autonomous position both within and outside society. But the artwork's autonomy, its internal antagonistic movement, does not reduce it to a unit of chaos. Rather, within

its enigmaticalness the subject encounters the artwork's critical dimension. This is what allows Adorno to contend, "the idea of a conservative artwork is inherently absurd." This is because the artwork occupies a critical posture beyond the limits of its social inception,

"By emphatically separating themselves from the empirical world, their other, they bear witness that that world itself should be other than it is; they are the unconscious schemata of that world's transformation."²⁸

How is it that the work's enigmaticalness, in its dynamic presence in and absence from this world, critically negates society? Adorno's answer is its truth-content, which the work possesses as its own cognitive capacity, what allows the work to remain an object not subsumable by the subject's concepts. The work's truth-content orients the movement of its internal parts, which depends upon philosophy for its self-actualization. Works aim toward the "determination of the indeterminate" in their resistance to reality, but in so doing they simultaneously pose a problem, that of their negative dimension. This is why we do not look at artworks and immediately think "Revolution!" Instead, the work "achieves meaning by forming its emphatic absence of meaning."²⁹ No interpretation will reveal the work "as a new immediacy" because the work's "enigmatical-ness outlives the interpretation that arrives at the answer."³⁰ Thus it becomes the objective of a dialectical aesthetics to no longer "explain away the element of incomprehensibility" but instead "understand the incomp-rehensibility itself."³¹

28 *Aesthetic* 177

29 *Ibid.* 127.

30 *Ibid.* 125.

31 *Ibid.* 347.

In order to perform this task, the subject allows itself to be disciplined by the truth-content of the work. Thus it becomes the task of aesthetics to reflect on the work's truth: "By demanding its solution, the enigma points to its truth-content. It can only be achieved by philosophical reflection. This alone is the justification of aesthetics."³² Philosophy becomes the midwife of the work's truth; it allows the unreality of the work to demonstrate the inadequacy of what is real. But this only occurs when the subject allows the work to speak for itself, in other words, how to be fully autonomous. Philosophy must dispense with its metaphysical quest for truth and submit to the truth of the work. Martin Jay clarifies, "Truth for Adorno was not... merely correspondence between propositions and an external referent in the current world, but rather a concept with normative resonances as well, referring to a future 'true' society."³³ The question thus arises, how does a dialectical philosophy perform this task insofar as there exists nothing stable within the work to comprehend?

Philosophy draws forth from the work its suspension of what is given in the world. Philosophy takes up a reflective task that is experiential; it provides, through the work, a moment of insight into reality's indeterminate other. It is the artwork which provides an antipode of the concept toward which dialectic thought moves. As the subject lingers in the work's truth-content, it makes manifest the violence of the philosophical concept. A dialectical aesthetic experience paralyzes the subject-object distinction, and in its paralysis the concept confronts its own inadequacy. This inadequacy is what submits reality to the possibility of its other; philosophical reflection on the work's truth-content interweaves reified consciousness and reflective self-consciousness,

thereby estranging the subject from its hypostatized relation to reality.

This experience re-orientates the way in which the subject engages the object. Philosophy does not content itself with the grasping of concepts, but instead realizes itself as an experience. Hence, *Aesthetic Theory* presents itself as a reflective exercise and not a mere handbook of aesthetics. A dialectical aesthetics offers a "how" of thinking and not a "what," which is to say philosophy invites the subject to follow a *way* of thinking. Philosophy becomes a verb instead of a noun. It is under this light that we should understand *Aesthetic Theory* as a text that moves its reader. Indeed, the text lingers in the experience of its object, the artwork, and therefore becomes artful in its movement, much like a musical score. In so doing, the text resists its instrumentalization; its thought depends upon our active participation. The way of thinking upon which it drafts the reader is not a method. It is slippery, antagonistic, much like the engimaticalness of the artwork, yet remains distinct from art in its presentation of concepts. We can trace this movement in the following passages:

Even by artworks the concrete is scarcely to be named other than negatively. It is only through the nonfungibility of its own existence and not through any special content that the artwork suspends empirical reality as an abstract and universal functional nexus. Each artwork is utopia insofar as through its form it anticipates what would finally be itself, and this converges with the demand for the abrogation of the spell of self-identity cast by the subject. No artwork cedes to another.³⁴

Only against the suffering of reality does the work revive its own singularity, its nonfungibility, and thereby direct its movement toward utopia. In *Aesthetic Theory*, philosophy responds by negatively presenting

32 *Ibid.* 128.

33 Jay 159.

34 *Aesthetic* 135

the contradictory movement of the work. The text does not explain away this movement, but participates in it. Indeed, the "artwork is utopia," yet simultaneously utopia is not entirely of the work; it is anticipated and dependent upon the subject's "abrogation of the spell of self-identity." We follow philosophy's mediation of the artwork in concurrence with its own account of the work. The demand the artwork places on philosophy is simultaneously fulfilled by the dialectical style of the text. This movement continues through the passage:

The nonfungibility, of course, takes over the function of strengthening the belief that mediation is not universal. But the artwork must absorb even its most fatal enemy – fungibility; rather than fleeing into concretion, the artwork must present through its own concretion the total nexus of abstraction and thereby resist it.³⁵

The text shares a movement of resistance with the artwork it portrays. The artwork's absorption of fungibility folds within the "nonfungibility" of its "own existence." Deep within the artwork's "nexus of abstraction" and resistance to it, dwells the call for a mode of thinking that pleasures before non-identity. *Aesthetic Theory* heeds this call as it unfolds through a "sequence of dialectical reversals and inversions."³⁶ Much like the aesthetic experience, Adorno's philosophy is present yet retreats from itself; it develops in a manner that is non-identical. Indeed, the movement of the text mediates between its aesthetics and glimpses into the individual works, which we can see in the continuation of the passage:

Repetition in authentic new artworks is not always an accommodation to the archaic compulsion toward repetition. Many artworks indite this compulsion and thereby take the

part of.. the unrepeatable; Beckett's *Play*, with the spurious infinity of its reprise, presents the most accomplished example. The black and grey of recent art, its asceticism against color, is the negative apotheosis of color.³⁷

The works mentioned do not serve to demonstrate a theory, nor does the brevity of their description undermine their relevance to Adorno's aesthetics. They belong to the movement of the text, which rides their aesthetic experience. This movement is confirmed in the following moment:

But because for art, utopia – the yet to exist – is draped in black, it remains in all its mediations recollection; recollection of the possible in opposition to the actual that suppresses it; it is the imaginary reparation of the catastrophe of world history; it is freedom, which under the spell of necessity did not – and may not ever – come to pass. Art's methexis in the tenebrous, its negativity, is implicit in its tense relation to permanent catastrophe.³⁸

The textual movement of *Aesthetic Theory* slides from its aesthetics to particular works and back to aesthetics in a seemingly fragmentary manner. Much like the artwork, the text feels tenebrous in its negativity, yet resists its own catastrophe by its very negativity. It does so in its negatively dialectical movement, which grounds itself in the experiences of artworks, such as Beckett's *Play* or "black and grey" ascetic art. The experience of particular works offers itself as the only foundation for an aesthetics due to the conditions philosophy faces in a post-metaphysical world that dismantles all stable foundations. Hence, the text moves in a non-deductive manner; it submits its own grounds to dialectical reflection. This means the text resists its own given-ness. Though constricted to the confines of the pages on which it is written, the text reads temporally. It

35 *Ibid.* 135.

36 Richter 101.

37 *Aesthetic* 135.

38 *Ibid.*

moves like a musical composition, but not like a pop song or Jazz piece, both of which Adorno disdained for their rationalized predictability. The text's form does not dictate the ordering of its contents, but instead, like an atonal Schoenberg composition, it weaves through the friction of its own elements.

This is not to say that philosophy implodes in its resistance to the demands of a world circumscribed by instrumental reason. The text does not forego rigorous philosophical investigation, but delicately mobilizes the concept through its own self-effacement. This strategy is made possible by the text's constellational style. The constellation ties together conceptual moments in such a way that resists the Kantian distinction between subject and object. The style of *Aesthetic Theory* bridges the chiasmic gap, as Kant figured it, between phenomena and noumena. By grounding itself in aesthetic experience, the text unfolds through constellations that give coherence to a dialectical aesthetics composed of conceptual formations that retain empirical phenomena. Concepts do not subsume the particular; the latter sustains itself through the former. Susan Buck-Morss clarifies this epistemological strategy:

Cognitive knowledge... was achieved by means of abstraction: the particular entered into the concept and disappeared. But in [constellations] the particulars, although conceptually mediated, reemerged in the idea...they became the idea in the conceptual arrangement of their elements. The role of the subject, to draw connections between the phenomenal elements, was not unlike that of the astrologer, who perceived figures in the heavens.³⁹

In a post-metaphysical world, in which there are neither things-in-themselves nor

transhistorical ideals, the subject's encounter with the world is limited to its particular empirical phenomena. The constellations that comprise *Aesthetic Theory* retain aesthetic experiences as non-hierarchical monads in an inter-connected web. Each moment, like a single star of a constellation, contains the totality, its own picture of the world, yet remains distinct from the other moments.

The constellated form of *Aesthetic Theory* allows the text to adapt itself to a world of becoming in that its constellations do more than simply present what is empirically given in artworks. The empirical task is the role of science, which submits empirical facts to research. Rather, each moment of the text interprets the fragmentary reality constitutive of the given. These interpretations manifest mediation at work; they penetrate the historical contingency and socially constructed dimensions of reality. Recall that mediation, for Adorno, is negative and in opposition to the Kantian conceptual appropriation of the object. Adorno's mediation of artworks in *Aesthetic Theory* preserves non-identity, and in so doing unwinds particulars from their conceptual reification. Unlike the aesthetics of Kant and Hegel, Adorno's does not ground itself in unity, as confirmed by the fragmentary and non-narrative structure of the above passages. This explains how the text does not offer an aesthetic method, but instead submits itself to the particularity of the artwork. What we find is an aesthetics attuned to the fragmented and contradictory nature of reality in bourgeois society. Where instrumental reason congeals this realm of contradictions into systems of identities, *Aesthetic Theory* unfolds through constellations that render visible what is antagonistic of reality. In a world that converts critical thinking into a method, dialectical aesthetics responds in its resistance to commodification. In the

³⁹ Buck-Morss 92.

market, commodities operate according to the principles of abstraction, identity, and reification, which Buck-Morss describes as the “ossification of the object as a mystifying fetish by splitting it off from the process of its production.”⁴⁰ In contrast, dialectical aesthetics reunites what instrumentality splits.

IV. The truth of the artwork lies beyond reality in its estrangement from the society in which we receive it. But how does the work retain its negativity, its openness to a world that does not yet exist despite its existence within a reified world? It is in mimesis that art’s truth-content remains in contact with a world other than the empirical: “By pursuing its own identity with itself, art assimilates itself with the nonidentical: This is the contemporary stage of development of art’s mimetic essence.”⁴¹ The work’s “mimetic essence” is the object of philosophy’s reflective response to the work. It makes possible the work’s openness to a primal world before the subject’s abstraction from nature through reason. Mimesis is what cannot be spoken in the work; it is a mystic openness to a world not translatable into language.

What cannot speak in the artwork, and therefore invites philosophical assistance, is its mimetic comportment, which Robert Kaufman describes as that which is “grasped not as transcription but as an attempt provisionally to know something of the otherness outside the subject.”⁴² This otherness resists conceptual appropriation because it belongs to a world from which the concept has not yet abstracted itself. Frederic Jameson clarifies that mimesis “can be said often to function as a more adequate substitute for the primal relationship

of subject and object.”⁴³ What is primal of mimesis “forestalls dualistic thinking by naming the dualism as such.”⁴⁴ Thus, mimesis works against the concept, forcing it back on itself. Rather than appropriate the work, the concept must approach the work by way of dialectical reflection – it must experience that which cannot be named using the subject’s tools of reason.

The nature of mimesis is one of non-identity, which occupies a world that is both primal and of the future. On the one hand, mimesis belongs to a world that exists prior to the ascendancy of the bourgeois subject and its domination of nature. Adorno writes, “Art is imitation exclusively as the imitation of an objective expression, remote from psychology, of which the sensorium was perhaps once conscious in the world and which now subsists only in artworks.”⁴⁵ In its mimetic dimension, the artwork offers a glimpse into what subjective consciousness has alienated from nature. Yet on the other hand, mimesis opens a free world not yet realized, beyond the subjective logic of identity:

Only the autonomous self is able to turn critically against itself and break through its illusory imprisonment. This is not conceivable as long as the mimetic element is repressed by a rigid aesthetic superego rather than the mimetic element disappears into and is maintained in the objectivation of the tension between itself and its antithesis.⁴⁶

The artwork’s mimetic comportment, which Adorno goes on to describe as “the plenipotentiary of an undamaged life in the midst of mutilated life,” is not recuperated in a nostalgic past, but imitates a world not yet actualized within our own. Thus, mimesis

40 *Ibid.* 98.

41 *Aesthetic* 134.

42 Kaufman 201.

43 Jameson 105.

44 *Ibid.* 105.

45 *Aesthetic* 112.

46 *Ibid.* 117.

assumes different contexts, both of the past and future, throughout the text. *Aesthetic Theory* does not advance an extractable notion of mimesis; its account, instead, can be said to unfold mimetically. That is to say mimesis works against the constraints of language. Our understanding of mimesis develops in fragments, each of which unfold within the contours of a particular constellated moment.

The text's fragmented account of mimesis illustrates its constellational structure and movement. In certain moments, mimesis is that which is remembered in the artwork; at other moments it speaks to the emancipatory potential of the work. These accounts are, of course, not mutually exclusive, as Adorno states, "The trace of memory is mimesis, which every artwork seeks, is simultaneously always the anticipation of a condition beyond the diremption of the individual and the collective."⁴⁷ In its fragmented and divergent moments, mimesis unfolds through the constellations in which its various account are situated. The text charges mimesis with different social, historical, and aesthetic valences, but never does so in a univocal manner.

I would like to suggest that *Aesthetic Theory* contains a mimetic dimension that allows it to resist its instrumentalization. Mimesis allows the object to speak for itself and therefore counters the violence done to it by subjective consciousness. It occupies a purely experiential world that escapes its petrification in language. Yet we cannot say the text is mimetic insofar as its medium is language, which necessarily obfuscates what is intrinsically unspeakable in mimesis: "By virtue of its double character, language is a constituent of art and its mortal enemy." Adorno goes on to clarify that "compared to significative language" the expression of mimesis "is older though unfulfilled."

47 *Ibid.* 131.

Mimesis, what affords the artwork its dimension of negativity, resists its inclusion within philosophy. Yet philosophy depends upon a mimetic dimension in order to preserve the primacy of the object apart from its conceptualization. Philosophy thus confronts a paradox: in order to resist its instrumental concretization it must not subsume its object, yet this requires mimesis, which resists linguistic translation. Thus philosophy must work against language by way of language, and this is what *Aesthetic Theory* accomplishes through its constellational style.

The text demonstrates its resistance to language in its constellational account of mimesis. As we have seen, mimesis unfolds in fragmentary moments. Each moment belongs to a constellation, yet no moment provides the complete picture. These moments are self-contained, yet simultaneously bleed into one another. Contradictory accounts are assembled alongside each other. They are not smoothed out and narrated, their development successive, but rather manifest the work of conceptualization. As disunited assemblages, the divergent accounts of mimesis expose a glimpse of a world in which thought lingers yet does not conceptualize its object.

There exists within the text an account of mimesis, its idea moves through the text's constitutive constellations, yet it never concretely presents itself before us. In other words, *Aesthetic Theory* employs language to provide an account of mimesis, but never names it directly. Language is all that we read, but language never identifies mimesis. Instead, constellations invite us to perform this task as we piece together their fragmentary moments. Consequently, we proceed through the text in a dialectical manner. Its idea of mimesis is absently present; it is there, but not in its self-identity.

Philosophy assumes a mimetic comportment of its own in its attempt to offer an unknowable alternative to the world it critically negates. Thus philosophy mobilizes itself against itself: it becomes dialectical not only in its content, but also in the style through which its content develops. *Aesthetic Theory* is certainly philosophic. But it preserves itself, in resistance to its instrumentalization as method, in its opposition to the concept, upon which philosophy has traditionally relied. In the face of a post-metaphysical world, the text presents itself as an experience, which has otherwise been denied by the grip in which instrumental reason binds our world.

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