Meteo r i t e

I S S U E   N O .  4 ,   F A L L   2 0 0 4 .

Meteo rite is the student journal of philosophy at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor.


All authors retain copyright on original works unless otherwise noted.

This journal is funded by the Department of Philosophy at the University of Michigan – Ann Arbor.
What is at stake for Adorno—or any other person living in the ideological prison of modernity? Might one—through Art—come to generate freedom in her cognitive relationship to the world, reconciling the individual with “nonidentity?” These questions will guide this exploration of select aspects of Adorno’s aesthetic philosophy. In this essay, I will examine the “culture industry,” which is one, if not the, chief protagonist in galvanizing enlightenment ideology. The culture industry systemically propagates false subjectivity, or ideological cognition. If Art is the means by which the liberation of subjectivity and freedom can be accomplished, then it must do so in response to an audience that exhibits a type of perception that cannot perceive the “real world.” This strain of perception is the result of the culture industry. Art that can compete with this type of cognitive deadening must engender qualities that allow it to reawaken subjectivity to the “real world.” For there to actually be an artistic audience is determined by Art’s ability to fight against the grain and ideology of modern society. It is supposed, then, that the modern world is bereft of an artistic audience. In order to break free of the impediments that the culture industry erects, Art must be hyperbolically cruel in its form in order to serve as the jarring catalyst for the reactivation of subjectivity. Adorno calls this the “method of cruelty.” I will examine the culture industry’s production and reproduction of the “non-audience” or the “dead audience”, and then look at the method of cruelty and Art’s ability to reconcile individuals with their subjectivity.
The triumph of enlightenment consists in its symbolic field of freedom: making “consumers feel compelled to buy and use its [i.e. the culture industry’s] products even though they see through them.”

This domain marks out a territory in which individuals’ dependency on the cultural machine trumps any misgivings that they might entertain about their own ability to choose or to be different. Free to choose any strain of ideology that the industry manufacture’s, these “pseudo–individuals” become industrialized produce, identical copies of each other, stamped with the UPC symbol of authenticity. In other words, the culture industry packages freedom in a certain capacity such that individuals—within a pregiven parameter organized and established by the industry—define themselves as free.

The moviegoer becomes the quintessence of modern ‘subjectivity’—life and the movies become indistinguishable.

Those who are so absorbed by the world of the movie—by its images, gestures, and words—that they are unable to apply what really makes it a world, do not have to dwell on particular points of mechanics during a screening. All the other films and products of the entertainment industry which they have seen taught them what to expect; they react automatically. The might of industrial society is lodged in men’s minds.

People know that life is not the movie but yet they wish and act as if it actually were. Society serves up the data of experience that inform people and condition them towards predictable patterns in accordance with the program of the enlightenment. The culture industry is that zone of psychological enforcement that carries out the program with extreme diligence. This program, then, is an ideology that creates a uniform blanket of mass self-deception.

The moviegoer is the paragon of modern culture because she represents the logic of enlightenment: the false identity between the whole and the particular. In terms of critical reason this is the false identity between the reified self and the reified object; or, the “paranoid” rationality of identity thinking. This logic determines the culture industry’s drive to crush and insubordination that would strive to sever the whole from the part: to produce a veritable antithesis.

This can be understood concretely in the notion of the “oeuvre,” the social act, the (art)work. The oeuvre is immanently social, that is, it is a socially particular artifact thoroughly infected by ideology and history. As a particular, its internal composition—mediated through consciousness—has the ability to be delivered over to the whole or to a context that transcends
itself. When Adorno discusses particular works of art, he discusses two forms of consciousness in relation to the oeuvre.

One form is able to release the immanent constitution of the artifact so as to witness the disjunction of the whole from the particular. This is actually the second act of remembrance: the capacity to understand the nonidentical element of cognition—or, the ability to transcend the false identity between thought and reified object. Critical rationality opens up an understanding of the particular’s determination within the whole, within the plurality of the world. To relate this to our discussion of remembrance, the particular delivered over to the whole is the ability to realize the contradiction between thought and truth.

A second form of consciousness is unable to understand the dynamic constitution of the oeuvre and tries to disassociate a particular object from its plurality. The particular is then reduced to its details. This, of course, is identity thinking, or the discharging of an object’s plurality. The form of consciousness flattens out perception into the dead intake of nothings. The culture industry is the ideological front designed for this purpose—to reduce the particular to its details. Consequently, the movie industry’s oeuvre exists solely in these details. The content and ideas never change insofar as the symbolic space of freedom is concerned because its concomitant cognition is petrified. Individuality of the artwork is only acceptable insofar as generality or conformity to the ideal of the mass is extolled—”mass” conceived as detail, as disjoined from the particular–whole dynamic, as flattened to such a point that the context truly becomes egalitarian in its aesthetic paucity.

If we relate this notion of the artwork to humanity, we see the same result is affected: subjectivity—the ability for an individual to understand the concrete grounding of her own particular self-hood within the immanent constitution of social reality (as a self which is constructed and deformed by the extant ideological conditions of history)—or particularity in relation to the whole, is truncated. Personal identity exists solely in the façade. Modern individuals only gain their ‘subjectivity’ by losing it, by conformity to mass–behavior, by the willingness to cede one’s life away to the details. The category of the detail becomes the vanguard of the cultural machine. The individual is stripped down to the mass–person just as the particular is stripped down to its details—this is the problem with enlightenment. That which accepts this identity—between the whole and the particular—operates with the spectacles of mass deception. The question for art becomes what art utilizes or works within this logic.

2 Dialectic, p. 127.
If the moviegoer is truly modern, it is because the imagistic nature of film is divorced from any relationship to critical cognition. A grand display of free-floating forms inundates the audience as a river of continuous moments whose presence glows with a frenetic immediacy. The audience is united with the movie-stars through the fact that all their movements are blocked like theatrical actors. Marx once wrote of modernity: “All that is solid melts into air.”³ Life becomes an image without cognitive relation, a free-floating sign without grounding in plurality. This is what is at stake for Adorno or any other person living the enlightened, modern world.

Enlightenment divorces the image from the cognition and the moviegoer from her social context. No connection can be established between the two. The amusement of the moviegoer is but one side of the coin. Without the sociological connection between social reality and play, it escapes the audience that the industrial machinery manufactures the content of their amusement. Thus, “Amusement under late capitalism is the prolongation of work.”⁴ One escapes the drudgery of the workday only to partake in events that are pre-packaged as entertainment and in experiences that are sanctioned by the cultural bosses.

We should entertain a fair amount of skepticism, though, to an approach that reduces all diversionary events as ‘after-images’ of the machine. How could modernist art, which is sanctioned by the cultural penthouses of the publishing juggernaut, retain its veracity as autonomous Art? Would not its banks too be eroded into the vortex of the free-floating image? What would it take for a cultural ritual or activity to escape the nullity of enlightenment? Such questions demand a reexamination of the effects of the culture industry.

If the cinema is dead (if it was ever alive), that is, unable to raise its mind above the onslaught of orgiastic images, then so is the musical audience. “The liquidation of the individual is the real signature of the new musical situation.”⁵ These pseudo-individuals, again, only perceive the difference of detail among musical compositions. Trained as they are not to look at the “immanent composition of the oeuvre”—the dynamic totalizing force that strives toward a “heightened emancipation from the particularity” of its constitution⁶—music becomes background, no better than the cellophane wrapping of a package. Even the great works of art are unable to communicate because no one possesses ears.

If the immanent composition becomes background—refracted through the culture industry’s logic—then the “details” are delighted in as the foreground of insubstantial image-experiences. Music
becomes an M&M candy shell. It is delighted in for the moment of its façade, permitting or excusing the listener from engaging with the work at any sort of cognitive level.

If the moments of sensual pleasure in the idea, the voice, the instrument are made into fetishes and torn away from any functions which could give them meaning, they meet a response equally isolated, equally far from the meaning of the whole, and equally determined by success in the blind and irrational which form the relationship to music…Where they react at all, it no longer makes any difference whether it is to Beethoven’s Seventh Symphony or to a bikini.”

The reduction of music to the level of flat immediacy—the regression of listening—produces delight. The audience engages music at the “infantile stage” in which subjectivity is lost. Immersed in a mode of deconcentration, the audience becomes skeptical with respect to music that seeks to disrupt the mediation of the culture music industry: music that revolts against complacency.

Heavy art—art that revolts against complacency—attempts to sever the connection between the particular and the detail, wanting to make art into a realm of freedom. Heavy art, though, is not the same thing as autonomous Art. Heavy art fails where Art succeeds because of its tendency not to break away from lethargy, succumbing to “pseudo-activity.” Not fully active, these forms fall prey to their own ‘revolutionary’ intentions. Adorno locates stains of pseudo-activism in jazz, the jitterbug, and political art.

While the jitterbug or jazz may seem like viable options in lieu of the mass music of the culture industry, they actually share in the same regressive listening, making them no better than industrial music. The jazz musician is “nearest to the sportsman: if not to the football player…he shines by a capacity for rough improvisations, even if he must practice the piano for hours in secret in order to bring the refractory rhythms together.” The possible merits of free-form jazz—creativity, improvisation, cognitive engagement—all fall short of true. Art because the industrial parameters only allow it a pre-given field in which to negotiate its rhythms. The industry defines its symbolic space by being the actual cause of its ideological underpinnings.

This is accomplished through enlightenment in that it propagates the myth of the fully autonomous subject. We are not autonomous beings precisely because enlightenment has petrified our cognitions against the experience of freedom and subjectivity—nor are the jazz musicians’ ‘improvisations’ fully creative or free attests. Jazz operates
under the assumption that a monadic subject possessing freedom can create *ex nihilo*: as if the rifts and cadences are pulled out of the air at random. Free-form jazz attempts to create music within the parameters of this falsified space of freedom; in so doing, it falls into a pseudo-activity. Enlightenment created the reified, “autonomous” self and defined art within the parameters of this non-freedom.

Jazz, the jitterbug, and other emerging pseudo-active forces operate according to the same formula as the mass industries by catering its audiences to spontaneous, non-cognitive ‘beatness’. The incessant cadences of Kerouac’s literary antics are perhaps the most gratuitous example of what is art (i.e. not Art). Its romantic insistence on individuality—distinction from the herd mentality—only hypostatizes its failure that more clearly. Its rhetoric of subjectivity cannot save it, according to Adorno, precisely because it too is unconcerned with the false identity between the whole and the particular. It attempts to pass off its oeuvre as more than just detail, as concerned with its immanent constitution. Its failure is evident because it is unable to produce anything but a regressed audience.

Light art is contrasted with heavy art but not its antithesis. Mass music can be juxtaposed with the acid jazz cadences of the “Live Evil” session or the poetic diatribes of Dean Moriarity, but not in a genuine sense of establishing true antithesis—an antithesis that is fundamental to autonomous Art. Heavy art is “bourgeois art, which hypostatized itself as a world of freedom in contrast to what happening in the material world, [and] was from the beginning bought with exclusion of the lower classes.”

Critical Theory can trace the historical emergence of modern heavy art from the ideology of *l’art pour l’art*. This movement is founded on the realignment of the social sphere of freedom. Only through the modern division of labor could such an ideology emerge, raising the banner of non-instrumental action: art as ritual activity without any practical purpose. Art as excess. Art as the expression of the liberalist theory of freedom and individual creativity. As an ‘autonomous’ realm, bourgeois art, is predicated upon the notion of individual creative output, or, under ideal circumstances, creation *ex nihilo*.

Adorno understands jazz as the recapitulation of false improvisations—as the attempt to posit pure immediacy of beatness: the work’s immanent composition arrests its audience in an ecstatic reification that is not the same as particularity transcending itself. Jazz is the idealistic counterpart to existentialism. Both cases smuggle in their own authentic jargon to justify the reification of the self. Both forget the second half of remembrance: the immanent social constitution of
consciousness. The jazz audience forgets itself and its subjectivity in the process of surrendering its auditory canals to regressive listening. The music becomes a fetish—the jazz audience is no better than the mass audience.

Adorno fails in this equivocation between jazz/jitterbug/political art because he conflates rhetoric with experience. He takes what is written about jazz (Kerouac, for example) and projects it onto all imagined jazz audiences. Is it true that jazz consists of regressive listening? I argue to the contrary. Jazz is not about pacifying the masses into a sort of beat ecstatic immediacy. The seemingly flat immediacy is not “habitual response;” or “numb thinking and deadened perception to a raw, wholly unfamiliar world” as it might be argued for the movie industry. The immediacy contains a deep structure that is cognitive and emotive, passionate and visionary. Jazz, as Coltrane once said, is an attempt to rejoin the world: an act of communication that opens up a field between the music and the audience. Its immediacy is instrumental in opening up the vista of the immanent constitution of the work: as dynamically active in wrestling the particular out of its particularity. The music transcends—not by obscuring the false identity between the whole and the particular, but by embracing it in its fragility. Jazz can in the best settings reactivate critical rationality.

The objection is perhaps best clarified once we gain an appreciation for how the work of Art asserts its autonomy. This is only possible with an understanding of the concept of beauty.

One of the traditional subjects of aesthetics—beauty—contains its own history with respect to the dialectic. The concept of beauty, though, conceived apart from its historical backdrop exists unaware of its own genesis. Tracing its genealogy is of vital importance to Adorno’s project in so far as reconciliation is possible as the concurrent experiencing of the beautiful and the ugly: the post-enlightenment beautiful. This context, or the aesthetic experience, demystifies reified consciousness and discloses subjectivity to individuals.

With the exile of mythic fear and the emergence of the modern self, “the traits of this [mythic] fear fell subject to taboo” and they became ugly.” The enlightened self, through its historical act of negation, inverted its mythic aesthetic values so as to expel to the margins the fear, which would liquidate reified consciousness. Or, that which could inject a serum of terror into the modern heart, exposing the latent fear grounded in the roots of self-hood. “But the old images of terror persist in history, which has yet to redeem the promise of freedom, and in which the subject—as the agent of unfreedom—perpetuates the mythical spell, against which he rebels and to which he

---

9 *Dialectic*, p. 135.
11 *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 47.
Our confrontation and reconciliation with the unconscious fear is what Adorno calls the “promise of freedom.”

This promise is contained within the dialectic as the ground of humanity’s redemption with itself. The reified self, whose historical construction has primarily been governed by the heavy-hand of domination, subverts the constitution of its present ‘autonomy’ qua details, thereby coming to terms with the latent fear of the natural world. Our confrontation with this fear and our victory over it is experienced as freedom or as reconciliation. This suggests that the experience of the ugly, as the modern enlightened response “to the cannibalistically threatening cult masks and grimaces [which are] the substantive imitation of fear”, needs to be approached from the standpoint of reconciliation. Only through our reconciliation with these forces of the dialectic can we hope to counteract the effects that leave us reified pseudo individuals.

If the ugly is that which is mythic, then the beautiful is that which is enlightened. Yet with almost all the concepts Adorno presents, there is a difference between what the concepts mean to the enlightened cognition and what they actually mean to the post-enlightenment consciousness of which Adorno takes himself to be an exponent. Beauty, like the ugly, has both a reified sense and an anti-ideological sense. The reified sense is part and parcel of the ideology of enlightenment. Art, that is, approached from an aesthetic perspective whose values promote the self *qua* domination.

Culture industry art occurs in a social domain that excludes subjective engagement. Music can no longer be approached with an ear toward experiencing the aesthetic precisely because the audience does not understand what the aesthetic is. People conflate the idea of beauty—as given by the enlightened cognition—with the experience of beauty. Mass art generated by the culture industry imagines the beautiful to be an objective concretion within the immediacy of an experience. Beauty is seen and recognized—it is not experienced as anything but the flattened perception that serves as the rule for the moviegoer or the regressive music listener. The mass individual would never imagine that the beautiful is actually ‘identical’ with the ugly.

Adorno denigrates jazz on the grounds of how inconducive it is towards the unfettering of subjectivity. The jitterbug or political art divert the attentions of the audience from the aesthetic experience—that is, the immanent composition of the work—into a shallow aesthetic mode that is not co-extensive with beauty. Why, though, is this the case? Why is it true to imagine that physical exertion implicit

12 Ibid.
13 Ibid.
14 *Aesthetic Theory*, p. 50.
to dance or to theatre inhibits the dynamic of beauty?

Adorno replies that the “isolated moments of enjoyment prove incompatible with the immanent constitution of the work of art, and whatever in the work goes beyond them to an essential perception is sacrificed to them. They are not bad in themselves but in their diversionary function. Is it fair, though, to reduce all works of art that happen to be ‘ecstatic’ or ‘joyous’ to the same level as mass art? Perhaps certain kinds of art that do allow for the experience of the aesthetic also happen to be enjoyable. Let us keep this in mind as we uncover the notion of the post-enlightenment beautiful and investigate the aesthetic experience of ugly art.

Of the ‘ugly’ art, Adorno writes:

Their radiance is dark; the beautiful permeates negativity, which appears to have mastered it. As if they feared that immortality would draw out their life blood, even the most seemingly neutral objects that art has sought to eternalize as beautiful radiate—entirely out of their materials—hardness, unassimilability, indeed ugliness.¹⁴

Ugly art not only is simultaneously beautiful, but is experienced as beautiful because of its impermeability to assimilation or convention. Consider Francisco de Goya’s Witch’s Sabbath for a moment. The lighting is somber, the mood is narcotic, and all the character images are grotesque: their visages cascading off each other in the revelry of bacchanalian evil. One confronts the image within the experience of transfixed horror. The internal logic of the piece denies any escape from the vortex of its negativity. Goya takes a sledgehammer to our minds—we are forced to engage it at the intellectual level it demands.
This is the effect of dark radiance and it outstrips our enlightened self-hood of the barriers that have been erected in opposition to the primordial fear. The ugliness of the work as it is experienced though this type of engagement demonstrates the fact that enlightenment has not been completely victorious. We perceive that our modern cognitive status merely masks the regressive retardation of our minds to the primordial fear.

The beauty of ugly art consists in its ability to hammer down the idolatry of enlightened cognition: beauty is self-destruction. The double character of Art consists in this unique paradox that unites the beautiful and the ugly in one moment. This allows the two elements of remembrance to emerge: subjectivity and the historical genesis of consciousness.

This suggests that the way of recovering the audience within the
parameters of enlightened cognition is via a method of cruelty. Only through the creation of art that drives a wedge into the reified consciousness of modern self-hood can the artist hope to communicate the message of the aesthetic. That is, to allow its viewers access to the aesthetic experience to the immanent constitution of the oeuvre.

Goya’s method of cruelty figures in the twisted images of the *Black Paintings*. On a more contemporary note, Radiohead and their recent exploration of modern life in relation to music is equally dark. *Kid A* is less an album and more a cohesive tryst within the world of a deadened musical audience whose auditory canals are stuffed shut with the candy-coated nothings of pop music. Thom Yorke’s plasticized voice emerges out of the backdrop of the bass’s synthetic rhythms. Its effect is less of the shocking pulse of Goya’s eminence and more the awakening to a soothing nightmare that slowly suffocates. These voices of the culture industry double back upon their own genesis through the method of cruelty, undermining the *faux*-validity of contemporary pop rock. In other words, like Goya they do not attempt to posit themselves as outside ‘the system’, but rather show what is that the system produces.

Art becomes Art because it affects the disjunction of ideology from consciousness. Or perhaps more precisely, in the appearance to consciousness of its own historical genesis—that the self is the formation and reformation of the institutional configurations of social reality. Ideology, then, is the act of forgetting which the subject undergoes toward its own constitution. The objective configurations of society—e.g. the culture industry—make this act of forgetting easy.

Adorno writes: “Reconciliation as an act of violence, aesthetic formalism, and the unreconciled life forms a triad.”\(^{15}\) This suggests a very crucial connection between cruel art, reconciliation, and beauty as it is defined an aesthetic formalism evocative of Clive Bell’s “significant form.” This triad in turn rests on a distinction between types of beauty: natural versus artistic.

As previously mentioned. Art explodes the rigid fusion between the image and cognition, thereby enacting remembrance. The experience of beauty mediated through Art differs from the experience of beauty in the natural world in that the artistic brand is ideological; that is, it concerns itself with ideology and its relation to consciousness. Let us begin with the idea of natural beauty.

Natural beauty is defined as “suspended history, a moment of becoming at a standstill.”\(^{16}\) “Like the experience of art, the aesthetic experience of nature is that of images. Nature, as appearing beauty, is not perceived as an object of action. The sloughing off of the aims

\(^{15}\) Aesthetic Theory, p. 48.

\(^{16}\) Ibid., 71.

\(^{17}\) Ibid., 65.

\(^{18}\) Ibid., 66.
of self-preservation—which is emphatic in art—is carried out to the same degree in aesthetic experience of nature.”17 So, natural beauty is a relationship between humans and the natural world insofar as nature is not seen as an “object of action,” or something to be ground up in the instrumental machinery of the juggernaut. The preservation of the self (the dialectical history of fear) is ‘abandoned’ to such a degree that the reification of the self is sloughed off so that history is distilled into a “moment of becoming.”

Beauty makes apparent the two ‘halves of the human being: subjectivity and selfhood. History as a moment of becoming discloses itself as both incomplete subjectivity and incomplete selfhood. Subjectivity is the cognitive standpoint that recognizes the immanent containment of the self within the social—not as social institutional forms, but as the creative ground of all social forms or instantiations; we will call this la société. Subjectivity is experienced as société, as freedom—as dislocation from the ideological patterns of petrified perception. Selfhood by contrast is the cognitive standpoint of reification where one’s decisions and actions are immediate, unreflective, and pre-given by one’s social institutions—”society” in the second sense. History as moment of becoming is the cognitive standpoint by which both subjectivity and selfhood are tenuously contained within the same moment as the unresolved contradiction in humanity.

We can approach this same discussion from our previous investigation of rationality. The moment of becoming is akin to the positive experience of the nonidentical component of cognition. Rather than fleeing back into identity thinking, which reduces particularity to details, we connect with our subjectivities, allowing the immanent movement from the particular to the whole to occur. However, this is not simply a flight into ‘pure’ subjectivity but rather the formulation of critical rationality: reason aware of its freedom and the historical constitution of consciousness. Or, reason that consciously maintains the dichotomy between the self and the subject without reducing consciousness to either component.

Natural beauty is defined as “a moment of history at a standstill.” As opposed to history as a moment of becoming—which is the cognitive standpoint of artistic beauty—natural beauty is a moment of becoming flattened out into the sphere of pure subjectivity; that is, it is imagined wrong-headedly to be immediate, pure, and unadulterated freedom. Natural beauty’s success is too much. “The anamnesis of freedom in natural beauty deceives because it seeks freedom in the old unfreedom. Natural beauty is myth transposed into the imagination and thus, perhaps, requited.”18 Beauty of this kind eradicates the
second half of the double character of art, the half of the contradiction that understands the historicity of consciousness. Freedom as natural beauty is experienced as an imagined pure subjectivity devoid of its immanent constitution within the social. Natural beauty is akin to the idealistic philosophies Adorno criticizes in the *Jargon of Authenticity*: “the mediation through the thinking subject disappears [so] completely” that the historicity of consciousness disappears into the “fullness” or “authenticity” of pure subjectivity.

Finally, we are in a position to understand what the post-enlightened beautiful is. The oeuvre is at the heart of the triad about which Adorno speaks: unreconciled life, aesthetic formalism, and violent reconciliation. The unreconciled life is human dignity reduced to the mass individual as manufactured by the culture industry. We call it false consciousness insofar as it is not consciousness at all—rather, it’s simply mechanical and pre-fabricated numbness. Critical rationality, or the ability to understand antithesis, is the way back to a life of reconciliation. We just need a push. The method of cruelty endemic to modernist art drives a wedge into our flattened perception—perception that sees art and beauty only in terms of pure essence, as aesthetic formalism does. The immanent movement of the oeuvre is remembered and self-hood can finally be understood in antithesis to freedom or subjectivity. Subjectivity, though, is not pure individuation but rather the ability to understand the self in relation to *société*: understanding the plurality of the natural world as the nonidentical component of cognition.

According to this reading, Adorno is justified in looking to Art or the oeuvre and its internal crystallizations in order to excavate the logic of its social instantiation in the dialectic. Moreover, Art provides us with an intimation of what anti-enlightenment cognition or ideology is like: critical rationality or the ability of come to terms with the ontological dichotomy between self-hood and subjectivity. Confronting the primordial fear of the natural world is equivalent to confronting the creation of the self and rejecting it. Not as the easy flight into pure subjectivity but rather as an attunement to the antithesis of critical rationality.

Jazz, like natural beauty, is not connected to critical reason as an instantiation of it. Its aspect of reification is formally equivalent to that of the culture industry, whose advertising media celebrate the meaningfulness of immediate and (supposedly) uncensored experience. This suggests how it is that experiences or actions become inflected with value for Adorno: only insofar as they are expressions of critical rationality. Freedom *qua* natural beauty contains just as
much paucity as endlessly-played sitcoms of FX syndication. Both are ideological and both falsely reconcile humans with the world.

This equivocation between natural beauty and the industrial apparatus of the cultural machine signals to me that there is something else at issue here, something we are missing. How could an experience which “recollects a world without domination” and “through this recollection dissolves [the self] back into that amorphousness out of which genius once arose and for the first time becomes conscious of the idea of freedom that could be realized in a free world from domination” be on par with the culture industry?19 Even if natural beauty collapses the antithesis of critical rationality, cannot we still say that hypostatized freedom is better than a reified consciousness? We still need to dig a little deeper.

The culture industry is successful most of the time in destroying the audiences of art, ideologically directing their minds to the details of the world, rather than its immanent constitutions. Art is Art because of its double character: or the ability to shatter the ideological fetters of the culture industry through its method of cruelty. Yet even Art can be denigrated to the status of a background context or referenced solely in regard to commodities. A Beethoven symphony, for example, being used to sell dog food to “people who love their pets!” aids in assimilating Art to the culture industry so that it can no longer bristle with dark radiance. The suggestion is that the more tied a world of Art is to the leveling mechanisms of the culture industry, the less likely it is to cultivate antithesis. Incessant advertising barrages serve up these real works as background context, pulling in even activated listening.

If it takes Art to awaken cognition, then it is curious indeed for a work of “non-Art” to produce this same awakening. By Adorno’s estimation, Nick Drake, the English folk singer, can hardly count as a true Artist. The songs he composed, while often reflecting a deep depression, dealt with themes of popular discourse: love, friendship, etc. One of his songs, “Pink Moon,” is a simple ballad echoing a somber lyricism. While the melody is haunting, it certainly cannot quality for the method of cruelty. Yet many would argue that “Pink Moon” does exactly what Adorno would hold it incapable of doing: engendering artistic beauty. How is this possible? Is Adorno’s configuration of artistic beauty completely correct or is there a slippage between the method of cruelty and the production of artistic beauty? Are there other ‘methods’ that also counteract reified consciousness? Perhaps there are alternative arts, such as jazz, that can enact artistic beauty to the same extent as modernism.
The concept of Art as it has been worked out is very simply the experience of artistic beauty; that is, the experience of the contradiction between thought and truth, between subjectivity and its immanent constitution in society. This might also be understood as the awareness of the false identity between the individual and the mass—the central ideology of the culture industry and modernity. No matter how it is that artistic beauty is activated—whether by modernism, jazz, the jitterbug, lyrical poetry, dark satire, etc.—the experience is *analytically identical* with the unmasking of the ideology of enlightenment. In other words, how individuals become aware of their critical rationality and the antithesis of subjectivity is not necessarily grounded in any formal method. To do so, as Adorno tries, may actually impose undue restrictions on what art can be.

Once could read the earthy poetry of Pablo Neruda—

Because I am unfinished and spindle-shaped  
I had an understanding with needles  
and then they were threading me  
and never have finished.

That's why the love I give you,  
my woman, my needle woman,  
coils in your ear moistened  
by the sea winds of Chillán  
and uncoils in your eyes,  
letting sadness drift.\(^{20}\)

and experience Artistic beauty. There is no method of cruelty haunting the words of this Chilean laureate—his form parallels the ephemeral lyricism of *Sketches of Spain*, rooted in the richness of the terrestrial. If the effect of remembrance is what Adorno is truly after, it makes no difference what the form of the oeuvre is, so long as antithesis is produced.

Once it is admitted that alternative ‘methods,’ not necessarily cruel, may produce artistic beauty, then the previous examples suggest that there may be a slippage between the method of cruelty and the production of artistic beauty. The poetics of Neruda obviously cannot be reduced to a method similar to Goya’s works, nor am I ready to admit that either one isn’t in fact Art. As I mentioned before, there is something else at work here, something we have not yet grasped.

This missing element is the moral philosophy of Adorno. An account of this will explain why it is that Adorno needs to hold on to the method of cruelty. With an appreciation of its relationship to morality, we can come full circle in our understanding of politics,
morality, art, ideology, and their interpenetration. Moreover, successful criticisms of his moral philosophy shall spell trouble for the method of cruelty suggesting that critical rationality can be extended to art forms that engage the world positively (which the method rejects): like jazz, like political art, like theatre.

Adorno once wrote to Walter Benjamin: “Both [modernist art and mass culture] bear the scars of capitalism, both contain elements of change. Both are torn halves of freedom, to which however they do not add up.”21 Mass culture seeks freedom through the act of purveying enlightenment: reconciliation with the primordial fear through the act of distancing the self further and further from the object. The self comes to consist solely in this type of deadened perception with respect to the world, where life takes on the aspect of a movie and objects become free-floating entities devoid of concrete qualities. In contrast to this, modernist Art takes a sledgehammer to this type of perception, attempting to reanimate critical cognition. Acting by means of a method of the method of cruelty, this type of Art militantly crushes the false sense of security that enlightenment creates, divesting the reified self of flattened perception. This opens up the real of freedom, which is an effect of artistic beauty. The method of cruelty, then, is necessary to open up the deadened cognition of the artistic audience.

Yet Adorno makes the claim that modernism (or mass culture) does not add up to full-fledged freedom. Complete freedom for humanity would depend on their ability to erase the domination implicit to the dialectic. Art is special in that it allows humans the experience of a freedom that is limited in scope—that is, experienced in respect to resisting mass culture. If we are to experience complete liberation, the impetus towards freedom that is driving mass culture needs to be erased in full.

Morality, then, is the cultivation of this resistance to mass culture—resistance that contains its own method of cruelty. Morality, however, is not identical with the “good life”, or a world beyond domination, but is the tactical action that we must take toward promoting this future society. The good life is banned from the outset because complete freedom is impossible to imagine in this historical moment, for “there can be no good life within the bad one.”22 Real freedom—i.e. not a torn in half of that freedom—is absolutized as that which is beyond domination, beyond reification, beyond alienation. Making do with what is possible in our time becomes the premise of Adorno’s morality: we must resist the false identity of enlightenment at all costs. We must act with a method of cruelty so as to become like

---

20 Neruda, Pablo.  
_The Yellow Heart_.  
p. 35.

21 Walter Benjamin.  
_Gesammelte Schriften_  
I/3 (Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, 1974). p. 1003.

22 Adorno, Theodore.  
_Problems of Moral Philosophy_.  
Hereafter: _Problems of Moral Philosophy_. p. i.
works of Art in that we “radiate—entirely out [our] materials—hardness, unassimilability, indeed ugliness.” Morality consists in the same sort of radical awareness of the juncture between the self and the subject that Art of the modernist strain exudes. This awareness must be thoroughly resistant insofar as resisting all positive conceptions of the world: politics, practical action, etc. It is only in works totally silent about politics that a “truthful” politics shines through.

Art excludes all affirmation of social reality. “The comfort that flows from great works of art lies less in what they express than in the fact that they have managed to struggle out of existence. Hope is soonest found among the comfortless.” Morality follows suit. Our situation demands instead “that we resist the call of practicality with all our might in order ruthlessly to follow through with this idea and its logical implications.” There is a shock value, it seems, found in a moral comportment based on a thoroughly cynical, anti-political mentality. Beyond the initial shock value, this type of person instills fear into people so as to crush their flattened perception, opening up a void in their cognition into which freedom may be smuggled.

Adorno’s diatribes against jazz, the jitterbug, and political art make complete sense in this context because they seemingly promote engagement with social reality that suggests that things aren’t quite so bad as they are. Moreover, as moral agents we must guard ourselves against reinsertion into the cultural machine. Our militancy must be overtly apolitical—contra false individuality and, most importantly, contra those types of activities reflecting pseudo-activity. The sign of true politicism—the only manner of morality we can entertain—is to reject all actions containing accommodation, which threatens to reduce the gains we made in our battle for true consciousness.

The heroic casting of morality is a symptom of the method of cruelty. Moreover, the method is the link between morality and aesthetics and casts critical rationality within the hues of nonpolitical cynicism. Through this refraction of what critical rationality is taken to be, Adorno fails to recognize other instantiations of that very rationality. Furthermore, this inability deludes him into believing that the best moral posture towards the world is equivalent to an overt rejection of it.

Through critical rationality we might come to immerse ourselves in the contradiction between truth and thought that the enlightenment blankets. However, extricating the aesthetic from the moral allow us to expand the category of Art well beyond the limits that Adorno would admit possible. More hopefully, Artistic beauty can be liberated from an overtly negative casting of it to include the range of positive dialectic freedom.